

A PILGRIM'S PROGRESS TOWARD FAITH:
WILLA CATHER'S QUEST FOR
THE "THING NOT NAMED"

By

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PREFACE

From the first book of Willa Cather's that I read, her work arrested my attention like no other. I was enthralled with Cather's gift for evocative language--for creating character and scene with the power of a poet. But more than that, I was taken in by what appeared to me a singleminded search in her fiction for the life well lived. As I progressed from story to story, Cather seemed to be working out through her themes and characters a definition of the meaning of ultimate human value. As I studied the particular characters who epitomize Cather's estimate of a well lived life, a pattern emerged. Discovering this emerging pattern precipitated my own search for the source of her standard.

I chose the biographical approach for this search because so much of Cather's fiction, by her own admission, is highly biographical. I soon discovered that, first, Cather's locus of value was not in Nebraska as so many critics have supposed, but in her native Virginia; and, second, I found that Cather's locus of spiritual value was inherited from the older members of her Virginia family, a Christian heritage which was very early implanted deep in her consciousness.

Cather was the beneficiary of a type of childhood which, according to Allen Bloom, is missing in modern American families. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom catalogs the religious traditions and practices which he finds regrettably absent in contemporary culture:

[Parents] have nothing to give their children in the way of a vision of the world, of high models of actions or profound sense of connection with others. The family required the most delicate mixture of nature and

convention, of human and divine, to subsist and perform its function. . . . In teaching a language and providing names for all things, it transmits an interpretation of the order of the whole of things. It feeds of books, in which the little polity--the family--believes, which tell about right and wrong, good and bad and explain why they are so. The family requires a certain authority and wisdom about the ways of heavens and of men. The parents must have knowledge of what has happened in the past, and prescriptions for what ought to be, in order to resist the philistinism or the wickedness of the present. Ritual and ceremony are now often said to be necessary for the family, and they are now lacking. The family, however, has to be a sacred unity believing in the permanence of what it teaches, if its ritual and ceremony are to express and transmit the wonder of the moral law, which it alone is capable of transmitting and which makes it special in a world devoted to the humanly, all too humanly, useful. (57)

What Bloom finds missing in modern families was abundantly present in Cather's early years through the efforts of her pious elders. Cather's grandparents, William and Caroline Cather and Rachel Boak, and her great-aunt Sidney Gore, gave Cather her "vision of the world," a vision that would later become the basis for her theory of art. They gave her a "language," religious in nature, to interpret "the order of the whole of things." I have come to believe that the moral foundation of Cather's fiction, including her aesthetics, is based on her Christian elders' "certain authority and wisdom about the ways of heavens and of men."

Even Jonathan Culler, a current leading iconoclast, admits that all writers write out of some center of authority: "Even if [a particular theory of culture is] 'emptied' by a radical theory, the center will inevitably fill itself in" (*Structuralist Poetics* 251). Jacques Derrida concurs that we cannot operate critically outside of a "center"; "[t]he center," he

states, is “absolutely indispensable” (271). Cather’s “center,” inherited, learned, and received from her elders, was religious and it was Christian.

However, as her fiction demonstrates, Cather’s acceptance of her religious inheritance came after much resistance and anguish of soul. Cather’s adult life as well as her fictional characters chronicle the tension between her rejection of that heritage and her irresistible pull toward it. The more that Cather tried to separate herself from her religious background and the Christianity it represented, the more she found herself drawn to it, first in the development of her theory of art, then simultaneously in her fiction and life itself. In the following chapters, I will trace Cather’s journey through her life and writings, beginning with her formative years in Virginia and ending with her affirmation of Christian values.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Editions of books by Willa Cather cited in the text:

April Twilights (1903), edited and with an introduction by Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press [Bison ed.]: AT

Alexander's Bridge (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press [Bison ed.], 1977]: AB

O Pioneers! (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913): OP

The Song of the Lark (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915; rpt. University of Nebraska Press [Bison ed.], 1978: SL

My Antonia (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918): MA

Youth and the Bright Medusa (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920; rpt. Vintage, 1975): YBM

One of Ours (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922; rpt. Vintage, 1971): OO

April Twilights and Other Poems (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923): ATOP

A Lost Lady (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923; rpt. Vintage, 1972): LL

The Professor's House (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925; rpt. Vintage, 1973): PH

My Mortal Enemy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926, rpt. Vintage, 1961): MME

Death Comes for the Archbishop (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927; rpt. Vintage, 1971): DCA

Shadows on the Rock (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931; rpt. Vintage, 1971): SR

Obscure Destinies (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932; rpt. Vintage, 1974): OD

Lucy Gayheart (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1935; rpt. Vintage, 1976): LG

Not Under Forty (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936): NUF

Sapphira and the Slave Girl (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940; rpt. Vintage, 1975):
SSG

The Old Beauty and Others (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948; rpt. Vintage, 1976):
OB

Willa Cather on Writing (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949): OW

Edited collections of Willa Cather's works:

The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896,
ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966): KA

Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction 1892-1912, ed. Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln:
University of Nebraska Press, 1970): CSF

The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902, ed. William
M. Curtin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 2 volumes: WP

Uncle Valentine and Other Stories: Willa Cather's Uncollected Short Fiction, 1915-1929,
ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973): UV

Books about Willa Cather:

E. K. Brown (completed by Leon Edel), *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1953): WC:CB

Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living* (New York: Knopf, 1953): WCL

Mildred Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press [rev. ed.], 1961): WWC

Elizabeth Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press [Bison ed.], 1963): WC:AM

James Woodress, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (New York: Pegasus, 1970): WC:LA

Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987): WC:EV

James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987): WC:LL

Chapter 1

Secret Webs, Distant Voices

*"To look at Willa Cather with both brain (or life) and hand (or art) in view is to find a fascinating pattern, a secret web of connections and relationships that . . . illuminate and in many ways redefine her as a person and as an artist."*¹

*"The artist spends a lifetime in loving the things that haunt him, in having his mind 'teased' by them . . ."*²

*"A reporter can write equally well about everything that is presented to his view, but a creative writer can do his best only with what lies within the range and character of his deepest sympathies."*³

"If I were writing a new book," wrote Elizabeth Sergeant in the Foreword to her biography of Willa Cather, "I should want to study the mysterious process by which Cather more than most novelists used and transformed her own personal experience into the stuff of those great books that are taking their permanent place in American history and literature" (5-6). Cather's "mysterious process" has been a fascination and a frustration for numerous critics, a fascination because there seems to be a voice behind

¹ From Bernice Slote, "The Secret Web," 2.

² From Cather's Preface to *The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett*, reprinted in *Willa Cather: On Writing*, 51.

³ From Cather's essay on Sarah Orne Jewett in *Not Under Forty*, 81.

the voice in her writing-- a "presence of the thing not named" (OW 41) --and a frustration because of either a reluctance to engage in biographical criticism, or the maddening lack of Cather's personal records to verify conclusions so tantalizingly hinted at in the works.

By now it is axiomatic that any critic seeking to explain Cather's creative process must to some degree delve into biographical data. We know that she peopled her fiction with those she knew of, heard about, or read about, some through outright portraiture, others variously disguised.⁴ It has been generally agreed that *The Song of the Lark*, *My Antonia*, *The Professor's House*, and especially *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are directly autobiographical.⁵ Norman Holmes Pearson goes so far as to say that an official biography of Willa Cather seems somewhat superfluous because her books are so full of her life (595-98).

Cather's propensity to write herself into her fiction puts her into the company of those, according to Eugene L. Stelzig, whose "self-reflexive impulse" finds expression "primarily through confessional fiction." Stelzig names Proust, Joyce, Hesse, D. H. Lawrence, Hemingway, and Bellow as "important figures associated with confessional novels" (26), and he establishes that, currently, credibility has been given this genre since

⁴ See Carl Van Doren in "Willa Cather," *The American Novel 1789-1939*. Van Doren asserts that Cather is an "instinctive biographer." See also E.K. Brown, Marion Marsh, and Ruth Crone in *Willa Cather: The Woman and Her Works*. They maintain that Cather's method is essentially portraiture and biography. James Woodress in "Willa Cather and History" argues that since Cather could not feel affinity with the present, she turned to history and found eras out of which she took characters who earned her sympathy. However, Woodress continues, her interest was in historical romance, not history, and though a work like *Death Comes For the Archbishop* is based on actual figures, it is largely fictionalized with much of Cather's own life inserted. James Woodress also mentions that "the portrait of Godfrey St. Peter in *The Professor's House* is not entirely understandable without recourse to the author's own life" (WC:LA 210).

⁵ See James Woodress, "The Uses of Biography: The Case of Willa Cather" for a treatment of this subject.

it has been fairly well established that “pure works of fiction is pure fiction” (27). Such a position “has gained ground as the formalist stress on impersonality has abated” (27).

Stelzig traces the origin of this trend most specifically to the Romantics:

Much Romantic and post-Romantic literature aims for a definition of the self in historical terms, as a process of becoming. This process has been enacted in literary form since the Romantics through autobiography as well as fiction, with confessional fiction forming a prominent and problematic middle term. . . . Indeed, what Schlegel observed about the relationship between writers of fiction and their works seems to hold substantially true nearly two hundred years later: “What is best in the best novels is nothing but a more or less veiled confession of the author.” (17)

That Cather is a Romantic and falls squarely into that tradition has been widely attested, most thoroughly by Susan Rosowski in *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*. Even though Rosowski's emphasis is on the “essential characteristic of romanticism” which concerns “a mode of perception by which the imagination is used in its synthesizing or creative powers to transform and give meaning to an alien or meaningless material world” (x), she also points out that Cather uses the imagination in personal terms. “*The Song of the Lark* (1915),” writes Rosowski, “is Willa Cather's *Prelude*, in which she used an autobiographical character to trace the growth of an artist's mind.” Rosowski seems to agree with Selzig's designation of the work as “self-reflexive”: “In [using an autobiographical character in *Song of the Lark*], Cather explored a theme that runs through modern literature, the development of a personal self to serve as a source of value in an otherwise common world” (xi).

Peter Bailey further confirms that the novel-as-autobiography is now a bonafide genre, generally accepted in critical circles, in spite of Wayne Booth's general condemnation of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In *The Rhetoric of*

Fiction, Booth questions the success of *Portrait* because the force of its personal references obliges us to seek clarifications in the life of the author rather than in that of the character.⁶ However, Peter Bailey writes,

[i]mplicit in Joyce's *Portrait* achievement . . . is the idea that the self can be fictionalized, metaphorized, molded into more or less objective aesthetic configurations if imagination and craft enough are applied to the task. (80)

In this respect, anyway, Cather is in good company with Joyce. She applied her imagination to her craft in such a way that she manipulated her autobiographical material into an aesthetic achievement.

Bernice Slote, the eminent Cather scholar, recognized the integral part that Cather's personal experiences played in her fiction. She observed that for Willa Cather, "the imagination was a way of being. What came to her of experience, in any form, became a part of her. . . . The person, who is also the artist, becomes the instrument by which experience is absorbed and translated" ("The Secret Web" 1). Even though reviewers of Cather's work, with insistent regularity, allude to the correspondences between her work and her life, they have been reluctant to do more than suggest these correspondences, and therefore, have left a wide sphere of investigation left relatively untouched. I would like to suggest that, instead of detracting from her artistic achievement, the necessity of biographical criticism to aid and complete Cather studies, in particular, adds to her reputation as a careful and complex artist, and, in general, gives us further insight into the fascinating processes of the human imagination.

For Cather, man's history is a collection of personal histories, and any historical record is only meaningful as it is translated through personal experience. This grounding

⁶ See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 323-39.

of time in personal experience rather than political or social history is one key to opening up her texts, for to her “every novel must be a meeting between the life line and the line of personal development, must be a personal discovery” (WC:AM 213). And, further, since Cather transforms her own experience into others, her fictional works, in the end, are illustrations of her response to man’s history as well as to time, as Susan Rosowski suggests.⁷ In addition, I am also suggesting that they are Cather’s discovery of the meaning of her own history and the meaning of time as it relates to her own consciousness of self; in short, a spiritual autobiography in fictional texts.

It is my argument that Cather’s ultimate judgment of the nature of man and her definition of the “good life” came through a process of exploring the growth of her own mind and the nature of her own experiences within the arena of her fiction, and that this journey ultimately led her back to a reidentification with her Virginia family members and their world view. John H. Randall observes that the “unifying factor in Willa Cather’s work” is that “she herself was engaged in a search, a lifelong quest for value” (*Landscape* xi). The Virginia clan were the ones who were always closest to her and who, in her early years, had the most impact on her development. Many of Cather’s central characters are modeled on these persons (the others are patterned after different aspects of herself), and to the end they remained the most important to her.

Willa Cather’s method of artistic creation involved taking these voices and the accompanying landscapes from her past and recreating them, sometimes in immediately recognizable form, sometimes not. The essayist Loren Eiseley describes the process of what goes on in the “unseen artist’s loft” in terms that reflect Cather’s own:

There are pictures that hang askew, pictures with outlines barely chalked in, pictures torn, pictures the artist has striven unsuccessfully to erase, pictures that only emerge and glow in a certain light. They have all been

⁷ In “Willa Cather: Living History” in *Perspectives: Women in Nebraska History*.

teleported, stolen, as it were, out of time. They represent no longer the sequential flow of ordinary memory. . . . The writer sees back to these transports alone, bare, perhaps few in number, but endowed with a symbolic life. He cannot obliterate them. He can only drag them about, magnify or reduce them as his artistic sense dictates, or juxtapose them in order to enhance a pattern. (qtd. in Heidtmann 208)

Cather told Elizabeth Sergeant that “her novels were transcriptions of love for people and places” (WC:AM 203). If we are to understand Willa Cather’s artistic methodology, we must closely examine these places and faces of well-loved people, who for her were “endowed with a symbolic life,” and determine how she received them into her imagination.

In a letter dated 1936 to Mr. Williams, a reviewer for *The Commonwealth*,⁸ Cather comments on her views of history and how history should inform art. She was much disturbed over current social criticism that debunked all writing which looked backward for value and truth. These critics disparagingly called such writing the “Art of ‘Escape,’” a category into which Cather’s works obviously fit. With her knife-edged prose, Cather carved out an argument that generally laid bare what she perceived as the falseness of current critical fads and argued that escape is the only proper goal for art. “What has art ever been but escape?” she asks. The term as used by the faddists, she continues, implies “an evasion of duty,” that the “world is in a bad way,” and it should be the task of the poet to “devote himself to propaganda and fan the flames of indignation” (OW 18).

But art, like religion, should not reiterate the endless details over and over in mirror-like fashion but should rather provide an escape from them by seeing them from a different angle and from a wide perspective, by getting at the root of things. That does not mean that artists should not “cry out against social injustice.” But the poet, like the

⁸ The letter is printed under the title “Escapism” in OW, 18-29.

“Hebrew prophets and the Greek dramatists” should go deeper. Rather than presenting an account of passing phenomena in a “coating of stock cinema situations,” he will consider the universal “greed and selfishness innate in every individual; the valour which leads to power, and the tyranny which power begets” (OW 22-23).

Cather had no use for the philosophy that “the one really important thing for every individual is his citizenship, his loyalty to a cause--which, of course, always means his loyalty to a party.” Rather, the highest calling for the artist, Cather insists, is to “refresh and recharge the spirit” (OW 20). The artist, like the priest (after all, “Religion and art spring from the same root and are close kin” [27]), points to something outside of the moment, something removed from the temporality of popular social and political reforms. He looks for the permanent and universal, the underlying spirit of the things. “[T]he themes of true poetry, of great poetry,” she concludes, “will be the same until all the values of human life have changed and all the strongest emotional responses have become different--which can hardly occur until the physical body itself has fundamentally changed” (28).

What some critics have regarded as Cather’s regrettable escape into the past⁹ is more accurately interpreted as a journey toward an eternal present. When Cather put her life into her fiction, she was actually *living history*, joining past and present into a synapse of timelessness, not just in memory, but in some special kind of eternal reality. Her view of time was religious, and she always tied her past to her present and future. She selected “out of the teeming, gleaming stream” of the details of her own personal

⁹ The most scathing of these indictments comes from John H. Randall, III, in *The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather’s Search for Value*. He interprets all of Cather’s themes as a rejection of twentieth-century life, which for him is an artistic weakness as well as a personal one. While Randall is right about Cather’s preoccupation with herself, he misinterprets the impetus of her themes. He possibly rejects them because he himself does not agree with their premise, that is, that life is only good when lived by eternal verities.

history “the stuff of immortality,” those primary human passions and values, and by so doing was able to transform her life into “the eternal material of art” (OW 36, 40). Alfred Kazin approaches this conclusion when he says that Cather’s vision was intensely private, deeply and compulsively nostalgic, coming out of a feeling that is both incommunicable and inexplicable (1, 12).

James E. Miller, Jr. gives the best advice to all who are trying to get at Cather’s “prime sensibility” or to understand the underlying pattern of the “primal plan” of her art:

I would suggest that critics turn their attention from external matters, from chronological time (the past) and from geography (Nebraska and the West) and focus on internal matters, on states of feeling and awareness. The word that might best define this area--consciousness--is a word that became for [Henry] James almost holy in its *evocation of being and becoming*, the . . . key to the nature of life itself (“WC and the Art of Fiction” 146)

The timeless quality that so many have noticed in Cather’s fiction does not come from a regression into the chronological past or from a yearning for a vanished geographical place. It is rather the affirmation of an eternal truth, of a universal plan and design of divine genius that shapes the life of man and nature and gives it its color and vigor. It is a yearning for that design and reality hidden in the self which, when found, gives meaning and completeness to existence. If Henry James’ search for the “evocation of being” is *almost* holy, Willa Cather’s is completely holy. She aimed to lay bare “the great truths, the deathless power that is in man,” writes Stephen Tennant. “[S]he restores to the ravaged ego its sense of unity . . . of a scheme, a final design in the rich, desolating chaos we call life” (OW xxiv, xiii).

Tennant does not say so, but his judgment must have been reserved for Cather’s more “positive” works--*O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, or

Shadows on a Rock, and possibly the first half of *The Song of the Lark*. Certainly, in works like *One of Ours*, *The Professor's House*, *The Lost Lady*, or *My Mortal Enemy*, that sense of eternal "unity" or "final design" can be found only, if at all, by negation. The reason for this disparity is that Cather's search for value was a journey, and sometimes the road led downward, other times upward. But like T. S. Eliot's road in *Burnt Norton* (in *The Four Quartets*), Cather's roads only appear to be divergent; actually, they are moving in the same direction--toward a spiritual and timeless reality.¹⁰ Cather's complete literary career is a travelogue down these roads and reveals her quest through her art to understand human life in general and her own in particular.

Critics have explained Cather's unique artistry as rising from an unusual capacity to empathize with experiences very different from her own, her ability to embrace a wide variety of cultures and peoples and imaginatively recreate them with love and verisimilitude.¹¹ The fact of the matter is she had a very hard time inventing believable characters or landscapes that did not have their origins in peoples and places that she knew very well from her own experience. The three novels that "failed" in the judgment of many critics--*Alexander's Bridge*,¹² *One of Ours*,¹³ and *Lucy Gayheart*¹⁴--either

¹⁰ In *Burnt Norton*, Eliot writes that in a spiritual journey, the way up and the way down are the same. In *Little Gidding* he reiterates the idea in a different form: "What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning" (V. 1-2). The same could be said of Cather's spiritual journey.

¹¹ See James Woodress, WC:LL 241, 294, 426 for a summary of views. See also Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom in *Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy* for a full treatment of the subject.

¹² Early criticism of *Alexander's Bridge* when it first was published was generally favorable. (See Bernice Slote's Introduction to the 1977 edition, vi - viii.) However, many critics after 1920 generally call it inferior. Alfred Kazin calls it her "pale first novel" ("Elegy: Willa Cather," 19), and when Elizabeth Sergeant read the galley proofs, to her surprise and "discomfiture," the story "seemed conventional" (WC:AM, 75). Also see John P. Hinz, "The Real Alexander's Bridge." Those who early on saw real

were placed in unfamiliar settings--such as London or war-torn France--or were peopled with characters who are not identified with the people Willa Cather loved best.

In *One of Ours*, Cather creates a character named David Gerhardt, a fellow army officer to the protagonist Claude Wheeler. In private life, Gerhardt is a violinist. The story behind Cather's invention of Gerhardt is illustrative of Cather's apparent inability to create vital characters from persons who had not haunted her mind from her earliest days--who were not a part of her own intimate, private history--even if she were deeply stirred by them. As Cather revealed in an interview for *The New York Herald*, December 24, 1922, Gerhardt was inspired by David Hochstein, a distinguished young violinist who

substance to the novel were detecting its autobiographical significance: that, as Bernice Slote suggests, Alexander "reflects in one form Willa Cather's own division of spirit" (Introduction, AB, xxvi).

¹³ Woodress speaks for many when he wrote that the "basic difficulty with *One of Ours* is the entire subject. Willa Cather should not have tried to write a war novel Nowhere is the book carelessly done, but seldom does it rise above the level of competent journeyman work" (WC:LA. 192).

¹⁴ Again, Woodress gives us the consensus concerning *Lucy Gayheart*: "Willa Cather knew that [the novel] was not up to her usual stand and admitted as much to close associates. . . . Stephen Vincent Benét in the *New York Herald Tribune* thought it was one of her rare failures, William Troy in the *Nation* called it a grave disappointment, and even J. Donald Adams in *The New York Times* had reservations. . . . There was no faulting Willa Cather's narrative skill or her competent prose; the difficulty lay elsewhere" (WC:LA, 251). Cather identified the "difficulty" as the fact "she had lost patience with her silly young heroine." Woodress comments: "This is a surprising statement to come from a novelist who knew that she only wrote well when she dealt with characters she loved and admired. . . . [T]he best explanation is that the author could not kindle an emotional response because she did not feel it herself" (251). The real "difficulty" lay in the fact that by the time *Lucy Gayheart* appeared in 1935, Cather was thoroughly dissatisfied with using some version of her imagined self as the subject for her art, as Lucy certainly is. Lucy is Cather's last attempt to reconcile the contradictions in her own character. Hence, her epithet of "her silly young heroine."

had been killed in the Argonne in 1918. Cather had met him three times and declared “he was the sort of person to whom you gave your whole attention.” He was “reticent” to the extreme, but “what he had to say was extremely interesting; and you didn’t feel that he had said it all before to a great many people.” Cather was deeply moved when she heard him perform and thought his playing “simply splendid.” “I felt,” she continued, “that he had the *stimmung* of that particular composition on that occasion more than any of the other players.” Cather’s long interview, observes Elizabeth Sergeant, is filled with vibrant and “moving thumbnail sketches of [this] gifted musician who had a fundamental disbelief in war.” But when Cather tried to create a character of him, even though he had struck a deep emotional chord in her, the result was “the rather pale and insubstantial David Gerhardt of the novel” (WC:AM 173-180).

