

50 CRITICS DISCUSS

Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

"A new heroine and a new country appear in *O Pioneers!*, 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.... *O Pioneers!* has many missions: it is a disclosure of the splendid resources in our immigrant population; it is the revelation of a changed and changing country; it is, indirectly perhaps, an embodiment of the feminist theory; and, finally, it is more than worth reading for its literary value."

E.U.S.

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

"It would be a gratifying result of the enterprise of our American academicians if a committee headed by 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!*
Chicago Evening Post
(25 July 1913)

"Miss Cather, indeed, here steps definitely into the small class of American novelists who are seriously to be reckoned with. Her *Alexander's Bridge* was full of promise, and her *O Pioneers!* showed the beginnings of fulfillment. In *The Song of the Lark* she is already happily at ease, a competent journeyman. I have read no late novel, in fact, with a greater sense of intellectual stimulation. Especially in the first half, it is alive with sharp bits of observation, sly touches of humor, gestures of that gentle pity which is the fruit of understanding."

H. L. Mencken
Review of *The Song of the Lark*
Smart Set (January 1916)

"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. I know of no novel that make the remote folk of the western prairies more real than *My Antonia* makes them, and I know of none that makes them seem better worth knowing."

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. A touch of the maudlin lingers in 'Paul's Case' and in 'Death in the Desert.' It is wholly absent from 'Coming, Aphrodite!' and 'Scandal,' as it is from *My Antonia*. These last, indeed, show utterly competent

workmanship in every line. They are stories that lift themselves completely above the level of current American fiction, even of good fiction. They are the work of a woman who, after a long apprenticeship, has got herself into the front rank of American novelists, and is still young enough to have her best writing ahead of her. I call *My Antonia* to your attention once more. It is the finest thing of its sort ever done in America."

H. L. Mencken
Review of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*
Smart Set (December 1920)

"Willa Cather's best work is satisfying because it is sincere. In her books, there is none of the sweet reek that pervades the pages of so many 'lady novelists.' Love, to her, is 'not a simple state, like measles.' Her treatment of sex is without either squeamishness or sensuality. She loves the west, and the arts, particularly music, and she has sought to express feelings and convictions on these subjects. She tried, failed, and kept on trying until she succeeded."

Latrobe Carroll
Bookman
(May 1921) 215

"Unluckily for Miss Cather, she seems to have read *Three Soldiers* [Dos Passos, 1921] inattentively, if at all. 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)

"Can H. L. Mencken have been mistaken when he decided that Willa Cather was a great novelist? I have not read *My Antonia*—which is said to be her best book—but I have not been able to find anything in her last two that seemed to bear out this description. 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....

If *One of Ours* only had more vitality, it might figure as a standard and a stimulus, as, for the limited number of people who have read it, James Joyce's *Ulysses* has done. It might serve to shame the 'younger novelists' from their sloppiness and their facility; but, as it is, they can evade the moral of Willa Cather's example by complaining that her books are dull. And, unfortunately, one cannot deny it."

Edmund Wilson
"Two Novels of Willa Cather" (1922)
The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties
(Random House/Bantam 1961) 39-41

[*One of Ours* is] "a romance of violinists gallantly turned soldier, of self-sacrificing sergeants, sallies at midnight."

Sinclair Lewis
"A Hamlet of the Plains"
New York Evening Post
(16 September 1922) 33

"E. E. Cummings' *Enormous Room* was the best book published last year that I read. Somebody told me it was a flop. Then look at *One of Ours*. Prize, big sale, people taking it seriously. You were in the war weren't you? Wasn't that last scene in the lines wonderful? Do you know where it came from? The battle scene in *Birth of a Nation*. I identified episode after episode. Catherized. Poor woman she had to get her war experience somewhere."

Ernest Hemingway

"To the query whether it is possible for an artist to exist in the United States, the best answer would be: Go read Miss Cather... With *A Lost Lady*, Miss Cather arrived at what can only be called perfection in her art.... 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....

Her most recent writing, to be sure, may indicate some development on Miss Cather's part, for in *Tom Outland's story* and still more in some of the episodes of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* there is more narrative interest, and in *My Mortal Enemy*, there is tenser drama... 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....

Among Miss Cather's protagonists, the women have a peculiar kinship with the land: they are simple, primeval, robust with a strain of hardness, heroic. Alexandra is a heroine of the Sagas, Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark* has the integrity of a single driving force, Antonia is elemental motherhood.... On the other hand, the young men in the early books, including Claude Wheeler of *One of Ours* and Neil Herbert of *A Lost Lady*, are antipathetic to the environment; they are sensitive, artistic, idealistic, deficient in force if not weaklings, fitted to thrive in favorable conditions but unable to conquer difficulties....

Yet her favorite theme persists throughout: the conflict of the superior individual with an unworthy society....Her view is that the pioneers in general were folk largely endowed with creative power and imagination, but that the second generation, except for a few artists who have inherited the spirit of the fathers, has degenerated and succumbed to the tyranny of ease and money and things. 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.... All her chief characters have the poetic point of view, and are forced by their viewpoint into conflict with their families and neighbors.... If some of her books suffer in comparison with those of writers who have grown in a more fertile society, yet they are richer and more varied than those of any other living American novelist—they are opulence itself compared with those, say, of Sherwood Anderson.”

T. K. Whipple
“Willa Cather”

Spokesmen
(1923; New York 1928; Berkeley 1963)

“[Her development was] the victory of mind over Nebraska.... She looks back lovingly to a pioneer West, as the cradle of heroic lives. An epic breadth of prairie spaces and industrious years, with a note of regret... Against this background she sets her immigrant women, with their vigor and wealth of life, and considers how the West has dealt with them.... A long-ignored theme—the lot of the immigrant who has come on a desperate adventure—the struggle of the children with the soil... Has matured slowly. The Troll Garden (1905) and Alexander’s Bridge (1912) are inconsequential. Her real work done late. Belongs to no school. Is neither naturalistic or romantic.... An individual artist, sincere, capable; an excellent craftsman. O Pioneers! (1913).... The tragic ending handled with great skill....One who had not lived through similar experiences and loved the memory could not write so....The Song of the Lark (1915)....The most convincing story of artist life written by an American.... One of Ours (1922)....The war atmosphere seems curiously old-fashioned.”

Vernon L. Parrington
Main Currents in American Thought III
(Harcourt 1927, 1930) 383-84

“One is reminded constantly...while one is reading Death Comes for the Archbishop by its similarity in material to some of the recent work of Mr. D. H. Lawrence. Both come face to face with the Indian and find there is no face there but an unclimbable cliff, giving no foothold, like the side of a mesa; but each takes it so differently.... 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 practising... 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)

“Her worst novel, *One of Ours*, received a Pulitzer Prize because in that year her worst novel was better than everybody else’s masterpiece.”

