INTRODUCTION

Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

Willa Cather became one of the greatest American novelists by extending the myth of the Garden of the West from where James Fenimore Cooper left off in his Leatherstocking Saga--into heroic agrarianism and on into the decadent modern world. She matched his 5 volumes with her own 5—the saga comprised of *O Pioneers!* (1913), *My Antonia* (1918), *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). These novels in succession also express an individuation process into a spiritual death, rebirth and ultimate transcendence. Her epic is more diverse and compressed, yet larger in vision and far better written than Cooper's. Cather is a refined artist, Cooper a clumsy one. They share agrarian pastoralism in the tradition of Crèvecoeur and Jefferson, belief in Manifest Destiny, inspiration from the pioneers, religious faith, animosity toward the newly rich capitalists in the cities, painterly Neoclassical aesthetics, panoramic vision and a sense of grandeur—the sublime.

Cather took on the literary responsibility to do for the West what Washington Irving did for New York, what Hawthorne had done for New England, and what Faulkner would do for the South. She created what critics called a "usable past" for her region, while far transcending regionalism in her art. Cather paid a high price for her contribution to American literature: She got reduced to a "regionalist." And because she wrote about the past (like Irving, Cooper, Hawthorne, Twain, and Faulkner) critics also reduced her to a "traditionalist." All the Modernists were traditionalists in some degree. The supreme Modernist was the most traditionalist of them all—T. S. Eliot. Most of her dismissive critics were urban liberal males in the East—many with Marxist inclinations--looking toward Europe. They had no interest in looking West at the empty plains, especially not through the eyes of a traditionalist. "As everyone knows," she wrote, "Nebraska is distinctly declasse as a literary background." Few have recognized the Modernism of Cather, especially as expressed in her most innovative masterpiece *The Professor's House,* one of the first two Modernist novels in American literature—with *The Great Gatsby*--and one of the few novels in world literature ever to contain multiple coinciding allegories, an intellectual feat elevating it into the literary stratosphere along with *Moby-Dick*, *The Blithedale Romance*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*.

BIOGRAPHY

Born on a sheep farm in pastoral Virginia, at the age of 9 Willa Cather suffered an exile from Eden when her father moved the family to the deprivations of bare frontier Nebraska. "It was a kind of erasure of

personality," she said. "I would not know how much of a child's life is bound up in the words and hills and meadows around it, if I had not been jerked away from all these and thrown out into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron." She got carried away into the Westward Movement.

NEBRASKA

She grew up with the West. Her father was softhearted and pastoral whereas her mother used a rawhide whip to punish her children for misbehavior at a time when mothers more commonly used a thin switch. She felt closest to her father. A strong, independent, popular tomboy, Willa cut her hair short, dressed like a boy and went adventuring with her brothers. She wore a derby hat, signed her name William Cather and confidently planned to become a doctor. After her family moved into Red Cloud she began reading all the books in the library of Jewish neighbors, went on rounds and talked science with local doctors, and studied Greek and Latin with a well-educated clerk in a dry goods store, developing Neoclassical aesthetic values and a particular love of Virgil. She stopped wearing the derby and let her hair grow out when she was about 18. She decided to become a writer rather than a doctor after her English professor, without her knowledge, submitted her essay on Thomas Carlyle to the *Nebraska State Journal* and it was published. Before graduating from the University of Nebraska in 1895 she had already become a regular contributor to the *Journal* and published columns, stories, and reviews of operas, concerts and plays.

PITTSBURGH

Cather felt the same urgency to escape the cultural limitations of provincial life around Red Cloud that Sinclair Lewis felt about Sauk Center and that James Joyce felt about Dublin. She accepted a position with *Home Monthly* magazine in Pittsburgh at the age of 22 and never again lived in Nebraska. She spent only 13 years of her life there and yet, though she moved away to live in cities, she would write primarily about the rural West. "The ideas for all my novels have come from things that happened around Red Cloud when I was a child." She began with a severely critical attitude toward provincial life, joining the "revolt from the village" like Lewis in *Main Street* (1920), then like Sherwood Anderson she realized she loved it: "That love of great spaces, of rolling open country like the sea—it's the grand passion of my life."