James Woodress identifies the problem:¹⁵ “Most of the characters, settings, and incidents [in *One of Ours*] are worked up for the novel from immediate materials, a method that Willa Cather deplored and used badly” (WC:LA 192). Cather herself wrote that “A reporter can write equally well about everything that is presented to his view,” as she proved with her sketch on David Hochstein, but in the same statement she also said that “a creative writer can do his best only with what lies within the range and character of his deepest sympathies” (NUF 81). David Hochstein did not belong to that category. Sergeant believes that Cather’s “deepest compassion was aroused by voiceless human beings whom she felt to be at the mercy of life and fate”; characters like Mahailey in *One of Ours* or Grandma Harris in “Old Mrs. Harris” were Cather’s most memorable. Sergeant was on the right track. Actually, Cather’s most memorable characters have a

¹⁵ Most of my references to James Woodress in this dissertation are based on his 1970 critical biography. His most recent biography appeared after most of these chapters had been written. I have added in the more current information from the new work where it is warranted, but as Woodress writes in his Preface, his “present view of Cather does not change in any basic way the image of her contained in [his] earlier view” (WC:LL, xv).

broader common denominator: almost all are patterned after the people close to her inner circle back in Virginia.¹⁶ Other than Claude,¹⁷ the well-rounded characters in *One of Ours*, Mrs. Wheeler and Mahailey, “are based on women whom Willa Cather had known and loved for years, and they are three-dimensional figures like others in her best fiction,” says James Woodress (WC:LA 191-92). The parts of the novel that are based on her Virginia family, including herself, are her most authentic. The parts that draw on more distant people and circumstances--David Gerhardt and the war--drift into unreality and inauthenticity.

Marian Forrester of *A Lost Lady* would have been doomed to the same fate as David Gerhardt if Cather, as she claimed, had relied solely on her impressions of Mrs. Silas Garber of Red Cloud for her model.¹⁸ Most critics, like James Woodress, take Cather at her word and believe Mrs. Forrester is “authentic” and “three dimensional” because Cather’s association with Mrs. Garber had penetrated the imagination of a young girl in Red Cloud. The fact is that Cather did not have a close enough association with Mrs. Garber for such a longtime influence to happen. Young Willa had been invited only once to a garden party at the Garber place, and that was mainly through the influence of

¹⁶ In WC:LA, 163-64, Woodress discusses how Willa Cather sees her characters (and herself) in others and vice versa. He illustrates with the case of Olive Fremstad’s impact on Cather and the writing of *The Song of the Lark*. Woodress further points out that even in S. S. McClure’s *Autobiography*, which Cather ghost-wrote, she emphasizes the circumstances in his life that most closely resembled her own, so much so that much of it reads like her own autobiography (162).

¹⁷ Even though Cather said that Claude was based on her cousin, the son of her Aunt Frank Cather, Cather was not close enough to him to have written such a heart-felt characterization. Actually, much of Claude is Willa herself, as some have noted. Elizabeth Sergeant points to a representative passage where Claude “said things about life that echoed Willa on her dark days” (WC:AM, 173).

¹⁸ See WWC, 69-70.

Carrie Miner.¹⁹ Cather herself barely knew Mrs. Garber. In fact, most of what Willa knew about her she learned through Carrie or the local gossip or by catching a glimpse of her “twirling about in her ruffled starched skirts” at the Red Cloud milliner’s shop (WC:AM 188). There is no question that Mrs. Garber arrested Willa’s attention and made a deep impression on her, but so had many other people, like David Hochstein, who had not found their way to becoming one of Cather’s memorable characters. The real impetus behind the creation of Marion Forrester--and the underlying reason for Cather’s attraction to Mrs. Garber in the first place--is in the person of her own mother, Virginia Cather.²⁰ Mrs. Garber, like Marian Forrester and like Virginia Cather, was a charming woman, an admired hostess who loved being admired and pampered with “lavish gifts of jewelry and lovely gowns” (WWC 72). She had Virginia Cather’s lovely hair and, like Virginia, was fussy about it. She also exhibited a trait that for Cather was a lifelong thorn--placing undue importance on physical good looks. Cather said that Marian Forrester was created out of an emotion (WC:AM 186-87), and the emotion that we feel for her through the young Niel Herbert gets its power from the emotion that Willa Cather felt for her own mother.

Cather describes her own drive to write as the “bliss of entering into the very skin of another human being,” implying that she forgot the self and immersed herself imaginatively in another (WC:AM 111). In truth, her fiction indicates she never did forget the self, nor that she immersed herself in totally imagined characters. “Mind and invention were not her tools,” is Sergeant’s perceptive assessment. Rather, “the decisive

¹⁹ In one of Cather’s many small exaggerations, she implied to Elizabeth Sergeant that she had picnicked there as a child many times (WC:AM, 186, 188). This is echoed in Mildred Bennett’s account that “Willa was often a Sunday evening visitor or she went driving with Mrs. Garber and her friends” (WWC, 73).

²⁰ For a full discussion of Virginia Cather’s influence on Cather’s fiction, see WC:EV, especially Chapter 2.

element was intuitive, poetical, almost mystical perception" (WC:AM 203). Cather's "intuitive" or "poetical" or "mystical" perceptions allowed her to see the familiar in the strange, but it was the familiar elements, not the strange ones, that inspired her art. Her characters and landscapes were born directly out of the materials already present in her experience. Cather said a true artist "must know his subject with an understanding that surpasses understanding--as the babe knows its own mother's breast" (WC:AM 196). That kind of longtime familial intimacy Cather had only with her Virginia family members.

These key figures from Cather's Virginian years can help unlock the puzzle of Cather's mysterious process that so captivated Elizabeth Sergeant. In the course of her life Cather met several persons who riveted her attention and implanted themselves in her imagination. For years they would haunt the back room of her mind, ever-present ghosts waiting to be brought to life. Usually, after much time, they re-emerged like the dress forms in Godfrey St. Peter's attic study, skeletons in the shape of family members, waiting to be dressed up in various costumes and masks as the characters in her books. "[S]he was jostled and churned up from below by meeting, usually through memory, a figure she could not deny. Then she paused, gazed, apprehended her fullest inwardly and communicated in a story what she saw and felt" (WC:AM 108-09).

As a child, Willa Cather had loved play acting and dressing up in costume (WC:LL 57-58). In creating literary characters, she employed the same gifts of theatrical direction and added a bit of Frankensteinian wizardry. She had an acute ability to make unusual correspondences and to draw linkages between persons far removed in time and place. Stelzig notes that the writer of autobiographical fiction can "use the autobiographical matrix, and range beyond it at will." Freed from the tyranny of literal facts, "he can give full rein to the play of the literary imagination in appropriating and transforming elements of his own experience, and [blend] these with invented material" (27-28). This exactly describes Cather's method.

She could look at some person--or even just read about him--and see, simultaneously, someone else, usually someone who went far back in her memory, and usually someone identified with a family member or with herself. Putting the two images together, she worked her imaginative hocus-pocus. The resulting fictional character might have the face of one person, the body of another, and the personality of yet another. Oftentimes, even character traits could be a composite of several persons. The possible combinations were endless. Myra Henshawe has the short stubbornness, interest in the arts, and abhorrence of overhead noise of Willa Cather, but she has the jealousy, imperiousness, and fashionable elegance of Willa's mother. Godfrey St. Peter's intellectual drives, his love of the Southwest and all things French (among many other things) link him to Willa Cather, but his looks, manners, and wife link him to Willa's father, Charles. In the same story, Tom Outland, in many respects a younger version of Willa Cather herself, like her, has his moment of disillusionment in Washington D.C. and his moment of epiphany on the Blue Mesa in the Southwest.²¹ "All the lovely emotions that one has had," said Cather in an interview, "some day appear with bodies, and it isn't as if one found ideas suddenly. Before this the memories of these experiences and emotions have been like perfume" (WC:AM 187).

Some of the guises are more transparent than others, and Cather herself identified the prototypes of several. She told her public that Anna Pavelka of Red Cloud, Nebraska, inspired Antonia Shimerda, and that Olive Fremstad, the Scandinavian soprano, sparked the creation of Thea Kronberg. What she did not tell them, and possibly was even not conscious of herself, was that her attraction toward Anna Pavelka had a great deal to do with the fact that Anna had qualities much like the women who filled young Willa's life in Back Creek, Virginia, or that in Olive Fremstad, Cather found

²¹ Woodress says that Tom Outland is Cather's "own dream self" and his adventure a romanticized version of Cather's own when she went to the Southwest years before the novel was written (WC:LA, 211).

a virtual twin, an artist whose experiences with family and career in many respects matched her own. All those who riveted her attention had one common mark--they reminded Cather either of one of her family or of herself. The result was not, as she claimed, a bliss that came from "entering into the very skin of another human being"; but rather the bliss of bringing someone else into her own.²²

Was Willa Cather aware of her own methodology? Her own revealing comments provide at least one part of the answer. She once wrote to a friend that her fictional people "are all composites of three or four persons." She believed that "most authors shrink from actual portrait painting" because it seemed "so cold blooded, so heartless, so indecent almost, to present an actual person in that intimate fashion, stripping his very soul" (WWC 22).²³

Yet Cather once admitted that she had drawn "one portrait of an actual person." She identified her as "the mother of the neighbor family in *My Antonia*" (WWC 22). Mrs. Harling of the novel, she said, was Mrs. Miner, a close friend and neighbor of the Cather in Red Cloud. And even further, on the flyleaf of a copy of that book which she gave to Carrie Miner, Willa Cather wrote an inscription that contradicted her claim to having written only "one portrait": "In memory of old friends whose portraits are sketched in this book" (WWC 45). In a later interview, Cather further denied her earlier claim that all her characters are composites by identifying the heroine of *A Lost Lady* as "a woman I loved very much in my childhood," a Mrs. Silas Garber, wife of the ex-governor of Nebraska. Cather even emphasizes the realism of this portraiture: "Now the

²² Sergeant never saw Cather so excited about a character, so much in a "state of mental-emotional passion" as she was about Olive Fremstad in whom Willa most closely saw herself. "Fremstad had somehow ignited Willa Cather's inner fires and projected her toward a story that would take a lot longer than *O Pioneers!* to write--a story about a great voice, and a woman impelled to discover and develop it, through her meagre home background sanctioned no such effort" (WC:AM, 109, 118).

²³ Quoted from an interview by Eleanor Hinman, *Lincoln Sunday Star*, Nov. 6, 1921.

problem was to get her not like a standardized heroine in fiction, but as she really was, and not to care about anything else in the story except that one character. And there is nothing but that portrait" (WWC 69).²⁴ At least we can conclude that whether her characters are portraits or composites, she knew they were drawn from real-life people.

Cather also made conflicting statements concerning her early awareness of her aims. She once said, "Thank goodness, I had a youth uncorrupted by literary ambitions. I mean it! I think it's too bad for a child to feel that it must be a writer, for then instead of looking at life naturally, it is hunting for cheap effects" (WWC 109). Yet she confessed that she had closely observed the people in her life with a motive beyond natural interest. "I always intended to write," she told Hinman, "and there were certain persons I studied" (Hinman interview, WWC 77). She never concerned herself about the plot, she wrote; the characters were all in all. "It happened that my mind was constructed for the particular purpose of absorbing impressions and retaining them" (Hinman interview, WWC 109). And retain them she did, sometimes until after decades of simmering in her memory; then they would appear as one character or another in her stories. The memories recorded in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* had been brewing in Cather's brain for over sixty years.

Cather was sensitive to anyone else's experience that matched her own, and not any less when it came to shared theories of art. Her attraction to Sarah Orne Jewett and Katherine Mansfield was born out of both. What she said about them was just as true for herself. Cather notes that Jewett had found that the "thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper--whether little or great, it belongs to Literature" (OW 47). And in her essay on Mansfield, Cather points out that Mansfield's greatest work came after she was freed "from the self-consciousness and affectations of the experimenting young writer" and found "her realest self" by going

²⁴ Quoted from an interview by Flora Merrill, *New York World*, April 19, 1925.

“backwards” in memory to her beginnings and her humble family in New Zealand. It was “out of those memories [that] her best stories were to grow” (114-15). Cather’s observations concerning these writers are thinly veiled assessments of herself.

“You can’t write imaginary things,” Willa Cather once said. “To have universal appeal, they must be true” (WWC 201).²⁵ Yet Cather’s consciousness of her method made her leery. She insisted that all evidence of her personal life be destroyed, and “obsessed with a desire for privacy, she destroyed all of her letters she could” and ordered her friends to do the same (WC:LA xi).

Cather even wanted to control how history judged her as an artist and as a person by designating what pieces of her work could be reprinted (WC:LA xii). Whatever success she had in this--destroying letters and asking others to do the same, discarding rough drafts, and controlling what works could be reprinted--only further whets the curiosity of the critic and biographer. But the evidence that we do have underscores--Cather’s protests notwithstanding--that her life *as she lived it* directly informs the very core of her art.

Another thing to keep in mind when considering Cather’s own statements concerning her artistic methodology is what Sergeant calls “her perplexing secretiveness” (WC:AM 90). She seemed to not only enjoy secrecy as a game which provided her with some power over others’ knowledge of her, but with this method she could also deny anything that might adversely affect people’s opinion of her. Consequently, her elastic imagination shaped experience to fit her own fancy. In this regard, one thinks of “Nietzsche’s assumption that deep truths are in need of the mask.” Confessional fiction is an “aesthetic” as well as “psychological game-playing with fragments of the self, self-exposure as well as self-masking.” A writer may not only “express himself in his work; he may also hide behind it, or disappear into it. He may become another, or many others,

²⁵ Willa Cather in conversation with Carrie Miner Sherwood.

in order to get a better purchase on himself, and to capture the existential sense (to borrow Kierkegaard's title) of 'stages on life's way'" (Stelzig 29).

Cather had a deep reserve and even fear about exposing the people in her life in her fiction. At first, it was partly because she was a bit embarrassed by her family's and friends' humble station in life and worried that their folksy ways might detract from the Eastern sophistication she had acquired. Elizabeth Sergeant tells us that when she first knew her, Cather was working at *McClure's* and had not won any acclaim as a fiction writer:

Cather would say disparagingly, ironically, that she could never write stories of Nebraska--Swedes and Bohemians were just a joke in New York--everybody would laugh. She was apparently still holding down the lid of her deep reservoir of regional memories, which Sarah Orne Jewett had begged her to tap and use in fiction. She was thinking of what "people might think" instead of what she had to say. (WC:AM 4)

Besides protecting her pride, Cather also dreaded "hurting people's feelings" with her characterizations, she told Sergeant. "[W]e all want to be liked" (WC:AM 90).²⁶ Cather knew whereof she spoke. In 1904, "A Wagner Matinee" appeared in *Everybody's Magazine*, and it caused quite an uproar back home. The story paints a rough picture of Nebraska in the days when Cather's own family moved West. The heroine, Georgiana, patterned somewhat after her Aunt Franc Cather but who also has the mark of Grandmother Rachel Boak, takes a trip to Boston after many hard years on the

²⁶ Hemingway said something similar: "I have never written a novel about the [Hemingway] family because I have never wanted to hurt anyone's feelings but with the death of the ones I love a period has been put to a great part of it and I may have to undertake it" (Bell, "The Personal Metaphor," 121). Of course, at least overtly, Hemingway never wrote that novel.

prairie with her husband. There she is taken to an afternoon Wagner concert where her starving spirit revives.

The Nebraska press, to say nothing of Cather's family, was outraged and insulted: "The stranger to this state will associate Nebraska with the aunt's wretched figure, her ill-fitting false teeth, her skin yellowed by weather," wrote Will Jones in the *Lincoln Journal*. "If the writers of fiction who use western Nebraska as material would look up now and then and not keep their eyes and noses in the cattle yards, they might be more agreeable company" (WC:LA 116). They misunderstood her story as badly as some have misunderstood the treatment of blacks in *Huckleberry Finn*. Cather immediately tried to defend herself. Didn't everyone know how desolate those days were, and couldn't they understand she was actually paying tribute to the self-sacrificing and enduring people who weathered those hard times? Her family "told her it was not nice to tell such things," and she was forever after more devious in the presentation of her characters. Cather told Elizabeth Sergeant that after she learned to write "symbolically"--meaning with masks--she was showing that she was a "mature writer." Such a writer "has to be free of the fear that his subjects will recognize themselves and be hurt" (WC:AM 5). Thus, her mix-and-match method of creating characters was born.²⁷

Cather had an even deeper reason for her reticence. For many years she seemed unhappy and unsatisfied with herself, and her artistic method made it possible for her to recreate herself and others as she pleased.²⁸ Yet she was driven toward it, obsessively so. She escaped direct exposure by looking at herself and her life through the disguise of fiction. It acted as her private analyst's couch, and her memories emerged like a drama with the characters' lives and feelings at a safe distance. In this way, too, she could come to some understanding of life and herself without fear of retribution.

²⁷ Also see Woodress's discussion in WC:LA, 116-117.

²⁸ See Sergeant's discussion in WC:AM, 4, 89, 92, 103, 111, 148, and 198.

It is difficult to determine where Cather's life of the senses ended and her life of the imagination began. If an experience hit her fancy, it was so molded into her own imaginative constructs that at times even she herself had difficulty distinguishing between experiential reality and imaginative reality. Once, with some friends, she was giving an account in vivid detail of her experiences with Lillian Russell. "But Willa," said Louise Pound, Willa's friend, "you never knew Lillian Russell." "Why, so I didn't," said Willa, smiling.²⁹ Mildred Bennett also tells that when she interviewed Willa's youngest sister, Elsie, to verify some details for her Cather biography, Elsie "often questioned certain facts." 'Is that really true,' she would ask, 'or is it one of Willie's little stories?'" ("Childhood Worlds" 209).

Fourteen years before Willa Cather's death, Dorothy Canfield Fisher was asked by the New York *Herald Tribune* to write a retrospective essay on her friend's work, and Cather's response to this project is an important clue in discovering her artistic methodology and the place art had in her life.³⁰ Even though Cather approved of the *Tribune's* choice of an author for the article, and even though she hoped the article would dispel the general image the public had of her as an anti-social recluse, she felt very uneasy about having herself unmasked for public viewing. After reading Dorothy's trial draft, Cather apparently sent a hasty telegram begging her to quit the project. In later letters Cather explained to her friend that articles about herself made her self-conscious. When she thought of herself in the past--in Red Cloud, Colorado, or New Mexico--the memories were spoiled because, she said, she had been running from herself all of her

²⁹ The exact dialogue is invented but not the substance of the conversation. See Bernice Slote, "Willa Cather: The Secret Web," 1.

³⁰ The article appeared in the *Tribune*, May 28, 1933, and the *Omaha World*, June 2, 1933.

life.³¹ Evidently for Cather, the only place that memory or her own view of herself was unspoiled was in poetic imagination.

After Willa Cather read Canfield's published article, she agreed with Canfield's conclusion that Cather's work was, in a word, escape (WC:LA 247). Here is a second use of the term. The escape that Cather defends for art in general is of a different sort than this other personal escape. The first is an escape *toward* truth; the second is an escape *from* truth. A second difference is that the first escape is toward a universal and comprehensive truth, whereas the second is concerned with a private and individual truth. She actually abandoned the self of the real world only to pursue that same self in a fictional world. There, she was able to more safely discover a personal reality. Through imaginative writing, the second escape would meet with the first. Eventually, Cather discovered that the eternal verities implanted in her during her Virginia years were in an essential way at the core of her own vision of life.

Most likely in no other way would Cather have ever discovered herself or the values she came to treasure. "[P]erhaps certain truths can only be adumbrated or brought out through fiction. . . . Certain forms of inner experience may only be conjurable in fantastic form" (Stelzig 32). Consequently, these truths need a fable, an allegory, a story as symbol, "to develop those inner truths that resist direct presentation":

Such exquisite symbolic self-fictionalizations can cast a spell and speak to a much larger audience than autobiography, for they can seem like echoes from our own depths, tropes of our own experience, ciphers of our own selves. If confessional fiction's foremost claim is that it will tell nothing

³¹ In all, Cather wrote four letters to Dorothy Canfield concerning this article. Only one is dated--June 22, 1933. Woodress paraphrases the information in the letters in WC:LA, 247. Cather made it a condition of her will that none of her letters could be published.

but the truth, the truth that it tells is accessible only through the magic mirror of fiction. (33)

* * *

Information about Willa Cather's early childhood yields profound evidence to help explain her life and art.³² In our search for those early influences that "echo" throughout her fiction, we go first to a place, a defined space that became the significant backdrop for Willa Cather's first years. Back Creek, Virginia, is located in the Shenandoah Valley west of the town of Winchester in Frederick County within sight of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Willa Cather's early years were "bound up in the woods and hills and meadows" of a family homestead that had a history of six generations. Cather would later marvel at just how bound a child's life can be to its earliest years (Slote, "An Exploration. . ." 215).³³

Cather's earliest recollections were always the strongest and most insistent. In an interview in 1921, she confessed that she did not collect materials for writing, but found it all in her childhood experiences. But what she said next is even more telling: she went west, not for materials, but for inspiration.³⁴ In other words, her real material lay outside the Nebraska years. Couple this with her statement that a writer collects all of his material

³² In this study, I am not investigating the current wisdom in child psychology, but a cursory glance at almost any study in early childhood development will confirm the centrality of the childhood years in the emotional and psychological development of the adult. See studies by Erik Erickson, *Childhood and Society* (1950, 1963), *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1959, 1980), *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (1968); M. O. Karmel and L. J. Karmel, *Growing and Becoming: Development from conception through Adolescence* (1984), and R. M. Thomas, *Comparing Theories of Child Development* (1985).

³³ Interview in the *Philadelphia Record*, 1913.

³⁴ See Eleanor Hinman, "Willa Cather, Famous Nebraska Novelist, Says Pioneer Mother Held Greatest Appreciation of Art--Raps Woman Who Devote Themselves to Culture Clubs" (1, 2).

before he is fifteen, and the conclusion has to be that her materials came from her life prior to the Nebraska experience.

Although the adult Willa Cather seemed to recognize the foundational role that her Virginian life had played, critics generally have not. With the exception of Bernice Slote, Sharon O'Brien, and James Woodress in his most recent biography, the consensus has been that anything significant to Willa Cather's art began when she was taken to Nebraska at nine years of age.³⁵ Cather's first authorized biographer, E. K. Brown, claims that the traces in Willa Cather's fiction of her years in Virginia before the age of eight are "few and faint" and that the "first nine years of her life gave her neither a subject or theme" (3).³⁶

³⁵ In her critical biography, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, Sharon O'Brien devotes significant space to establishing the influence of Cather's Southern heritage (see Chapters 1 and 2, 11-58), but she does not go as far as I do in saying that all that Cather deems important and the very focus of her art begin and end there. Bernice Slote hints more than once that critics should look more closely at Cather's years in Virginia. See Introduction, *The Kingdom of Art*, 61; 104-06. James Woodress notes some of the important Virginia influences in WC:LL.