William Lyon Phelps
Yale University
presenting Cather with honorary degree of Doctor of Letters (1929)

“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...She has not needed to expatriate herself in order to do her work, and she is as scornful of expatriate writers as she is of literary cliques and cabals.... Her first novel had opened with a description of a

gentleman on his way to a tea party on Beacon Hill. Her second, in its first sentence, disclosed a Nebraska town in a high gale of wind. For Miss Cather, the wind was at last blowing in the right direction.... 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. She is preeminently an artist dominated by her sense of the past, seeking constantly, through widely differing symbolisms, to recapture her childhood and youth. A sort of reverence for her own early years goes, hand in hand, with her Virgilian ancestor-worship; and out of this has flowered her finest work.”

Clifton Fadiman
Nation
(7 December 1932) 564-65

“There is more of the splendor and terror, the flutter and glimmer and vitality of human experience in one chapter of [D. H.] Lawrence than in whole volumes of Willa Cather....The novels of Willa Cather have almost always a single center of interest. In *A Lost Lady* (1923), which is probably, all things considered, her best piece of work, it is that Mrs. Forrester whose charm and weakness are both portrayed with so much humanness and delicacy of touch.... I do not mean for a moment to suggest a parity between the delicate and shallow pencilings of Miss Cather and the really serious social studies of Mr. Galsworthy....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

“As detached as Mrs. Wharton, as forceful as Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, in novels revealing influences so different as the frontier, George Sand, and Sarah Orne Jewett, breathes upon us, not anger, not despair, but calm and peace. She recalls the scenes of her youth when she saw the Bohemian immigrant battling with the Nebraska prairie (*My Antonia*, 1918). Or she portrays the soul’s starvation of Thea Kronberg, born for music (*The Song of the Lark*, 1915). The neurotic boy, the agony of the pioneer, the bigotry of the small town, death by the bayonet in the trenches, the futility of outward achievement, and, indeed, all the outrageous fortunes bewailed by our neurotic novelists, are in her pages.

But *Antonia* is close to the earth, Claude, Professor St. Peter, Mrs. Forrester, Auclair, Old Rosicky, and all her other ‘people,’ as she calls her characters, have fulfillment; they drink deep of life and find it good. This sense of the past, this conviction that the roots of life are sweet, this water from the deepest springs of the race—these intuitions ennoble the novels of Miss Cather. Moreover, 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 technique, Miss Cather’s source of power.”

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

“The two successors of *O Pioneers!*—*The Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia*—closely resemble it... Both depend upon a mystical conception of the frontier, and both look back longingly to the heroism of earlier days....The earlier chapters of *One of Ours* describe a sensitive Nebraskan boy in the years before the war....Though he seems capable of a heroic idealism, his life is miserable and futile. Then the war

comes, and he enlists, goes forth to battle in heroic mood, and dies a hero's death. Thus Miss Cather, thanks to a romantic and naïve conception of the war, was able to approximate her favorite theme. But the second part bears no relation to the issues raised in the account of Claude's unhappiness in Nebraska. For Miss Cather, as for Claude, the war provides an escape from apparently insoluble problems....

Miss Cather has never once tried to see contemporary life as it is; she sees only that it lacks what the past, at least in her idealization of it, had. Thus she has been barred from the task that has occupied most of the world's great artists, the expression of what is central and fundamental in her own age.... Miss Cather, we see, has simply projected her own desires into the past: her longing for heroism, her admiration for natural beauty, her desire—intensified by pre-occupation with doubt and despair—for the security of an unquestioned faith. What is true of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is also true of *Shadows on the Rock*. Miss Cather has again created her ideal frontier and peopled it with figments of her imagination. The construction is even weaker, the events even more trivial, the style even more elegiac, the characters even less credible. The book has a certain sort of charm, for Miss Cather's dreams have beauty and are not without nobility, and it has brought consolation to many readers who share her unwillingness to face the harshness of our world....

Twenty years ago Willa Cather had no need of exposition, for her themes were implicit in her material, but now her romantic dreams involve the distortion of life, and she cannot permit the material to speak for itself.... She frankly abandoned her efforts and surrendered to the longing for the safe and romantic past.... If, to the qualities Miss Cather displayed in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, had been added the robustness of a Dreiser or the persistence of an Anderson, not only survival but growth would have been possible. But the sheltered life seldom nurtures such qualities. She has preferred the calm security of her dreams, and she has paid the price."

Granville Hicks [Marxist]
"The Case Against Willa Cather"
English Journal
(November 1933)

"It is idle to try to classify her neatly as a realist, or a 'novelist of character,' or as one who went 'beyond naturalism,' as a satirist or a romanticist. She is all of these things. She is Willa Cather, mobile, capable, sometimes great, always clear-cut, and most of the time interesting, a social commentator whose pen is never sharp enough to hurt anybody, and whose vision is frequently inspiring. In her court the human race is acquitted of the most serious charges against it and given a character. It is very grateful for it, being in sore need."

Harlan Hatcher
Creating the Modern American Novel
(Farrar & Rinehart 1935) 59

"Miss Cather's turn to the ideals of a vanished time is the weary response to weariness, to that devitalization of spirit which she so brilliantly describes in the story of Professor St. Peter. It is a weariness which comes not merely from defeat but from an exacerbated sense of personal isolation and from the narrowing of all life to the individual's sensitivities, with the resulting loss of the objectivity that can draw strength from seeking the causes of things."

Lionel Trilling
After the Genteel Tradition
Malcolm Cowley, ed.
(Norton 1937) 61-62

"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

"Among the prominent women writers of the present generation—and there have been a great many of them—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....Her literary following has always been reliable and devoted.... *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) [is] probably her masterpiece....

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. Her best work undoubtedly comprises those books which began with *O Pioneers!* and ended with *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. In these there is a quiet approach to life, fully sensitive to its beauty but not ignoring the mean, ignoble, and ungracious. She is realistic implicitly rather than explicitly but is none the less effective because she leaves much to the reader's imagination."

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. The elder woman knew from the first that the younger would sooner or later write about her own country.... Willa Cather later found her way, in *O Pioneers!* (1913), by trying to tell the story of her characters as if she were talking about them to Miss Jewett....The novel itself was, whether consciously or not, an allegory of the conflict in Willa Cather herself between her instinctive love for her native place and her deliberate appetite for other regions....

Alexandra drags her dull brothers after her and establishes the family fortunes. Antonia, less positive and more pathetic, still holds the center of her retired stage by her rich, warm, deep goodness. Thea, a genius in her own right, outgrows her Colorado birthplace and becomes a famous singer with the fierce energy of a pioneer who happens to be an instinctive artist rather than an instinctive manager, like Alexandra, or an instinctive mother, like Antonia....Willa Cather's pioneers are in several respects like the artists of her earlier and later stories. They are alike in their single-mindedness. They work much by themselves, contending with hard obstacles and looking forward, if they win, to a freedom seldom achieved in crowded communities....

