

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF WILLA CATHER

(1876-1947)

"Miss Cather's second novel....The novel has great dramatic power; it is deep, thrilling, intense—and this intensity comes through the simplicity—one might almost say severity, of treatment."

E.U.S.

"*O Pioneers!* A New Heroine and a New Country Appear"
Boston Evening Transcript
(16 July 1913)

"W. D. Howells should discover this novel by Willa Sibert Cather....It is touched with genius. It is worthy of being recognized as the most vital, subtle and artistic piece of the year's fiction....There is something in her calm yet vivid narrative that seems so profoundly true, a faithfulness not merely to the exterior of life, but to its intimate soul, that it has an extraordinary zest....It is a spirit, an attitude toward life, that in its large and simple honesty has a kind of nobleness."

Floyd Dell

Review of *O Pioneers!*
(25 July 1913)

"Miss Cather is a craftsman whom I have often praised in this place, and with increasing joy. Her work for ten years past has shown a steady and rapid improvement in both matter and manner. She has arrived at last at such a command of the mere devices of writing that the uses she makes of them are all concealed—her style has lost self-consciousness; her feeling for form has become instinctive. And she has got such a grip upon her materials—upon the people she sets before us and the background she displays behind them—that both take on an extraordinary reality."

H. L. Mencken

Review of *My Antonia*
Smart Set (February 1919)

"These early stories are excellent, particularly 'The Sculptor's Funeral,' but Miss Cather has learned a great deal since she wrote them. Her grasp upon character is firmer than it was; she writes with much more ease and grace; above all, she has mastered the delicate and difficult art of evoking the feelings."

H. L. Mencken

Review of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*
Smart Set (December 1920)

"The war she depicts has its thrills and even its touches of plausibility, but at bottom it is fought out not in France but on a Hollywood movie-lot. Its American soldiers are idealists engaged upon a crusade to put down sin; its Germans are imbeciles who charge machine-guns six-deep, in the manner of the war dispatches of the New York *Tribune*. There is a lyrical nonsensicality in it that often glows half pathetic; it is precious near the war of the standard model of lady novelist."

H. L. Mencken

Review of *One of Ours*
Smart Set (October 1922)

"Miss Cather's new novel—*One of Ours*—seems to me a pretty flat failure....She has told us with commendable accuracy almost everything about the engagements she describes except the thing that is vital to the novel—what they did to the soul of Claude....Her books are dull."

Edmund Wilson

"Two Novels of Willa Cather" (1922)
The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties

"Miss Cather does not dissect and explain her people; she presents them, but more, so to speak, from the inside—presents not only their surfaces but their most hidden recesses. This presentation is perhaps less simple and direct, and is accomplished somewhat more by use of implication and symbol, and is more colored or shot through with interpretation—but she is still making 'things and people tell their own story.'...In *O Pioneers!* there is much description and elucidation of character; in *My Antonia* comparatively little, the people being so solidly set before us that little is needed; and in the later novels there is practically none....

Her insistence on objectivity no doubt explains Miss Cather's success in the biography and portrait-painting to which she is inclined in preference to drama...depicted by a multitude of minute touches, none of which in itself seems of much moment. Of this the early chapters of *One of Ours* afford excellent illustrations—work to which justice has not been done because the second half of the book is disappointing....Being primarily a biographer concerned with transmitting a sense of the personalities of her people, Miss Cather is comparatively indifferent to action, whether narrative or dramatic. She eschews exciting incident, and she is sparing of those scenes and deeds in which character is elicited and crystallized and made permanently memorable....For the most part until lately her scenes have tended rather to idyllic picture than to dramatic crisis or stirring action....

In *A Lost Lady* she has achieved an exquisite delicacy without fragility, and in *The Professor's House* she has carved a set of Chinese filigree boxes, one within another, out of a substance as firm as ivory; it would be difficult to find two stories at once more subtle and more powerful than *My Mortal Enemy* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Here is the delicacy and the refinement of mastery, not of weakness; her uncommon union of fineness and strength more than anything else distinguishes her among her contemporaries....

Many signs—her not infrequent sentiment and rare sentimentality, her original difficulty in focusing her subject, her early inclination to irrelevancies, her initial preoccupation with local color, avoidance of big scenes, dramatic crises, and stirring action, and infrequent communication of emotion, and then by implication—all point to a central limitation in Miss Cather....Her style is a case in point. Until her later writing seldom was there emotional tension or lift in her language, seldom did it rise to a dramatic pitch and communicate strong feeling directly....