In 1901, Cather moved in with Isabelle McClung, the daughter of a prominent judge in Pittsburgh, a respectable household. Cather was extremely reserved in her personal relations, like her exemplar Henry James. She was an emotional conservative like Alexandra: "One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them." She became a high school teacher in 1903 and published a book of poems, then a collection of stories, *The Troll Garden* in 1905.

NEW YORK

Her stories attracted such approval at *McClures Magazine* in New York that she was hired as an editor, where she worked for 11 years. In 1908 she met the distinguished Sarah Orne Jewett, who urged her to quit her job and write about Nebraska. That same year she moved in with another editor, Edith Lewis, with whom she lived for the rest of her life.

Alexander's Bridge (1912)

Her first novel *Alexander's Bridge* tells the story of Bartley Alexander, an engineer whose inner bridge and literal bridge both collapse, based on the Quebec Bridge which collapsed in 1907. Like a male version of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin, a novel Cather deplored in her review, Bartley pursues a fantasy of liberation from social responsibility through an affair until he drowns. In his fatal passion, Bartley is an unsympathetic counterpart of the sympathetic Emil Bergson in *O Pioneers!* Both are cautionary tales evincing a Victorian moral heritage. Cather later dismissed her first novel with its affected cosmopolitan tone as a youthful vanity, imitative and conventional. Nevertheless, *Alexander's Bridge* is instructive. Cather displays the formative influence upon her of Flaubert and especially of Henry James. "In those days, no one seemed so wonderful as Henry James; for me, he was the perfect writer."

She joined the Realist tradition as a novelist of manners like James and Edith Wharton, while also transcending Realism with moral allegory in the tradition of Hawthorne.

O Pioneers! (1913)

As soon as Cather turned from fashionable drawing-room fiction to writing about Nebraska, heeding the advice of her friend Sarah Orne Jewett, she achieved her first masterpiece. Alexandra replaced Alexander. She began her 5-volume epic with a celebration of the pioneers in the democratic spirit of Walt Whitman, quoting his poem "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" Declaring herself a "novelist of the soil," she produced a refined work of art with Neoclassical aesthetic qualities including simplicity, economy, balance, and social value. The structure of the novel is an antithesis contrasting the love plots of Emil/Marie and Alexandra/Carl, one passionate and wild, the other controlled and wise. Neoclassical devices such as parallelism and symmetry give her novels solidity, clarity, and strength.

When her father dies, leaving her "head" of the family on the farm—because her brothers are dolts with materialistic city values—Alexandra also has the heart to transcend all adversity, reconciles opposites as symbolized by her union with Carl, and even forgives the killer of her brother. Cather reverses gender roles and asserts her Modernism by rejecting the conventions of the popular novel in writing "a slow-moving story, without 'action,' without 'humour,' without a 'hero'; a story concerned entirely with heavy farming people, with cornfields and pasture lands and pig yards." She also began to develop the evocative plain style of a literary pioneer, a subtle Platonic symbolist who enjoyed "the idea of things more than the things themselves." Many critics have ranked *O Pioneers!* higher than *My Antonia* as a work of art, for its perfection of dramatic form, Neoclassical symmetries, panoramic historical vision, moving pathos, and the inspirational heroism of Alexandra the Great.

The Song of the Lark (1915)

Cather's many early stories about artists, a preoccupation shared with Henry James, culminate in this novel about the rise of Thea Kronborg from a humble background on the western frontier to success and fame as an opera singer—a great Wagnerian soprano--climaxing with triumphant standing ovations at the Metropolitan. Cather loved music and projects her own story of attaining success as a great artist. Like her, Thea is helped to success along her way up by a succession of generous men. Cather avoids a conventional love story and pleases feminists by having Thea avoid marriage until she can "have it all." At the end she consents to marry a man she loves, but only as a career woman, with the understanding that her highest priority is her Art. As Cather developed her aesthetic of the economical "unfurnished" novel, she criticized this one as too detailed. Detractors have found the last half dull.

My Antonia (1918)

Most people, in particular male critics, considered this her best novel until after the 1960s, as Feminists have preferred the powerful and childless leader Alexandra—who is so superior to her stupid brothers--to the prolific earth mother and farm wife Antonia. Alexandra and Antonia personify archetypal masculine and female characteristics of the heroic pioneer women who tamed, settled and populated the West—the strong and self-reliant women who make their beneficiaries, the complaining Feminists of today, sound like childish neurotics. Antonia was modeled on a real farm girl named Annie Sadilek.