Though Willa Cather admired orderly, comely, fruitful societies, her passion was for heroic individuals. She preferred them to be heroic, she demanded that they be individual. Her characters were too specific ever to be mistaken for types. She drew no caricatures. If she had to choose between form and reality she chose reality. 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. The realities which interested her were not all equally interesting to others. 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).... *A Lost Lady* (1923) differs from Miss Cather's previous studies

of women in the Middle West in that the heroine's grace, charm, and cultivated taste place her above and apart from the new grasping generation that succeeds the era of pioneers.... *My Mortal Enemy* (1926) is a short novel concerned with a selfish and strong-willed woman who brings about her own downfall. The author's idealism and love of the past reach a climax in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), her celebration of the spiritual pioneering of the Catholic Church in New Mexico."

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

"Willa Cather's traditionalism was...anything but the arbitrary or patronizing opposition to contemporary ways which Irving Babbitt personified. It was a candid and philosophical nostalgia, a conviction and a standard possible only to a writer whose remembrance of the world of her childhood and the people in it was so overwhelming that everything after it seemed drab and more than a little cheap. Her distinction was not merely one of cultivation and sensibility; it was a kind of spiritual clarity possible only to those who suffer their loneliness as an act of the imagination and the will...Later, as it seemed, she became merely sentimental, and her direct criticism of contemporary types and manners was often petulant and intolerant. But the very intensity of her nostalgia had from the first led her beyond nostalgia; it had given her the conviction that the values of the world she had lost were the primary values, and everything else merely their degradation."

Alfred Kazin
On Native Grounds
(Reynal 1942) 250-51

"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....In 1923 *A Lost Lady*, her most skillful though not her most powerful work; in 1927, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, her masterpiece....

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....

Her youthful background in the unmade West, and her sensitiveness to the pervasive influence of new land upon European man, made her the summer-up of our long tradition of local color, now felt to be part of the history of a great country. And her feeling for vital passion in any of its forms (passion, she says, is what she seeks in all her stories), gave her power over a theme unique in the nineteenth century, the overflow of vigorous men and women from the Old World into new country."

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

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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.... Her own absorption in her people and her land creates the suspense that she herself has felt....She is preservative, almost antiquarian, content with much space in little room—feminine in this, and in her passionate revelation of the values which conserve the life of the emotions.”

Henry Seidel Canby
Saturday Review
(10 May 1947) 23-24

“From the whole range of Cather’s values, standards, tastes, and prejudices, her tone is that of an inherent aristocrat in an equalitarian order, of an agrarian writer in an industrial order, of a defender of the spiritual graces in the midst of an increasingly materialistic culture....Selecting and enhancing the most subtle effects of wealth, she has, rather like Sam Dodsworth’s wife, either looked down upon or ignored the whole process of creating wealth. Writing so discretely about the age when business was a personal adventure, she has neglected to mention the most typical forms of the adventure.”

Maxwell Geismar
The Last of the Provincials
(Houghton 1947) 217-18

“While she rejected the world of the garage and the modern department store, she also rebelled against the ‘well-furnished novel.’ The novel must henceforth be ‘demeuble’; it must be spare, dry, uncluttered. As the style ‘improved,’ the setting became more starkly simple, the problem more simply posed and more simply answered. The novel was no longer to be like *The Song of the Lark* (1915); *One of Ours* (1922) was the last of the ‘furnished’ novels, and even it possessed furnishings of a uniform grayness and drabness.

Miss Cather had from the beginning tried for a strict definition of manners; it was partly a non-Jamesian expression of a Jamesian taste, partly a morally useful metaphor of the land. In her most famous novels of the prairie states she developed her own kind of international theme: it was the Old World that advanced into the New, settled it, fought its recalcitrance, tutored it, and eventually reduced it to nearly classical squares, triangles, and rectangles of fertile soil....

Miss Cather, in *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia*, offers a land myth and a land goddess to rule it: a noble creature, strong, patient, robust, sensitive, and enduring, who undergoes a symbolic courtship with the land. The land at first coerces the heroine, but at last she is able to dominate it. It then becomes metaphorically ‘polite,’ civilized, classically ordered, and religiously fertile. It acquires a ‘manner,’ and the result is a noble, creative, and productive unity of man and nature. Like most carefully wrought designs, this pattern of decorum and fertility is threatened from without. The ugly, venal, amoral cities offer another way of life, a deceptively easy and distracting one. But the cities are not communities; they are huge congested areas in which man lives and dies in isolation—dies frequently of isolation. The exploiter—the man who sells what other men make, the man who is interested only in calculating risks and profits—is the villain: Ivy Peters of *A Lost Lady* (1923), whose instinctive sense of business contrasts eloquently with the grand manner of Captain Forrester; Bayliss Wheeler who is merely a servant of industry and the machine.

From her reflections upon the moral and religious significance of the pioneer scene, Miss Cather suggests her ideal pattern of morality and decorum. Her hero or heroine has a strong sense of what is proper: great sensitivity (which by itself, however, often leads to disaster), great strength and courage, an almost superhuman talent for heroic struggle and fortitude, most of all, a faith, which is realized in the fertility rites of the seasons on the land, the sowing and the harvest, and in ceremonials) both secular customs and religious rituals), which are accepted without question or skepticism.”

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(1949; Viking/Collier 1962) 182-83

“Admired, even honored while alive, Miss Cather is still neglected. In many of the more important studies of current literature she is hardly mentioned.... Serene in her own confidence, neither brittle nor folksy, she avoided the two traps that often waylay the American: the tenuousness of an excessive alienation or the bluntness of regional chauvinism.... Perched between two eras she could see the true and

the false in each; though unhappily, 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....

And 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)

"To Willa Cather the past was significant for its moral qualities, and only gradually did romanticism triumph over morality. Throughout her long literary life she was engaged in an elaborate remembrance of things past—the past of the pioneers who had built the West, of the immigrants who had carried with them into the New World their sense of beauty and art, of those earlier spiritual pathfinders, the Franciscans and Jesuits, who had served their fellow-men and their God so selflessly. And all her novels and stories—those of the Arcadian Virginia of her childhood, of the golden Nebraska of her youth, of the New York she had known as a young journalist, of the shimmering Southwest that belonged to the past even in the present, and the Quebec that seemed to have only a past—were animated by a single great theme as they were graced by a single felicitous style. The theme was that of the supremacy of moral and spiritual over material values, the ever recurrent but inexhaustible theme of gaining the whole world and losing one's soul....

The tradition that she so triumphantly maintained was peculiarly American, the standards to which she so instinctively conformed those that had sufficed her mentors, Sarah Orne Jewett and Henry James and, in an earlier day, Hawthorne. Her roots were deep in the American and the Christian past; she had inherited the best of Virginia... Miss Cather rejected the 'overfurnished' novel as she rejected the overfurnished countryside—rejected alike the furniture of sociology, of psychology, and of physiology, for 'a novel crowded with physical sensations is no less a catalogue than one crowded with furniture.' She thought the traditional themes of love and despair, truth and beauty, the struggle with the soil and the struggle for artistic honesty, far from exhausted; indeed she held, with Henry James and Ellen Glasgow, that these were the only themes capable of inspiring great art....

