

Fight Song: The Writing of Willa Cather



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Gustave Flaubert said of art: It is not to make you laugh or make you cry, not to put you in a rage, but to act in the manner of nature, that is to fill us with wonderment. Few writers meet that standard; Willa Cather is one of them.

Willa Cather is recognized as one of the foremost writers of American letters. She did, for a rapidly expanding west what Hawthorne had for cloistered New England, Mark Twain for the borderlands lands and Sarah Orne Jewett for coastal Maine: she gave them a place in our national mythology, and gave all of us a way to see the beauty in those unfamiliar landscapes and the heroic nature of the simple lives described; warts and all, as the saying goes. These were not pastoral novels, though they can be seen as such. She did not describe a perfect world—just one as beautiful as the world is. In answer to the question a novel must ask: "Is life worth living?", her answer was always yes. She did not come to this work easily; the first novel she was willing to own was not written until she was 39 years old, after years of apprenticeship, but none of those years was wasted on her. She lived fully and stored each of her experiences in her memory where they gathered meaning.

Outside of a circle of scholars, her work today is rarely read—a puzzle to her admirers. But anyone who graduated from high school in the latter half of the last century, *My Antonia* was required reading. Some of us were captured by that work, the world she offered us, the people who inhabited it. For most, it was studied, then placed on the bookshelf with other remnants of student days. Many remember it had something to do with the prairie. But the captured will tell you much more. If asked what drew them to her writing, readers will point to a lyrical quality in her descriptions; an ability to see beauty in the most simple things and to her landscape. Joan Allen, a Nebraska native here today, put it perfectly: "She allowed us to see the beauty in the never-ending land and the never-ending sky; beauty I didn't see." Her words a poetic echo of Sinclair Lewis, who noted a century ago: "No one knew Nebraska was beautiful until Willa Cather wrote about it." This is accomplished in the sparest of language. But like a symphony or a fine painting it takes work to comprehend fully, and remains difficult to categorize, even with the benefit of a century of study by scores of literary scholars.

Her life, her space, and her art were tied together. She spent her early career fleeing the lands that nourished her, and did not succeed in her attempts to be a creative artist until she understood that most basic thing: that her material, as she puts it, rested in the places she loved, in the people she loved, in the experiences of her youth when her senses were most keen and everything was new. Critically, it rested too in this odd nation as it created itself. Her readers feel her struggles to achieve something great and recognize the feeling behind the epitaph she carefully chose " that is true happiness, to rest in something great and good."

Her distinctive style is a reflection of her power of observation, her training, and the time in which she lived. None of her experience was wasted on her. Nearly all her books came from a well of memories that had had time to season. Memory keeps what is essential and lets the rest go. She left us with eleven novels, two novellas and dozens of short stories that provide readers with something approaching a body of American myth.

As she says of the mountain woman Mrs. Ringer in "Sapphira and the Slave Girl" Cather was "born interested". That curiosity never waned. She was not born to the plains, as it might be easy to assume. As a young child she lived in the comforting hills of Northern Virginia—not far from the Pennsylvania line—surrounded by family in an established farming community. She was an only child until her siblings came along, a child among adults, her teachers and playmates. There she rode about on her pony with almost complete freedom, sometimes following her gentle father as he worked the with his sheep on the farm, sometimes visiting the mill or the creek, listening to the stories adults told of neighbors and the past, asking questions. Her grandmother taught her to read early, using the Bible and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as readers, and her father took her to sit in at a neighboring girl's school, but on the whole, she was left to explore and learn as she saw fit. This idyllic life ended abruptly when her father decided to leave the mountains of Virginia and join his parents and brother in the recently opened lands of Nebraska. It was the first of many separations—of dividing herself in two. Leaving the shelter of Virginia, a landscape of " maternal embrace" (EV p 63) was traumatic for her. She watched as the family belongings were auctioned off, carried away on wagons to the homes of strangers, and struggled against tears as Vic, the family sheep dog raced

to catch the train as they left, his chain trailing behind him. They arrived in Red Cloud days later to be carted over fields to her grandfather's homestead in Catherton, a section of the Divide—the area between the Republican and the Platte River in the high prairie; the last to be settled by the new pioneers. Tossed out of her Eden, she found herself in a country as "bare as sheet iron". Riding in the back of her grandfather's Studebaker wagon on a day in April she felt she says, "as if we had come to the end of everything--it was a kind of erasure of personality." (Woodress) "Her one purpose on life just then was not to cry," (p 10 stout world) a goal made all the more difficult by the singing of the larks rising from the grasses.