Miss Cather's way of writing is inconspicuous, as she wishes it to be, and in a sense impersonal. It stands outside the English tradition; its polish is not that shiny gloss imparted by the *eloquentia* which Englishmen have learned from French and Latin. Her style is her own natural mode of expression painstakingly cultivated, and it constitutes a perfectly modulated instrument which can attain to surprising range of compass and volume....For sheer sustained beauty of description I know nothing that surpasses the account of the Blue Mesa in *The Professor's House*—far too lovely and too cumulative to injure by quotation. Here, unless it is the pictorial element in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, is the final triumph of a gift in which Miss Cather has always been eminent, of evoking concrete sensuous imagery, an ability which lends full-bodied solidity as well as beauty to her work....

Usually she sets off society against the background of natural grandeur....The American community, whether family or town or neighborhood, is always the villain of the piece....Modern civilization has entailed the loss of elements essential to an entire human development."

T. K. Whipple
"Willa Cather"
Spokesmen

(1923; New York 1928; Berkeley 1963)

"The most sensuous of writers, Willa Cather builds her imagined world almost as solidly as our five senses build the universe around us. This account of the activities of a French priest who was given a diocese in the southwest...impresses one first of all by its amazing sensory achievement...Great is her accomplishment. That feat of making a composition out of the juxtaposition of different states of being,

which Velasquez was so fond of practicing...Perfectly conveyed is the difference in palpability between things seen and things remembered; as perfectly as those other differences in palpability which became apparent to the senses of the Archbishop as death approached him."

Rebecca West
The Strange Necessity
(1927; Viking 1928)

"She is a writer who can conjure up from the look of a place and the actions of people a narrative as solid as a house, written in prose as surely counterpointed as music. She produced, in *My Antonia*, an undoubted American masterpiece...She is the antithesis of the Romantic artist at odds with himself and the world...To her, the first law of writing is to be yourself and to be natural."

Louise Bogan
"American Classic"
New Yorker
(8 August 1931)

"Miss Cather's mind is basically static and retrospective, rich in images of fixed contours....The characteristic quality of her mind...is not its puritanism or its idealism, but something deeper in which these are rooted."

Clifton Fadiman
Nation
(7 December 1932) 564-65

"Miss Cather's undertakings are never so difficult as Galsworthy's, and her achievements are relatively easy ones. Still, she is an artist of distinction within her narrow range; and the neat composition of books like *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House* (1925) will serve to illustrate our present point."

Joseph Warren Beach
The Twentieth-Century Novel: Studies in Technique
(Appleton-Century-Crofts 1932) 263-64

"[Her] tranquil pictures of prairie and Western town, of Spanish Southwest and Quebec, with storm-buffed ships from France at anchor beneath the Rock, live in a deceptively simple style. Ease and strength do not wholly explain its beauty; into it has entered that contemplative mood which is, quite apart from her experimentation in the later novels with symbolism and other modern techniques, Miss Cather's source of power."

Stanley T. Williams
American Literature
(Lippincott 1933) 150-51
(November 1933)

"Miss Cather's style, grave, flexible, a little austere, wonderfully transparent, everywhere economical, is wonderfully apt for her purposes. There are certain things, to be sure, it cannot do. It cannot register wit or amusement or even humor, save rarely; it never rises to passionate indignation; it lacks earthiness, despite Miss Cather's profound belief in a normal relation with the earth. Dialogue, as she reports it, is seldom more than adequate. But within its boundaries it is beautiful writing, liquid to the ear, lucent to the eye.... There are few to whom the adjective 'classic' can be more truly applied, for beneath the quick sympathy there is a Roman gravity, a sense of the dignity of life which contemporary fiction...has mainly lost."

Howard Mumford Jones
Saturday Review
(6 August 1938) 16

"Willa Sibert Cather has earned a secure and honorable position as one who was an excellent stylist as well as a sympathetic interpreter of humanity...She always expressed herself in an unusually lucid, direct manner, yet with great flexibility and finish. She tended to develop, however, a simplicity which is

sometimes exaggerated and austere; and her preoccupation with style therefore imparted a certain thinness to her later works, even when, as in *Shadows on the Rock*, she invested her work with historical garments."