Just as [Frederick Jackson] Turner, when he placed himself on the vantage point of the frontier, was able to see the significance of the whole of American history, so Willa Cather, when she looked out upon life from the prairie or mesa of from one of those Rocks which figure so largely in her books, was able to see, from those vantage points, the real meaning of life in America. It was because the frontier simplified, clarified, and dramatized universal moral problems that she returned to it again and again....

She subscribed to that romantic tradition, so strong in American literature and art, that saw nature splendid in all its manifestations and man virtuous only when he accommodated himself to nature—the tradition that stretched, politically, from Jefferson to Bryan, that found literary expression in so many writers from Cooper to Rolvaag, that was reflected in the work of naturalists like...Muir and in landscape painters from the Hudson River school to Winslow Homer and Grant Wood....

But after the pioneer and the builder, after the Antonias and the Alexandras, the Captain Forresters and the Tom Outlands, came the exploiters and the spoilers. Thus Niel Herbert, who loved the Lost Lady, 'had seen the end of an era, the sunset of the pioneer.'... Nothing could bring it back, but Miss Cather found a sort of mournful consolation in recalling its heroic virtues. This moral is implicit in all the early novels—notably in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*. With *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House*—both daring from

the early twenties—it becomes explicit. ‘The whole world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts.’ ... Better than any of her literary contemporaries, she represented the force of tradition in 20th-century America—the tradition of the artist, the tradition of the pioneer, the tradition, eventually, of the universal church.”

Henry Steele Commager
“Willa Cather”

*The American Mind:
An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880’s*
(Yale 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....

She resented the sort of criticism that is based on careless reading and lack of understanding and was especially annoyed by the outcry against *One of Ours*, which had absorbed all her energy and determined every action for so long that she hardly knew where to turn after it was finished. Pacifists came at her ‘like a swarm of hornets.’ It was disconcerting to have Claude regarded as a glorification of war when he was so clearly a farmer boy, neither very old nor very wise, escaping from the dreary round of struggle for gain by fighting for an ideal. Couldn’t her critics see that she was trying to treat war without any attempt at literalness as if it were some war back in history, that she was solely concerned with its effect upon one boy?”

Elizabeth Moorhead
“The Novelist”

These Two Were Here: Louise Homer and Willa Cather
(U Pittsburgh 1950)

“In these short stories she is handling themes which for the most part she had already left behind in her novels. She is drawing on her Nebraska memories and other recollections of her childhood, and the richness of texture and clear emotional pattern which the autobiographical impulse gave to *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* are to be found here also....

‘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....

The second story, ‘Old Mrs. Harris,’ is the longest and most substantial in the book. It is the study of a southern family who have moved to a small town in the West and find that the pattern of family living they bring with them is misunderstood and resented by their new neighbors. Old Mrs. Harris has left her comfortable southern home to follow the fortunes of her married daughter: she regards it her duty, as an old woman, to do all she can to enable the younger generation to live in as carefree a manner as possible, and that point of view is accepted as a complete matter of course by her daughter Victoria, who allows her mother

to act the part of family drudge (as it seems to the neighbors) without any awareness of doing wrong.... The brightest part of the picture is Mrs. Harris' relations with her grandchildren; here something of the old southern clan sense, the sense of the organic unity of the family, is preserved....

'Two Friends,' the final story in *Obscure Destinies*, is a much slighter affair. It is cast in the form of a reminiscence and tells the story of two friends who lived 'in a little wooden town in a shallow Kansas river valley.' One was a banker and one was a big cattleman, and in spite of differences in background and temperament there was a deep affection between them. They spent every summer evening sitting side by side on two armchairs on the wooden sidewalk outside the banker's store and talked together. The flavor and quality of their talk and of their personalities are presented through anecdotal retrospect, and a tone of easy informality pervades the narrative.... The sketch ends with an account of how the two friends moved apart. Dillon was in Chicago at the time when the Democratic convention first nominated William Jennings Bryan, and he came back full of enthusiasm for the great orator. Trueman, who regarded Bryan as a 'great windbag,' could not conceal his contempt, and thus Bryan drove the two friends apart."

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. The singer's odyssey in *The Song of the Lark* is moving, but Fred Ottenburg is a ludicrously impossible character, and...his mating with Thea is about as thrilling as the loves of the plants....

Personally I can see no reason why a fine writer should be required to be in sympathy with the mood of her time. As Auclair tells Saint-Vaillier, 'Change is not always progress.' It is much more important to be attuned to what Dorothy Canfield calls 'the rhythm of the permanent,' and sometimes this may even mean to be deliberately out of tune with the times....Granville Hicks's [Marxist] attack on Willa Cather for her retreat to the past, *EJ*, XXII (1933), 703-710, now seems something of a curiosity of criticism. She was defended vigorously by Archer Winsten, *Bkm* (NY), LXXIV (1932), 634-640, and by J. Donald Adams, *The Shape of Books to Come*, pp.120-125....

Alexander's Bridge (1912) was not in itself very important. It came out of 'meeting some interesting people in London,' plus a warm, youthful enthusiasm for Henry James.'... *O Pioneers!* [1913] and *My Antonia* (1918) should be read together, though *My Antonia* is the better book....Miss Cather later repudiated *The Song of the Lark* [1915] on the ground that 'the full-blooded method, which told everything about everybody' was not the right method for her....Nobody has ever questioned that the picture of Nebraska in the first part of *One of Ours* [1922] is superbly done. Even Miss Cather's war is more exciting in Nebraska than it ever becomes in France....The charges that have been leveled against the book are

many. It is charged that it breaks in the middle. It is charged that it poses a problem which is never solved. It is even charged that the author's own attitude toward the war is naïve....*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....

Her first book, *April Twilights* (1903), a volume of poems, came out while she was teaching English in Allegheny High School. Her mood in these years was chiefly the familiar one of rebellion against the cultural bleakness of the small town and the small-town mind, later so fully exploited by Sinclair Lewis in *Main Street* and *Babbitt*.... *Alexander's Bridge* (1912)...was imitative of Henry James in its London setting and mild ethical theme, but it was followed a year later by *O Pioneers!* in which Miss Cather returned to the immigrant folk she had known as a child. It and *My Antonia* (1918) must be ranked with the finest of Middlewestern novels for their unforgettable central characters and their rich detail of pioneer life in Nebraska. With them and *The Song of the Lark* (1915), the story of a girl whose voice carried her from Colorado to the Metropolitan Opera Company, Miss Cather's reputation was firmly established. It has never since been in danger."

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

"A German music master gave many hours to her instruction in the history and appreciation of music, including opera, thus developing her interest in a subject later of major importance in her novels and stories. In contrast with such people were the materialists of the same frontier, and there was always the austerity of a new soil to be conquered....