Willa had traveled in the comfort of her whole family, but she felt the loss of her home as keenly as the newly orphaned Jim Burden in *My Antonia*, traveling alone to an unknown future.

"Cautiously I slipped from under the buffalo hides, got up on my knees and peered over the side of the wagon. There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land, not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land—slightly undulating...I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it and were outside man's jurisdiction. I had never before looked up when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it.If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be."

Her sense of dislocation did not leave her and gave her an extraordinary sympathy for the immigrant experience—a theme that emerges again and again in her writing as she matures.

By the end of the first autumn she and the country had had it out. Looking back she says, "that shaggy grass country had gripped me with a passion that I never have been able to shake. It became the happiness and the curse of my life". She regained her sense self and explored every corner of the region, becoming completely a part of her new environment. She was an immigrant in this new land, but she was not facing

this newness alone; around her were immigrants from Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, France, escaping conscription or poverty or persecution, lured by the promise of virgin soil but still pained by the loss of home and the time-polished culture left behind. Unafraid of unfamiliar languages or customs and always comfortable with the company of adults, she spent precious time listening to the stories of the older women in these enclaves along the Divide. These stories, the people who told them and the world they reflected became part of her as well. She does not lose them.

Her father, a good sheep farmer Back in Willow Grove Virginia, was no match for life on the frontier. Her mother, a proper and somewhat imperious southern lady, longed for the companionship of other women. Within two years, like her surrogate, Jim Burden, the family had rented a house in town. There Cather began to attend school and became fully engaged in the life of the town--never giving up her friends on the Divide. She accompanied the town's doctor on his rounds, gathering stories of the families along the way and learning what she could of the practice of medicine. Pulling her younger brothers behind her in a wagon, she visited neighbors, questioned shopkeepers and listened.

The stories she heard, the people she came to know—all were stored in her memory to be called up later in her work. Her brilliance, and eccentricity, was clear to the townspeople, and several stepped forward to help her develop. The Weiner's', well-educated immigrants from France, whom we will come to see in *Obscure Destinies* as the Rosen's, shared their extensive library with her and read to her in French and German; William Drucker, an English immigrant, encouraged her to think critically and taught her the classics in Greek and Latin— all in all, a fine education. And she discovered theater and music: The Opera House of Red Cloud was a good stopping point for touring companies. There, Cather developed a love of both that became central to her sense of self. She sought music in the immigrant communities as well; she found beauty in it all.

Though Cather recognized the need for art, particularly drama and music, she did not expect to be an artist herself: her greatest enjoyment came from those rides with the town's doctor. Dissecting frogs was a favorite pastime, according to a childhood autograph book and she even experimented with vivisection. She intended to practice

medicine and since doctors at the time were expected to be men, she began signing her name Wm Cather MD, cropped her hair short, and adopted both the attire and demeanor of a young man. Her parents did not object. Her father was never inclined to impose his views on her, and her mother's approach to raising her children was very much like Victoria Templeton whom we come to know in "Old Mrs. Harris": Mind your manners, stay clean, and help with the household. After that you could do as you wished. If they thought she would outgrow this phase they were almost correct—she did return to more feminine attire but not for several years, when she was at the university, and even then, retained a preference for the simple and practical. She was playing a part as a young man, and it gave her a chance to understand the world of another.

Cather always had feet in two places; Virginia and the Divide (the name itself is suggestive of her life and mind) and was always on her way somewhere, aspiring toward something. She, as William, left for Lincoln at 16, having given the valedictory address for her class of three and looking boldly ahead. By the time she graduated she felt stifled by what she saw as the conventionalism of Red Cloud— a network of caution. She left her prairie reluctantly but knew it was time for her to go. After a year of preparatory courses—required of all the rural students—she still aspired to go into medicine, despite the fact that algebra eluded her. In her freshman year, however, her professor gave her class what was for her a pivotal assignment: Write an essay on "The Personal Characteristics of Thomas Carlyle". She had read Carlyle but knew little about his life; she intuited his character largely from his work, and in her frank response gave away as much about her own beliefs as Carlyle's.