Antonia Shimerda is the daughter of Bohemian immigrants farming on the frontier prairie of Nebraska. Her story is told by her friend Jim Burden, who is much like Cather in experience and character, though Cather is also much like Alexandra and Augusta. Like Cather, as a child Burden journeyed from Virginia to Nebraska. Telling the story through Jim, who admires Antonia so much, gives Cather a way to glorify Antonia beyond what her own Realism allows, giving the story a mythic dimension by celebrating an epic heroine. Mr. Shimerda is a dreamy impractical musician who bought poor agricultural land, is crushed by circumstances and kills himself in his barn, leaving his problems to his wife and extra farm work for Antonia, whose burden is heavier than that carried through life by Jim Burden. The family quits the farm and moves into town and Antonia goes to work as a hired girl, moving up in the world. But then she is seduced, deceived and impregnated by a railroad worker. Disillusioned by "progress" in the town, she

retreats to the country to bear her illegitimate child. She finally prevails in her struggles, eventually marries a reliable farmer and raises a large family in a triumph over adversity.

Critics unable to follow more than one character at a time have complained that the story shifts from Antonia to Jim Burden and back again (developing ironic contrasts between the successful fulfilled life of the underprivileged farm girl and the privileged but unfulfilled young man.). Feminists have objected to a male narrator. This is the novel to read for the most authentic dramatization of the European immigrant experience on the prairies, for characterizations, and for gritty and sometimes coldblooded Realism. As always, Cather is not as plain as she seems. The narrative is resonant with echoes of mythology and is itself a contribution to the ongoing myth of the Garden of the West. *My Antonia* contains the signature mythic symbol in the work of Cather, later the logo of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation: the plough on the plains magnified across the distance by horizontal light in the sunset—"heroic in size" and "exactly contained within the circle of the disk."

1922

Years later, Cather declared that "The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts." One of her biographers, Phyllis Robinson, says of Cather that "She felt the division between the world before 1914 and the postwar world as if the line had been drawn through her own soul." Then Isabelle McClung married Jan Hambourg in 1916. But the world did not break in two until 1922, the year Cather published *One of Ours* and got the worst reviews of her life. She had hoped to please her new publisher Alfred Knopf, but he had been unable to sell the serial rights to any magazine. She had been ill much of that year, verging on mastoiditis. Doctors blamed the infection on her tonsils and the operation removing them weakened her so much she had to spend time recuperating in a sanatorium, then after her release she fell ill again. *One of Ours* was published in September. In November she traveled back to Nebraska for her parents' 50th wedding anniversary, where she felt too weak to speak before the Omaha Press Club and had to cancel at the last minute. She appears to have struggled through an ordeal comparable to that of St. Peter in *The Professor's House.* At the end of the year, she joined the Episcopal Church.

One of Ours is the story of an idealistic Nebraska farm boy named Claude who gives his life for his country in World War I. Cather put her heart into it. She tried to redeem herself to neighbors of her family in Nebraska who had been offended by some of her writing, especially for the sake of her mother. She appealed to friends in Red Cloud by modeling sympathetic characters on people well known in the town and she identified strongly with her idealistic young hero. She wanted to show people in Nebraska how much she loved them. She wanted to lift hearts, to transcend the national depression that followed the war and to express her love of America. The public at large responded well to her idealism and to mostly favorable reviews by making the book her first bestseller. It won a Pulitzer Prize.