George K. Anderson and Eda Lou Walton, eds.
This Generation: A Selection of British and American Literature from 1914 to the Present
(Scott, Foresman 1939) 313-14

"At the university Willa Cather had accepted the principles and admired the methods of Henry James, who seemed to her to do flawlessly what she wanted to aim at. In 1907, when she met Sarah Orne Jewett and her friends in Boston, the young plainswoman felt that she, 'an American of the Apache period and territory,' might come among them 'to inherit a Colonial past.'...Miss Jewett's advice had more effect on Willa Cather than the example of Henry James....For every novel she tried to find the form that would fit the hero. She had no set formula....Willa Cather constantly varied her forms. Only her scrupulous concern for reality was unchanging....Some of her books are powerful, some merely graceful. But they are always truthful. And hardly one of them has won thin with time. They were not written in temporary fashions, and had nothing to lose when fashions passed."

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 282-85, 292-93

"After graduation from the University of Nebraska (1895), where her study of Latin may have influenced her graceful Virgilian style, and a period of journalism and high-school teaching, she published a book of poems, *April Twilights* (1903)."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 128-29

"Miss Cather's creative mind ranged widely through literature, and she chose her tradition in craftsmanship, which was French, and her subject matter, which was the heroic but neglected *virtus* of the last pioneers of the unconquered West....Willa Cather, like the greatest of her predecessors among women in English fiction, Jane Austen, was extraordinarily consistent in her art from beginning to end. She did not experiment except within the limits of her purpose; she knew exactly what she wanted to do. And this can be described in her own words from a book *Not Under Forty* (1936), in which she recorded her admiration for her master in the art of fiction, Gustave Flaubert, and for her older contemporary, Sarah Orne Jewett....

Willa Cather discarded plot from the beginning. She yielded to her subject matter, content to evoke its cadences, its qualities, its stream of significant experience. Even the poignant death of the lovers in *O Pioneers!*, surely one of the notable scenes in English literature, is known only by its preliminaries and its evidences, as if to have made it a climax of a plot would have detracted from its perfect place in a chronicle of a land so immature, so hard that passion could find only a thwarted release. Therefore, from beginning to end, the Cather novels are not stories of plot, but chronicles, given a depth and significance lacking in the merely historical chronicle by that 'sympathy' which leads to a perfect interplay of environment and character. Her art was essentially a representation of this reaction between the soul of man and its environment. That is why the best of her stories are told against the land—the sweep of red grass on the rolling plains of Nebraska."

Henry Seidel Canby
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1212-16

"Perched between two eras she could see the true and the false in each; though...in the press of the 'new writing' her own best work, produced between 1918-1931, was passed over by the 'revolutionaries' whom it might have benefited most....An admirer of Proust, Mann, Stravinsky, and the modern painters especially, she could detect the obscurantism of many of their camp followers...by holding to the traditional as a base she enlarged rather than restricted her area of mobility, and was constantly and quietly experimenting....Unlike many women of talent she never got lost in the jade rooms of sensibility. Her prose, primitive yet articulate, neither circumlocutory nor infantile, is always clear, and even at its most

musical never evaporates into just sound. It is charged with that echoing vibration she sought as one of the definitions of a literary art....She is one of our few writers who can be reread with increasing excitement and pleasure, and her rank, however modest, is assured in that catholic hierarchy she so much respected: Tolstoy, Turgenev, the French prose masters of the nineteenth century, and the Americans, Hawthorne, Twain, Jewett and James.”

George Schloss
“A Writer’s Art”
The Hudson Review III.1
(Spring 1950)

“‘Paul’s Case’ was good from every point of view. Original, a vivid character study of a boy who would be considered today a subject for a psychiatrist. It was well written—imagery, rhythm of phrase. Moreover, the story had caught the very tone of Pittsburgh as I knew it.... I knew how Paul felt...As soon as I was settled at home I began making enquiries and soon discovered that she was indeed living in my own neighborhood, a member of a certain well-known judge’s household....

She set Flaubert’s objectivity, restraint, and rhythmic sense far above the unmeasured outpourings of Balzac. And she was naturally deeply impressed by the great Russian realists....Willa Cather had taken an apartment on Bank Street in Greenwich Village and there I often saw her....Through the hard patient discipline of work she achieved beauty of style: a simplicity and clarity that are the perfection of art, brushed lightly with poetry, so lightly that you know it only because scenes and passages linger in your mind like strains of music.”