³⁶ See the following for representative articles and books claiming the Nebraska experience as the primary one: Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, "Willa Cather" (4-5); Mildred R. Bennett, in *The World of Willa Cather*, focuses mainly on the Nebraska years and asserts that these years contain the seed for all Cather was to become: the events, people, and places translated into art. In "The Childhood Worlds of Willa Cather" (204), Bennett does say that the "specifics to which [Cather] returned throughout her career" include the Virginian experiences as well as the Nebraskan, but Bennett mentions nothing more than the pieces that directly refer to Virginia. Robert L. Gale, in "Willa Cather and the Past" (209-22), names the four circumstances in Cather's past that most importantly shaped her fiction: (1) her family's move to Nebraska and the ensuing immigrant experiences, (2) the Lincoln years when she discovered the performing artists, (3) her first trip to Europe, and (4) her discovery of the Southwest. Glenda Woltemath, "Daughter of the Prairies" (12-14). Lois Quinnett, in "Willa Took 'Roads to Freedom,'" insists that Nebraska was Cather's "passion," the wellspring of her inspiration. Also see

Not only does Virginia count for little; its fiction [*Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, "A Night at Greenway Court," *My Antonia*, and "Old Mrs. Harris"] does not offer an important record of early childhood translated into Western terms. The novels are full of interesting adolescents, boys as often as girls, presented with a finely sympathetic understanding, seen very convincingly from within, and these adolescents are often devoted to younger children; but there is very little sense or feeling of what it means to be a young child (4).

Like so many others, Brown assumes that all of Cather's most vital experiences *should* be found in her Western fiction. He is amazed by Cather's apparent "dismissal of the experiences of early childhood" (3) and assumes the child must appear on the surface of the text in order to be considered and to be accounted for. He did not consider that the child may be buried in the consciousness of the adult, and the child's influence on the adult's life may be far greater than any immediate circumstance or influence. The fact is

Bruce Paul Baker, "Nebraska Regionalism in Selected Works of Willa Cather" (19-35); Sister Lucy Schneider, "Artistry and Intuition: Willa Cather's 'Land-Philosophy'" (53-64); and Henry C. Haskell, "Return as a Native Matured Willa Cather's Genius." David D. Anderson, in "Willa Cather's Second Century" (13-14), expresses misgivings over the international focus of the seminar for which the paper was written, fearing it will detract from the regional (Nebraskan) nature of Cather's work since Nebraska is her point of departure and the source of her most perceptive inspiration and insight. For other foci on Nebraska, see Stephanie Kraft, "Willa Cather, the Prairie, and Red Cloud" (11, 94-104), and Richard Paoli, "Red Cloud: A Novel Setting" (1, 11). Post-60's criticism leans toward the significance of relational influences on Cather, but even there, the persons these critics identify come after the Virginia years, the one exception being Sharon O'Brien. Phillip L. Gerber, in *Willa Cather*, almost ignores the Virginia years, astonishing given the fact that his aim is to show the connectedness of the themes in Cather's works, and to do that one has to consider, at the very least, her one overtly Southern novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

that in all of Cather's fiction is a subtext pointing to those early childhood experiences. They are the driving force behind all her efforts, and the type of people whom she later created as her most exemplary heroes and heroines is altogether found in the folks of Back Creek, Virginia.

Willa Cather was born in Back Creek in 1873 where for six generations her family had dug roots deeply into the Shenandoah Valley soil, circulating strong Southern traditions.³⁷ Her great-grandfather, James Cather, had settled in the Back Creek area in the early 1800's. The long history of the family was marked in the land of Cather's birth—in the kitchen where the old women, while churning butter or baking pies, would tell the stories passed on from one generation to the next, and in the graveyard where names out of the past matched one's own. It was inscribed in the protective hills of the Blue Ridge and in the grazing land and in the home place of Willow Shade.

Sharon O'Brien notes that even though Cather "could not legally inherit the land" of her birth, "she was its emotional and spiritual heir":

The landmarks that made Virginia "familiar" were not merely well-known topographical features but also signs of her family's presence in the world before she was born: previous generations of Cathers had settled and farmed the land, building houses and fences, barns and graveyards.

(WC:EV 61)

Cather's artistic response to the human imprint on nature is expressed by Tom Outland in *The Professor's House* when he discovers the remains of an old Indian civilization high

³⁷ General biographical data are taken from the following biographies: E.K. Brown, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*; Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living*; Elizabeth Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir*; Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather*; James Woodress, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art*; and Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*.

up in the rocks of the Mesa in the Southwest: “[T]here is something stirring about finding evidences of human labor and care in the soil of an empty country. It comes to you as a sort of message, makes you feel differently about the ground you walk over every day” (PH 194). Like Moses in the presence of God, anyone who experiences this “message” is on holy ground. Tom describes the tower rising up in the middle of the stone houses in religious terms, as “symmetrical and powerful,” holding “all the jumble of houses together” and making “them mean something” (201).

One thing that first terrified Cather in Nebraska was the absence of any familiar landmarks, any evidence that man had tamed and shaped nature into order or beauty. It reminded her of what Balzac said about the desert: “*Dans le desert, voyez-vous, il y a tout et il n’y a rien: Dieu, sans les hommes.*”³⁸ Even into adulthood, every time Cather returned to the West for a visit, she had “an unreasoning fear of being swallowed by the distances between herself and anything else jumped out at her--as in childhood again” (WC:AM 79). What few evidences of civilization there were at that first encounter with the flat sheet of Nebraska came either from the Virginian immigrants or the European, both of whom had a rich heritage. No wonder Cather gravitated to the Wiener home in Red Cloud, and the immigrant Europeans on the prairie, with their old world graciousness and order.³⁹ There she found something of flavor of the home she had lost.

The European settlers in Nebraska were uncanny reminders of Cather’s people back in Virginia. Cather wrote in *The Nation* in 1923 that the Europeans “spread across

³⁸ “In the desert, you see, there is everything and there is nothing: God, without men” (quoted in WC:LA, 153).

³⁹ Cather’s preference for this kind of home continued throughout her life. The homes she frequented in Lincoln (the Westermanns’) and Pittsburgh (the McClungs’) had the same quality. Cather herself was imminently unable to create that same atmosphere in her own dwellings, with the exception of the Number Five Bank Street in New York which was cared for by her French cook and housekeeper who created an old world atmosphere for her.

our bronze prairies like the daubs of color on a painter's palette," and their "older traditions" and European ways excited her.⁴⁰ They must have reminded her of the Virginian culture she still yearned for. Their customs and their folktales were the "landmarks" Cather was hungry for. O'Brien observes that

[w]hether constructed by nature or by people, landmarks are products of the human imagination, the visual equivalent of folktales and stories.

What makes landscape meaningful in Cather's fiction are inhabitants who possess their world imaginatively and emotionally rather than economically, marking the land the way a writer marks a blank page.

(WC:EV 61)

Cather believes, as does Wordsworth, that when the imagination lovingly and creatively marks the land, giving it order and shape, it demonstrates its link to an eternal divine spirit. Cather viewed art and religion as partners in the same endeavor--both are activities that unite man and nature with a universal spirit. In this respect as well, the European settlers matched the Virginians and gave Cather a point of reference.

Edith Lewis emphasizes Cather's attachment to the Virginia landscape, that Cather "[loved] passionately . . . every tree and rock, every landmark of the countryside" (WCL 8). It was here in Virginia that Willa Cather's lifelong romantic attachment to nature and her propensity to attach meaning to it were born. Willow Shade, the Cather farm, boasted a generous stand of cottonwoods and willows, and wild flowers grew everywhere. Willa was an "unusually perceptive, impressionable child, and a very observant one" (WC:AM 13), and those observations remained in her memory of Willow

⁴⁰ Willa Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" (236-38).

Shade's landscape so vividly that almost sixty years later, she described it in loving detail through the eyes of Rachel Blake in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* :⁴¹

In the deep ravine below the road a mountain stream rushed coffee brown, throwing up crystal rainbows where it gurgled over rock ledges. On the steep hillside across the creek the tall forest trees were still bare,-- the oak leaves no bigger than a squirrel's ear. From out the naked grey wood the dogwood thrust its crooked forks starred with white blossoms-- the flowers set in their own wild way along the rampant zigzag branches. . . . In all the rich flowering and blushing and blooming of a Virginia spring, the scentless dogwood is the wildest thing and yet the most austere, the most unearthly. . . . Along the rail fences the locust trees were in bloom. The breeze caught their perfume and wafted it down the road. Every Virginian remembers those locusts which grow along the highways: their cloud-shaped masses of blue-green foliage and heavy drooping clusters of cream-white flowers like pea blossoms. . . . [S]he used sometimes to be homesick for these mountains and high places. (SSG 115-117)

Cather's choice for her own burial place was near the mountains of Jaffrey, New Hampshire, a place she had discovered in 1916 and had returned to year after year for an extended stay (WC:LL 37). She wanted her final resting place to be where she could look up and see "a familiar mountain," a reminder of her Virginian home (37). Cather was "moved by the quiet and peace of the ancient, fern-covered burial place, from which one could look across to the mountain" (WWC 226). Like Myra Henshawe in *My Mortal*

⁴¹ Even though the circumstances of Rachel Blake are much like those of Rachel Boak, the personality and character are Willa's herself, and Rachel's rapturous impressions of the Virginia landscape are also Cather's own.

Enemy, she wanted to meet death on a hilltop, the landscape most closely resembling her native Virginia.⁴²

Mildred Bennett tells us that as “soon as Cather could walk, she roamed hills and fields rich in wildlife and varieties of trees and flowers” (“Childhood Worlds” 205).⁴³ Cather’s love of flowers was shared by her Aunt Franc Cather, who went to Webster Country in Nebraska as the bride of George Cather. A botanist, Franc Cather continued to pursue her interest in Nebraska as she had earlier in Virginia, and “pressed the prairie flowers and classified them by both technical and common names” (206). Cather later recalled, rather romantically, that in the first year in Nebraska, “she picked wild flowers and sat with them in her lap, crying over them because they had no names and no one seemed to care for them” (206). Elizabeth Sergeant remembers that, even in New York, Cather’s apartment was always filled with flowers, just as Sapphira Colbert’s rooms were in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

Many judge Cather’s exposure to French culture in the Wiener home in Red Cloud as the beginning of her lifelong obsession with all things French.⁴⁴ But even the attraction to the Wieners and other French immigrants had its birth in Virginia. One

⁴² We can only speculate as to why Cather did not choose Virginia as her burial place rather than New Hampshire. She had grown very fond of the Jaffrey location, and it was the site where several of her well-known works were written. In her adult years, she still exhibited some bias against the modern South with its slow-moving and relaxed ways; to her the people seemed lacking in vigor and industry. Evidently, she either exempted her own elders from her general opinion or believed that the South had changed from the days she had lived there.

⁴³ In one of her rare commitments to a social concern, Cather later promoted forest conservation and worked for the observation of Arbor Day, which was adopted first in Nebraska in 1872 (WWC, 143).

⁴⁴ Woodress says that “Willa Cather had been a Francophile from early childhood” with her contact the “French community on the Divide and Mrs. Wiener’s stories of France” (WC:LA, 102).

beginning at Back Creek was in the house of her friend, Mary Love, whose mother was the daughter of a former United States minister to France (WC:LL 24). Here young Willa was intrigued by Mrs. Love's stories "about her years abroad" and Willa "admired her many treasures from France" (Bennett, "Childhood Worlds" 205). Willa encountered that same French world in the Wiener home in Red Cloud. As she records in "Old Mrs. Harris," it was "the nearest thing to an art gallery" that she had ever seen and housed a "large library" with "many French books" (OD 102-03). It must have seemed to her that those Virginia memories of French treasures had come to life.

In addition to this human resource as a stimulus toward France, the Virginian environment itself was very similar to French culture. Almost everything that Cather admired in the French could be found in post-bellum Virginia. "In a more personal sense," comments Bernice Slote, "France may have been to her the detailed equivalent of her generalized but primary feeling about Virginia, with its structured society, its sense of past and continuity, its richness, elegance, and romance" (KA 61). Cather once made a comment about French people in reference to Elizabeth Sergeant's volume, *French Perspectives*, which matches the sentiments she held about her own Virginia people: she believed the French had "values, aims, and a point of view" that harmonized with an "acquired wisdom" gleaned from "enduring verities." One did not find anything of the sort, she said, in the Middle West (WC:AM 145).

In a lecture at Omaha in October, 1921, Cather made the similarities between the French and her Virginians even more explicit: "The Frenchman doesn't talk nonsense about art, about self-expression; he is too greatly occupied with building the things that make his home. His house, his garden, his vineyards, these are the things that fill his mind. He creates something beautiful, something lasting." These occupations were exactly what Cather had observed in Back Creek, and just as the French painter turned to "a garden, a home, a village" for his subject, so did Cather for hers. "Restlessness such

as ours [in modern American society], success such as ours, do not make for beauty,” she continued, making her plea for what is truly valuable in human life:

Other things must come first; good cookery, cottages that are homes, not playthings; gardens, repose. These are first rate things, and out of first rate stuff art is made. It is possible that machinery has finished us as far as this is concerned. Nobody stays at home any more; nobody makes anything beautiful anymore. (WC:CB 226-27)⁴⁵

Cather had learned the beauty of homemaking through the efforts of the field hands and the shepherders, and the older women in the kitchens and gardens of Back Creek. She transformed it artistically in both the prairie novels of *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*--in which her family directly participated--and in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*, which both celebrate French culture and domesticity.

These four novels also reveal Cather's imaginative link between the way that the French Catholics brought their culture to the new world and the way her own pioneer family transferred their culture to Nebraska. In both cases, it was a fusion of art (as she described it in the Omaha lecture) and religion, which became for Cather a paradigm for her own art. The conquest and creation of a new Eden by both the French missionaries and Cather's own grandparents was not unlike Cather's own creation of a new myth for the pioneer West.⁴⁶

Cather's notions of the “good place” began and ended in images of home, not just landscapes, but the smaller, manmade spaces defined and enclosed in houses. Meredith

⁴⁵ Cather even hired a French cook when she was living with Edith Lewis at Number Five Bank Street in New York. Josephine Bourda was like one of the vital immigrant women of Nebraska who “created a sort of French household atmosphere around us” (WCL, 88).

⁴⁶ See Bennett's discussion in WWC, 132 and 139.

Machen observes that in Cather's fiction "the house is a key image," that embodies "her past experiences as they were transformed into art" (5). Houses, in fact, become a synecdoche for her states of mind.⁴⁷ The house of "indestructible solidity" (WC:CB 12) at Willow Shade and its surroundings, "are the center of all of Willa Cather's early memories" (WC:LL 23), and as such became Cather's locus of value, the prototype of "the good place" in her fiction. As Woodress describes it,

Willow Shade was a beautiful house to remember. Its three-story sturdy brick facade, pierced by large, evenly spaced single windows, was fronted by a portico with fluted columns, and behind the main structure was a solid two-story brick wing. Each room in the house had a fireplace for heating, six great willows shaded the spacious lawn, and a rather

⁴⁷ While Machen's astute observations greatly undergird this study, she identifies Cather's Nebraska experience and her home in Red Cloud as being at Cather's emotional center rather than the home in Virginia. "Though [Cather] cared about these places [--the "wooded hills" and the "house which she grew up in" in Back Creek--], "they did not mark her psyche nearly as much as the places in Nebraska did" (11). Machen supports her thesis in part with the evidence that Cather used the Red Cloud home as the setting for *The Professor's House*. I contend that that is proof it was not for Cather the ultimate good place. It is, in fact, the place where St. Peter experiences great despair and a quasi-suicide attempt. The one great artistic work which had been written there does not bring him lasting peace or happiness. The one thing in that home, however, that does give him some kind continuing peace is the person of Augusta, a prototype of Cather's Grandmother Cather. The "happy homes" in Cather's fiction have the orderly homemaking traditions of her Virginia family and are presided over by self-giving, generous-spirited women who create art out of ordinary, everyday tasks--such as the homes of her grandparents' and Antonia (MA), or the serene "French" home of Bishop Latour (DCA), or the peaceful, orderly home of Euclid Auclair (SR). Even the home in "The Best Years" which is patterned on the Red Cloud house has an orderliness that was not to be found in the real house. (See "Old Mrs. Harris.")

formal box hedge extended from the portico towards a full-running creek spanned by a rustic bridge. (WC:LA 23-24).

In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather recalls that from the porch “the broad green lawn sloped down a long way,” and “[a]ll was orderly in front; flower-beds, shrubbery, and a lilac arbour trimmed in an arch beneath which a tall man could walk” (SSG 20).

The imposed orderliness of the Willow Shade is mirrored repeatedly in Cather’s fiction as manifestations of man’s best artistic expressions--in Alexandra’s farm, where “order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm” (OP 84), or in the gardens of Grandmother Burden or Antonia, or in Bishop Latour’s or Godfrey St. Peter’s carefully tended French gardens. In contrast is the yard of the Charles Cather home in Red Cloud, described in “Old Mrs. Harris” as an ugly ungrassed slope, littered with “a few velocipedes and iron hoops” and a “messy ‘flower-bed’ that was even uglier than the naked gravel spots” (OD 118-19). Even Grandma Harris misses the “flower-garden” and the “beautiful old trees” from back home (83).

The central place of activity at Willow Shade was the kitchen quarters where Grandmother Boak presided. “As an adult, Cather remembered the kitchen on the ground floor as being the most pleasant room in the house, also the most interesting” (WC:LL 15). Young Willa observed women like her grandmother “whose arduous tasks . . . were as vital to the family’s survival as their husband’s farming duties” (WC:EV 17). These constant tasks of “preserving, butter-making, quilting, weaving, spinning, and candle-making” (WCL 8) and the orderliness of Willow Shade’s domestic traditions were later transferred into many of Cather’s stories.⁴⁸

In her Nebraska and post-Nebraska fiction, the warm and nourishing kitchens or well-tended gardens and orchards of the European settlers as well as her Virginia family

⁴⁸ See O’Brien’s discussion of Cather’s art expressed in domestic skills in WC:EV, 62-63 and 415-18.

appear in the fictional kitchens and gardens of Grandmother Burden, Antonia Shimerda, Father Joseph Vaillant, or Euclid Auclair. Cather's penchant for giving great significance to the faithful caring for daily family needs, including the tending the land and livestock, of housing, clothing and feeding a family, had its inspiration in Virginia, not Nebraska. Cather's mature fiction repeatedly lifts these never-ending human activities to heroic levels.⁴⁹

When the Cathers moved West, Willa longed for her home at Willow Shade. The cramped little house in Red Cloud with its odd and inconvenient organization had none of the order or tidiness of Willow Shade, and it had fewer of the people who had helped to keep it that way. "The Cathers were better off than many of their neighbors, and there were always servants in the house," and the "old woman from the mountains came down to help during the busy seasons" (WC:LL 25). Cather longed, along with her mother, for the "great, classic house in Virginia with its servants and fireplaces" (WWC 20) and thought for a time her homesickness would make her "go under" (KA 448).

It is not surprising that the Cather house in Red Cloud has been viewed as the important one in her fiction. Willa Cather herself helped perpetuate the myth that Nebraska was the primary source of all her important material. Once she did so in an interview in 1921 just before *One of Ours* was issued: "The ideas for all my novels have come from things that happened around Red Cloud when I was a child. I was all over the country then, on foot, on horseback and in our farm wagons."⁵⁰ In the same interview she made the oft-quoted statement that the

years from eight to fifteen are the formative period in a writer's life, when

⁴⁹ See Machen, "Home as Motivation . . .," 1-41, for an excellent appraisal of the psychological and creative implications of the image of home, especially for the female artist.

⁵⁰ From an interview by Eleanor Hinman, *Lincoln Sunday Star*, November 6, 1921; quoted in Mildred Bennett, "The Childhood Worlds of Willa Cather," 209.

he unconsciously gathers basic material. He may acquire a great many interesting and vivid impressions in his mature years but his thematic material he acquires under fifteen years of age. (WWC 3)

Yet in the “Biographical Sketch” she wrote for Alfred Knopf, Cather emphasized that it was the stark contrast between Virginia and Nebraska and the cataclysmic break with her Southern home that was the impetus behind her art, not Nebraska itself.⁵¹ Cather’s friend Dorothy Canfield also perceived that at the heart of Cather’s fiction is “an imaginative and emotional response to the great shift from Virginia to Nebraska” (WC:CB vi). Many have pointed out the violent contrasts in the two loci: from the serene, established farm life of the Southeast, to the patch-work culture of European settlers in Nebraska; from the pastoral hill and dale landscape of Virginia, to the slate-flat, windy barrenness of Nebraska. Certainly this wrenching change had profound effects on a sensitive and intelligent child like Willa.

Cather’s personal and artistic yearnings for order, tradition, and stability had their origins in the place which she called an “old conservative society” where “life was ordered and settled, where the people in good families were born good, and the poor mountain people were not expected to amount to much” (qtd. in WC:EV 60). The jolt of being abruptly transplanted from this “definitely arranged background” to a land as bare as a sheet of iron where immigrants struggled for a new life did two things for Willa Cather: it made her hang on tighter than ever to her past, and it broke loose in her the dramatic creative impulse that fueled her art.

The trauma of that move from Virginia to Nebraska when Cather was ten years old was still sharp in her memory when she was thirty-nine and in an interview for a newspaper spoke of the emotional and psychological desolation she encountered in a land

⁵¹ See [Willa Cather], *Willa Cather: A Biographical Sketch/ And English Opinion/ and an Abridged Bibliography*, 2.

with no human or natural landmarks:

I shall never forget my introduction to it. We drove out from Red Cloud to my grandfather's homestead one day in April. I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a studebaker wagon, holding on to the side of the wagon box to steady myself--the roads were mostly faint trails over the bunch grass in those days. The land was open range and there was almost no fencing. As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything--it was a kind of erasure of personality. (KA 448)

As we discover in *My Antonia*, Jim Burden (as Willa Cather) was only able to rediscover and redefine himself in Grandmother Burden's home where the Virginia traditions and patterns of homelife had been merely transplanted. Grandmother's kitchen was "heavenly safe and warm" like "a tight little boat in a winter sea," and her garden in a "sheltered draw bottom," was protected from the usual fierce prairie wind. In both places Jim was "entirely happy" (MA 65, 18). Cather's search for the lost place and a lost self continued for many more years, and no matter where it led--to the University of Nebraska or to a career as a journalist in Pittsburgh, to New York or to the life of a reclusive writer in New Brunswick--her search always led back to the familiar faces and landscape of Back Creek, Virginia.