However, too many young men had been sacrificed for what seemed to survivors insufficient cause. A young war correspondent named Ernest Hemingway had reported on the war and drove an ambulance on the Italian front, where he had been severely wounded. He had called the war "the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth." John Dos Passos also drove an ambulance in the war and just the year before he had published a widely acclaimed antiwar novel, *Three Soldiers* (1921). And earlier in the same year e. e. cummings, who likewise had driven an ambulance in the war, had published his autobiographical novel *The Enormous Room* (1922) based on his experiences while held in a French concentration camp on a false charge of treason. They won no prizes. The prominent critic and poet Malcolm Cowley also had driven an ambulance and shared the common revulsion against the war. Ezra Pound had lost friends like T. E. Hulme and other poets in the war, Sinclair Lewis had been an avid promoter of Cather until he read this novel and expressed his disappointment, and Sidney Howard in *The Bookman* declared that "She should stick to her farms." The influential Edmund Wilson called the novel a failure. Even Cather's friend Elsie Sergeant thought she had romanticized a horrible catastrophe. The powerful H. L. Mencken, who had been a strong advocate of Cather, thought the book broke in two: that the first half set in Nebraska was almost as good as *My Antonia,* but that the second half pertaining to the war fell to the level of the *Ladies Home Journal.*

That was the worst insult, being reduced to a "lady writer." Generally speaking, Cather was defended by women who had never been in combat. And she was not the only woman novelist to write naively about the war. The situation recalled William Dean Howells praising John DeForest for his Realism in his novel based on his experiences in the Civil War in contrast to popular war novels by women: "The heroes of young-lady writers have been everywhere fighting the late campaigns over again, as young ladies would have fought them." The literary movement called Realism was largely a rebellion by male writers and the best women writers—Freeman, Chopin, Wharton, Cather—against the tyranny of taste imposed on all American writers by women, by Victorian feminists such as Sarah Hale, the Editor of *Godey's Ladies Book*. Realists were oppressed by the censorious moral rigidity of Victorianism—and were contemptuous of female sentimentality and the romantic artifice of their "genteel tradition."

In 1886 DeForest praised Howells for his Realism: "I admire most of all, your honesty & courage. How dare you speak out your beliefs as you do? You spare neither manhood nor womanhood, & especially not the latter, though it furnishes four fifths of our novel-reading public. It is a wonder that the females of America…do not stone you in the street." The "genteel tradition" lasted until *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce was declared not obscene by a U.S. federal judge in 1933. Women have always dictated prevailing taste in American literary publishing because they have constituted over 80% of the readers. Male writers had roughly half a century of relatively free speech, until Feminists took over literary publishing during the 1980s and began imposing their censorious version of Political Correctness.

Faulkner always said that novelists should try to achieve the impossible. Cather tried in *One of Ours* but reached too far beyond her grasp and lost credibility with highbrow critics and male writers—those whose judgments she cared about most. She seemed to them to reassert the old tyranny of sentimental lady writers and Romantic taste. Also, the publication of both *Ulysses* and "The Waste Land" in the same year as *One of Ours* increased the contrast between Cather's traditionalism and the aesthetic radicalism of the Modernists. Her literary world broke in two. She felt herself fading into the past with her values.

A Lost Lady (1923)

Once she began writing about heroic women—Alexandra, Thea, Antonia--Cather produced 3 successive novels ending in triumph, then *One of Ours* about an idealistic young man killed in the war. The backlash against her is comparable to that against John Steinbeck decades later when he supported the Vietnam War. Cather tried to heal the wounds inflicted by critics by withdrawing to the comfortable side of her broken world--into the past--and by writing a short novel that would demonstrate her mastery as an artist, a eulogy for the spirit of the pioneers and the myth of the Garden of the West.

The name of the lady, Forrester, evokes the pioneers who felled trees and cleared spaces in forests on the way West. She was a vivacious and charming young woman on the frontier in Sweet Water, Colorado, who married a much older pioneering railroad man, Captain Forrester. During their progress across the continent railroad men had to cut trees to make ties and lay tracks. The railroad was the popular symbol of progress in the 19th century and the wife of Captain Forrester represented the ideals of civilization, as women had throughout the Victorian Age—the justification for displacing the forests. Her corruption is an historical allegory of the moral and spiritual decline of western culture after the pioneers. Cather modeled Forrester on Silas Garber, who founded the Farmer's and Merchants Bank on the main street of Red Cloud in 1889. Mrs. Forrester commits adultery with a man who marries someone else, then after her husband dies she has an affair with the vulgar businessman Ivy Peters. Again her lover marries someone else. This time the villain Peters greedily takes over the Forrester mansion, symbolizing the loss of pioneer virtues in later generations and their replacement by the crass spirit of moneygrabbing. Peters is repulsive. By now the town considers Mrs. Forrester a lost lady.