"Carlyle's was one of the most intensely reverent natures of which there is any knowledge. He saw the divine in everything. His every act was a form of worship, yet it was fortunate that he did not enter the ministry. He would have been well enough in the pulpit, though he would have preached on Scandinavian mythology, and on the Hindoo, as well as on the Hebrew faith; but he could never have smiled benignly at the deaconess' tea parties, nor have praised the deacon's stock, nor have done the thousand other little things requisite for success."

The essay was full of wit and feeling, beautifully written, though filled with spelling errors that were her trademark. " It is very likely that Carlyle used violent language when interrupted in one of the soliloquies of Teufelsdröckh to be informed that his coffee was ready. Very likely Mrs. Carlyle was much hurt and grieved; she certainly made excellent coffee."

To her surprise her professor submitted the essay to the Nebraska State Leader. It appeared there and the *Hesperian*, the student paper on the same day. The praise it garnered was intoxicating. She would be a writer—of what she did not yet know. She immersed herself in the classics and continued to read widely in preparation. At her graduation in 1895 she could look back on her role as managing editor of the *Hesperian*, managing editor of the class yearbook, weekly columns for the Nebraska State Journal and her first published short story "Peter" a dark tale of an immigrant who failed to adjust to his new land and his son, who adapted perhaps all too well. She had put her love of theater to good use in reviews of the traveling performances that became known throughout the national theater community: if you got approval from Willa Cather, you were good. Gustav Frohman, manager of road shows to all part of the country said: "...the best theatrical critics of the West are said to be connected with the Lincoln Neb, press....I have heard it from professionals and non-professionals all along the road,...poor companies begin to tremble long before they get here. That kind of respect is worth something." (p 92 Woodress)

In her time at Lincoln Cather made friends for life, accepted as an equal by a community of superior scholars. She fell in love, was rejected and survived. These experiences too were not lost on her. In interviews later in life, as Cather developed into a novelist, she reflected with certainty: all of a writer's true material is gathered before the age of 20. The people and places of her childhood and young adulthood shaped her in a way she came to understand only much later, but they contain what mattered to her; what her themes might be. Each appears again and again, and each novel or short story gives us a different perspective on those central themes. The friends from this time, her family, sit as portraits for characters in her dramas. But before she could find meaning in her surroundings, before she could examine the thread of her life, through her writing she had to escape the strictures of her family and surroundings.

She had no financial backing from her parents—they could barely afford her years at Lincoln—so she had to make a living with her writing. She did not have the luxury of developing her style without a job; journalism was an easy fit. With the experience and notice gained from her years reviewing for the Lincoln paper and student publication she moved on to writing soft pieces for the *Home Monthly Magazine* in Pittsburg while continuing to produce reviews and criticism for the *Pittsburg Leader*. She tried her hand at teaching—a job she truly loved once she survived the first year.

In Pittsburg, as always, she lived fully. Her letters home can barely contain her descriptions of gatherings with new friends, excursions on the river, climbs up the hills surrounding the town. She had access to better theater and opera than in Lincoln, and most important, she met Isabelle McClung, her muse and the person to whom her novel *Song of the Lark* is dedicated. Together they made a longed-for trip to Europe, where Cather came to better understand the lands that lay behind the stories she heard on the Divide. Here too she met Edith Lewis. Isabelle and Edith would become Cather's ersatz family; the women she relied on for the remainder of her life.

She continued to write short stories and poetry with some small success; her only book of poetry, *April Twilights* was published during this time. One of these stories attracted the notice of the editor of *McClure's* magazine, one of the foremost journals of the early 20th century. She was invited to join his staff in New York. The move took her away from friends and students in Pittsburg—a difficult break for her—but her work there put her among the best and brightest stars of the literary world at the time. Nevertheless, she struggled to write something she was happy with. She tried on, for a while, the style of Henry James—a master of detail and refinement. Though many of these were published, they register today as stilted and false. She lived in New York: she was not a New Yorker.

We see her struggle to find her footing as a writer described years later in the development of Thea, the central character in Cather's *Song of the Lark*. For years Thea plods away at her music, developing her skill with the piano and singing, but not until someone wise enough to recognize her natural register does she blossom. Like Thea, Cather struggled to find her voice.