Elizabeth Moorhead
“The Novelist”
These Two Were Here: Louise Homer and Willa Cather
(U Pittsburgh 1950)

“‘Neighbour Rosicky’ is a character sketch projected through the arrangement of symbolic incidents. The last years of this wise and kindly old Czech farmer in Nebraska are described so as to develop a sense of what such a life stood for in terms of a satisfactory adjustment to the demands both of nature and of one’s fellow men. Its earthiness almost neutralizes the incipient sentimentality, and the relation of the action to its context in agricultural life gives the story an elemental quality that is lacking in the thinner accounts of the artist’s life that we find in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. The story opens with Rosicky in the doctor’s office, being told to take things easy because he has a weak heart, and it ends with his death after he has ignored the doctor’s advice by raking thistles out of an alfalfa field.”

David Daiches
“The Short Stories”
Willa Cather
(Cornell 1951)

“Mr. Maxwell Geismar wrote a book about her and some others called *The Last of the Provincials*. Not having read it I do not know his argument; but he has a case: She is a provincial; and I hope not the last. She was a good artist, and all true art is provincial in the most realistic sense: Of the very time and place of its making, out of human beings who are so particularly limited by their situation, whose faces and names are real and whose lives begin each one at an individual unique center. Indeed, Willa Cather was a provincial as Hawthorne or Flaubert or Turgenev, as little concerned with aesthetics and as much with morals as Tolstoy, as obstinately reserved as Melville. In fact she always reminds me of very good literary company....She is a curiously immovable shape, monumental, virtue itself in her work and a symbol of virtue—like certain churches, in fact, or exemplary women, revered and neglected.”

Katherine Anne Porter
The Days Before
(Harcourt 1952) 72-73

“She is, we are told, the historian of the Nebraska frontier. And though her workmanship is exquisite, her range is narrow....Far beyond that of most novelists, Willa Cather’s was the artist’s approach to life. The concrete held her, never the abstract; human beings, human consciousness. Like Neil Herbert, in A

Lost Lady, she was concerned not with what men have thought but with what they have felt and lived; even her 'anchors' were not ideas but 'merely pictures, vivid memories.'...She was helpless when it came to sexual love....*Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) is *My Antonia*'s only possible rival as Miss Cather's most important book....one of the most lambent and luminous narratives in American literature."

Edward Wagenknecht
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*
(Holt 1952) 319, 321-27, 329-30

"Her vision is of essences. In her earlier novels the essential subject, a state of mind or feelings, was enveloped in the massiveness of the conventional realistic novel. It was there but it was muffled. Then she saw that if she abandoned the devices of massive realism, if she depended on picture and symbol and style, she could disengage her essential subject and make it tell upon the reader with a greater directness and power, help it to remain uncluttered in his mind. The things that pass, the things that merely adhere to states of mind and feeling, she began to use with a severe and rigid economy. Her fiction became a kind of symbolism, with the depths and suggestions that belong to symbolist art, and with the devotion to a music of style and structure for which the great symbolists strove, Pater and Moore and the later Henry James."

E. K Brown
Willa Cather
(Knopf 1953) 340

"Like Henry James and Sarah Orne Jewett, to whom she acknowledged her indebtedness, she always thought of storytelling in qualitative terms and her work was a constant striving for perfection. In 'The Novel Demeuble,' first published in *The New Republic* for April 12, 1922, she expounded her doctrine that literary art is primarily a matter of selection and simplification, the learning of when to subordinate detail to the desired effect. The effects which she chiefly sought were in the realm of subtleties of character and situation. She was akin to James in her aims, but was perhaps more aware than he was of the importance of setting and of physical action; she was, in short, somewhat closer to tradition and on the whole more popular. Seldom if ever, however, did she compromise with her artistic conscience. It is easy to complain of her limited range and to question the ethical and social bases of her thinking, but no one is likely to deny her integrity."

Theodore Hornberger
The Literature of the United States II, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1171

"*My Mortal Enemy* (1926), *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) are minor works only in the comparative sense. Each is a penetrating study of a woman, and each in some degree, but especially *My Mortal Enemy*, illustrates her invention of "the novel demeuble"—the novel stripped of superfluous characters and circumstances in order to emphasize a single individual. Willa Cather was well recognized by her contemporaries, if never quite enough."

Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, eds.
The American Tradition in Literature II, 3rd edition
(Norton 1953-67) 1109-1111

"Although not a major novelist in scope and design, she had an artist's vision of the life she portrayed and was particularly successful in the shorter forms, such as the tales included in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920) and the three novelettes of prairie life that make up *Obscure Destinies* (1932). Her style is elegiac, her manner retrospective. Late in her career she elaborated a theory of the 'unfurnished' novel, by which she sought to return her fiction to simple storytelling in revolt against the overloaded novels of British and American Naturalism. This was largely an effort to justify her own attempt to convey in her fiction a poetic mood, a nostalgic emotion, rather than to paint a social scene."

Lillian Herlands Hornstein, Ed.

"Until Willa Cather wrote her stories, no one had ever conveyed a sense of the teeming aesthetic resources of the multi-racial West, the dawning talents of the new immigrant strains that were beginning to find expression...Her gift of evocation and what Vachel Lindsay called her 'passion for the skyline' had something soft, wild and free about it. Sometimes her note was elegiac, sometimes idyllic, while her style, so luminous, buoyant and fresh, recalled the fragrance of sage-brush and clover, the wind and the snowy peaks flashing against the sky."

Van Wyck Brooks and Otto L. Bettmann
Our Literary Heritage: A Pictorial History of the Writer in America
(Dutton 1956) 209

"In all the tales of regional America that have been produced in the past forty years nothing has exceeded her skill in evoking the place-spirit of rural America in her finest books—*My Antonia*, *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*....The full-bodied and heavily documented novel was never congenial to Miss Cather; she rightly understood her art to be one of elimination and selection, which eventually meant that it was an art of simplification and didactic idealization. *The Song of the Lark* and *One of Ours* drag with detail. *My Antonia* and *A Lost Lady* are her finest successes because there her selection defines, suggests, and evokes without falsely idealizing....No one who read her books between 1915 and 1930 can forget their poetry of evocation and retrospective beauty—no sensitive reader can miss it today."

Morton D. Zabel
"Willa Cather: The Tone of Time"
Craft and Character in Modern Fiction
(Viking 1957)

"In style Miss Cather's work is restrained and artistic; she has a subtle feeling for words and avoids the awkwardness of the more 'elemental' naturalists. Although she once declared that in writing *O Pioneers!*, the first of her mature novels, she decided 'not to write at all' and merely to concentrate on telling the story, her prose is actually carefully thought out and subtly arranged. She is a classic stylist, even in her theory of economy: 'Art, it seems to me, should simplify,' she wrote. When she revised *The Song of the Lark* in 1937, twenty-two years after its original publication, her main changes consisted of deletion of detail, superfluous documentation which she felt detracted from the central effect of the work. Sometimes, especially in her later novels, her style seems almost skeletal...Here she is closer to Crane and Hemingway and to the Norwegian Knut Hamsun than she is to other American regionalists of the type of Faulkner and Steinbeck, or to her early model Henry James.

When Miss Cather's novels have a weakness it is generally in construction. Frequently they include disparate elements which she does not quite succeed in combining (e.g., *One of Ours*, the early farm scenes and the later account of the European war); at other times she seems to have trouble with point-of-view problems, for instance the device of describing Antonia through the eyes of Jim Burden often causes the reader's attention to be distracted from the central drama of the story. Other novels (*Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Shadows on the Rock*) are episodic and lack any single strong plot to tie them together; their unity is one of theme rather than of story. Her novels are often divided into 'books' or sections which are unified works of art in themselves; this suggests that her talent was primarily that of a writer of novelettes and stories, which she combined to the best of her ability to make into novels."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 189-92

"Many critics have complained about the restraint of Miss Cather's prose style, calling it the result of a spinsterish fear of coming to terms with life. It may be closer to the truth, however, to say that her early study of the classics gave her an ingrained distaste for Romantic bombast; certainly her portrayals of the moral victories of the pioneers, the calm certitude that follows a hard struggle, are well served by her quiet manner."

Max J. Herzberg and staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 160

"Willa Cather's secure work is recollective and memorial. Except as a register of incontrovertible past impressions her moral intelligence is uninteresting."