She admired the stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, whose Maine was a region as apparently barren but as spiritually deep as her own Nebraska....This quest for spiritual unity, so common to American writers in her time, became a desperate struggle for Willa Cather during the first World War, somewhat vitiating her grasp of her theme in *One of Ours* (1922) and *A Lost Lady* (1923). In *The Professor's House* (1925),

however, she was again at her best...In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), an enduring American masterpiece, the history of the Southwest becomes a synthesis of the whole past of that land, and the country itself becomes an epic character along with the heroic and saintly missionaries Bishop Jean Latour and Father Joseph Vaillant. The religious devotion depicted in this book reflects Willa Cather's confirmation, in 1922, in the Protestant Episcopal Church....

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

"The artist Thea Kronberg of *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and the prairie girl Antonia Shimerda of *My Antonia* (1918) have in common a primitivism that is a moral criticism of society because it is based on unhampered nature....Cather's women act on their instincts without thought and make of life a noble thing. The world which they create out of their own vigorous and naïve personalities is a world of pioneers, of an escape from the corruption of an effete society left far behind—except for those few who, like Mrs. Forrester of *A Lost Lady* (1923), bring corruption with them....

Her growing mastery of symbolism opened new ways for others in fiction. Her stories came close to perfection because they dealt with essences of experience and expression, but both life and art escaped her final grasp. More courageous than any of her contemporaries except Dreiser, her one direct contact with the life of her times, when as a young girl she worked for S. S. McClure and his group of 'muckrakers' in New York, never found its way through to her fiction. Instead, she spun a translucent web about her personality and left her criticism of life to be inferred rather than spoken."

Robert E. Spiller
The Cycle of American Literature
(Macmillan/Free Press 1955, 1967) 165-66

"Willa Cather's best-known novels catch and mirror the pioneer spirit of the frontier. In *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918) she extols the heroic qualities of the men and women—first-generation Bohemians, Poles, Germans, Swedes, Russians—who broke the ground in Nebraska and had the vision to see the future of the new land. *One of Ours* (1922) and *A Lost Lady* (1923) mirror the way in which the second generation betrayed the hopes of the first and nostalgically mourn the passing of the earlier vigorous era. In *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *The Professor's House* (1925), Willa Cather again extols the qualities of strength and endurance in the struggle with nature or in the effort to carve a successful career in contemporary midwestern and southwestern America. In her later years she turned to the past to write of the Spanish missionaries in the Southwest (*Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 1927) and the French in Quebec (*Shadows on the Rock*, 1931), again celebrating the pioneer spirit.

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.
The Reader's Companion to World Literature
(New American Library/Mentor 1956) 80-81

“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

“The interesting thing about Miss Cather’s career is that it started in protest against and flight from the very world she ended by idealizing and mourning. It recapitulates a characteristic American pattern of rebellion and return, censure and surrender....She could not bring her early criticism into effective combination with her later nostalgic sentiment.... In 1927, at fifty-four, Willa Cather, after three decades of steady and patient labor in her craft, stood at the height of her career, with fifteen years of her best work behind her and her most popular book, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, claiming an unstinted admiration. When she died twenty years later, she had already come to appear as the survivor of a distant generation, remote from the talents and problems of the past two anxious decades....

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)

“Her dominant theme, the motif that winds its way through her work from one end to the other, is the one which preoccupies most modern American regionalists: the relation between town and country, or between the highly complex urban civilization of the twentieth century and the elemental simplicity of rural life. For Willa Cather, as for [Hamlin] Garland, the rural life is the life of the frontier, and the urban world is the cultivated artistic and intellectual life of the Eastern seaboard. Her region is the vast area stretching from Nebraska southwest to New Mexico and Arizona, especially the great prairie area where she herself spent her girlhood.

She is a psychologist rather than an agrarian; she is less interested in the way the harvest is wrested from the earth than in the effects of prairie life on various kinds of personalities. Her protagonists are for the most part foreign-born immigrants who come to the prairie region bringing with them the traditions and prejudices of the old world along with the wisdom of a more venerable civilization. Miss Cather admires the pioneer life not because it is elemental (cf. Steinbeck or Faulkner) but because it is stimulating and healthy; her ideal hero is a European provided with the traditions of his European heritage but rejuvenated by contact with the frontier....

Miss Cather is not a Naturalist; her world is a poetized one where the brutal side of rural life is glossed over and where human passions are refined almost to the decorum of a Henry James. There are many Romantic qualities in her work. She is interested primarily in the past: not only in the days of her own youth, but in the lost youths of her characters. Her pioneer women are constantly recollecting past times, past tragedies, past glories, and past joys; some of her novels seem composed almost entirely of reminiscences. One of her two most famous novels, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, is practically an historical Romance; it actually begins with that hoary device so dear to the nineteenth-century novelist, the

solitary horseman riding across a plain. Miss Cather's essential interest, however, is in personality rather than in incident; she is a Romantic chiefly in her cult of the distant and misty past. She has little sympathy with the spirit of her own time; there is little of the liberal democratic fervor of Dreiser, and nothing whatsoever of industrialism, business, or modern politics.

In such novels as *Alexander's Bridge* (1912) and *The Professor's House* (1925) she utilized contemporary settings and characters, but the characters in such novels are invariably intellectuals or artists who have little contact with the commercial and industrial main-current of twentieth-century life. Actually she admires most in American culture those elements drawn directly from foreign societies; her most sympathetic heroes are foreign-born....

The themes of Willa Cather's work are interlocking, or rather they are contained one inside the other, like a set of Chinese boxes. The main or 'outer' theme, which contains the others, is that of the contrast between civilization and frontier. At the next level are the secondary themes, most of them involved with adjustment to frontier life. Examples are (1) the plight of the elderly and cultured immigrant who is unable to adjust to the crudity of life on the frontier (Mr. Shimerda in *My Antonia*, the pharmacist Euclide Auclair in *Shadows on the Rock*); (2) the revolt of the sensitive young person against the frontier and his search for tradition and stability in the intellectual centers of the east, or in Europe (Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours*, Jim Burden in *My Antonia*); (3) the conflict between native Americans and Europeans on the frontier (*O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, *One of Ours*, and several other novels and stories); and (4) the conflict between generations, usually involving a hard and thrifty son and a romantic and dreamy father (Mr. Shimerda and his son Ambrosch. Within these basic conflicts can be found sub-themes, for example the friendship between the raw frontier boy and the professor who befriends him and introduces him to a wider culture, found in *The Professor's House*, *One of Ours*, and several other works.