One of her early assignments for *McClures*, a rewrite of the life of Mary Baker Eddy, took her to Boston. There, the wife of Louis Brandeis introduced her to Annie Fields, the charming widow of one of the great publishers of the time. In the house where Hawthorne, Emerson, Lowell and Longfellow had joined the Fields for tea she understood, for first time in her life, that American letters had a past of their own. In that room "the ugliness of the world, all possibility of wrenches and jars and wounding contacts, seemed securely shut out." (Woodress) Fields, in turn, introduced Cather to the person who would help her find her voice; Sarah Orne Jewett. Jewett was one of the few women writers who had Cather's respect. (Others included "the Georges: George Elliott and George Sand, The Bronte sisters, and Jane Austen.) Jewett was one of the faces on the "author cards" of her youth. Her prose was simple, as Cather described it, with light around her phrases, capturing the essence of New England. Jewett advised Cather to go home in her writing, both to the physical landscape and to her memories; to find a quiet place in her mind from which to begin and to write about only that which had "teased the mind" over years—that which one could not escape. When her work in Boston was complete, Cather did indeed go home, beginning a reconciliation with her family and her past that was possible only because she now had a secure existence away from it.

She went farther still on that trip making the first of many journeys to the desert southwest to visit her brother Douglas. There, she discovered the feeling of a country with a past and yet untouched by modern material culture with safe sheltered spaces that freed her mind. The discovery gave her what she needed to move out of her "long apprenticeship". Once free to reconnect with her roots the novels poured from her: first *O' Pioneers!* her second novel, but the first she was willing to claim as her own, then *Song of the Lark* followed soon after by the luminous *My Antonia*.

Once she began to work on her own material, she allowed she had "...less and less power of choice about the moulding of it." It seems to me there of itself, already moulded..." The writer is ultimately guided by "the thing by which our feet find the road home on a dark night." p 232 woodress, from her 1922 introduction to Alexander's Bridge). She may not have recognized it herself at the outset, but a goal emerged, announced in *My Antonia* through the voice of Jim Burden.

“One March evening in my sophomore year I was sitting alone in my room after supper. There had been a warm thaw all day, with mushy yards and little streams of dark water gurgling cheerfully into the streets out of old snow banks. My window was open, and the earthy wind blowing through made me indolent. On the edge of the prairie, where the sun had gone down, the sky was turquoise blue, like a lake, with golden light throbbing in it. Higher up, in the utter clarity of the western slope, the evening star hung like a lamp suspended by silver chains—like a lamp engraved upon the title page of old Latin texts, which is always appearing in new heavens, and waking new desires in men. It reminded me, at any rate, to close the window and light my wick in answer. I did so regretfully, and the dim objects in the room emerged from the shadows and took their place about me with the helpfulness which custom breeds.

I propped my book open and stared...at the page of the Georgics where to-morrows lesson began. It opened with the melancholy reflection that, in the lives of mortals, the best days are the first to flee. “Optima dies...prima fugue.” I turned back to the beginning of the third book, which we had read in class that morning. “Primus ego in partial mecum...deducam Musas”; “for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country.” Cleric [Jim’s classics professor] had explained to us that “patria” here meant, not a nation or even a province, but the little rural neighborhood on the Mincio where the poet was born. This was not a boast, but a hope, at once bold and devoutly humble, that he might bring the muse (but lately come to Italy from her cloudy Grecian mountains), not to the capital, palatia Romana, but to his own little “country”; to his father’s fields, “sloping down to the river and the old beech trees with broken tops.”

This then was her goal. Other lands had poetic myths and legends, but who was to write for the new lands?

It was not with any sense of pride she took this on, but because she couldn't not. There were lives inside her demanding to have a voice. Like other novelists before and since, Anne Tyler comes to mind, Anne McDermott, Cather needed to be these characters for a time, needed to "be inside their skin" to tell their stories.