Nebraska "has been the happiness and the curse of my life," Cather said in 1921 (WWC 140). Whenever Cather visited the West, she experienced "the same tightness of the chest that she recalled as a child" when she first came upon the blank Nebraska prairie. The feeling had been stronger then, but it never left her:

She never could let herself go in the West but was always resisting a little, like a person who could not swim fighting the water instead of going with

the current. She was feeling the old dichotomies again: Virginia versus Nebraska, New York versus Red Cloud, East versus West, desire versus possibility, that had tugged her in opposite directions all her life. (WC:LA 151)

Cather used her Nebraska experiences in her stories, but she could never write there. Her creative energy would emerge only in the East. Even though she returned often almost obsessively to Red Cloud to see family and friends, “she never lingered too long” but escaped “to Pittsburgh, New York, New Hampshire, or her island retreat on Grand Manan, New Brunswick” (WC:EV 59). Even though she was able to transform her Nebraska experiences through memory into art, the power to make the transformation came only after she returned East--the region with a history and a resemblance to her earliest roots. In effect, Nebraska was, for Cather, a literary blank canvas on which she could paint a new Virginia with all of the fine grace and established traditions of her eastern home but with the added vigor of the pioneer spirit as exemplified in her Cather relatives and the immigrant Europeans.

Cather made occasional “visits to relatives who remained in the Virginia colony [which] kept her sense of the land and its people vivid” (WC:CB vii). Once on a trip to her birthplace with her close friend Isabelle McClung, Willa found the place “dismal, ghostly and a bit sentimental.” But a six-mile daily walk in the rain of the North Mountains quickly brought back those early memories and “lifted her spirits again; the woods being especially rare in the rain.” Cather told Sergeant that “the air was totally different where fields had never been cleared and harvested nor virgin forest cut,” and that “any thoroughly untamed aspect of nature refreshed her” (WC:AM 120). Cather made a visit to her old home just before she wrote the autobiographical “Friends of Childhood” section in *The Song of the Lark*.⁵² It was as if she were calling up the forces

⁵² See Sergeant, WC:AM 134-35 for a discussion of the circumstances.

of her earliest childhood to empower her to transform the barren slate of Nebraska into order and design.

Cather's biographers stress how the memories and impressions of the Cathers' life in Virginia were rehearsed again and again in the family. Even years after Cather left Nebraska, Willa Cather's friends in Red Cloud remembered her often standing in the general store, at the urging of her father, "discoursing . . . on Shakespeare, English history, and life in Virginia" (WWC 1). When Cather went through her rebellious "male disguise" period in Red Cloud, she took the name, William, which was linked to her Virginia heritage. Her grandfathers on both the Boak and Cather side were named William, and her mother's brother, who died a family war hero by fighting for his Virginian regiment in the Civil War--and who Cather later made the subject of a short story and a poem of the same title, "The Namesake"--was William Seibert Boak.⁵³ This name-taking was not, as Sharon O'Brien believes, just a rebellious break with assigned female roles⁵⁴ but a break from an uncomfortable Western identification and a reidentification with her Virginia roots.

As much as Cather loved the landscape and community of Virginia, it was the people tending her Virginia nest who affected her the most. All those she cared about in those early childhood years appear in one way or another in her major works: her mother and father, the Cather grandparents, William and Caroline Cather, her aunt Sidney Cather Gore, grandmother Rachel Boak, and family friends. Cather's "gift of sympathy" was always extended in life as well as art toward people who in some way reflected the characters of these early loved ones. In examining the role these persons play in Cather's fiction, it is apparent that their lives reflect some central core of meaning that extends out from herself into a universal significance.

⁵³ See Woodress, WC:LA, 27-29, for discussion of the sources for the short story.

⁵⁴ For a more complete analysis, see O'Brien's discussion in WC:EV, 108-111.

Surrounded by these doting family members, Willa was nourished on tribal custom and intimacy. Edith Lewis, Cather's companion for over forty years, notes that her life "was one of great richness, tranquil and ordered and serene" (WCL 12). For almost ten years, Willa enjoyed this Arcady of the South with its orderly homelife built on established tradition (WC:LL 25), and most of all, she thrived under the fond and rich attention paid to her by family members and friends who saw in her an eager receptacle for the stories and folk traditions handed down to them for generations.

Edith Lewis describes the daily life of the Cather household in Virginia as Willa experienced it:

For an active, observant child, very much alive to everything that went on around her, there were no dull days at Willowshade. Negroes and poor whites were employed in the fields and about the house, where spinning and quilting, butter-making and preserving and candle-making were carried on by the house-servants and by old women who came down from Timber Ridge and North Mountain to help out during busy seasons. Butchering and curing and sheep-shearing were done on the place. One of the regular occupations of the Negro servants, as they sat around the fire on winter evenings, was to cut old materials into narrow strips, sew them together, and wind them into balls, to be made into rag carpets by a neighbour woman, a carpet-maker. . . . A stream of visitors came and went--kinsfolk and friends from Winchester and Washington and the countryside around. The house was often full of guests. (WCL 8-9)

The women at Willow Shade wove a tapestry of tales that lodged in young Willa's imagination and stayed there for life. Edith Lewis recounts that Willa would "creep under the quilting frames and sit there listening to their talk" (WCL 10-11) and that the "young girl heard the unwritten history of the community that never entered written records or

public history” (WC:EV 29). As Cather later said, one of her first introductions to the art of narration was in the kitchen of the farm house in Virginia, a meeting place not only for Cather kin but also “the women who came down from the mountains to help out at Willow Shade--and to tell stories” (WC:EV 29).

Mrs. Anderson, the inspiration for Mrs. Ringer in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, was one of the best of those storytellers. Lewis tells us that her “talk was full of fire and wit, rich in the native idiom.” As the “preserver and transmitter of local folklore, gossip, and legends” (WC:EV 29), she “knew the family histories of all the countryside and all the dramatic events that had become legends among the country people” (WCL 10-11).

Young Willa absorbed these stories of her family's history as well as others which she “remembered all her life” (WCL 11). Whenever Willa Cather went back for a visit to Back Creek after she graduated from college, she made a point of seeing Mary Ann Anderson, who “was still full of local history” (WC:LA 25). Through her and other women, including family members, Cather learned to associate the art of narration with the act of knowing and preserving one's heritage. She learned that images and events in the lives of one's ancestors, put into words, could provide the comforting sense of connectedness and continuity with a long past, which gave noble and significant meaning to the present. These Virginia storytellers to a great degree can be credited with inspiring Cather's own gift of narration, the results of which are a fictionalized record of her search for an understanding of herself in relation to her own past.

The immigrant women in Nebraska who were so appealing to Cather were also storytellers. “She spent hours in the kitchens of the immigrant farm wives--thus regaining her favorite room at Willow Shade while they prepared meals” and listened to them “tell her stories about the old country” (WC:EV 71-72). The “real feeling of an older world across the sea” that their narratives gave her was connected inevitably in her mind to the older world back in Virginia (KA 448).

Also born in the early Virginia years was Willa Cather's lifelong appreciation for humble folk, the simple and the ordinary, those people whose lives do not excite the attention of a public greedy for glitz.⁵⁵ Lewis also records that

[t]he humbler sort of travellers, like the tin peddler and Uncle Billy Parks, the broom-maker, were often lodged over night in the wing at the back of the house. Willa Cather, for whom these casual guests had an especial attraction, remembered once opening her tin bank and giving Uncle Billy Parks all the money in it as a token of her esteem. (WCL 8)

Another person like Uncle Billy Parks, who figures largely in Cather's fiction, is Margie Anderson, Mrs. Anderson's daughter. She lived at Willow Shade partly as nursemaid, partly as houseworker, and stayed with the Charles Cather family through the Nebraska years until her death in Red Cloud in 1928. "She was considered 'simple' by some of the neighbours," and Willa tried unsuccessfully to teach her to read. But what impressed her on Cather's imagination was her "faithful, loving nature," and her possession of "a kind of wisdom and discernment about people deeper than practical wisdom" (WCL 11).

What mattered for Cather always was the heart, not the head; feeling, not intellect. The hallmark of such persons was always their humility and, like Margie, their "perfect self-forgetfulness and devotion" (WCL 11). It is not surprising, then, that Margie figures so prominently as Mahailey in *One of Ours*, as Marty in the poem "Poor Marty," and as Mandy in "Old Mrs. Harris," and that something of her entered Sada in the "December Night" chapter of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

That kind of "self-forgetfulness and devotion," however, was most strongly exhibited in Cather's older family members, and, as with Margie Anderson, Cather

⁵⁵ In the interview with Eleanor Hinman, Cather repeatedly stressed her insistence on seeing the average life as fascinating (see "Willa Cather, Famous Nebraska Novelist").

affirmed their superiority in her fiction as she remembered their example of a noble, selfless love. This working together of imagination and memory also “recovered the connection,” O’Brien notes, “between herself” and these women “she had known in her childhood”--Sidney Gore and Grandmothers Cather and Boak. To Cather, they were “unselfconscious artists who offered her a domestic tradition of creativity in their cooking and gardening skills.” In Cather’s novels, “kitchens and gardens are the spaces where nature is transformed into culture, rituals created, and order established” (WC:EV 16-17). Cather herself later called these realms of homely service the “kingdom of art” (KA 449).

Young Willa had nearly complete freedom in that pastoral environment that so fed her spirit. Eschewing formal schooling, she was allowed to pursue her interests wherever they led her, whether reading *Pilgrim’s Progress* multiple times (WC:LA 22 and WCL 9), or listening to the local lore colorfully told by neighboring women who came to assist in the house work, or accompanying her father in his rounds to take care of the sheep (WC:EV 15), or wandering for miles around the rocky and hilly landscape with the Blue Ridge mountains in view, either alone or often with Margie Anderson, the Cathers’ slow-witted and loyal house helper (WWC 57; WCL 11).

Willa Cather’s Virginia experience provided her not only with material for art, however unconscious that acquisition may have been,⁵⁶ but it also gave her the people whose values and flavor of life would become the central focus of that art. These Virginian influences so indelibly impressed themselves on Willa Cather that even when she thought that that part of her life was of no great consequence, her mind was still

⁵⁶ Cather’s skepticism of Freudian or Jungian psychoanalysis bordered on scorn. In a discussion with Elizabeth Sergeant concerning the merits of psychoanalysis (Cather, uncharacteristically, considered seeking help with a personal crisis), Sergeant warned her that a writer “should not write and analyze at the same time” because “material came from the same source--the unconscious,” to which Cather replied dubiously, “The unconscious, . . . the unconscious--” (WC:AM, 328).

working on it, making itself felt in the various ways just explored. If one looks for a common motif in Willa Cather's oeuvre, the one insistent refrain that is repeated in every work is not, as so many have judged, an escape from the present, but an effort to connect with the past, which is a very different emphasis altogether. Through her protagonists, Cather is insistently on a quest for an understanding of the self, a self that is often hidden in the familiar faces and distant voices that early shaped her own.

A deeper process, however, was happening simultaneously with the one that generally implanted her Virginia years in her imagination. It is the process under all processes that leads to the answer as to why the adult Willa Cather was attracted to the people she was, why certain people lodged in her imagination and became the stuff of her art, while others, seemingly as interesting to her, did not. If submitted to a literary x-ray, all the people she encountered who became the inspiration for her stories have one common identifying mark, a uniform, skeletal structure: their character traits match up with one or more of a Virginian family member. These family members include her paternal grandparents, William and Caroline Cather, her maternal grandmother, Rachel Seibert Boak, her great-aunt Sidney Cather Gore, and her parents, Charles and Virginia Cather.⁵⁷

Cather agreed with one reader that she "could only write successfully when she wrote about people or places she admired greatly or even loved. The characters she created could be cranky or queer or foolhardy or rash, but they had to have something in

⁵⁷ In this study I am generally ignoring the influence that Cather's siblings had on her, especially her brothers just younger than she. The reason for the exclusion is in the arbitrary limitations I am putting on the study. Her brothers' influence was primarily in the area of giving Cather emotional support and strength rather than in shaping her values, as did her older relatives.

them that thrilled her and warmed her heart” (WC:LA, 174).⁵⁸ Even Cather’s admiration for the people in Nebraska who figure so prominently in her fiction had its origin in her admiration of her Virginia people.

Cather’s longtime friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher recognized the powerful influence that the Virginia years had had on shaping Cather’s character and her lifelong predispositions. She wrote that Cather spent this most formative “period of life which most influences personality in a state which had the tradition of continuity and stability as far as they could exist in this country, and in a class which more than any other is always stubbornly devoted to the old ways of doing things” (“Daughter of the Frontier” 7).

James Woodress expresses the popular critical opinion when he asserts that the “real beginning” of Willa Cather’s “life of the imagination” occurred “eighteen months” after she moved to Nebraska (WC:LA 32). However, as I have shown, Cather’s imagination had been prodigiously active during her childhood years in Virginia. Part of the critical error can be attributed to a statement Cather herself made--that a writer gathers his material between the ages of eight and fifteen (WC:LA 260). She went ahead to say that a writer gets all of his *thematic* material (my emphasis) before the age of fifteen. One could find several explanations for the the apparent discrepancy in the two statements. Cather may have been making a distinction between materials in general and thematic materials in particular, or she may have been using the term *thematic* in the narrative sense of plot, or, finally--and I believe this to be the most likely--she herself at this time was not aware of the profound influence that her years in Virginia had on her.

Regardless, Cather’s own tenets concerning the proper materials for art reinforce the case for putting her Virginia experiences at the front of her creative imagination. Cather herself made a sharp distinction between “materials” as journalists use them,

⁵⁸ In a letter to her Red Cloud friend, Carrie Miner Sherwood (1939), Willa Cather agreed with Margaret Lawrence’s assessment of her writing in *School of Femininity* (1936).

which are facts, and the materials of artistic creation, which are “emotions.” In “novels, as in poetry,” Cather wrote, “the facts are nothing, the feeling is everything” (OW 84). Cather’s deepest and brightest feelings do not originate from the journalistic facts of her years on a western prairie; they were born, rather, in a southern land and with a people who became the core of her art. In the next chapter, I will focus even more narrowly on certain family members who became pivotal to Cather’s art, whose penetrating vision points to the “presence of the thing not named.”

Chapter 2

The “Light Behind”

“If [a writer] achieves anything noble, anything enduring, it must be by giving himself absolutely to his material. And this gift of sympathy is his great gift; it is the fine thing in him that alone can make his work fine. He fades away into the land and people of his heart, he dies of love only to be born again.”¹

From her early attempts at short fiction, which appear in *Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912* (1965), to the culmination of her highly acclaimed career in the volume of short stories, *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948), Willa Cather’s artistic efforts are grounded in a great store of personal experience that she lived out with enormous passion and energy. To a remarkably unvarying degree, her stories are imaginative recreations of those personal experiences, and hidden in them--with varying amounts of clarity--is a fascinating and progressive account of one pilgrim’s quest for spiritual value. It started with her beginnings in Virginia and Nebraska, then led out into the world, and, finally, came back again to the parish.

Thus far I have shown the indelible influences that Cather’s early years in Virginia had on her life and art, the images and impressions of this amiable and lively domestic scene which provided “an adult’s memories” that for the critic of her fiction “constitute

¹ From Cather’s Preface to “The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett,” OW, 49, 51.

important psychological and biographical evidence" (WC:EV 46). However, a further purpose of this study is to focus attention even more narrowly. As much as her early identification with Virginia, its land, home, and family friends provided important imaginative constructs for Cather's art, an even more important and critical influence came from a more immediate source.

In her fiction, Cather repeatedly turns to the theme of the pull of the clan, the inescapable influence of the generations behind.² The pull of Cather's clan on her life and art, however, is not just biological or genetic; nor is it just the cumulative force of custom and tradition that ingrains itself and shapes the tribal pattern. As much as the Southern traditions of the tribal family shaped her developing consciousness--its order, its simple life lived close to the land, its everyday duties done with joy and love and care--in the final analysis, it was particular family members who most keenly impressed themselves on her imagination. They were her grandparents William and Caroline Cather, her great-aunt Sidney Cather Gore, her grandmother Rachel Seibert Boak, and her parents, Charles and Virginia (Jennie) Cather. In her fiction, Cather's deep feeling for these relatives is translated into various characters who are the objectifications of her primary sympathy.

However, Willa Cather does not present all of the characters fashioned after her

² Hiroko Sato in "Willa Cather in Japan," and L. C. Chang in "Willa Cather and China," both observe that the importance Cather places on family roots explains her special appeal for the Oriental reader; Sharon O'Brien, in "Stronger Vessels: Willa Cather and Her Pioneer Heroines," notes that Cather's pioneer women in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* achieve self-definition through connection to the land, art, and family; Frank W. Shelton, in "The Image of the Rock and the Family in the Novels of Willa Cather," comments that Cather's use of the rock as symbol is a complex configuration that variously means human association as well as individual isolation, but in the *Shadow of the Rock*, the symbol is fully linked with the ideal of family ties; Barbara Ann Gehrki, in "Willa Cather's Families: Fictions and Facts in Her Plains' Writings," claims that the key to understanding Cather's plains' fiction is recognizing the dominant role of the family.

family members with the same degree of approbation nor the same amount of sympathetic attachment. Distill the natures of all of Willa Cather's central characters down to essential ingredients, and they fall into one of two types--either those who most resemble in kind her three grandparents and great-aunt, or those who resemble her parents, especially her mother, or herself. For example, Old Mrs. Harris, who is a portrait of Grandmother Boak, represents the finest in human values and the highest in human purpose, whereas Myra Henshawe, who is to a great degree a composite of Virginia Cather and Willa herself, shows how empty human vanity is, even when it is in pursuit of art and excellence.

Cather's four Virginia elders were embedded most deeply in her, not because she found them more interesting than the others--her mother, for example, held a fascinating if not troubling hold on Cather all her life--but because the qualities of character these people possessed, and the underlying religious convictions they held, eventually embodied for Cather the ideal model of human life and the principles by which it should be lived. In short, they were the human expression of her own best self, temporal links to some eternal reality in which she participated.³

While critics notice the central place that family and religion occupy in Cather's art, none have explored their original source nor have they made the various connections in Cather's life and art to these roots. Critics recognize that her theory of art is of a religious nature and that it uses Biblical rhetoric for its metaphor; they identify Cather's essential themes of the centrality of family and the common life as a locus of value as opposed to the pursuit of high art and the life of culture. They point out that Cather's personal struggle pitted these two value systems against each other, a struggle which seemingly she never resolved to her satisfaction. They call it a psychic split or a tension

³ From this point on, I will use the term "elders" to refer to one or more of these four relatives of Cather: William and Caroline Cather, Sidney Cather Gore, and Rachel Seibert Boak.

between East and West, between nature and culture, between primitivism and civilization.⁴ What I am suggesting is that all of these identifications of tension are merely various modes of describing what was for Cather one elemental struggle--her search for religious reality and faith. It all begins and ends with the faith of her fathers, the Christian traditions and religious world view strongly held by her Virginia elders and inculcated into Willa Cather's mind and imagination at a very early age. This, then, is the touchstone by which one should examine Willa Cather's life and art to understand her primary sensibility.

Cather's elemental preoccupation with religion is readily evident in her fiction, but her affirmation of it is not. Unlike Tolstoy after his conversion, or, in this century, unlike Flannery O'Connor, Cather's religious concerns are subtle and submerged under layers of metaphor, symbol, and suggestive language. Tolstoy's and O'Connor's "Christian" work comes out of convictions formed by personal faith. Cather was never so sure about hers, and her fiction chronicles her years of doubt. Unlike her favorite, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, her quest for faith and ultimate redemption is not so recognizable. Even though religion is often mentioned in her fiction, and in some of it is an important theme, her own quest is primarily hidden in the images and imaginative connections her evocative language creates. Cather herself identified the process of all authentic creations: "What 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, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it" (OW 41). Thus, it is not too hard to understand why James Woodress, in his most recent and exhaustive critical biography, gives 1922 as the date which signals the beginning of Cather's interest in religion. In that

⁴ For the most comprehensive summary of these views, see Edward Bloom, *Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy*; David Daiches, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction*; David Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination*; Sharon O'Brien, *Willa Cather: the Emerging Voice*; and James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*.

year, Woodress says, she joined the Red Cloud Episcopal Church, but before that, “matters of religion and faith never had troubled her very much” (WC:LL 337). They had indeed “troubled her very much,” as I aim to show. The search for Cather’s religious beginnings actually starts with her Virginia elders.

William and Caroline Cather were staunch and devout Southern Baptists committed to hard work, church loyalty, community service, and strong family ties.⁵ William built Willow Shade in Back Creek, Virginia, in 1951 and developed a prosperous sheep ranch which he worked with his two sons. He also acted as the County Sheriff until he answered the call of the pioneer in 1877 and journeyed to the flat, arid land of Nebraska. Caroline was a no-nonsense but loving woman who took great pains to keep her family well fed and comfortable.

Both Caroline and William Cather were zealous in their family’s religious training, and as evangelical Christians, their lives and beliefs were based on what they believed to be the unquestionable truths in the Bible, on a knowable God, on personal salvation through Christ, and on holy living. These beliefs governed every aspect of life. Faithful church attendance, daily Bible readings, and prayers were as much of life’s regular patterns as cooking the meals and feeding the stock. Even though Grandparents Cather moved from Back Creek to homestead in Nebraska the year after Willa was born, the family traditions they had already established and their return visits perpetuated their strong influence. Jim Burden’s reunion with his grandparents in *My Antonia* tells how ties were reestablished when his family moved West. The novel is Cather’s paeon of praise to her Cather grandparents, but she also celebrates the legacy of their noble example in her first highly acclaimed novel, *O Pioneers!*. William and Caroline Cather were the real westering pioneers in Cather’s family, not her own father and mother. The

⁵ General biographical data on the four relatives is not referenced and may be found in WC:EV, 11-25 or WC:LL, 12-43. Any information that may not be considered general knowledge is documented.

pioneer character and spirit in Alexandra Bergson (who has much in her of Willa Cather herself) find a match in William and Caroline Cather.