Critics had not forgiven Cather for *One of Ours.* Edmund Wilson called *A Lost Lady* "a charming sketch… Willa Cather is a good craftsman, but she is usually rather dull." In *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* (U Nebraska 2000) Joan Acocella has documented the condescension and belittling tone of reviewers such as the influential Joseph Wood Krutch, who actually liked Cather. Still, male critics were never as disrespectful to Cather as sex-crazed Feminist critics were to be later in the century. In the long run, a consensus emerged among most objective critics that *A Lost Lady* is a minor classic and her most

perfectly written novel. Cather's allegory of the corruption of the West is mild and refined compared to Faulkner's lurid allegory of the corruption of the South, the horrific *Sanctuary* (1931). Warner Brothers filmed a Hollywood version of *A Lost Lady* in 1934, losing the allegory by moving the locale to Chicago and losing the tone by starring a romantic Barbara Stanwyck in an affair with an aviator. Cather never allowed another movie to be made of her work.

The Professor's House (1925)

Though perfect as art, *A Lost Lady* did not restore her to high regard among the elite critics. She had only reinforced her image among them as a "traditionalist" writing about ladies, out of touch with the modern world. The innovative structure of *The Professor's House* is her rebuttal, her demonstration that she could be a Modernist too. In fact, to repeat, Willa Cather wrote one of the first two Modernist novels in American literature—with *The Great Gatsby*. The two novels have much in common. Cather is in the same current with Nick Carraway at the end of *Gatsby*: "'So,' Nick says, 'we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past'."

Cather's fourth volume in her Epic of the West, *The Professor's House* has never been recognized as her greatest novel because its innovative structure has not been understood. The influential critic Joseph Wood Krutch reviewing the novel in *Nation* declared: "fragmentary and inconclusive, it starts off in several directions but never quite arrives at any of the proposed destinations." He considers the innovative structure a "mistake." Modernism was not yet apparent in the American novel. Krutch had not noticed the literary explosions made just three years before by "The Waste Land" and *Ulysses,* both of which could be described by a linear mind as "fragmentary and inconclusive." Even as late as 1942, Alfred Kazin called the structure of *The Professor's House* "a technical mistake that has damned the book." Krutch and Kazin understood Realism but not Modernism. What is more, neither even recognized allegory. Hawthorne and Melville were over their heads. In this novel Cather was over their heads. A few years later, so were *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* (1930).

The main theme of Cather is a main general theme of American literature, the conflict between the flesh and the spirit in the individual and materialism and idealism in society. There is a direct thematic line from "The Flesh and the Spirit" (1678) by Anne Bradstreet, through Emerson, Hawthorne and Henry James to Willa Cather. In *The Professor's House,* a consistently ironic novel, the professor of history Godfrey St. Peter, is an idealist who teaches the ideals of western civilization in a society abandoning them. His world is breaking in two. His university is abandoning high standards and his wife and daughter Rosy are acquisitive materialists devoted to shopping. His best student Tom Outland, who most embodied his ideals, was killed in World War I. Tom becomes his spiritual guide and ultimately a Christ-evoking figure, while his salvation in this world proves to be his humble seamstress Augusta.

The first part of the novel, about his alienation from his family, ends with St. Peter recalling when Tom Outland was his student and they spent a lot of time talking and studying together in his old house and garden. St. Peter does not want to leave his old house, representing traditional values, and move into the new one his wife has built. In the second part of the novel Tom tells the professor the story of how he discovered the Blue Mesa (Mesa Verde) and a Cliff City inside it that unites humanity with the Earth, Nature and God—a pantheistic paradise, an ideal Garden of the West. The first part of the novel flows naturally into the second—a simple, clear transition--yet the reviewers and critics got lost.

The second part of the novel is much shorter than the first, and the third and last part is much shorter than the second. The novel tapers. The linear story of the Professor is broken in two like his world—form expressing content—but it has a center in "Tom Outland's Story," placed there because (1) it is central to the diminishing life of the Professor; (2) it centers him and the book like a mandala, expressing wholeness; and (3) the image of the Blue Mesa creates what Ezra Pound defined as a "vortex." The following year in *The Sun Also Rises* Hemingway centered his mandala structure with the bullfight metaphor. Five years later in *As I Lay Dying* Faulkner centered his mandala structure with the dying mother Addie. Cather visited Mesa Verde for the first time herself in 1912 and she sent her artist Thea Kronborg there in 1915. The experience was inspirational for both. The Mesa containing the Cliff City became central to Cather's spiritual life—her vision of the ideal.