She was prepared for her role—to be the poet of her childhood fields—through her studies of the classics, her familiarity with the stories that have been handed down for centuries, through powers of observation sharpened through her 19 years as a journalist and teacher, and through her own native gift to give lyrics to the most elemental of tasks. She drew from all those things, but alone they did not form what she saw as art. A writer must learn his craft, she said later, and then let go of all he has learned. To develop her art she had to reshape the rules of a lifetime. She had spent years exploring her world and listening to the stories of those around her. These stories—including those the land itself told—were the ones she felt compelled to write. These were ones that had "teased her mind", the ones Jewett had asked her to look for. All of the stories then, had been filtered through memory. She had no notes or diary to shape her work—either would have destroyed it—only memory. As memory they are not sharp. They have a gauzy quality—regardless of the sun or wind described. As memory they are episodic--with spaces in between episodes that are not predictable. In her 1922 essay: "The Novel Demeublethe novel unfurnished-- she says: "If the novel is to be a form of imaginative art it cannot be at the same time a vivid and brilliant form of journalism. Out of the teeming, gleaming stream of the present it must select the eternal material of art." (P40 NUF)

She drew too on her sense of poetry. As mentioned earlier, her first published book was of poetry; if that had remained her medium, we would not be talking about her today. Only one bears repeating. But it is the combination of lyric and lucid prose that works. Through it she sought to engage the reader—to create a place inside the mind where the story could live for a while as it did in hers. She did not want to describe a world, she wanted to create the sense of a world. Again, in "The Novel Demeuble" she goes on to say:

"Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that one might say is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not

named, the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it...the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives...quality to the novel or the drama as well as to poetry itself.”(p41 NUF)

She supplies an example from Hawthorne’s *The Scarlett Letter*: one can scarcely see the actual surroundings of the people; one feels them rather, in the dusk. That is what makes it great.

She achieved this by removing “unnecessary furniture”; by sharing only what needed to be shared in language as poetic or as bare as required. In the passage read earlier Jim responds to the earthy wind with indolence—we are not told it is still warm, but we feel it nonetheless. He reflects dreamily and then catches himself with an abrupt: “It reminded me, at any rate, to close the window and light my wick in answer.” We almost shake ourselves awake as he abandons his reverie, but of our own accord. Her reminder is a bare breath in the text.

In her novella *The Professor’s House*, Godfrey St. Peter is finding it more and more difficult to live in the world he has built for himself. His state of mind is captured as he looks out from his treasured attic study:

St.Peter did not go out of the house that afternoon. He did not leave his study. He sat at his desk with bent head, reviewing his life, trying to see where he had made his mistake, to account for the fact that he now wanted to run away from everything he had intensely cared for.

Late in the afternoon the heaviness of the air in the room drove him to the window. He saw that a storm was coming on. Great orange and purple clouds were blowing up from the lake, and the pine trees over about the Physics laboratory were blacker than cypresses and looked contracted, as if they were awaiting something. The rain broke, and it turned cold.

(p 275 PH)

We need no description of anguished thoughts to understand what he is going through, or where he will land. Everything is polished clean.

Nor do we need any adjectives to feel these two contrasting scenes from *O'Pioneers!*

One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away. A mist of fine snowflakes was curling and eddying about the cluster of low drab buildings huddled in the gray prairie, under a gray sky. The dwelling houses were set about haphazard on the tough prairie sod; some of them looked as if they had been moved in overnight, and others as if they were straying off by themselves, headed for the open plain. (p139 EN)

And this from later in the novel when Carl comes to tell his friend Alexandra that his family will be among those to leave, he finds her in her garden:

Alexandra had gone over to the garden across the draw to dig sweet potatoes—they had been thriving upon the weather that was fatal to everything else....She was standing lost in thought, leaning upon her pitchfork, her sunbonnet lying beside her on the ground. The dry garden path smelled of drying pumpkins and citrons. At one end, next to the rhubarb, grew feathery asparagus, with red berries. Down the middle of the garden was a row of gooseberries and currant bushes. A few tough zinnias and marigolds and a row of scarlet sage bore witness to the buckets of water Mrs. Bergson had carried there after sundown, against the prohibition of her sons....

She was standing perfectly still, with that serious ease so characteristic of her. Her thick reddish braids, twisted about her head fairly burned in the sunlight. The air was cool enough to make the sun pleasant on one's back and shoulders and so clear that the eye could follow a hawk up and up, into the blazing blue depths of the sky. Even Carl...loved the country on days like this, felt something strong and young and wild come out of it, that laughed at care. (p 162 EN)

In those few words you can see the town as clearly as if it were a stage set, can feel its isolation. You know Alexandra and can see the colors in her garden; you feel the sun through the fall chill, though you are never told it is fall. By what she leaves out—by her poetic but uncluttered phrases, she brings you in. Your mind fills in the details in a way that makes you part of the process

Her style, her lyricism call to mind the music Cather loved. She was a fan of all opera and loved orchestral music as well. (Dvorak's New World Symphony was a revelation.) Her use of spaces, her precise language, the extent to which you are drawn in to the writing, feel very much like listening to a modern symphony.