As an analyst of the differences between European and American culture Willa Cather suggests comparison with Henry James, and indeed her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, lies strongly under James' influence. Her mature work, however, shows more originality; she reverses James' American-in-Europe theme and develops the problem of the European immigrant in American society, especially the frontier society of the west. In her girlhood in Nebraska she observed many types of immigrants: Czechs, Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, Russians. Many other American writers observed these people as well, but they described them from the outside (e.g., Garland's Middle Border tales). Willa Cather penetrates their psychology and shows them internally, in their innermost reactions to their environment. She sees in these people, even in illiterate peasants, the mark of an ancient civilization, a maturity, a contact with the past, lacking in the brash and successful American farmer or town merchant of the middle west. The archetype of these Europeans is the Bohemian settler Shimerda of *My Antonia*, a musician and a reader, cultured, melancholy, who eventually commits suicide because he is unable to adjust to the crude life of the Nebraska prairie. Yet in his failure he bequeaths to the growing American frontier a tradition, a cultural contact with the past, which enriches the new nation.

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

"Miss Cather emerged with a number of books—nineteen, counting the two posthumous volumes—each of which is different from all the others and most of which, though written with her absolute integrity, might be classified as more or less happy experiments. But at least three books—*My Antonia*, *A Lost Lady*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*—are the very flower of her genius. There aren't many authors of whom we can say that three of their works are contributions to the small permanent body of American literature."

Malcolm Cowley
"Willa Cather: An Assessment" (1960)
The Portable Malcolm Cowley
(Viking/Penguin 1990) 368-69

"To talk of Miss Cather's world is a little like trying to extol the Stone Age to a Renaissance man. We must remind ourselves... She had been a child of the frontier; and long after the frontiers were gone she yearned—with an ache that had all the poetry of youth and adolescence in it—for the old, the cherished things she had known. This she expressed in one form or another in twelve novels...almost fifty [years old] by the time she reached the end of her strivings and became famous....

Miss Cather's central theme is that of people who pull themselves up by their bootstraps....Her heroines, those women with feminized masculine names, Alexandra, Antonia—and the name Alexandra itself reminds us of one of history's greatest conquerors—have tenacious wills and an extraordinary capacity for struggle.... Already in *O Pioneers!*, and in the finest of the prairie novels, *My Antonia*, the younger rebel in Willa Cather is making her peace with the Nebraska she had fled and is discovering a deep love for the place and the people she had known....

The triumph and achievement of the pioneer yields to disillusion, and disillusion harbors in it a wish for extinction. A whole world has been lost and seems irretrievable save in memory.... For Miss Cather, the American past was heroic, and it had been her privilege to witness one phase of it. The present seemed drab. Her picture of soldiers returning from the First World War and finding life an anticlimax after the excitement and danger of the field of battle is consonant with her feelings about the conquest of the frontier. The past was splendid; the present was dull and she seems to have arrested her experience of the old splendor at its moment of triumph; nothing that came after could equal it.... There is, in *A Lost Lady*, a highly significant passage. Miss Cather, speaking in the voice of the omniscient author, expresses contempt for the new generation which succeeded the pioneers on the frontier, the young men who were diluting the achievements of their parents and destroying the values of the earlier world. (The new men are Bayliss Wheeler of *A Lost Lady*, and the smooth-talking Louis Marcellus of *The Professor's House*.)...

And like her pioneers Willa Cather had conquered too. She has made herself powerful as a writer; her books were read; she had financial ease. She, too, had been a pioneer and now she had her success.... With success achieved, she was like her professor in *The Professor's House*. She felt depressed.... Then her world broke in two, as she said, and she wrote out her despair in *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, and *My Mortal Enemy*. Where her theme had been power and conquest, it had become frustration and death.... *My Mortal Enemy*...ends in the death of the heroine, and in it Willa Cather seems to offer herself a kind of ambiguous resignation and the possible solace of religion. But the novel is of a piece with its immediate predecessors and the view of life in it is dark and ominous."

Leon Edel
Willa Cather: The Paradox of Success
(Washington 1960)

“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

“In the late 1920’s Willa Cather was generally considered one of America’s two or three best living writers. This judgment, shared by a good many writers, scholars, and critics of the time, may not have been correct. Almost no one today would agree that it was. But the pendulum, it seems to me, has swung too far. There has been no Willa Cather revival in the sense that there has been a Fitzgerald revival, a Sherwood Anderson revival, and a Nathanael West revival. Her work, never noisy or self-assertive, has attracted fewer and fewer champions in recent years. I hope the concert of critical voices in this book will help to bring about a more intelligent and enthusiastic audience for Willa Cather’s work... 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

“She had a greater personal affection for Claude Wheeler, the ordinary Nebraska boy who went off to war and died bravely far from home on a French battlefield, than for any of her other characters.... When Elsie Sergeant [friend injured by explosion while touring a French battlefield] came home, hobbling on crutches, Willa besieged her too to talk about the war. Elsie, however, did not entirely sympathize with Willa’s curiosity. She could not escape the feeling that the war, which had injured her so cruelly, was only a story to Willa. It seemed to her that Willa showed a lack of sensitivity to the true cost of those four years. It was obvious to Elsie that Willa and she were never likely to agree about the war...”

The newspapers were filled with dramatic acts of heroism.... There is no doubt that stories such as these fed Willa’s own romantic view of the war as an opportunity for young men to redeem dull, ordinary lives by dying gloriously in the service of their country and her great ally.... Edith [her partner] wrote later that Willa said she wanted to live in the Middle Ages, and so they did, rarely venturing beyond the Tuilleries except to get money or see a performance at the Opera-Comique.”

Phyllis C. Robinson
Willa: The Life of Willa Cather
(Holt 1983) 222-25

“*O Pioneers!* (1913), *Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Antonia* (1918) reveal the aspirations of young men and women on the frontier who try to trick defeat and betrayal with their hopes and unflinching will.... The twin roles of religious faith and memory are strong forces in Willa Cather’s fiction. The human need for illusion, dreams, and a vision of a world that lies beyond the material frame permeates her accounts of characters whose lives are made greater, though not necessarily happier, by their insistence on linking their present desires with the aspirations experienced by previous generations. Repeatedly, she portrays the psychological patterns of those who make pilgrimages of the spirit into virginal territories, either geographical or spiritual. Her confirmation as a Protestant Episcopalian in 1922 made her especially responsive to the traditions of Roman Catholicism that had led priests into the frontier areas of New

Mexico and French Canada. Priests and pioneers shared the same tradition of heart's longings that are central to much of her fiction.

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

"Today she is compared with the most widely acclaimed American novelists of the twentieth century—Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner—all of whom were a full generation younger than she. She grew to maturity at the end of the nineteenth century and became an eloquent spokeswoman for the values that shaped her to a twentieth-century world so different from the one into which she was born.... 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....

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.

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

"Cather is traditionally regarded as the elegist of the pioneer period, the repository of what America thinks of as its early, true-grit triumphs. She did write three novels, her so-called prairie trilogy—all based on her childhood in Nebraska—that can be read this way. In the 1913 *O Pioneers!* A young Swedish immigrant Alexandra Bergson, raises a blooming farm out of the barren Nebraska plain. Then comes *The Song of the Lark*, in which Thea Kronberg, another little Swede, stuck in another prairie town, dreams of becoming an artist, and actually makes it. In the third book of the series, the beloved *My Antonia* (1918), the struggle is crueller, the rewards fewer, but still the heroine—a Czech girl this time, Antonia Shimerda—has what you could call a happy ending....