The Professor's House is Cather's greatest novel because it (1) compresses her Epic of the West into one economical book; (2) bridges past and present with dynamic contrasts; (3) incorporates with multiple ironies the myth of the Garden of the West and the struggle for both psychological and religious salvation by St. Peter; (4) contains multiple coinciding allegories as complex as those of Hawthorne and Melville; (5) is centered like a mandala revealing her own psychology as well as St. Peter's most fully; (6) raises "Tom Outland's Story" into company with literature evoking transcendent consciousness such as *Walden* and *Moby-Dick*; (7) establishes the Blue Mesa as one of the most vivid monadic symbols in American literature, her equivalent of the white whale; (8) is radically innovative and effective in structure; (9) surpasses *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as a novel mainly because the latter is more like the biography of a saint than a novel; (10) wrote the first fully Modernist novel in American literature.

MODERNISM

Willa Cather and Robert Frost were born a year apart, roughly a quarter century before Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Hemingway. They became the two major literary bridges, in American fiction and poetry, between the 19th century and the 20th. Both are among the most deeply rooted of American writers, identified with a place while transcending regionalism--along with Thoreau, Hawthorne, Twain, Black Elk, Faulkner, Welty, and Flannery O'Connor. Other major writers drew inspiration internationally—Melville, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter.

Though rooted deeply in place and tradition, Cather is also a Modernist—see characteristics under Modernism--in (1) affirming ideals, rejecting the materialism of the modern world; (2) transcending society and ego in both her art and her personal life, maintaining privacy more than any other Modernist; (3) striving to be objective and impersonal in order to be universal; self-effacement is a tradition in modern fiction originating with Henry James; (4) thinking internationally, as in telling the stories of European immigrants in America and in writing an epic of Canada. (5) As a Neoclassicist and Realist she believed in universal truth as a literary ideal and (6) rebelled against the conventions of 19th-century Victorianism, in particular with her subject matter and plots; against the overfurnished novel, affirming Neoclassical economy like Ezra Pound and Hemingway; and against the style of explanation as opposed to evocation, again like Hemingway and his iceberg principle. (7) These aesthetics define her mode of Modernism as *holistic realism* (with Frost, Anderson, Hemingway), as distinct from *intellectual expressionism* (Stein, Eliot), disposed to be concrete rather than abstract—though she is also overtly intellectual, unlike Hemingway for example--plain rather than difficult, (8) Her occasional Expressionism is subtle, mainly in metaphorical descriptions. She keeps her (9) unique individuated style as plain, natural, smooth, and transparent as possible, so that you forget you are reading--more evidence of her transcending ego. (10) Although like Eliot she interlaced her writing with classical allusions, her intellectuality is subordinated to her story and does not confuse or distract the reader.

(11) Willa Cather used the "mythic method" more extensively than Eliot did. (12) She wrote the first fully Modernist novel in American literature, with an (13) innovative (14) non-linear structure in *The Professor's House* that is "rounded" like (15) a mandala centered by the Blue Mesa, (16) an image of revelation--a "vortex" as defined by Ezra Pound. (17) At the center of her vortex, countering Eliot's wasteland, is the Cliff City in the desert, made of earth--the most complex symbol of (18) mind and Nature coalescing to be found in the whole Romantic tradition since Coleridge. Each through a separate (19) individuation process, Cather, Outland and St. Peter each attain (20) holistic consciousness on the Mesa. The novel contains 4 coinciding allegories, giving it a (21) complexity and (22) density of meanings that critics have overlooked, making it (23) difficult at least for them. Also in the Romantic tradition absorbed by Modernism, she believes in (24) organic art and Nature as a symbol of spirit, (25) expressed in archetypal allegory such as the journey into the Wilderness, the creation or discovery of a Garden, and the achievement of a Heavenly City--salvation in the Sky. St. Peter's story is also (26) openended.