With these spare phrases she shared what mattered to her. The cadre of Cather scholars and reviewers—not to mention admirers--each have their own notion of her central themes. These themes run through all her work, appearing again and again through both characterizations and plot; it is almost impossible to separate the two in her novels.

Perhaps clearest in her early novels, but present in all, is what it means to be an immigrant. She was transplanted at a perfect age to appreciate the dilemma of the immigrant community: old enough to remember her old home, young enough to adapt to a new one. But the feeling of loss never left her: she always felt as if she were of two places—divided.

When Jim Burden leaves the station in the back of his grandfather's Studebaker wagon, The Shimerda family, newly arrived from Bohemia, leaves along the same dim track. For them the sense of dislocation is amplified by the loss of culture. They struggle to keep the old-world values alive, while trying to adapt to the new land. Antonia's father knows hope lies in the next generation—in Antonia in particular. She will be the true pioneer. We understand the choice Mr. Shimerda makes when he entrusts his daughter to his new neighbors. "He placed the book in my grandmother's hands, looking at her entreatingly, and said, with an earnestness I shall never forget, Te-e-ach, te-e-ach, my Antonia!" Antonia, young and vibrant, thrives. Mr. Shimerda does not. For him, the pull of the old world—his memory of it—was too painful. This then is one of the themes she presents: how does the immigrant balance old world and new.

The land itself functions as a character and the relationship between the land and its inhabitants is another central theme. It lives and breathes, has angry moods and gives back. This is particularly true of her early novels, but it infuses later ones as well. In *O' Pioneers* "It wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness." And later, "John Bergson had made little impression upon the wild land he had come to tame. It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods; and no one knew when they were likely to come, or why. Mischance hung over it. Its genius was unfriendly to man.... There it lay outside his door, the same land, the same lead-colored miles. He knew every ridge and draw and gully between him and the horizon. To the south, his plowed fields; to the east, the sod stables, the cattle corral, the pond, —and then the grass." But when tamed she sees a friend, a source of life: "Few scenes are more gratifying than a spring plowing in the country, where the furrows of a single field often lie a mile in length, and the brown earth, with such a strong clean smell, and such power of growth and fertility in it, yields eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft deep sigh of happiness." (p174 EN) "The air and earth are curiously mated and intermingled as if one were the breath of the other." The land talks back: it responds with grace or violence. It invades the spirit of those, like Alexandra and Antonia who belong.

In all of her novels, and many of her short stories she insists upon the importance of art and culture to a life well-lived—or a life lived at all—regardless of the nature of the art. Her view of art is broad. In *O'Pioneers* Alexandra's grand vision for the land is art. She counters droughts by raising sunflowers, barren winters by raising chickens, hard times by buying more land. She does these things, not to acquire wealth, but to nurture the land and her vision for it. "We come and go," she assures her beloved friend Carl at the close of the story, "but the land is always there. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while." (p 289 EN) More pointedly and poignantly in "A Wagner Matinee", we see the narrator's aunt unable to leave the concert hall after a performance of music she had not heard in years: "I never knew how far it bore her or past what happy islands. But I understood her." the narrator tells us. "For her, just outside the door of the concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle

tracked bluffs; the tall unpainted house, with the weather curled boards...the crook-backed ash seedlings where the dish-cloths hung to dry; the gaunt, moulting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door.”(p 110 EN) For his aunt music was refuge.

The search for art is a central element in her most autobiographical novel, *The Song of the Lark*, her *Kunstlerroman*, a map of the years-long path Thea Kronberg takes to find her voice and then to learn its power. But it is no less so for Cécile Auclair in *Shadows on the Rock*, where the need is met more simply: a perfect cup of cocoa in the morning, a polished pot, a properly dressed salad. And in the desert southwest of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* it is in the carefully decorated pottery of the pueblo women, and in a crock of onion soup lovingly prepared:

“On coming into the dining room, Bishop Latour placed his candlesticks over the fireplace...illuminating the brown soup-pot. After they had stood for a moment in prayer, Father Joseph lifted the cover and ladled the soup into the plates, a dark onion soup with croutons. The Bishop tasted it critically and smiled at his companion. After the soup had travelled to his lips a few more times he put it down and leaning back in his chair remarked, “Think of it Blanchet, in all this vast country between the Mississippi and the Pacific Ocean, there is not another human being who could make a soup like this.”