Warner Berthoff [urban liberal]
The Ferment of Realism: American Literature, 1884-1919
(Macmillan/The Free Press 1965) 258

"According to a survey conducted in 1929 by John Stalnaker and Fred Eggan, Willa Cather was ranked first in 'general literary merit,' Edith Wharton second."

James Schroeter, ed.
Willa Cather and Her Critics
(Cornell 1967) xiii

"Cather specifically rejected the realism she associated with a journalist's itemization of facts. She worked more closely with the modernist writers of her generation, who approached their subjects by means of suggestion and the power of descriptive language. But however oblique her treatment, Cather's analysis of why we dream of something better and of how those dreams result in courage and not in defeat makes her narratives of hopeful immigrants and sensitive carriers of culture seem accurate deep down at the bone of truth."

Martha Banta
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1033

"Her subtle prose style and careful handling of narrative grew from her admiration for the work of...writers such as Hawthorne, Flaubert...and James. Willa Cather's distinguished writing connects twentieth-century American literature with its own past as well as with its European roots...While Willa Cather's reputation as a writer rests on her novels, she wrote over sixty short stories as well...The three stories in *Obscure Destinies*—'Neighbor Rosicky,' 'Old Mrs. Harris,' and 'Two Friends'—were written at the height of Cather's career as a novelist and show her fully in command of her craft... 'Old Mrs. Harris' is both Cather's favorite among all her stories and the most autobiographical work she ever wrote. It is a coming-of-age story for a young woman, with a narrative point of view reminiscent of Sarah Orne Jewett's 'A White Heron.' Today critics argue that 'Old Mrs. Harris' is Willa Cather's finest piece of writing of the 1930s."

Margaret Anne O'Connor
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(Heath 1990) 1039-41

"She despised political art...and the best young critics were mostly Marxists, or at least committed leftists....Not only did she ignore economics, she ignored sex...Cather was already marked as old-fashioned by her prairie novels....What these people wanted were novels that would mirror their postwar disillusionment, the way *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises* did. They wanted experimentalism, subjectivity: James Joyce...Woolf...[Cather] wrote in a prose that looked decidedly nonexperimental—pure, classical, like something carved from white marble....Her austere style is part of Modernist classicism; her tragic vision, part of Modernist pessimism. But the nobility of her characters, and the privacy she allows them, are an inheritance from the nineteenth century, one that did not go down well in the twenties...Basically there were two interpretations. Either she was the Prairie Elegist—'the voice of the old unravaged prairie and the human spirit' (Leon Edel)—or she was the Classical/Christian Idealist, whose art was 'essentially one of gazing beyond the immediate scene to a timeless sky.'"

Joan Acocella
Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism
(U Nebraska 2000) 3, 17, 24, 22-23, 34

“She was regarded as insufficiently Modernist, both in method and in outlook...Her prose was confidently cadenced and classically pure, never—like that of Hemingway or Faulkner—calling attention to itself, but instead devoted to illuminating her characters and their landscapes. (No one described landscape more beautifully than she.) Snobbery, egotism, politics never marred her storytelling. She wrote with a fine eye for the particular without ever losing sight of the larger scheme of the game of life...‘As one grows older,’ she wrote to the Nebraska editor Will Owen Jones, ‘one cares less about clever writing and more about a simple and faithful presentation.’...

Sarah Orne Jewett, the author of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, had once advised the young Willa Cather to ‘write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up...And to write and work on this level, we must live on it—we must at least recognize it and defer to it at every step. We must be ourselves, but we must be our best selves.’...

‘People say I have a “classic style,”’ Cather wrote to Roscoe, another of her four brothers. ‘A few of them know it’s the heat under the words that counts.’ A feeling for the English sentence, she felt, was ‘the beginning of everything.’ Style, she believed, was ‘merely the writer, not the *person* himself; what he was born with and what he has done to himself.’ Admiration and love for her subjects were strong ingredients in her writing. ‘I can write successfully only when I write about people or places that I very greatly admire; which, indeed, I actually love.’ Real feeling was at the heart of great writing for her, though of course it took ‘skill to get that feeling across to many people in many languages, but the strong feeling that comes out of the living heart is the thing *most necessary—and most rarely found.*’

Joseph Epstein
“The Selected Letters of Willa Cather”
American Spectator.com
(21 September 2013)

Michael Hollister (2015)