(27) Cather synthesizes more traditions than any other American writer of the 20th century, including Classical, Platonic, Christian, French novel, German novel, Dutch genre painting, Neoclassical, Romantic, Transcendentalist, Pantheist, Agrarian Pastoral, Realist, Modernist, as well as traditional forms of Music—including sonata and opera. (28) Cather's ideal of perfect art in the transcendental mode of holistic consciousness is embodied in Thea the opera singer, dramatized in "Tom Outland's Story," and sustained

throughout *Death Comes for the Archbishop.* (29) Her Platonic idealism and transcendent tone give her plain style at its best a luminous quality that enlarges significance like the sunlight magnifies the plow in *My Antonia.* (30) Things are symbols of ideas.

My Mortal Enemy (1926)

This is a severe Realist critique of Romanticism that—ironically—in its cautionary theme resembles *The Awakening* (1899) by Kate Chopin, of which Cather disapproved in her review. The story is narrated by a woman who once admired the glamorous Myra Driscoll Henshawe, much as Jim Burden admired the unglamorous Antonia, but unlike Jim she is disappointed by her. Myra renounces a large inheritance to elope for love and winds up alone and poor. When the novel opens she is a vain, worldly, imperious woman in her middle years. In the second half of the story she is 10 years older, crippled, dependent, and near death. She and Oswald Henshawe have moved from New York into a shabby place in California. They prove to be "lovers and enemies at the same time." Myra regrets her romantic choice in youth to elope with Oswald, she turns to Catholicism and dies clutching a crucifix. Cather implies that Myra's mistake was not marriage, but Romanticism—rejecting her family and the past. The critique of passion recalls the tragedy of Emil Bergson and Marie in *O Pioneers!* This novel seems to have been a purgation, a venting of criticism before she rose again in spirit to the top of the Mesa.

Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927)

This is the last volume in her Epic of the West, the most popular of her works, and the most spiritual. Considered by some her greatest novel, it is closely based on the lives of two French missionary priests in New Mexico, Bishop Jean Baptiste L'Amy (1814-1888) and his vicar-general Father Joseph Machebeuf. They are renamed Fathers Latour and Vaillant. One critic called them "Peter and Paul of the desert." The story is told as the old archbishop waits for death, looking back on his life. It may have given Faulkner the concept of *As I Lay Dying* (1930). The narrative is an expression of transcendent consciousness such as Tom Outland attained on the Blue Mesa. It is the culmination of Cather's spiritual development, just as *Four Quartets* (1943) is T. S. Eliot's and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) Hemingway's. All three works are sacramental, expressing in unity, vision, language, themes, form, style and tone the attainment of psychological wholeness—or salvation. Secular critics—Marxists, Feminists, Postmodernists—are too far removed from the sacred to feel it, too far from the Mesa to see it. The repose of the prose in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* expresses the spiritual peace of felt salvation.

LAST NOVELS

According to a poll in 1929, the greatest living American novelists were Edith Wharton and Willa Cather. The poet Wallace Stevens said of Cather, "She's the best we have." Sinclair Lewis called Cather the "greatest American novelist' and when accepting the Nobel Prize in 1930 he said—rightly—that she deserved the honor more than he did.

Shadows on the Rock (1931) is a panoramic historical novel about the civilizing of Canada set in 17th-century Quebec, under French rule. The "shadows" are traditions and folktales of both France and the New World falling upon the "rock"--the solid foundation of the new society, as when St. Peter said "upon this rock I will build my church." As in her Nebraska novels, Cather dramatizes the transplantation of pioneers sinking European roots into new soil. Here she attempts an Epic of Canada in one volume.

Lucy Gayheart (1935) is the poignant tale of a girl from the Platte River country who goes to Chicago, falls in romantic love with a great singer for whom she plays accompaniments, and is devastated when he dies. She learns that "Life" is the only true sweetheart. She must go on living and make the most of it, a moral like that repeated in stories by Henry James. In a bitter irony, just as she has begun to adjust to life again, due to a bit of temper and by chance, she goes out skating on the Platte and breaks through the ice—making the point that we should live as intensely as we can without stomping on the ice.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940) is about a rich white lady in Virginia, an invalid who grows jealous of her slave girl Nancy Till, the mulatto offspring of an affair between a black housekeeper and a traveling

painter who did Sapphira's portrait. Sapphira unjustly suspects that Nancy has designs on her husband. She conspires against her until the slave girl escapes to Canada on the Underground Railroad. The novel is distinguished by its irony, scrupulous characterization, and calm judicious tone.