“Not unless he is a Frenchman,” said Father Joseph. He had tucked a napkin over the front of his cassock and was losing no time in reflection.

“ I am not deprecating your individual talent, Joseph,” the Bishop continued, “but, when one thinks of it, a soup like this is not the work of one man. It is the result of constantly refined tradition. There are nearly a thousand years of history in this soup.”

These are all art in Cather's world—she makes no judgement. The domestic stories chronicle the humanizing effects that a strong culture has upon a region's inhabitants. Here a garden in the desert or the precise order of a Provincial household becomes high art. The spaces her characters inhabit in these novels become sacred.

It may be helpful to see this view in the context of the times in which she was writing. The Victorian world, the world of moral certainties and manners was fading. The world was getting smaller, less insular, and the realization that there were multiple truths and even flaws in western culture as it was being lived had begun to infiltrate the minds of those who cared to look—the observers—artists, journalists, social scientists. Modernism challenged the Victorian certainties. It saw an unpredictable universe, where knowledge itself is incomplete and uncertain, leaving those within on a constant search for answers. The static view of what is right or good no longer holds in the modernist view; the modernist is too aware of the flaws in society and increasingly aware of the alternative truths previously unrecognized. Culture was no longer defined by western ideals of refinement, but the more abstract notion of the ways communities develop meaning for those living within them; not manners, but how we live. Cather began to write seriously in the midst of this transition.

There is a shift in her thinking just after the first world war, when for her, as for most of the world, the world seemed irrevocably broken. The world broke in two, were her words. Her novel of that period, *One of Ours*, had a darker tone, as did *The Lost Lady*, a novel many consider her finest, but even in these novels we can see her unifying themes.

Cather's acknowledged goal, as described earlier, was to create an image of those heroes who turned the prairie into settled farmland. They were a particular breed, not defined by their sex or strength, but by their dreams: "A pioneer should have imagination" the narrator tells us in *O' Pioneers*, "should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves." (EN 161). In Cather's own words: the road is everything. Pioneers take different paths in her novels: they unite with the land, as Alexandra does in *O'Pioneers*, and Antonia in *My Antonia*, but in later novels they also soar on the stage, as Thea does in *Song of the Lark*; they build a community and a cathedral as Bishop Latour does in *Death Comes to the Archbishop*. Each takes flight in their own way. It is not the achievement that satisfies their greatest need, but the seeking.

But for all the tensions between the old word and new, between the hold of the land and the need for escape, between the need for art and its absences, a central theme in her novels remains the power of youth and the development and self-discovery of the heroine or hero. (Daiches and others). They aspire to be part of something bigger than themselves.

Toward the end of her productive years, Cather wrote to her brother Roscoe: “As for me, I have cared too much, about people and places—cared too hard. It made me as a writer. But it will break me in the end.” (November 6, 1938) She did indeed value her friendships, including those with her brothers, and her places: the Prairie, the pueblo country of the southwest—above all else. She kept and nurtured them all. Through them she gave us some of the finest novels of American literature. She gave us heroines and heroes for a nascent country—ones we still need today.

In *My Antonia*, Jim revisits his childhood friend before he goes off to study in the east. He dreads the goodbye, but Antonia knows the distance is irrelevant. “Ain’t it wonderful Jim, how much people can mean to each other. “But Jim’s mind drifts backward:

As we walked home ward across the fields the sun dropped and lay like a great golden globe in the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose in the east, as big as cartwheel, pale silver and stroked with rose color, thin as a bubble or ghost moon. For five-perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on the opposite edges of the world. In that singular light every little tree and thick of wheat, every sunflower stalk and climb of snow on the mountain, drew itself up high and pointed; the very clod and furrows of the fields seemed to stand up sharply. I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there. (p910 EN)

As I went back alone over that familiar road, I could almost believe that a boy and girl ran along beside me, as our shadows used to do, laughing and whispering to each other in the grass. (p911EN)

What wonder her words instill.

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