Supplementing and expanding the influence of the Cather grandparents was Sidney Cather Gore, William's sister and Willa Cather's great-aunt. Another devout Baptist, Sidney Gore became such a force for social good that the Virginia community eventually gave itself her name and is yet today called Gore. A woman of great energy and indomitable faith, she believed that if one cooperated with the Divine Power who governed the universe, great things could be accomplished, even by a widow woman constricted by social restraints and prescribed female roles. Living just a mile from Willow Shade, she made her home into a boarding house and often became a one-woman social agency, rehabilitating those who had slipped into unhealthy and destructive patterns of life. Sidney Cather Gore was an enthusiastic participant in the life of the clan, and her painstaking adherence to domestic order was celebrated in Cather's every fictional homemaker of quality. Willa Cather was inordinately fond of her and stayed in close touch with her all her life (WC:LA 260). One very remarkable if not wonderfully disguised portrayal of her Aunt Gore comes in the person of Father Joseph Vaillant in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, that very pivotal novel in Cather's career.

Rachel Seibert Boak, Willa Cather's maternal grandmother, was the paradigm of one who makes herself small so that others can be great. After Charles Cather and her daughter Virginia were married in 1872, they lived with Rachel until after Willa was born on December 7, 1873. After the departure of William and Caroline Cather for a visit to Nebraska the following year, Charles, Virginia, and Willa moved into Willow Shade. Rachel Boak went with them to be the family domestic and Willa's nursemaid, a role often assumed, according to Cather's "Old Mrs. Harris," by widowed mothers in the South. Rachel Boak became for Willa Cather a kind of calm, rock-like fortress, an unobtrusive power whose force and effect is so steady and quiet that when one is young, especially, one is apt to ignore it and take it for granted, but when one is older and it is

gone, the void it leaves is a measure and reminder of its true value.⁶ Such was the case of Willa Cather's developing understanding of her Grandmother Boak. Cather repeatedly celebrates in her mature fiction the worth of those, like Rachel Boak, whose destinies in a philistine world often appear obscure and worthless, but who are actually far superior if judged by the eternal and universal verities found in both classical and Christian traditions.

The relationship between Willa Cather and her parents is more complex and contradictory than that with her elder relatives, and the role they play in her fiction is just as difficult to unravel. The influence of her older family members is relatively clear-cut and more easily defined. As a child, Willa Cather wholly internalized their influence, as an adolescent and young adult, questioned and rejected much of it, and as an adult, returned and embraced a refined version of it. As to her parents' influence, Cather's response was a continuous mix of embracement and rejection, especially with her mother. The fact that both Cather's darkest fiction (*Alexander's Bridge*, *The Professor's House*, *My Mortal Enemy*) and her most idealistic--(*Shadows on the Rock*) deal with characters who resemble her parents (as well as herself) tells of the complexity of the relationship. It took Cather a lifetime of writing to even approach an understanding of the contradictions in herself, which mirrored the disparate attitudes she held toward her older family members and her parents.

Charles Cather, the handsome youngest son of William Cather, was easy-going and gentle in his ways. He adored his wife, doted on his children, admired his more forceful father and grandfather, loved music and poetry, and was better at following leadership than giving it. He had none of the sternness or business savvy of his father, but he had all of his gentlemanly ways (WC:EV 14-16). Willa adored him, and his

⁶ Cather presents this understanding of her grandmother most poignantly in "Old Mrs. Harris."

approbation was a quiet underground river that fed her self confidence under circumstances that might have otherwise hindered her progress (WC:EV 14-16). Yet Charles' frequent appearances in various fictional characters are not always complimentary. Carl Lindstrum in *O Pioneers!*, Hillary Templeton in "Old Mrs. Harris," Jacob Gayheart in *Lucy Gayheart*, and Niel Herbert's father in *A Lost Lady*, in spite of their agreeable and gentle ways, all have a look of lostness about them, an ineffectuality that prohibits them from heroic or respected endeavor.

Charles Cather was quite overwhelmed by the more dominating will of his vivacious and beautiful wife, Virginia. Virginia Boak was from the poorer family but assumed the role of an aristocrat. Encouraged by the pampering willingly given by her husband and mother, Virginia was ever the Southern belle, a person of style and elegance to be admired and catered to (WC:EV 35-36). The Boak family had Episcopalian roots instead of Baptist,⁷ and Virginia evidently influenced Charles to defy his parents' ban on dancing and party-going, recreations they enjoyed together for many years. Preoccupied with her appearance and the social niceties and wanting her children to reflect her image of Southern propriety, Virginia inevitably clashed with her independent and nonconforming eldest child (WC:LL 28). The Cather heroines who most match Virginia Cather's personality and character are always a confusing and contradictory mix of admirable and deplorable qualities: Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady*, Myra Henshawe in *My Mortal Enemy*, and especially Sapphira Colbert in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Part of the reader's confusion in arriving at a clear view of these characters is the narrator's own confusion. Often the narrator's judgment is at odds with the evidence that she presents, an understandable confusion when one understands the source of the narrator's emotion. Cather not only had that same mix of emotions concerning her mother, but

⁷ In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather traces her early religious heritage on both sides of her family.

adding further to the complexity, she identified closely with her and always said that of all her family, she was most like Virginia Cather (WCL 7).

Ironically, what Willa Cather disliked most in her mother she too often found reflected in herself--an unseemly desire for the advantages of wealth and public admiration,⁸ a petulant self-absorption which demanded others look after her comfort, and the drive to be considered a part of the upper echelons of society, especially the society associated with Eastern aristocracy and its accompanying culture and means.⁹ What Cather most liked and admired in both herself and others were the qualities she found in her older Virginian family elders: a deep human feeling, a commitment to "taking pains," an unswerving dedication to one's duty, and a grand vision of personal and human destiny.

A personal journal kept by Cather's great-aunt, Sidney Cather Gore, provides a revealing sketch of these pious Christian family members, especially of the manner in which they expressed their religious faith. Selections from Sidney's journal, which she kept throughout most of her adult life, were printed by her son James Gore in 1923 (*My Mother's Story*). These pious and devout expressions are representative of all of Cather's family elders. Cather's grandfather, William Cather, had followed his sister Sidney's example in leaving their Presbyterian heritage. He embraced with her the more

⁸ Sergeant records that Cather welcomed Jewett's advice to leave her job at *McClure's* because it separated her from her worst temptation--the lure of big money (WC:AM, 62).

⁹ Virginia Cather wanted above all else to be a wealthy Southern belle, surrounded by admirers and attended to by adoring servants. Her ambition exceeded her means. However, marrying into what appeared to be a prosperous family helped to encourage her fantasy. William Cather, her future father-in-law, had sent her for a time before her marriage to a boarding school in Baltimore, a school committed to preparing "young girls to become cultured, graceful partners for Virginia Gentlemen" (WC:EV, 39). Charles Cather fit her imaginative vision of a beau and, for a time, with their lives attached to the comfortable means of Willow Shade, Virginia lived out the fantasy. The move to Nebraska changed all that. See Chapter 2, WC:EV.

evangelical Baptists after experiencing a conversion experience similar to Sidney's (WC:EV 13). His wife Caroline was of like mind, quiet but firm in her faith (WC:EV 23). Rachel Boak was a devotee of the Bible as well (WC:EV 26) and appears to have held beliefs similar to those of the elder Cathers.

Sidney Gore's journal makes plain that their beliefs were comparable to those of other evangelicals. They believed that man was fallen and needed to be redeemed back to God. This redemption was consequent to each person's recognition of his own sin, which was defined as one's selfish will at enmity with God's will. They believed that recognizing such a condition and asking forgiveness changed one's motives and directions. It also provided a person with the power to live righteously by God's standards as revealed in the Bible.

According to Sidney Gore's journal, her religious conversion experienced when she was a young married woman, accomplished all those things. Her "inward transformation" became the central fact of her life (WC:CB 10). It happened soon after she was married, and even though she felt that she "had attained the acme of happiness," she confessed to "an aching void." In her journal she asks, "And who is there, destitute of religion, that does not feel this void?":

When in the whirl of excitement or when engrossed with the pleasures of this world, the unregenerate may for a time banish the conviction that they are at enmity with their God. But thanks to an all-wise Providence, we are creatures of reason and reflection, and when either one resumes their wonted place, we feel a longing desire for that peace of mind which this world can never give, nor take away. (Gore 11)

After her brother William made the same commitment, Sidney urged the rest of her family with evangelical ardor to "repent" of their sins and become true believers. Her diary records, "I fervently prayed that [my father] might speedily become reconciled to my course

and fall out with his own. And that the scales would fall from his eyes so that he might see that unless he too repented, he would likewise perish" (Gore 3).

As much as Cather loved and revered her elders, and as much as she breathed into her pores the flavor of their character and beliefs, the manner in which they expressed their piety disturbed her. The point in her life at which this realization took place is uncertain. "She had been brought up a Baptist, but there are strong evidences that religious doubts entered her mind while she was yet a child," Bennett tells us (WWC 134). Her rebellion is suggested in the experience of Thea in *The Song of the Lark*, whose doubts, says Bennett, "surely echo Willa herself" (134). It is suggested in the experience of Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours*, who feels uneasily pressed from the ages of fourteen through eighteen to experience a religious "conversion" (OO 44-45). It is also suggested by Cather's uneasiness with her grandparents' religious standards hinted at in the heavily autobiographical *My Antonia*. Jim Burden knows "it would be useless to acquaint [his] elders" with his plan to go to a Saturday night dance. His "Grandfather didn't approve of dancing" (MA 220). Certainly, Cather's earliest writings at the University of Nebraska when she was but sixteen years old reflect this rebelliousness, as do some early stories.

In one early story, which Marilyn Arnold calls an "important forerunner of Cather's prairie novels and later stories" (WCSF 20). Through the distance of fictional narrative, Cather is able to explore the reasons for her rejection of revivalist religious expression. The story is "Eric Hermannson's Soul" (1900). In many respects, Eric's dilemma is the same as young Willa Cather's. Eric is caught between a fierce desire for a type of religious, deeply-felt experience and the prescribed expectations of others as to what a religious experience should be.¹⁰ "[T]he wildest lad on the Divide" (CSF 360),

¹⁰ As important as critics think this story is in not only demonstrating Cather's early facility in controlling her materials but also in reflecting important themes in her oeuvre, none has given much attention to the religious conflict in young Eric. It is impossible to

Eric is the son of a devout Free Gospeller. Mrs. Hermannson is a member of a radical fundamentalist group whose beliefs and religious expressions emphasize a wrathful God and the innate evils lurking in man's desires and in the natural world. Along with other faithful Norwegian believers in the community, Eric's mother has been frantically praying for her son's conversion. He has cavorted with "worldly" pleasures, such as music, dancing, and an occasional trip to the saloon.¹¹ Their insistent prayers are not without effect. An impressionable and sensitive young man, he is susceptible to the fears and pressures that others' convictions impose on him: "For days he had been fleeing before them as a criminal from his pursuers, and over his pleasures had fallen the shadow of something dark and terrible that dogged his steps" (CSF 361).

Just as in the case of Huckleberry Finn, what society tells Eric is true religion and what he feels to be his true religious inclinations are two very different things.¹² Eric's

properly interpret the overall structure and theme of the story without recognizing the conflict. Cather gives considerable to developing it.

¹¹ Bennett records, "When Willa and the other children were putting on plays [in Red Cloud,] some of the little girls were to dress as fairies and do a rhythmic dance. One of the mothers objected that dancing was sinful, and when she finally permitted her child to dance, she was ostracized from her church organization. At the same time 'moral' enthusiasts were circulating a book entitled 'Ballroom to Hell' which was destined to stamp out the evil of dancing" (WWC, 135).

¹² Woodress tells us that Cather "got to know Mark Twain during his last years when he lived at 21 Fifth Avenue not far from Washington Square." Often bedridden, he "entertained three or four young people at a time, including Cather on occasion, in his bedroom." Cather rejected Van Wyck Brook's assessment in *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* "that Twain was a blighted genius." If he had been, "he never would have written *Huck Finn*." Twain was "much taken" with Cather's poem, "The Palatine," when it appeared in *McClure's* in June, 1909 (WC:LL, 210), and his "very flattering approval of the poem" appears in Albert Bigelow Paine's *Mark Twain: A Biography* (1912) (Bernice Slote, intro. to *April Twilights 1903*, 1962). The poem later appeared in Cather's second edition of poetry, *April Twilights and Other Poems* (1923).

“natural religion” involves a worship of spiritual and natural beauty. It is embodied in his most valued possession--his violin. To his mother and her church, however, the “fiddle” is the “very incarnation of evil desires, singing forever of worldly pleasures and inseparably associated with all forbidden things” (360). Yet for Eric, the violin and the music he makes with it “stood, to him, for all the manifestations of art; it was his only bridge into the kingdom of the soul” (361).¹³ So the very thing that others consider a sinful “weakness” is the same thing that Eric intuitively seeks for his soul’s health and salvation.

The crux of Eric’s dilemma is not primarily the church members’ disapproval, but his mother’s. He is anguished by her displeasure and unhappiness with him, and his violin is the “final barrier between Eric and his mother’s faith” and her approval. One night in a church service at the Lone Star schoolhouse, Eric listens to the impassioned sermon of Asa Skinner, who was “shouting of the mercy and vengeance of God” with a “terrible earnestness”:

¹³ Bernice Slote points out that Cather’s “concept of the relationship of music and the soul” may have been shaped by a book “which had been in her possession probably during her high school years.” In the first chapter of Thomas C. Upham’s *Abridgement of Mental Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1873), appears the following: “‘The soul, considered in its relationship to external nature, may be compared to a stringed instrument. Regarded in itself, it is an invisible existence, having the capacity and elements of harmony. The nerves, the eye, and the senses generally, are the chords and artificial framework which God has woven round its unseen and unsearchable essence. This living and curious instrument, made up of the invisible soul and the bodily framework which surrounds it, is at first voiceless and silent. Nor does it appear that it will ever send forth its sounds of harmony, until it is touched and operated upon by those outward influences which exist in the various forms and adaptations of the material world. Under these influences it is first awakened into activity’ (18-19)” (Intro. to *April Twilights 1903*, xxxvii-xxxviii, n).

It was a great night at the Lone Star schoolhouse--a night when the Spirit was present with power and when God was very near to man. . . . The schoolhouse was crowded with the saved and sanctified, robust men and women, trembling and quailing before the power of some mysterious psychic force. Here and there among this cowering, sweating multitude crouched some poor wretch who had felt the pangs of an awakened conscience, but had not yet experienced that complete divestment of reason, that frenzy born of a convulsion of the mind, which, in the parlance of the Free Gospellers, is termed "the Light." On the floor before the mourners' bench lay the unconscious figure of a man in whom outraged nature had sought her last resort. This "trance" state is the highest evidence of grace among the Free Gospellers, and indicates a close walking with God. (359)

The narrator makes clear that the nonrational, frenzied worship is exercised by people likewise unbalanced, but she emphasizes that they have been made that way by the cruelly desolate and hard life on the prairie. While maintaining an aesthetic distance, the narrator is compassionate and uncondemning.¹⁴ Understanding the motives, however, does not make the results of such misinformed worship any less devastating. The annointed of this group, "Asa Skinner, servant of God," is a "man made for the extremes of life; from the most debauched of men he had become the most ascetic." Even though his features are "bestial," there is in them the pathos of a man who bears the "scars of many a hand-to-hand struggle with the weakness of the flesh," and the "drooping lip" where "sharp, strenuous lines" bespoke a battle with that weakness "that had conquered it

¹⁴ Mildred Bennett believes that the story shows Cather's "bitterness toward religious proselytizing" (WWC, 135). I find no tone of bitterness, only sadness and disappointment.

and taught it to pray.” It was as if “after Nature had done her worst with that face, some fine chisel had gone over it, chastening and almost transfiguring it,” producing a “certain convincing power in the man” (359-60).

In the service, Asa Skinner spots the prime target of the community’s prayers sitting in the congregation with his evil violin resting on his knee. Quoting from scripture, he invokes the heavenly voice that stopped St. Paul in his tracks on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:4):

“Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? Is there a Saul here tonight who has stopped his ears to that gentle pleading, who has thrust a spear into that bleeding side? Think of it, my brother; you are offered this wonderful love and you prefer the worm that dieth not and the fire which will not be quenched. What right have you to lose one of God’s precious souls? Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” (361)

Directing his frantic pleading right to Eric, “a great joy dawn[s] in Asa Skinner’s pale face” as he realizes it is taking effect. Eric begins to sway “to and fro in his seat.” The “minister [falls] upon his knees and [throws] his long arms up over his head”:

“O my brothers! I feel it coming, the blessing we have prayed for. I tell you the Spirit is coming! Just a little more prayer, brothers, a little more zeal, and he will be here. I can feel his cooling wing upon my brow. Glory be to God forever and ever, amen!” (361-62)

The emotional pitch builds as shouts and hallelujahs go “up from every lip.” Eric sees other converts fall on the “mourner’s bench.” A gospel hymn is started, a “chant of terror and rapture,” which offers “Glory to the bleeding Lamb.” The “hymn [is] sung in a dozen dialects” by this congregation of immigrants “from almost every country of Europe,” voicing “all the vague yearning of these hungry lives, of these people who had

starved all the passions so long.” Unfortunately, the narrator concludes, the oppressive message of the revivalist preacher sets them up to “fall victims to the basest [passion] of them all, fear” (362).

This gospel of fear finally overcomes Eric. He gets to his feet and with lips set and lightning in his eyes, he takes “his violin by the neck” and crushes “it to splinters across his knee.” To Asa Skinner the sound is like “the shackles of sin broken audibly asunder” (362).¹⁵

In this story, Cather writes a fictional account of what she must have witnessed herself in the church services that she attended as a child with her family elders.¹⁶ In it we find what she found so terrible and deadening about their Christianity. Any religious expression that emphasizes the fear of God rather than his beauty, and his terrible judgment on sinful man rather than his love, grated against Cather’s sensibilities. To young Cather, such religion was a misdirected search for the dark pits in man and nature. Such a preoccupation with sin and the perception of a wrathful God bent on destroying whoever possesses it denies sensual joy and imagination. It twists and distorts one’s naturally positive religious impulses and turns it into something grotesque and debilitating.¹⁷

Eric’s “conversion” lasts for more than two years, during which time the vigor of

¹⁵ In *One of Ours*, David Gerhardt, the musician-soldier, smashes his violin when he realizes that the war is virtually destroying man’s capacity for music or anything else of beauty. In Cather’s scheme of things, misguided heroism, as well as misguided religion, kills the artistic impulse.

¹⁶ Other than the references to going to church in *My Antonia*, we know that Cather was given religious instruction at her grandparents’ church with her Grandmother Cather as her Sunday School teacher. See WC:LL, 42.

¹⁷ As much as Cather’s views here match those of William Blake, there is no evidence that she even read his work, much less was influenced by him. See WC:LL, 50-51 and 71-79 for a list of the works with which Cather was familiar, including her college curricula.

life drains out of him, and he becomes as “glum as a preacher” (367). Then appears in Rattlesnake Creek a young woman from the East. “[A]h!,” says the narrator, invoking a Homeric epithet, “across what leagues of land and sea, by what improbable chances, do the unrelenting gods bring to us our fate!” (362). Margaret Elliot, “a girl of other manners and conditions,” comes from New York with her brother for a visit to “wild” Nebraska. It will be her last “taste of freedom” before she marries. “It comes to all women of her type--that desire to taste the unknown which allures and terrifies, to run one’s whole soul’s length out to the wind--just once” (363).

On that prairie, deadened by gruelling hardship and a defeating gospel, Eric Hermannson finally meets a person to match his naturally fiery impulses and his love of art, a person who also yearns for new experiences that will “run one’s whole soul’s length out to the wind.” One day Eric hears Margaret sing “the intermezzo from *Cavalleria Rusticana*” as she plays an old parlor organ (366), and an incarnational miracle happens. Margaret later tells her brother of Eric’s response:

He shuffled his feet and twisted his big hands up into knots and blurted out that he didn’t know there was any music like that in the world. Why, there were tears in his voice, Wyllis! Yes, like Rossetti, I *heard* his tears. Then it dawned upon me that it was probably the first good music he had ever heard in all his life. Think of it, to care for music as he does and never to hear it, never to know that it exists on earth! To long for it as we long for other perfect experiences that never come. I can’t tell you what music means to that man. . . . It gave him speech, he became alive. (366)

Like Aunt Georgiana in “A Wagner Matinee” (1904), Eric’s parched and starving soul revives on hearing the glorious sounds, and he fixes its love on the woman who redeemed it. She is the incarnation of a divine spirit, a gift of the gods. “This girl represented an entirely new species of humanity to him, but he knew where to place her.

The prophets of old, when an angel first appeared unto them, never doubted its high origin" (368). "An embodiment of those dreams of impossible loveliness that linger by a young man's pillow on midsummer nights," Margaret is more than physical loveliness; she is a "complete revelation." She "held something more than the attraction of health and youth and shapeliness" (370). In Margaret, Eric encounters the fusion of his divided self--his longing for both transcendent and human ecstasy, for divine and human love.

Consequent to this second "conversion" of Eric, Margaret arranges a dance to be given for those few left who had not "gone over to the Free Gospellers," those who would not "rather put their feet in the fire than shake 'em to a fiddle" (367). She insists that Eric come. Again, Eric is faced with the choice that was before him at the Free Gospellers' meeting, but this time there is no struggle, no question. "Yes, I will." His heart had spoken, but his head "believed that he delivered his soul to hell as he said it" (371).

Eric's most profound statement of love and commitment to all that Margaret represents in his imagination comes after they have a near-disastrous horseride. The high emotions of the moment arm Eric with the courage to blurt out a desperate confession: "I love you more than Christ who died for me, more than I am afraid of hell, or hope for heaven" (352). Eric's newfound divine love has not transformed his reason, has not so immediately corrected the errors of what he has been taught is true. In grasping the one thing that his soul yearns for, he is certain he is damning it. "I never be sorry," he tells Margaret in his broken English, and when he speaks, it is "as when some great animal composes itself for death, as when a great ship goes down at sea" (377). "I have not been so happy before," he continues; "I not be so happy again, ever" (376-77).

But he is happy again--once. On the landing on top of a windmill, Margaret yields to him, finding in him "the look" for which she had searched in men all her life, this profound mix of the spiritual and sensual.

Eric was thinking with an almost savage exultation of the time when he should pay for this. Ah, there would be no quailing then! If ever a soul went fearlessly, proudly down to the gates infernal, his should go. For a moment he fancied he was there already, treading down the tempest in ages gone, all the countless years of sinning in which men had sold and lost and flung their souls away, any man had ever so cheated Satan, had ever bartered his soul for so great a price. (378)

The next day, Eric is confronted by Asa Skinner's anguish at his fall from grace, but Eric "drew in the breath of the dew and the morning" and "something from the only poetry he had ever read flashed across his mind . . . : 'And a day shall be as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day'" (379). Cather here uses a passage from II Peter 3:8 which compares God's eternal perspective to the temporal restrictions of man's viewpoint. Eric implies that in a moment of time, he had entered an eternal realm and experienced a touch of the divine which widened his vision to vistas he did not know existed. He had lived forever in a day, and the prospect of being cast into an unending hell grew pale by comparison. As the ancient Hellenes, at the risk of horrid punishment, chose their own most noble aspirations over their gods, so Eric "drew himself up to his full height" and looked with "exultation" toward his doom (379).