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.'"

“Cather became recognized as one of America’s foremost novelists by the mid-1920s. During the 1930s, however, her literary reputation suffered as a result of attacks from left-wing critics who found her work escapist and romantic and the author unwilling to engage with the stern economic and social issues of the time. But Cather’s work continued to find a large readership, and all of her works remained in print... Since 1970, over fifty books concentrating either in whole or in part on Cather’s life and work have appeared. The number of academic articles published since 1970 is over three hundred....In the 1980s (and later), feminist criticism, inspired by the women’s movement, reread Cather as a woman writer who was resisting patriarchal narratives and creating new stories for her pioneer heroines.”

Sharon O’Brien, ed.
Introduction, *O Pioneers!*
(Norton Critical Edition 2008) xviii-xix

“Willa Cather’s literary reputation is even now, nearly 70 years after her death, less than clear. In her day—born in 1873, she published her main novels and books of stories between 1912 and 1940—she was regarded as insufficiently Modernist, both in method and in outlook. She was later found to be a poor fit for academic Feminism, for she wrote about the great dignity of female strength and resignation in the face of the harshest conditions. Advocates of gay literature who inhabit universities under the banner of Queer Theory have attempted to adopt her, taking her for a lesbian—she never married and had no serious romantic relationships with men—but her lesbianism remains suppositious at best. The powerful critics of her day and of ours have never lined up behind her. All she has had is readers who adore her novels and stories.

I am among them, and if pressed I should say that Willa Cather was the best novelist of the 20th century. Not all of her novels were successful: *One of Ours*, *Lucy Gayheart*, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* don’t really come off. But those that do—*O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Antonia* (1918), *A Lost Lady* (1923) *The Professor’s House* (1925), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931)—do so with a grace and grandeur that show a mastery of the highest power. Willa Cather’s great subject was immigration to America, chiefly among northern Europeans, their endurance in the face of nature’s pitiless hardships, and what she calls ‘the gorgeous drama with God.’ 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.

Cather’s favorite of her own novels, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, her account of two missionary French priests settling what will one day be New Mexico, strikes so exquisite a note of reverence that many people took its author for a Catholic. She wasn’t. Born a Baptist, she later became an Episcopalian. In one of the letters in the recently published collection *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, Cather writes to a sociologist at the University of Miami named Read Bain that she was not a Catholic nor had she any intention of becoming one. ‘On the other hand,’ she wrote, ‘I do not regard the Roman Church merely as “artistic material.” If the external form and ceremonial of that Church happens to be more beautiful than that of other churches, it certainly corresponds to some beautiful vision within. It is sacred, if for no other reason than that it is the faith that has been most loved by human creatures, and loved over the greatest stretch of centuries.’

That we have *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* at all is a point of interest in itself. Willa Cather intensely disliked having her private life on display. She carefully promoted her books, frequently chiding publishers for their want of effort at publicizing them and stocking them in bookstores. But she didn’t think that promoting and publicizing extended to promoting and publicizing herself. She eschewed writing blurbs for the excellent reason that ‘sometimes the best possible friends write the worst possible books.’ She gave few interviews, and when she wrote something about another person in a letter, she not uncommonly asked that her recipient keep it in confidence. Like Henry James, she burned many of the letters sent to her.

‘We fully realize that in producing this book of selected letters,’ write the editors of *The Selected Letters*, ‘we are defying Willa Cather’s stated preference that her letters remain hidden from the public eye.’ Their justification is that now, 66 years after her death in 1947, with her artistic reputation secure, ‘these letters heighten our sense of her complex personality, provide insights into her methods and artistic choices as she worked, and reveal Cather herself to be a complicated, funny, brilliant, flinty, sensitive, sometimes confounding human being.’ The letters, in their view, flesh out in a useful way the skeletal figure of the pure artist that Cather preferred to project.

Nothing in *The Selected Letters* touches directly on the vexed question of Willa Cather’s sexuality—on, that is, whether or not she was a lesbian. The reason is the paucity of the letters to the two women with whom Cather was closest during her adult life. The first was Isabelle McClung, in whose family’s house she lived while a journalist and high-school teacher in Pittsburgh. Isabelle later married a violinist named Jan Hambourg from a Jewish family of musicians, which was painful for Cather, who didn’t much care for him. When Isabelle died, in 1938, Cather felt it as a great subtraction. The second, Edith Lewis, with whom Cather shared apartments in New York and vacation homes in Grand Manan Island in the Bay of Fundy and in Maine, worked in publishing and later as a copywriter. She assisted in innumerable ways, from proofreader to nurse during Cather’s many late-life ailments. Lewis survived Cather and wrote a rather anodyne memoir of her after her death.

Hermione Lee, Cather’s least tendentious biographer, refers to Edith Lewis’s status as that of ‘wife’ to Willa Cather. But she also allows that there is no evidence of the novelist ever having been the lover of either Isabelle McClung or Edith Lewis. If Cather’s and Isabelle McClung’s had been an active lesbian relationship, it is highly unlikely that Isabelle’s father, a judge known for his conservative outlook, would have permitted Cather to live in his house. Nor would Cather have traveled and lived so openly with Edith Lewis if theirs was a lesbian relationship, for there were few things that Willa Cather more greatly condemned than scandal. Case closed, or so one would like to think, though it probably never will be, for, as La Rochefoucauld had it, dirty minds never sleep.

Willa Cather was born in Virginia and, fortunately for her art, her family moved to Nebraska when she was nine. The move was jolting in every sense, physically and psychologically. The Nebraska landscape was barren, conventional cultural life there nearly non-existent. Her father, a gentle man of great dignity, arranged farm loans, at which he was only moderately successful. Her mother did not easily take to life on the prairie. Cather was the oldest in a family of seven children, with two sisters and four brothers. The town of Red Cloud, where the Cathers settled, was without many amenities, but she found there an Englishman named William Drucker who instructed her in Greek and Latin. German-Jewish neighbors kept a decent library to which they allowed her access. Her initial impulse was to become a doctor. She dressed boyishly, was called Willie. In some of her letters in later life she writes of her insensitivity to her family, but in regard to her surroundings she was one of those children on whom not much was lost. Great writers are in training for their art long before they are even aware they wish to be writers.

Willa Cather grew to know the Bohemian, Swedish, Norwegian, German farmers with whom her father did business, and to love the land despite its droughts, scorching sun, brutal winters, and unforgiving severity. She would later come to love the Colorado of the cliff dwellers, of whom she wrote in *The Professor’s House*, and the Southwest even more. ‘I do not think my heart ever got across the Missouri river,’ she wrote to an old Nebraska friend. To her publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, she wrote during a holiday in Red Cloud: ‘I get more thrills to the square mile out of this cornfield country than I can out of any other country in the world.’