TRANSCENDENCE

Shakespeare transcended his ego so completely that some people still do not believe he wrote his own plays. Melville in *Moby-Dick* makes transcendence of ego essential to psychological development and spiritual salvation, as it is in all the major religions. Cather became an Episcopalian, much like T. S. Eliot, who declared that poetry "is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." Faulkner once said that he wished he had published his novels anonymously. Joyce says through Daedalus, "The personality of the artist…finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself so to speak." Modernists aspired to objectivity in their art, to transcend the limitations of personal identity in order to be universal. Willa Cather left no diaries, journals, or autobiography. She did not permit any publication or even quotation from letters she wrote to friends and she burned all the letters she could. She wanted to be judged by her art, not by her personal life.

In her most completely transcendent work of art Cather identifies with priests, who were *celibate!* She was conservative by temperament, background, upbringing, religion, and aspiration for transcendence and universality. According to the feminist Nina Baym in *Women's Fiction* (Cornell 1978), at the time Cather grew up, "the liberated woman was sexually liberated, not in the modern sense but in the sense of being liberated from sex" (255). Cather repeatedly criticizes indulging passion. Passion killed Emil and Marie in *O Pioneers!* and destroyed the life of Myra in *My Mortal Enemy.* It is far more likely that Cather remained celibate like her model Henry James probably did, than that she behaved like a lusty Feminist who cannot even imagine abstinence let alone transcendence. The more Feminist critics have projected their fantasies about her private life, the more they have demeaned her and disrespected her transcendence as an artist. They have tried to strip her naked, but they have only exposed themselves. Feminists reduced literary criticism of Cather to a form of lesbian pornography. They are too low to obstruct our view of her art, rising above the plain like the Mesa—the grandeur of Cather.

DEATH

One morning in the Spring of 1947, Willa Cather felt tired in her Park Avenue apartment in New York. She remained in bed and had her lunch brought in. Her partner Edith Lewis said, "Her spirit was high, her grasp of reality as firm as always." That afternoon, alone in her room, Cather suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage and died in bed before Edith got home. She was buried in rural New Hampshire, one of her favorite pastoral retreats. She had chosen the hillside location of her grave with Edith, who lived 25 years longer and was eventually buried beside her.

Michael Hollister (2015)

PLOUGH IN THE SUNSET

"Coronado never did find what he was looking for, but died in the wilderness of a broken heart. But if the spirit of romance had been to this country, so has the spirit of civilization. This is symbolized by the plough against the sun. The agricultural implement is made the symbol of a whole way of life; as it stands with its tongue and shares contained within the circle of the sun it becomes representative of everything Willa Cather has been glorifying. Willa Cather prepares for this symbol, as she does for others, by the use of light as a transfiguring agent. The world as seen under ordinary light, the common light of day, looks as ordinary and commonplace as the pedantic mind can conceive of it as being, but when illuminated by some special kind of light, such as sunset, it becomes transfigured and the real glory that lies latent in everyday things is brought out. In this manner a perfectly ordinary, homely farming tool is made the symbol of a settled agricultural civilization, which is thereby given a kind of cosmic approval.

Coronado and the plough against the sun are two opposites which, taken together, are meant to embrace the whole of life; neither one is sufficient alone, but together they suffice. Coronado had his heart broken by the plains country, but the plough conquered it. In her choice of the plough as a symbol, Willa Cather

shows that the people she is most interested in are not the nomadic pioneers but the tillers of the soil who come after them; her symbol stands in marked contrast to the hunting dog and musket grouped around the dying Leatherstocking at the end of Cooper's novel, *The Prairie* [1827]."

John H. Randall, III
"Interpretation of *My Antonia*"
The Landscape and the Looking Glass
(Houghton 1960)

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 phallocentric 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 booed 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 Rittter, 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

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

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] 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) 56, 132, 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

Michael Hollister (2015)