Like Eric, young Willa Cather was an inspired rebel, fully believing that following her higher intuition would damn her but choosing to do it anyway.¹⁸ Her soul, every bit as much as Eric's, required the music and high passion of art. "There is no god but one god," she had written Mariel Gere in 1896 when she moved to Pittsburgh, "and art is his revealer." Sounding very much like the Eric Hermannson in the story she

¹⁸ Eudora Welty writes that Cather's rebellious characters never rebel "for [rebellion's] own sake as much as for the sake of something a great deal bigger--for the sake of integrity, of truth, of art" ("The House of Willa Cather," 15).

would write four years later, she proclaimed this would be “her creed” as long as she lived, and if need be, “she was going to follow it to a hotter place than Pittsburgh” (WC:LA 76).¹⁹

Cather’s revivalist heritage did not make its way to her through her parents. Cather’s biographers note that Charles Cather was a lover of music and the entertaining arts. A violinist like Eric Hermannson, he was forbidden by the austere William Cather from playing any music on Sunday.²⁰ In the William Cather home, dancing was considered a worldly evil to be shunned. After Charles left home and married Virginia Boak, the social, fun-loving belle who wanted her courtship to last a lifetime, he forsook his father’s ways and took his wife’s. He and Virginia loved to dance, go to concerts, and attend plays at the opera house in Red Cloud. It appears they attended the Baptist Church and its social functions (mentioned in “Old Mrs. Harris”), but they did not adhere to its strict practices. It was Willa Cather’s grandparents, especially William and Caroline, who exerted the same kind of earnest pressure on Willa Cather “to be saved” as Eric experiences with his mother and Asa Skinner.

Much of Eric Hermannson reappears later as another character, Claude Wheeler, the protagonist in Cather’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *One of Ours* (1922):

Claude had gone through a painful time of doubt and fear when he thought a great deal about religion. For several years, from fourteen to eighteen, he believed that he would be lost if he did not repent and undergo that mysterious change called conversion. But there was something stubborn in him that would not let him avail himself of the pardon offered. He felt

¹⁹ This is Woodress’s paraphrase of the letter written in 1896 (WC:LA, 76).

²⁰ Violin players appear several times in Cather’s fiction, and in all cases, their violins become a symbol of shattered hopes and thwarted artistic endeavor. See Peter in “Peter,” Mr. Shimerda in *My Antonia*, as well as David Gerhardt in *One of Ours*.

condemned, but he did not want to renounce a world he as yet knew nothing of. He would like to go into life with all his vigour, with all his faculties free. He didn't want to be like the young men who said in prayer-meeting that they leaned on their Saviour. He hated their way of meekly accepting permitted pleasures. (OO 44-45)

Nothing could better illustrate Cather's own attitude at this period in her life toward her elders' religion than "Eric Hermannson's Soul." Even though the Baptist strain of evangelical Christianity was not similar in all respects to the Free Gospellers--and even though her elders, including Sidney Gore, were not themselves of an unbalanced or extreme emotional nature--the general emphasis on the sin of man and the fear of God's wrathful punishment, as well as a preoccupation with evil in man and nature was the same. One's present and eternal well-being rested on being stricken by "conviction" and turning away from one's sinful past through a miraculous conversion at a "mourner's bench," as is illustrated in Sidney Gore's journal. Add to that their tendency to view social pleasure as "worldly" and unfavorable in God's sight, and you have a creed that to an imaginatively responsive and vibrant young woman like Willa Cather was something thoroughly distasteful. Unlike Wordsworth, who acknowledged that his poetic gift was "fostered alike by beauty and fear" (*The Prelude*, Book 1, 302), Cather believed fear to be soul-killing.²¹ Cather believed that her elders' church repressed the imagination and gagged the intellect. Their method of religious practice was a clamp which strangulated the spiritual development necessary for making art or life. Later Cather was to say to her friend Carrie Miner that "Those who make being good unattractive do more harm than those who strive to make evil attractive" (WWC 135).

²¹ For a discussion of the similarities between Wordsworth's and Cather's art, see Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*. Rowsowski, however, makes no mention of their religious differences or striking religious similarities.

As much as Cather disliked the extremism of the revivalists, however, she was not unsympathetic with their religious zeal. She saw in it a passion and a deep caring for something, which she believed was required for a purposeful endeavor and the fulfillment of a rich life. In a fictional vignette that appeared in the *Journal*, November 5, 1893, Cather contrasts the religious enthusiasm of a “heavy-featured coarse-looking man” dressed in a Salvation Army uniform with the word “saved” in large letters on his collar, to the intellectualism of a “professor of language whose features are moulded with that exquisite delicacy which is the product of long centuries of purity of life and development of intellect on the part of his ancestors” (13). Cather determines that the uncultured man is the truly “saved,” while the other one “is lost”:

“Saved” not by knowledge, or capacity or righteousness, but by enthusiasm. Well, why not? Let us give the church as well as the devil its dues. By what is a man ever saved other than by enthusiasm? Why, you may take it in the mental world. It is not the great, scholarly mind that does the great work, it is the man who knows a few things and loves them. A genius is just another way of defining a great enthusiast. The finely trained minds who lose themselves in the world, the men who know all about poetry but never write a line, the men who know every date in history but never are heard of by the publishers of histories, these are all lost men, lost eternally because of their frozen souls. There is nothing very paradoxical after all in being saved by enthusiasm.
(13; in WP. I. 7)

Here, Cather may have been making a historical link to the nineteenth century movement of Enthusiasm, which was associated with revivalist zeal in Victorian England. For Cather, any genuine expression of passion or enthusiasm (etymologically meaning “filled with God”) puts one in touch with the divine, which, for the moment, makes him

God's priest. She is merely reiterating what she so often said was a necessity for genuine life as well as genuine art--religious passion and sincere feeling.²²

Especially in her earlier years as a writer, Cather emphasized the enthusiastic joy of creation, which for her was merely a reflection of the Divine Artist's joy when he made the world. As she wrote in 1894, "the tropics were made in exalted, exuberant passion, passion that overflowed and wasted itself, made in all the divine madness of art" (KA 45). Like Wallace Stevens,²³ she rejected a stiff-necked and solemn religion, and in this respect, at least, she deeply understood her relatives' "enthusiasm" over their religion. As long as it remained bright and happy and confirmed a joyful life, she recognized its close resemblance to any creative act which linked the human with the divine.

* * *

In these early university years when Cather was developing a theory of aesthetics, she joined Christianity and Greek myth in her art, fusing historical Christian dogma and the dynamic, interaction of man and gods of nature which appears in the classics. When Cather first encountered the writings of Thomas Carlyle in her studies at the university, she found a philosophy of religion kindred to her own. In the now famous paper that

²² As Bernice Slote comments, "[i]n the first years, Willa Cather seemed to be on the side of feeling" to the exclusion of craft, of emotion over mind (KA, 72). As years went by, Cather vacillated between the two, but by the end of her writing career, in works like *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and "Old Mrs. Harris," she chose feeling over intellect.

²³ Wallace Stevens once wrote of Willa Cather, "We have nothing better than she is. She takes so much pains to conceal her sophistication that it is easy to miss her quality" (Holly Stevens, 38).

first gave her public recognition, she wrote about his views with a conviction that confirmed she shared his views:²⁴

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 He was too passionately, too intensely religious to confine himself to any one creed. (KA 423)

In Cather's earliest stories, the mixture of religions--more specifically, pagan and Christian--is common.²⁵ If one considers the various types of tropes and analogies describing religious experience that Cather uses throughout the course of her literary career, a pattern emerges. Religion is experienced in the life of the individual in the same manner as it has been experienced in the historical life of man. Just as the earliest generations of man were primarily emotional in their approach to deity with no formalized, systematized theology, so are children. The Dionysian impulse is the first, both in historical man and the individual man. As many Christian theologians have attested, the stories of the pagan gods, arising as they do from man's deepest spiritual impulses, anticipate and lead to the revelation of Christ.²⁶ The individual man matures, so does his reason, and he is ready for higher religious development. From this

²⁴ "Concerning Thomas Carlyle" was first published simultaneously in the *Nebraska State Journal* and the University paper, the *Hesperian*, on March 1, 1891. See KA, 421-42 for comparisons and an explanation of the two versions.

²⁵ See KA, 33-36.

²⁶ Writers of the Middle Ages, particularly Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* and Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, presuppose such a view.

viewpoint, Christianity, in its purest form, is the culmination of all religious revelation and the most refined fusion of both the Apollonian and Dionysian capacities in man.

It is no wonder, then, that the children in Cather's fiction who are marked with heightened sensibilities and artistic temperaments are the romantic repositories of religious wonder and exalted imagination, susceptible to suggestions of magic and the supernatural. Pagan and elemental, they hum with Whitmanesque primitive energy and joy and act unconsciously out of a higher wisdom like Wordsworth's children. The child in "Jack-a-boy" (1901), "like some joyous spirit" who "played long ago in Arcady," hears "the pipes of Pan as the old wood gods trooped by in the gray morning." He memorably demonstrates that "sometimes the old divinities reveal themselves in children" (CSF 320-21). In "The Treasure of Far Island" (1902), Douglass Burnham returns to his childhood home to recapture his youth, symbolized by the digging up of a treasure he buried long ago. It recalls a time as in a Virgilian pastoral where the meadows "were the greenest in all the world because they were the meadows of the long ago; and the flowers that grew there were the freshest and sweetest of growing things" because they were a part of a "long ago in a golden age" (CSF 276).

Critic Marilyn Arnold is bothered by the fact that Cather "frames a less than subtle comparison" between the little pagan, Jack-a-boy, and Christ, the Savior. It "jangles the sensibilities" and threatens good taste, she writes, since Cather has already compared him to "wood nymphs and Greek divinities frolicking in the fields of Arcady" (CSF 38). This same fusion occurs in "The Treasure of Far Island." When Douglass, along with his childhood lover, discovers the buried treasure, the narrator describes the event with both pagan and Biblical references, which shimmer with the same golden, burning heavenly vision:

The locust chirped in the thicket; the setting sun threw a track of flame across the water; the willows burned with fire and were not consumed; a

glory was upon the sand and the river and upon the Silvery Beaches; and these two looked about over God's world and saw that it was good. In the western sky the palaces of crystal and gold were quenched in night, like the cities of old empires; and out of the east rose the same moon that has glorified all the romances of the world (CSF 282)

The juxtaposition of these two traditions, however, is perfectly in line with Cather's view of religious history. The Christ is anticipated in the pagan; they are from one seed, the latter, a sapling, the former, the fully developed tree.

Even in the adult artist, though, the child is present. "An artist is a child always," Cather writes in "The Treasure of Far Island," even though "a child is not always an artist." An artist must never lose the child's vision; his intuitive spiritual impulses must always be active to give impetus to artistic creation. Douglass knows this: "whenever I look back on [childhood], it is all exultation and romance," and to "people who live by imagination at all, that is the only life that goes deep enough to leave memories" (CSF 280). The adult artist, then, takes the stuff of his childhood and the primitive religious fervor with which he experienced it, and with his added knowledge and reason, gives it shape and meaning.²⁷

This exactly describes the imaginative construct of Cather's mature works, reflected in novels like *My Antonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. These works rely primarily on Biblical metaphor to describe the highest in human experience. The central characters, Antonia and Bishop Latour, represent the best in human aspiration; they are both fully realized artists whose foundations are in the Christian religion. Yet

²⁷ As much as these themes in Cather's stories resemble Wordsworth, there is no evidence that she read or studied his work. For a discussion of Cather and the Wordsworthian connection, see Susan Rosowski, *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*, 63-75.

they both have still residing in them, the pagan child that is their source of joy and exuberant energy.

For Antonia, this child is presented in the form of her own child, Leo. Leo is an impetuous twelve year old, Antonia's most difficult child and most loved. He is a little pagan, a child of Dionysus, fresh out of a mythic forest, defying convention and stretching life's limits with a raw energy and passion befitting a future artist. Jim Burden describes him:

The boy was so restless that I had not had a chance to look at his face before. My first impression was right; he really was faun-like. He hadn't much head behind his ears, and his tawny fleece grew down thick to the back of his neck. His eyes were not frank and wide apart like those of the other boys, but were deep-set, gold-green in colour, and seemed sensitive to the light. His mother said he got hurt oftener than all the others put together. He was always trying to ride the colts before they were broken, teasing the turkey gobbler, seeing just how much red the bull would stand for, or how sharp the new axe was. (348)

But like Jack-a-boy, he is also associated with Christian typology. His birth points to his future--he was born on Easter. And we are invited to conclude that this little animal of unbridled creativity and energy is the embryo that will develop into a full-blown Catherian artist, self-sacrificing and redeeming the world with love and beauty, just like his mother, Antonia.

For Bishop Latour, the pagan worshiper was the boy in him that was revived every time he felt the light and dry Southwest winds "blowing in through the windows," and smelled the "fragrance of hot sun and sage-brush and sweet clover"; they "made one's body feel light and one's heart cry 'To-day, to-day,' like a child's." It was the

thing that gave him great love for his work, and it was the thing that was closest to him when he was dying:

Something soft and wild and free, something that whispered to the ear on the pillow, lightened the heart, softly, softly picked the lock, slid the bolts, and released the prisoned spirit of man into the wind, into the blue and gold, into the morning, into the morning! (275-76)

For Cather, the artist-child has the characteristics requisite to making true art: imagination, intelligence, and great powers of love which include the ability to have great feelings. Cather makes clear that all of these attributes work together best in the child. Her major protagonist-artists are successful relative to their relationship to their childhood selves. Alexander Bartley has rejected his childhood self, the result of which is a terrible personality and character split in middle life. Thea Kronberg can only continue as a great artist as long as she keeps in touch, either physically or in memory, with the places and people of her childhood. Godfrey St. Peter is rescued from a self-destructive mid-life *angst* through a young man who, by reminding him of his childhood self, returns Godfrey to his original being. Even Bishop Latour, at the end of his long and productive life, recognizes that the force behind his faith is somehow connected to the life of the child:

In New Mexico he always awoke a young man; not until he rose and began to shave did he realize that he was growing older. His first consciousness was a sense of . . . a wind that made one's body feel light and one's heart cry "To-day, to-day," like a child's.

Beautiful surroundings, the society of learned men, the charm of noble women, the graces of art, could not make up to him for the loss of

those light-hearted mornings of the desert, for that wind that made one a boy again. (275).

Even after Cather was reconciled to the historical dogmas of the Christian faith, she did not relinquish her belief that the childlike, Dionysian impulse was necessary for creative and spiritual vision.

On the surface, it may appear that Cather's revulsion toward the manner in which evangelical Christians expressed their faith caused her to abandon Christian orthodoxy altogether in favor of a classical pagan religion. As Bernice Slote has noted, Cather's early theory of art is greatly informed by paganism.²⁸ What we actually see, however, is Cather in the process of finding her own way to her own interpretation of the Christian faith. Along the way, she experiments with various other religious forms and deviates from orthodoxy by her own imaginative interpretations. But finally she discovers that rejecting a certain interpretation of Christianity or an unacceptable mode of its expression is not necessarily the same thing as rejecting the essentials of its teachings.

No matter how fiercely Cather separated herself from the practices of religious training during these years, she could not quite extricate herself from a conviction that there was truth in her grandparents' and aunt's beliefs. Their noble example of life outside their formal religious practices spoke too eloquently to be dismissed. Cather loved the solid, orderly, and simple life of faithful service they embraced. She loved their great human feeling and sacrificial nature. She agreed with them in spirit if in mind. Part of Cather's personal growth during the early years of her writing career was in learning to distinguish between the universally good and the humanly inadequate in her elders' beliefs, and she did it both through writing fiction and by developing her own theory of

²⁸ For a full discussion of Cather's early theory of art, see Slote's introductory essay to *The Kingdom of Art*. However, Slote does not develop an argument that shows Cather's efforts to draw distinctions between or fuse Christianity and pagan thinking.

art. Both would satisfy her creative impulses and intellectual requisites and her inclination toward intuitive belief in the divine. The result was a religion of art, and its expression became her worship; its demands, her vocation.

At this juncture in Cather's artistic development, the themes in her writing are a mixture of a longing for "lost divinity, or lost belief" (KA 34-35)--a yearning for the sureness and solidity of her forebears' values--and a repulsion from their apparent backwardness, rigidity, and religious practices woefully devoid of conventional artistic beauty. However, in the progression of Cather's writings, from her novice attempts at the University of Nebraska until she became a recognized writer with the publication of *O Pioneers!* in 1913, we can see a parallel progression in her developing understanding of the value of her family and her past. Understanding this transformation and the surrounding circumstances is at the center of understanding the meaning of Cather's art.

The picture of Willa Cather in her years at the University is one of a vibrant, energetic young woman with the dust of the prairie still on her and with the gift of a precocious mind. As we see in Vickie in "Old Mrs. Harris," Cather was an intellectually eager youngster, having gotten just enough of a taste of culture and the arts through some of the Europeans in Red Cloud to make her hungry for more. Stubbornly intent on going to college in spite of her family's restricted financial means, Cather found an avenue through the help of her father, who took out a loan that would cover the first two years (WC:LL 63).

In Lincoln, as it had been on the Divide and in Red Cloud, Cather found a transplanted culture. "[T]he learning of the University came from other places--the East and Europe. It was an immigration of ideas," and the "very differences stretched the mind" (KA 8). True to her former pattern, Cather gravitated "to families who, like Aeneas, had brought their culture, their household gods, to the new land" (KA 9). As a railroad center, Lincoln was "a convenient stop for first-rate theatrical and musical companies" (WC:LL 65), and Cather took in as many as she could. The university itself

in the early 1890's was "a little Renaissance world" with some of America's most distinguished scholars (WC:LL 67). In this environment that celebrated the classical ideal and the humanistic tradition, Cather fully developed her notions of culture and art.

At the university, Cather's unusually fine mind and prodigious talent caught the attention of several important people who opened doors of opportunity for her. An essay on Thomas Carlyle, written in Cather's first year in Lincoln before she had matriculated to the university course,²⁹ so thunderstruck Cather's English teacher that he had it sent off for publication in the *Nebraska State Journal* without her knowledge (WC:LL 72). Charles Gere, the paper's editor, not only called attention to the extraordinary essay of a girl "sixteen [actually seventeen] years of age," but two years later he gave Cather a permanent post as drama critic at the *Journal*. Another essay written six months later, "Shakespeare and *Hamlet*," caused a similar stir.

All this was heady stuff for a young girl straight off the prairie, and true to the archetypal pattern of the young leaving home, caused her to turn a critical eye toward the small-town life that was at this time most dominant in her memory--her Red Cloud years. Her home and family now seemed pedantic, uninteresting, and backward; and their religion, particularly, appeared dreary and deficient, artistically as well as intellectually.

Cather's journalistic writings during her years at the University of Nebraska from 1890-1895 provide a remarkable view into her own developing theories of art. As editor of the school paper, the *Hesperian*, and as drama critic for the *Lincoln Journal*,³⁰ she produced an astonishing amount of work which early reveals her prodigious gift of

²⁹ Cather had to take one year of preparatory courses before she was admitted to the university, as did most others who were products of Red Cloud's deficient educational system.

³⁰ During Cather's last two years at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln and in the following year in Red Cloud, she wrote a weekly column on the arts for the *Nebraska State Journal* called "As You Like It." These articles are collected in KA, edited by Bernice Slote.

language with its powerfully evocative quality. Her mind penetrated to the core of things quickly and with great certainty. These early pieces, Virginia Faulkner reminds us, are valuable for “their manifold and crucial connections with her later work and in the unparalleled insights they afford into the process by which a gifted writer becomes a great artist.” Reading these writings, “we are as close as we are likely to come to getting inside the skin of a writer in the act of being and becoming” (WP. I. xv-xvi).

Amazingly, Cather’s “first convictions and principles of art,” developed before she was twenty-one, “were unchanged through the years,” observes Bernice Slote, even “down to the fundamental metaphor of art” (KA 82). Cather took her metaphor from the religious heritage so deeply ingrained from her past. She used the orthodox doctrines of Christianity, and like Blake and the Romantic inheritors of his vision, borrowed its language as metaphor, creating a new creed-of-the-artist. Even though Cather appreciates the American Romantics, Emerson and Whiteman, and their aim to create a similar creed, her own creed was more aligned “from the first with the British brand of romanticism” (Rosowski, *Voyage Perilous* 9). But Cather’s borrowing from the British romantics was not just linguistic; she also took the original substance behind the metaphor, the tenor as well as the vehicle.³¹ “Willa Cather joined art and religion, not only in the allegorical kingdom of art but in the primary belief that man’s creation shares in some divine power.” In Cather’s scheme,

God in creating the world was the “divine Artist”; the human artist serves and worships, becoming both the priest and the translator of God. If the God of art can also be a temporal ruler, vested with power and demanding

³¹ See Susan Rowskowski, *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather’s Romanticism*, for a discussion of Cather’s ties to the Romantic movement. Strangely enough, however, Rosowski omits any mention of the Romantics’ treatment of orthodox religion, including Cather’s.

worship, service, or renunciation from his subjects, the artist in turn has “that kingly dower which makes men akin to the angels.” The revelation of divine things is through inspiration and the gift of genius; the artist with individual talent gives back “what God put into him.”

(KA 43)

Cather came to envision herself more and more as this divinely endowed artist and vouchsafed her vision with a passionate neo-platonic idealism inspired by historical Christianity. Such idealism befitted one who would be transported through divine inspiration closer to God than most, who would be “the priest and translator of God” to man (*Courier*, Nov. 23, 1895; KA 409). Just as Christ is God incarnate in orthodox Christianity--the antitype of the high priest--so is the true artist an incarnation of God in Cather’s religion of art. He is endowed with divine power to transform life and point to the beautiful and the true. As Christ’s followers are to be partakers of the divine image, so is the artist. The artist is also of the elect, chosen to receive the empowerment of God. In the reformed theology of Cather’s early ancestors, God elected certain ones to be saved and to receive his Spirit.³² In Cather’s re-interpretation, the artist is one of the chosen whose immortal touch is born by “the Shadow of God’s hand as it falls on the elect” (KA 44).