Some of Cather’s more interesting letters are to publishers and editors. The first major publisher for her novels was Houghton Mifflin, where she dealt with an editor named Ferris Greenslet. She felt her books treated as second-class merchandise there, and in 1919 she left Houghton Mifflin for the firm of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Knopf, who was then 26 years old and who had begun his firm four years earlier, was eager to have Willa Cather’s books on his list. The move was providential, and profitable to both author and publisher. The young Knopf brought out her books in handsome editions, and always treated their author as the literary equivalent of a *grande dame*, which was, one learns from her letters, the least she expected. For

a girl raised in the outback of North America, Willa Cather, once out of Nebraska, quickly took on the cosmopolitan qualities of the highly cultivated writer. She worked eight years for *McClure's*, the New York magazine where Ida Tarbell and other muckraking writers of the day regularly wrote. Cather herself ghost-wrote for the magazine the biography of Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. She made a number of trips to Europe. Her experience widened, her insights deepened.

Willa Cather's taste in literature, music, food, travel were all impressively refined. She favored Balzac, Tolstoy, and Henry James, and claimed the last two as influences on her own writing. She preferred French over English novelists, because they dispensed with congeniality and their range of interests was much wider. Her love of music ran strong, and she later befriended the Menuhin family, whose son Yehudi was the great violin prodigy of his day. Food was important to her, in and for itself and for what it conveyed about civilized culture. In a scene in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the novel's main character, Bishop Latour, is served an onion soup by his assistant Father Vaillant, about which the bishop remarks: 'I am not deprecating your individual talent, Joseph, but, when one thinks of it, a soup like this is not the work of one man. It is the result of a constantly refined tradition. There are nearly a thousand years of history in this soup.'

Willa Cather hated vulgarity, in art and in life. She wrote to Alfred Knopf, on the death of his father, of 'that delicate instrument inside one which knows the cheap from the fine. The recognition of the really fine is simply one of the richest pleasures in life.' In life so in art: '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.' She chose not to have her novels published in school editions, for she didn't want them to be 'assigned to students as part of the grind'; forced to read her in school, she felt, they would be unlikely to do so in later years when they were mature enough to appreciate her.

Cather had published five books—a volume of verse, another of short stories, and three novels—before *My Antonia* (1918), the novel of life on the prairie as told by Jim Burden, who arrives in Nebraska on the same train as the novel's heroine, the Bohemian immigrant Antonia Schimerdas. Randolph Bourne, one of the powerful critics of the day, said of the novel: 'Here at last is an American novel, redolent of the Western prairie, that our most irritated and exacting preconceptions can be content with.' Not all the criticism of the novel was positive; nor was its commercial success immediate. But its achievement as a work of art convinced Willa Cather of her own standing as an artist of high seriousness. The rest of the world soon followed her in this opinion. Her World War I novel, *One of Ours*, a book that peters out sadly in its second half, won a Pulitzer Prize. (Pulitzer Prizes in the arts, as everyone knows, go to two kinds of people: those who don't need them and those who don't deserve them.) Universities began lining up to give her honorary degrees, a queue that lasted throughout her life. Her novels, under the publishing orchestration of Alfred A. Knopf, had a reliably steady sale.

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.' 'To write well,' Cather wrote to her brother Douglas, 'you have to be all wrapped up on your game and think it awfully worth while.' For her there was no better game. She steered clear of politics in her writing, feeling that those with 'zeal to reconstruct and improve human society seem to lose touch with human beings and with the individual needs and desires which make people what they are.' Not even Tolstoy could win through as a reformer, she notes in one of her letters, and 'certainly no one ever took the puzzle of human life more to heart or puzzled over it more agonizingly,—not even the New Republic.'

'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.*’

The toughest thing to arrange in life is a smooth exit. *The Selected Letters* shows that Willa Cather could not arrange one. Illnesses kicked in as she grew old. An inflamed sheath of the large tendon in the thumb of her right hand kept her from writing for months at a stretch. The death of friends and members of her family threw her off course to the point of near-nervous breakdown, for she felt things deeply. As she wrote to Thomas Masaryk, the founder and president of Czechoslovakia, she felt, as people of a certain age will, that ‘the times are out of joint.’ Elsewhere, in the preface to *Not Under Forty* (1936), her collection of essays, she wrote that no one under the age of 40 was likely to understand her essays, for ‘the world changed in 1922, or thereabouts,’ by which she meant that the world was no longer producing men and women with the solidity of character of the immigrant generations. The world seemed a more garish yet dreary place than the one she grew up in, filled with such vulgarities as Ivy Peters, a character whose coarseness she described in *A Lost Lady*.

A note of complaint works its way in the late-life letters; the editors note that she could sometimes play the ‘drama queen.’ But this tends to be blotted out by the many passages of insight and good sense. She is wonderful on child-raising, and the penalties attaching to too much mother love. There is also the solace of accomplishment recognized. She is delighted to find herself the subject of an article in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. When she learns that Thomas Hardy and J. M. Barrie thought well of her novels, she writes to William Lyon Phelps, the Yale professor and literary critic: ‘I think there is nothing so satisfying as having given pleasure, in their old age, to some of the writers who fascinated one in one’s youth.’

Skeptical of modernity, Cather had a low view of ‘the cold pride of science [which] is the most devilish thing that has ever come into this world. It is the absolute enemy of happiness. The human mind, not the spirit, has disinherited human nature.’ In *The Professor’s House*, she formulates this precisely when she has the novel’s eponymous hero Professor Godfrey St. John tell a student:

No, Miller, I don’t myself think much of science, as a phase of human development. It has given us a lot of ingenious toys; they take our attention away from the real problems, of course, and since the problems are insoluble, I suppose we ought to be grateful for the distraction. But the fact is, the human mind, the individual mind, has always been made more interesting by dwelling on the old riddles, even if it makes nothing of them. Science...hasn’t given us any richer pleasures, as the Renaissance did, nor any new sins—not one! Indeed it takes the old ones away. It’s the laboratory, not the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world...I don’t think you help people by making their conduct of no importance—you impoverish them... The king and the beggar had the same chance at miracles and great temptations and revelations. And that’s what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives. It makes us happy to surround our creature needs and bodily instincts with as much pomp and circumstance as possible. Art and religion (they are the same thing in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had.

In one of the last of her letters, she writes to E. K. Brown, one of her early biographers: ‘...we learn a great deal from great people. The mere information doesn’t matter much—but they somehow strike out the foolish platitudes that we have been taught to respect devoutly, and give us courage to be honest and free. Free to rely on what we really feel and really love—and that only.’

When Willa Cather wrote that, did she know that she herself had become one of those great people? One hopes so, for she indubitably was.”

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

Michael Hollister (2015)