Borrowing the language of the revivalists in a *Journal* article (1894), Cather writes that a human artist “must have grace, abandon, and the inward fire” to produce true art. Such art has a moral aim; it “postulates an appreciation of goodness, greatness and truth” (KA 150), and any deviation from those principles is the “sin” that pollutes art. “In the artist,” Cather writes, “goodness is partly integrity; sin is the waste of genius on the

³² James and Jasper Cather, William Cather’s grandfather and great-grandfather, were staunch Presbyterians (WC:EV, 12), and as such would have held to the Calvinist doctrine concerning the election of the saints.

tawdry and the inhumane" (KA 57). Cather again invokes scripture to validate her unique definition of sin:

A book much more frequently quoted than followed remarks: "The soul that sinneth shall die." There is something in it. The Hebrews knew a thing or two. They had Solomon's glaring example before them. A more modern way to put it would be, "The soul that abases itself shall die." It does not matter much in what way, whether it is through whisky or frivolity, the yoke of social bondage, general indolence or Charlotte Behrens [an inferior actress], it all amounts to the same thing. (KA 152).

The desecration of this sacred flame means certain damnation. Unlike the deathbed conversions in Christian lore, "there are no deathbed repentances in art," Cather writes. The gospel of art requires "a whole long life not only of faith but of works to give an artist salvation and immortality." Christ may have taught a way to salvation for the wayward soul, but "for the prodigal in art there is no return."

A man cannot spend his life or even a few years of it among the husks and the swine and then go back clean and upright to his father's house. Neither can he call on a dozen young ladies and the wine houses in the same afternoon or reach the temple of fame by walking the Rialto in creased trousers. (*Journal*, Dec. 2, 13; KA 152)

Excellence in art, no more than excellence in Christianity, cannot be achieved in the presence of careless morality or merely careful propriety.

What Cather worked for, writes Slote, "was the sense of goodness or perfection, the linked and interchangeable 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty': or even what seems to be a mystic insight":

The ideal is more often directly expressed as an early pattern or achievement, but the human which approaches the divine is enough reason for reverence and passionate excitement. Greatness is also splendor, . . . [and] splendor in art gives the impulse to transfigure, lift, shine, and make more than ordinary. The greatest artists, then, become as the gods, and the highest arts are holy ground. (KA 59)

This ideal inherent in genuine art is not to be found in the world of men. "Today all artists see too much of the world, they are alone too little. He who walks with the crowd is drawn to its level" (KA 434). The ideal is found, rather, through creative, inspired thought in which "all the forces of body, brain and soul are drawn to one vital center in the effort of one life to give individuality to a greater life" (434). But modern men of letters, burdened with their learning,

are unwilling, either for the sake of the idea itself or for the sake of the truth which inspired it, to undergo the pain, the suffering, the separation from other men, the solitude and the loneliness which thought learning [sic] involves. They each love; they are not strong enough for the sacrifice, so they say "we will serve both, men and art." They serve the one, but the other they prostitute. They do not intend this, it comes upon them gradually. They forget that an artist should be unlike other men, for he should be a revelation to other men. (KA 434)

Cather's artist is an incarnation of Christ, willing to forsake all to bring to birth a divine "revelation to other men." The artist is not like "the model young man [who] came to Christ and said, 'Lord, what good thing shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?'" and when told he would have to "give all," went away sorrowful. Rather, he is one like her own revered model, the one artist she found worthy to be God's "second son." He was

born on the “immortal twenty-third of April,” and on that night “three hundred and thirty years ago,” “God a second time turned his face in love toward man” (WP. I. 56). In Shakespeare, Cather the university student discovered a literary Christ, one with whose image she could with her whole heart aim to be “conformed.”

If I were asked for the answer of the riddle of things, I would as lief say
“Shakespeare” as anything. For him alone it was worth while that a planet
should be called out of Chaos and a race formed out of nothingness. He
justified all history before him, but sanctified all history after him.

(*Journal*, April 29, 1894; WP. I. 84).

Cather’s mental construction of two “Christs” would later develop into a pivotal point of conflict in terms of her mature judgment on her choice of art as religious vocation. In the resolution of that conflict she would not only reach a final judgment on the god of art, but she would also make a choice about which Christ was the real and true one. The art of the first Christ--the historical Christ of orthodox Christianity--was a living artifact, a life of sacrificial deeds inspired by love, written only on the passing lives of those who knew him and who would later write about him. He was a divinely endowed artist who relinquished his control of how the future would receive him or the past would judge him; he flung away, so to speak, any rights to determine or shape history’s memory or judgment of it by not making a permanent artifact of his text.³³ Cather’s second “Christ,” representing artists who create artifacts, is one whose energies are poured into a carefully controlled and consciously shaped design, who lives a life of isolation that denies human relationships and is often selfish. In Cather’s fiction, the first “Christ” is found in her simple and giving characters of “obscure destinies,” who, like

³³ More conservative branches of orthodox Christianity, especially the evangelicals, would argue that God through Christ did indeed control his “text” by the direct and inerrant inspiration of the writers of scripture.

her own revered family members, create homes and gardens and families and human relationships by sacrificing personal comfort and ambition. The second "Christ" is embodied in her artists, and by inference herself, who constantly struggle with mixed motivations and spiritual doubts as they doggedly seek their own fulfillment in the holy grail of art.³⁴

According to orthodox Christianity, the Bible is the divinely revealed artifact of God's voice to man. It narrates the life and message of the incarnated Word, God's only son. The Bible is not only the highest revelation; it is the last. Nothing further is required. In the early stages of Cather's theory of "art as religion," however, revelation is extended. The incarnation of Christ is not only repeated in the artist; it is actually a more advanced revelation. Instead of God's spirit incarnated in the body of Christ, it is now incarnate in art through the spirit-filled artist, spirit made flesh, beauty made artifact.

Cather would later modify her view and cast the artist in the role, not of a new revelation, but as a disseminator of revelation, an artist-priest who translates God for man into human terms. As such, the artifact always points to "something else," some "core of light" which "produces in the perceiver a transfiguration" (KA 49), just as the Son was to point to the Father. All true art, then, is a translation of the "Word." If it is genuine, it always points to a mystery, the veiled reality behind the physical sign. When one has touched this "higher thing" in his feelings, the incarnation is complete--the human has discovered the divine. Slote summarizes Cather's view: "the truth of art is intangible as spirit though caught for a time in human sense" (KA 49).

³⁴ What I am calling Cather's tension between a religion of art and a religion of love-in-action, Raymond Thorbert calls a dissatisfaction with any one set of artistic principles, a pull between craft and material. Jean Lavon Throckmorton labels the dichotomys as Cather's intellectual art novels and her prairie and southwest novels, and finds the latter to be far superior.

As a “passionate idealist,” Cather defines in her journalistic statements that true art “has lofty types and conceptions back of it” and must be “warmed by all things human” (KA 51). The notion of “lofty types” comes from both Christianity and classical art, whose aim is a noble type of excellence both moral and beautiful. Art may meet the requirements of form, substance, and artistic principles, but if it lacks “the other”—the “high rare, splendid ideal that justifies the quest and the devotion,” then the other requirements do not matter (KA 59). In such a case, the art is false. “The man who founds his art upon a lie lives a lie,” Cather writes, but if he has “the other,” the thing “that God puts in him” (KA 43), his art will have “something half the ideal of heaven and half the power of human excellence” (KA 59). The goal of Cather’s art, then, is to realize art as a gift of God, like faith; as David Stouck’s points out, it “is to transcend the human condition—to create something permanent, immutable, outside the world of time and chance” (*W.C.’s Imagination* 171).

Cather found her gift of artistic expression more accessible to her than faith. Cather “found it difficult to believe,” writes Bennett (WWC 137). Cather told her friend Carrie Miner that “faith is a gift” (WWC 245), and for a long time, she was not its recipient, more by choice than by exclusion. During the years when she first discovered her own gift, she would not confess it was God-given, for a time bragging to her college classmates that “she professed not to believe in God” (WC:LL 337). But her atheism was short-lived.

Even though Cather could not accept the claims of Christianity during her university days, she could not do without the divine. In her remarkable essay on “Shakespeare and *Hamlet*” (1891), Cather early takes up her quarrel with the critics on the adamant point that art is spiritual, a quarrel that would not let up to the end of her life.

These critics insist, Cather charges, on judging literature wholly from a scientific, intellectual viewpoint rather than one from spirituality and feeling:³⁵

The critics have no other light than the intellectual, for they have declared that the emotions and intentions are not to be trusted. The altar lights they have called *ignis fatui*, and have put them out. They analyze the play in a most scientific manner, and do it most skillfully. . . . They say, "This caused life," or "This resulted from life," but life they never find. They think they have all, . . . [b]ut they never . . . hear the great heartbeat.
(KA 428-29)

They are like the "lost men" of the later essay, those with "finely trained minds who lose themselves in the world" and are "lost eternally because of their frozen souls" (WP I, 7). They have not the wisdom of Christians or pagans who acknowledge something greater than themselves; thus, they "never . . . hear the great heartbeat."

If Cather were alive today, she would be disturbed but not surprised by current trends in literary criticism represented by deconstructionists' leading popularizer, Jonathan Culler. His views seem directly descended from the socialist/secularist critics who raised Cather's ire. In his recent article "Comparative Literature and the Pieties," Culler encourages teachers of literature to actively attack religion, to "expose Eurocentric pieties about the nature of 'man.'" He is alarmed by what he calls a recent "revival of interest in the sacred," and deplores the conferring of "legitimacy on religion" by "our most famous critics," by name Frye, Hartman, Bloom, Booth, and Kenner. The worst

³⁵ In a single year, Cather had come full circle in her opinions concerning science. In her high school valedictory the year before, she ringingly proclaimed that "Scientific investigation is the hope of our age, as it must precede all progress" (WC:LL, 62). At this time, Cather was planning on a career in medicine. It was after she saw her Carlyle essay in print that she changed to humanities and forever changed the course of her life.

of it, he continues, is that such an acceptance of a spiritual reality “contributes to its unassailability in the social and political arena” (31).

For Cather, the “great heartbeat” of literature derives from the universal force of a divine Person, not from man’s social and political involvements nor from science; it is manifested in the cosmic and spiritual power of love found in human feeling, not in rational systems and reductive analysis. “The great secret of Shakespeare’s power was supreme love, rather than supreme intellect, supreme love for the ideal in art [not *of* art]” (KA 434). Cather’s notion of great love is not grounded in any naturalistic theory of biological or psychological phenomena; as her statements on art attest, it has a historical birth in the mind of God and is evidenced in the life of Christ. Even though Cather may have been crediting Shakespeare’s power to something that he himself would have denied, the fact that she believed his touchstone of value was agape shows us the source of her own value.

* * *

As Cather’s world expanded at the university and in Lincoln--as she delighted in the opera and theater and furthered her studies in the great classics--she refined her notions of genuine art. In so doing, she discovered more particularly what it was in the church’s presentation of the Christian faith that had so alienated her spirit. As much as she sympathized with its emotional fervor, she cringed at the anti-intellectual and anti-cultural bias of the prairie church. In a *Journal* article, June 2, 1895, she was delighted that the Lincoln Episcopalians were risking community condemnation for staging a current popular play, George du Maurier’s *Trilby*. “There is a general idea abroad that the Lord does not delight in either art or intelligence,” she writes and she commends the churchmen for taking a “difficult” stand; “[It] is just this fact [that such an enterprise is unacceptable in the religious community] that has always made church progress so slow” (9; KA 118). One reason Cather was so drawn to the Catholic church in her novels was

its artistic sensibility. This essay anticipates her decision in 1922 to join in Red Cloud the nearest thing Protestants have to the Holy Roman Church, the Episcopal Church (WC:LL 337).

Another church practice on the prairie which Cather thought lacked artistic intelligence was the choice of music. In a column for the *Journal*, October 7, 1894, Cather's subject is "Moral Music." In it she charges the church with promoting worship music that is simply bad art. "If we believe that the Lord takes any interest in human affairs at all we cannot suppose the music of Mozart and Handel and Bach and Beethoven accidental," she writes. "The Lord has made his own musicians and his own music, but the churches give him 'Let us Scatter Seeds of Kindness' and 'Pull For the Shore, Sailor.' He must be a very loving and patient God indeed to endure such music" (*Journal*, 13; KA 178-79). Cather continues:³⁶

[G]od must be very fond of beauty Himself, He never made an unlovely thing any more than He ever made a "moral" thing. In nature God does not teach morals. He never limits or interferes with beauty. His laws are laws of beauty and all the natural forces work together to produce it. The nightingale's song is not moral; it is perfectly pagan in its unrestrained passion. The Mediterranean at noonday is not moral, the forests of the Ganges have no sermons in them. . . . The world was made by an Artist, by the divinity and godhead of art, an Artist of such insatiate love of beauty that He takes all forces, all space, all time to fill them with His universes of beauty; an Artist whose dreams are so intense and real that

³⁶ That Cather would single out revivalist music as a sign of that particular religion's inadequacy is no surprise. As her fiction and biography reveal, music for her was a special kind of human expression, the soul's speech that links it to some cosmic harmony. For a full discussion of the impact music has in her fiction, see Richard Giannone, *Music in Willa Cather's Fiction*.

they, too, love and suffer and have dreams of their own. Yet when we come to worship the Painter, this Poet, this Musician, this gigantic Artist of all art that is, the God whose spirit moved upon chaos leaving beauty incarnate in its shadow, we bring the worst of all the world's art and lay it at His feet. Of all the innumerable human absurdities that have been committed in religion's name this is the most absurd. In the general crash and destruction of things, when the Potter tries His vessels by fire and every man and every artist is judged not according to his piety or according to his morality, but according to his works, when the Master Workman selects from this world the things that are worthy to endure in the next, it is not likely that He will take Baxter's *Saints' Rest* or the Gospel Hymns, or bound volumes of the sermons of great divines--for in the next world we won't need any sermons. Please God, we will be wise enough then to be taught by beauty alone. He will probably take simply the great classics and the things which should be classics, and the paintings that will make even heaven fairer, and the great tone melodies that must make even His angels glad, and the many lives that in themselves are art, and the rest will perish in the void "as chaff which the wind driveth away, or stubble which the fire consumeth." (*Journal*, Oct. 7, 1894, 13; KA 178)

Cather here is juxtaposing scriptural passages taken from Psalm 1:4 and I Corinthians 3:12-15. Both speak to the issue of God's judgment--of the ungodly in the first, and of the righteous in the second. In Psalms 1, the godly man is defined as one who "delights in the law of the Lord." The text rests on images of creative fertility. He is "like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper" (2-3). The ungodly

man is a hollow straw man, “like the chaff which the wind driveth away” (4). In the Corinthian text, the issue is not a comparison of the godly to the ungodly, but between two progressive states of the righteous. St. Paul is explaining that at the final judgment of the saints, all their deeds will be tried by God’s holy fire: “the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is” (13). Those not made of “gold and precious stones”--those done out of pride or wrong motives--will be burned. In other words, if a man’s works grow from an impure heart, or impure motives, they are sinful and cannot enter into heaven. However, even though one’s deeds “cannot be counted to him for righteousness,” the redeemed one himself “shall be saved; yet so as by fire” (15).

Comparing the Biblical teaching to Cather’s interpretation, Cather’s God is more exacting and unforgiving than the Bible’s. In her creed, sin is unredeemable. Furthermore, one’s motives do not count. Evil or good intention is the same. Piety or morality do not count. Just the product counts, the works. Her definition of sin is not a bad heart, but bad art. Her God condemns a man for producing bad art even if his motives are good. Consequently, she had no patience with the hymn singing of the folks back home, nor any aspect of the bad “art” of their religion.

Although Cather believed for a time that the “heart” of the artist did not matter if he produced divine art, she soon began to explore the consequences of that creed in her fiction. As part of her creed of art, she asserted that the divine artist was engaged in the highest form of human endeavor. It made no matter if he himself were flawed. She denounces an Oscar Wilde as a criminal, but his art “is of God” and a “heavenly birthright . . . which makes [him] akin to the angels and [able] to see the visions of paradise” (*Courier*, Sept. 28, 1895; in KA 392). However, as Cather absorbed herself in the conventional world of art and doggedly worked to become a part of it herself, it did not take her long to see a problem with her artist-as-saint dogma. Even as early as 1896, her last year in Nebraska before she moved East, Cather was already writing of the abuses of art by artists:

It is greatly to be feared that literary people are rather mean folk when you get right down to the pericardiums that lie hidden behind all their graceful artistic charms. They love humanity in the abstract, but no class of men can treat the concrete individual more shabbily. (*Journal*, June 7, 1896; KA 68).

Here, Cather identifies her dilemma: how can she validate the artistic product of one whose character is the antithesis of the irreducible principles of art, principles which she herself insisted lay on the foundation that inspiration can only come to one with a noble heart? Cather eventually had to grapple with this contradiction in her theory, with the inescapable cause-and-effect relationship between intention and action. A hint of that is already present when she recognizes that there are artists other than vocational artists: there are “many lives that in themselves are art” and who may be judged worthy by the “Master Workman” to be selected “from this world” and “to endure in the next” (*Journal*, Oct. 7, 1894, 13; KA 178). In 1895 Cather wrote about one artist who, according to Cather, rejected the god of art for the god of humanity. When the French actress Réjane gave up her career for her child, Cather wrote, she proved that she “knows that there are other things on earth than art, things higher and more sacred” (*Journal*, April 21; KA 70).

Another article of this period more clearly reveals the reason for her philosophical dilemma. She writes that “the highest kind of art . . . has lofty types and conceptions back of it; . . . is elevated by high artistic sincerity, warmed by genuine love for all things human, stimulated by some great belief” (*Journal*, Dec. 9, 1894; KA 52). Here is the criterion for “salvation” in art that she so often found missing in the conventional art world. It is a criterion that more closely matched the religious views and actions of her pious family members back home who knew of “things higher and more sacred.” They obviously exemplified the best that art could attain. In order to see it, one had to be “spiritually unblinded” :

It is high and noble art to so take the scales from men's eyes that they can see the good that is near to them. In this century it is not the man who plays classic roles or who paints classic pictures, but the man who can distill poetry out of the commonplace, who is the truest artist. (*Journal*, April 5, 1894, 6; rpt. WP. I. 78)

She would later celebrate this living poetry of the "commonplace" in the characters Grandmother and Grandfather Burden, Augusta, Antonia, Father Joseph Vaillant, Euclid Auclair, Neighbour Rosicky, and Old Mrs. Harris. In this early statement, she predicts what her own work would become after her own "scales" were lifted so that she could "see the good" that was near to her.

Just as Cather's theory of art had ambiguous and contradictory elements in these early years at the university, so did her own emotional response to her family elders. The evidence is in her fiction. A story published only a month after "Eric Hermannson's Soul" reveals the other side of Cather's divided mind concerning the religious heritage passed to her by her pious elders. In "The Sentimentality of William Tavener" (May, 1900), Cather's memory this time takes her gratefully into the warm and orderly nest of her grandparents. Set in farming country, the story concerns people who in many respects could be Virginia-born copies of the Burdens in *My Antonia*. As Marilyn Arnold writes, the story's "calm and yet deep" quality "suggests a new solidity, a gentle tone that would be felt again in the stories of Antonia and Rosicky and Bishop Latour" (WCSF 29). Whereas the earlier story condemns the debilitating aspects of Cather's family's religion, this one celebrates the devout family and the ability of its members, when faced with difficulties, to ride out life's tendency to erode love. The central characters arrive at old age with a great store of mutual respect and feeling for each other. The whole story is a series of muted still-life scenes, bathed in a golden sfumato of age and human feeling. It is an example of the type of story Cather advanced in her essay, "The Novel

Démeublé,” one that has had “all the furniture [thrown] out of the window,” has eliminated “all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations,” leaving “the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre, or as that house into which the glory of Pentecost descended” so that “emotions, great and little” may play freely (NUF 51).

Even though Cather rejected many of her elders’ creeds and practices, she was drawn to the kind of persons they were, the largesse of their spirit and the generosity of their hearts. And even though she was repulsed by what she viewed as their narrow, constrictive religion, she admired their lives of pious devotion, tied to the land in a long history of family and cultural tradition. Like Theseus attaching a thread at the door of the labyrinth to insure finding his way back, Cather’s appropriation of the images and rhetoric of evangelical Christianity for her new religion of art, and her celebration of the home and family, kept a close connection between her past self and her growing self. It was the thread that repeatedly guided her back home.

Having begun to write stories at the University of Nebraska, Cather continued to produce them in an interim year before she moved to Pittsburgh to be the editor of the *Home Monthly* magazine in 1896. Her first three stories are set on the Nebraska Divide. The tone of these stories is one of anguish, reflecting the pain that early pioneers experienced in fronting a blank and forbidding land. But the tone more exactly parallels Cather’s own anguish at having been wrenched away from her established and familiar home in Virginia. The memory of the pain was still fresh when she wrote “Peter” (1892), “Lou, the Prophet” (1892), and “The Clemency of the Court” (1896), all three depicting a terrifying environment “frightening in its coarseness, violence, and frank depiction of the raw underside of human existence bereft of the cultural trappings” (Arnold, *Short Fiction* 2). Cather’s mother constantly bemoaned the loss of her comfortable and protected life in Virginia (WC:EV 60), and her father, like the title character of “Peter,” was a sensitive but ineffectual man, ill-suited to face the challenges

farming anywhere, let alone on formidable, unbroken land.³⁷ In the story, Peter longs for the past, for the grace and culture of his Eastern home, and despairing of ever seeing it again, commits suicide.

In “Lou, the Prophet” appears a passage that hints at Cather’s own longing for her Virginia home: “Among the northern people who emigrate to the great west, only the children and old people ever long much for the lands they have left” (CSF 535). The tone of overwhelming despair and defeat in these stories could very well have been an imaginative projection of similar emotions from Cather’s own parents as well as herself, and they mark the first of a long line of stories marked by a nostalgia for a lost place.

“The Elopement of Allen Poole” (1893) and “A Night at Greenway Court” (1896) are set in Virginia, the latter story in colonial times and the former in the Timber Ridge area that Cather herself knew so well. “A Night at Greenway Court” presents an expatriot Virginian who, “In the prime of his success” in Virginia, “left home, country, friends, and all that men hold dear, . . . and buried himself” in a wilderness (CSF 486-87). In “The Elopement” appears a “capsule description and recreation of Willa Cather’s Virginia home,” notes Bernice Slote, “paralleled in almost every detail by passages in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*” (1940). Slote draws direct connections between the details of Cather’s Virginia background and this story as well as later fiction (KA 104).

On the surface it appears that Cather’s family elders do not appear at all in this earliest fiction. Yet she wrote two stories that very well could have resulted from her youthful divorce from their influences and traditions while she was a student at the

³⁷ When William Cather left the Back Creek farm in the charge of Charles, it was a prosperous and well-kept operation. However, Charles, who lacked his father’s and his brother’s skills, decided to sell the farm after the barn burned down in 1883. He then followed his family west to pursue a dream of success on the virgin prairie, only to give that up, too, after eighteen months when he moved into Red Cloud. See WC:LL, 31, 43; Bennett, “Childhood Worlds,” 206.

university. In “A Son of the Celestial” (1893), Cather presents tradition and long-standing values through a settlement of Chinese, a people of “terrible antiquity” who resolutely transplanted their culture “in the new west.” The narrator’s tone is somewhat scornful of their old ways as they “settled down and ate and drank and dressed as men had done in the days of the flood” (CSF 526). No worship of the past here.

Cather’s vicarious rejection of her own “old world” continues in “The Conversion of Sum Loo” (1900). In this account, Cather takes a jab at the religion of her evangelical family elders, not through the venerable Chinese, but through the local Baptist Christians in the story who, in their zeal to see folks “saved,” had wrongly assumed that their Oriental “convert” was safely in the fold. Cather’s light ridicule of the revivalist Christianity of her family elders in the story again signals her incipient conversion to another religion, the religion of art. Cather remembered years later some of her “bitter” writings and wrote to a friend, “it makes one feel so grown up to be bitter” (WC:LL 73).

After her graduation from the University and a restless year at home in Red Cloud, Cather was offered a position in 1896 as editor of a small Pittsburgh magazine, *Home Monthly* (WC:LL 112). Flattered and excited to be on the way to her goal of becoming a great artist, she moved East. The transition was emotional as well as physical, and it signals a split in Cather’s psyche that was to haunt her for the rest of her life. The beginnings of the pull between East and West--between culture and nature, between the refined and the common--are hinted at in the writings of the Lincoln years. But in the Pittsburgh years, and later in New York, they emerge full-blown.

The most obvious thing pulling Cather toward the East at this time was its association with the world of art and culture. She yearned after it like a babe for milk. In the Nebraska years it had started in Red Cloud with her association with her music teacher, Professor Schindelmeisser, with William Ducker, a retired classics scholar, and with the Charles Wieners, who spoke German and French and introduced Willa to French literature (WC:LL 52-55). When in Lincoln, she continued her pattern of eschewing

association with the ordinary run of people and gravitating toward those with an Eastern or European cultural flavor to their lives. "In retrospect," writes biographer James Woodress, "it seems that the people she chose were among the most cultivated and interesting people in Lincoln" (WC:LL 82). Among them were the Charles H. Gere family, he the founder and publisher of the leading newspaper in Lincoln, the *Nebraska State Journal*;³⁸ the Westermanns, a German family who owned another Lincoln newspaper; the Canfields (James Canfield the university's chancellor and his daughter Dorothy, later to become a Pulitzer prize winner), and others of note (WC:LL 66-67).

After her graduation from the University, Cather was unable to find employment in Lincoln and spent one unhappy year in Red Cloud, or as she called it, "Siberia," bewailing her "bitter exile" from the centers of culture. Her "first concern was not writing but escape from stagnation into life: the world of music, drama, art." In June, 1896, she received the offer of the managing editorship of the newly reorganized magazine in Pittsburgh. She was "overjoyed at her deliverance," and she wrote Mariel Gere that on the train out, she felt as if she were going home (CSF, Bennett, Introduction, xvii-xviii).

When the twenty-three year old Cather "escaped" Red Cloud, she thought she was leaving a Western desert for an Eastern oasis. Because of her position as editor, she was introduced to Pittsburgh society, and despite her earlier disparagement of social clubs, she wrote Mariel Gere that she was delighted and astonished at being included in the social calendar of the "swell" women's club of the city (WC:LA 77-78). She was

³⁸ It was in Gere's newspaper that Willa Cather's first published piece appeared. She soon after accepted an offer to become a regular contributor to the *Journal*, and in addition to her school work, turned out a voluminous amount of journalistic writings in these years. See *The Kingdom of Art* and *The World and the Parish* for the complete collection. Charles Gere's daughter, Mariel, became a close friend of Cather's, and their correspondence provides important biographical information.

introduced to several New York drama critics and Rudyard Kipling, and she enjoyed the fruits of a thriving city dominated by men like Carnegie, Mellon, and Westinghouse who were determined to make it a center of culture. Things such as the Carnegie Library and Music Hall, the Pittsburgh Symphony, and the splendid theaters were “cultural resources much vaster than she had known in Lincoln,” and she reveled in them (WC:LA 78-79). She continued to seek out friendships with those who shared her love of European literature and culture, such as George Seibel, a newspaperman, and his wife, lovers of French literature, and Isabelle McClung, a young socialite dedicated to the arts with whom Cather developed an intense and lifelong friendship (WC:LL 119-120, 139).

In Pittsburgh, however, Cather also “found herself in the bosom of rock-ribbed, conservative Presbyterian” society (WC:LA 75). She found its stern conservatism “as chilly as a wine cellar” and its church-centered social life stuffy, dull, and sorely lacking in *joie de vivre*, an even worse situation than the society of her family’s Baptist Church back in Red Cloud. It may have been dull and dreary, but at least the people were generally warm and generous. But perhaps the most distressing in Pittsburgh was her discovery that her beloved arts were supported by the money of the “robber barons” who preached “The Gospel of Wealth,” a philosophy contrary to Cather’s strongest impulses (WC:LA 79). Here she was confronted head on with the dilemma that she would grapple with in her fiction: how could art be bedfellows with a system philosophically contrary to it; yet how could it survive without the money from big business? It appeared that, paradoxically, Arcadia depended for life on Philistia.

Further complicating Cather’s crisis was the fact that she herself was attracted to the comforts and advantages of wealth. As much as she distrusted big business, she admired the graceful style of living that money could buy--the well-appointed, spacious homes and the quiet elegance of the wealthy. It made her own humble home in Red Cloud seem embarrassing by comparison (WC:LL 140). When she was invited by Isabelle McClung in 1901 to leave her dingy apartment and come live with her at the

McClung mansion, Cather felt like she at last was meeting her destiny as a woman of worth. The house “had solidity, elegance, comfort” and a “staff of servants” (WC:LA 92). It not only was the closest thing to Willow Shade she had experienced since leaving Virginia, but it far surpassed it and became the realization of the elegance that her mother, Virginia, always felt she deserved (WC:EV 38).

Regardless of these predilections, however, after one year in cosmopolitan Pittsburgh, Cather’s heart turned homeward to her family in Red Cloud. She had severed connections with the *Home Monthly*, and in the fall she would join the *Pittsburgh Daily Leader*. In between jobs, she made a visit to Nebraska in June, 1897. As soon as she returned to Pittsburgh, she wrote Mariel Gere that she was painfully homesick. “[S]he was already tired of the gay Bohemian life”; “A west wind was blowing and it made her ache to be home” (CSF, Bennett, Introduction xx-xxi). What made her ache was not the Nebraska prairie but the transplanted Virginia family and their close counterparts, the European neighbors.

Cather’s homeward gaze is evident in “The Burgler’s Christmas” (1896), a story she wrote in her first year in Pittsburgh, and the home she looks to has the nature and qualities of the homes created by her Virginia family. In the story, Cather expiates her guilt for her apparent rejection of her roots, her lack of loyalty in emotionally abandoning home and falling in love with the East. The protagonist is a young man named Willie, a name Cather went by with her family and close friends. Obviously from a cultured background, Willie finds himself in Chicago, a vagrant and a failure, destitute of money or respectability. He had years before severed ties with his parents who lived somewhere “down East.” Unbeknowns to him, they had since moved to Chicago. Willie has failed at everything he had set out to do, and hungry and desperate, he burglarizes his own parents’ house. Caught in the act by his mother, he is overwhelmed by her compassion and joy at seeing her prodigal son.

It may appear that the house and parents in the story are linked to Cather's parents in Back Creek, but the house has the spaciousness and genteel qualities of Willow Shade. The nurturing mother who feeds and warms the pathetic Willie more closely resembles the maternal figures of Caroline Cather or Rachel Boak than Virginia Cather. In O'Brien's opinion, the story is one of many of Cather's that "feature a search for a maternal figure," and links maternal love with feeding (WC:EV 52). But as we learn in "Old Mrs. Harris," Virginia Cather kept well away from the kitchen, and it was Willa's grandmothers with whom she associated warm kitchens and comforting nourishment. By the end of the story, the son "has traveled back even further into the past" (WC:EV 52), but it is a past more closely associated in memory with a long familial line that leads to Virginia. Consequently, the "rich content" that Willie experiences back in his home more closely resembles Cather's experience with the older women of her family.

After Cather determined to worship God at the altar of art rather than at the "mourner's bench," and as she identified more closely with the artist as celebrant, her stories become more and more preoccupied with the religious calling of the artist. However, her incisive powers of observation of the world of art in Pittsburgh altered her earlier rosy picture. Often she found that her admired artists had clay feet and stone hearts, and that those dwelling in the realms of art did not automatically have sanctified motives. The first "Christ" was challenging her second.

When Cather's close companion, Isabelle McClung, invited her to move into the luxurious McClung home in 1901, and provided her a comfortable sewing room on the top floor in which to write (WCL 54),³⁹ Cather produced the stories that would later

³⁹ At the time that Cather was putting these observations into stories, she had terminated her post as a journalist for the Pittsburgh *Leader* in April, 1900 (a position she accepted after quitting the *Home Monthly*), and had begun teaching English in a Pittsburgh high school in March, 1901 (WC:LL, 146, 148). She believed the move would give her more time to write.

appear in the volume, *The Troll Garden* (1905). The stories in this volume anticipate the juxtaposition in her mature novels of art and experience, East and West, and especially the artist and the common man. In the world of art as well as the world of commerce, one finds the greedy and the insensitive. The threat of materialistic seduction invades all spheres of human activity, and the only index of value in any of them is the creed of genuine art. As David Stouck writes, the design of this collection of stories “touches on many of the author’s major themes--the quest for what is genuine and lasting, the moral opacity of material possessions, [and] the artist as tragic figure” (*W.C.’s Imagination* 181).

In “Flavia and Her Artists,” the first story in *The Troll Garden*, Cather exposes the art world at its crassest. Flavia collects so-called artists, not because they create beauty or truth in their work, but because of their celebrity value. M. Roux, the rare genuine artist in Flavia’s crowd, perceives “at a glance” that “all Flavia’s artists have done or ever will do means exactly as much to her as a symphony means to an oyster” (TG 164-65). David Stouck found this character proof that no longer for Cather is an artist “by definition a sacred personage” (*W.C.’s Imagination* 176). No better are most of Flavia’s artists who pretend to admire her for the material advantages that her husband’s money provides. In her last year in Nebraska, Cather had written that “it is greatly to be feared that literary people are rather mean folk when you get right down to the pericardiums that lie hidden behind all their graceful artistic charms. They love humanity in the abstract, but no class of men can treat the concrete individual more shabbily” (*Journal*, June 7, 1896, rpt.KA 68).

As Arnold points out, Cather’s primary “concern here [in “Flavia and Her Artists”] is not with art per se, but with the attitudes and behavior of human beings, some of whom happen to be artists” (WCSF 48). This is no promotion of art for art’s sake but rather of art for humanity’s sake. An example of the true artist presented in this story is Arthur Hamilton, ironically Flavia’s husband. A sensitive man, he has many earmarks of

Cather's father, Charles, but his spirit matches Cather's grandmothers'. He is the measuring stick for human value in the story because he "acts instinctively and selflessly out of love and human caring" (WCSF 48).

In *The Troll Garden* Cather also explores the twin sides of what happens to an artist who chooses the "garden of art" at the expense of human relationships, as well as one who chooses human relationships to the detriment of his artistic impulses. The "contest is not between the sordid money-grubbing world and the heaven of pure art, but rather it is between the practical and the imaginative impulses which can quicken inside anyone" (WCSF 53). In "The Garden Lodge," the "practical" Caroline Noble has achieved a hard-won peace and created a calm, secure home for her family. But she has sacrificed "unsatisfied yearnings" (189) to do it and settles for serenity without passion. That is, she does until the opera star Raymond d'Esquerre comes to her home for rest and study. He reawakens her need for the passion of art and the imaginative life, and although she squelches it again, it comes back to her in a dream. Her unconscious affirms that the shadows of that paradise "always so scorned and flouted" are in fact "the realities," and that mundane reality without romance is the real shadow.

However, just as Robert Frost insists on a two-sided vision, so does Cather by not letting this conclusion rest unchallenged. D'Esquerre, the artist who can enamour his audience with enchanted visions, has sought in Caroline the relief of "a quiet nature, a cool head, a strong hand" (190) as a necessary corrective to the glamorous world of art. The contradiction is that the garden of art is enchanting mainly to those outside of it. D'Esquerre lives with a "tacit admission of disappointment under all this glamour of success--the helplessness of the enchanter to at all enchant himself" (TG 194). Already, Cather recognizes the absence of substantial reality in the world of art, just as Paul does in another story in this collection, "Paul's Case."

The same theme appears in another story in this volume, with an even more cruel denouement. "A Death in the Desert" warns that the promise of perennial happiness in

the garden may in fact turn into isolation and death for more than just the one enamoured with the promise. In this story, the artist is so absorbed in himself that he is unaware of another's suffering and love. This is at the heart of Cather's definition of false art; it inhibits the means of grace. A later variation on this theme comes in the heavily autobiographical, "Old Mrs. Harris." In that story, the budding artist Vickie and her self-centered mother Victoria are so absorbed in making their own place in life that they inexcusably ignore the physical and emotional needs of the elderly and overworked Mrs. Harris.

True art, then, must validate human as well as artistic principles. The stories that demonstrate a satisfying realization of human endeavor are those connected with the life of Cather's elders. In Marilyn Arnold's words, Cather's ideal of genuine art connects "aesthetic (or artistic) sensibility and meaningful human life and interaction" (WCSF 46). On the one side is Willa Cather and the "aesthetic sensibility" possessed by all true artists, and on the other her Virginia elders and all others like them with their example of "meaningful human life." In all of the stories collected in *The Troll Garden*, no artist is successful in realizing both aims.

Cather herself remarked to her friend Elizabeth Sergeant some time after the publication of *The Troll Garden* that the stories "now hardly seemed to belong to her. She herself had outgrown the harsh mood that had inspired the Western ones. The starvation of a girl avid for a richer environment seemed to stick out, to deform to make the picture one-sided" (WC:LL 180). Here is Cather's own confession of the nature of her stories. They are stopping off places in her journey to ultimate value, temporary states of mind as she searches in other worlds for the real one. She would find the true "richer environment" in the images of home and the old faces who populated it.

In 1906, Cather resigned her teaching position in Pittsburgh and moved to New York to join the staff of *McClure's Magazine*. Her performance was so successful that by 1908 she was managing editor (WC:LL 182, 199). In spite of her demanding

schedule, she wrote nine stories before she left in 1912. In some of these stories, Cather is dealing with her past only indirectly, but its influence is there, whether in characters who resemble family members or in themes that advance her search for a lost value she had left behind with her Virginia family. In two of them, however, she uses the theme of the past directly by taking situations out of her own history. In one of them in particular, Cather seems very aware of her own obsession with her private history.

In "The Namesake" (March 1907) Cather breaks through the veil that had disguised her use of her past in so many other stories and overtly celebrates her claim to a line of great Virginia progenitors. Cather bases the protagonist on her own uncle William Lee Boak, brother of Virginia Boak Cather, who fought and died for the Confederacy long before Willa Cather was born. His memory was cherished and kept alive by Cather's mother, and "to the end of her life" she "cherished her brother's sword, and the Confederate flag" (WC:CB 15).⁴⁰ In Cather's imagination, her blood was co-mingled with a splendid young hero, and he exemplified all the grand yearnings she felt within herself.⁴¹ As yet, Cather will not publicly identify herself with a relocated Virginia

⁴⁰ In adolescence, Cather went through a phase of name-altering to better suit her own vision of herself. She pretended she had been named for her Uncle William Boak, and even though it was not true, she was adamant throughout her life that she was his namesake. Cather's given name was not Willa but Wilella after her father's sister who had died of diphtheria in childhood. Her parents shortened it to Willa or Willie. See WC:EV, 13 and 107.

⁴¹ That Cather closely identified with her young uncle is also evident in a poem she wrote in the early 1900s with the same name, "The Namesake." It appears in her first volume of poetry, *April Twilights* (1903). The epigraph to the poem reads: "*Vigesimum post annum in obscurum correpto lucem vigesimi gaudens percipisse.*" Out of dark obscurity, then, Cather means to bring to light this one out of her past, and in so doing, win fame for them both. In part, it reads:

Often have they told me how
Hair like mine grew on his brow.
He was twenty to a day

family who still appears to her rather backward and without social commendation, but she can lay claim to blood kin who died valiantly.

“The Namesake” is primarily the reminiscence of Lyon Hartwell, an American sculptor who has worked for years in Paris. He also takes students, and they are curious about a piece on which he is working, a bronze entitled *The Color Sergeant*, which depicts “the figure of a young soldier running, clutching the folds of a flag, the staff of which had been shot away” (CSF 139).

“Where in the world does he get the heat to make an idea like that carry?” asks one of his perplexed students, believing Hartwell to be more Parisian than American. The narrator tells us that Hartwell set aside his usual diffidence--“No man ever guarded his mystery more effectually”--and, with a voice “charged with feeling,” told the story. Hartwell had been named after this uncle, and the passion in his own work, he tells his students, was the result of a trip home he made years before that put him back in touch with his family and the memory of his dead uncle (CSF 139-40).

Hartwell’s long description of his forsaken home in Pennsylvania has much in it that reminds one of Cather’s description of Back Creek in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. The Hartwell homestead “lay on the high banks of a river.” As far as the eye could see were the slopes of gentle hills. But when Hartwell returns, he feels a foreigner in the old

When he got his jacket gray--
 He was barely twenty-one
 When they found him by his gun.

 Proud it is I am to know
 In my veins there still must flow,
 There to burn and bite away,
 That proud blood you threw away;
 And I’ll be winner at the game
 Enough for two who bore the name.
 (AT, 25-26)

house: "Within the house I was never at home. Month followed month, and yet I could feel no sense of kinship with anything there. Under the roof where my father and grandfather were born, I remained utterly detached" (CSF 143).

Hartwell's frustrating detachment from his past changes, however, when he discovers his dead uncle's trunk in the attic of the old home. The house is occupied by an elderly aunt whose mind is unclear most of the time but who clings to the memory of her nephew. She insists on flying his Confederate flag every Memorial Day and asks Hartwell to get it from the attic. In the trunk is his well-marked copy of the *Aeneid* and a sketch of the federal flag, accompanied by lines he had copied from the "Star-spangled Banner."

Through these significant artifacts, Hartwell experiences a miracle of spiritual union with his past. "[T]he moment I saw it, wind and color seemed to touch it" (145). With his past personalized and attached to a kindred spirit, Hartwell is transported back in time: "I seemed, somehow, at last to have known him." And, as in a vision, he sees his boy-uncle in graphic detail, "his flashing eyes looking straight before him" (145-46).

This story clearly anticipates Cather's return to her personal history in *O Pioneers!*. Turning her attention backwards to her Virginia uncle as a worthy subject for art opened the door for further discoveries in her family's history. The fact that Hartwell finds his spiritual roots in his uncle's copy of the *Aeneid* is especially significant. That noble work celebrates the westward movement of a great man of destiny who would found a great nation, an epic pioneer. It becomes Cather's parallel for the story she would write of her grandparents' trek westward in *O Pioneers!*. In that novel Cather makes her Aeneas a female who has the strength of character and body found in her grandparents. She identifies herself with these "heroic" family members, first of all, by the artistic action of creating a great culture in the pages of her story, and, second, by identifying herself with the heroine, Alexandra Bergson.

In chronicling Hartwell's homecoming in "The Namesake," Cather chronicled her own. Turning toward her family for value and for the subjects of her art was a major step in a journey that would not only make her own "heart well," but her art, too. Cather's awareness of this homegoing is evident in the passionate speech she gives to Hartwell after his apocalyptic encounter with his past:

The experience of that night, coming so overwhelmingly to a man so dead, almost rent me in pieces. It was the same feeling that artists know when we, rarely, achieve truth in our work; the feeling of union with some great force, of purpose and security, of being glad that we have lived. For the first time I felt the pull of race and blood and kindred, and felt beating within me things that had not begun with me. It was as if the earth under my feet had grasped and rooted me, and were pouring its essence into me. I sat there until the dawn of morning, and all night long my life seemed to be pouring out of me and running into the ground.

(146)

As life-changing as Hartwell's discovery was for him, the issue was not settled for Cather. It would be six years before *O Pioneers!* (1913) would be published, her first novel to evoke "the pull of race and blood and kindred." In the interim came her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), a work that seems to forsake altogether her newlyfound materials from her past. Actually, these materials are there, hidden in the mood and the fractured consciousness of Bartley Alexander. But like a great fish who breaks the surface momentarily only to dive down to safer territory, Cather's conscious use of her past makes only intermittent appearances before *O Pioneers!*

* * *

Much has been made of the admonition that Sarah Orne Jewett gave to Cather in a long letter written in 1908, in which she urged Cather to some day turn to her early experiences for artistic materials (WC:LA 133). Many critics believe Jewett's advice was the major reason Cather turned to her family's pioneer days in Nebraska for her stories. In reality, Jewett was merely reminding Cather of what she already knew--that her past was the mine out of which she could dig her best work.

Cather herself even pointed to Jewett's advice as her turning point. One possible explanation is that Cather needed the permission of an established artist to justify using homely material for high art. She had not yet been inducted into the halls of artistic fame, and in fact, still felt quite removed from that rarified society.⁴² Jewett seemed to understand Cather's insecurities and supported her in her efforts to be a part of "Bohemia," as she called the Eastern cultural centers of art. "One must know the world so well before one can know the parish" (WC:LA 132). Jewett well knew that after Cather got perspective on her humble and ordinary origins, she would see just how extraordinary they were.⁴³

⁴² Elizabeth Sergeant several times mentions Cather's references to her own feelings of professional inadequacy. Even after she had become a successful editor of a nationally recognized magazine in New York, Cather could "at any time feel impatient with the limitations of her prairie education" (WC:AM 64). When Sergeant told Cather that with "The Bohemian Girl" she had hit her stride, Cather "remained incredulous at [her] certainty" (76). And, later, "Willa was still in need of reassurance about her new story, *O Pioneers!*" (95).

⁴³ Willa Cather's closeness to her family elders was much like Sarah Orne Jewett's. E.K. Brown, in describing the similarity between Jewett's "cherished intimacy" with her elders and Willa Cather's, quotes Jewett with some lines that could just have well been said by Cather if Jewett had included grandmothers in her list: "I was brought up with grandfathers and granduncles and aunts for my best playmates. They were not the wine one can get for so much the dozen now" (WC:CB, 139). It is no small wonder that Cather was greatly drawn to Jewett and her art. It celebrated the everyday and especially a generation of kin who not only lived the old values but believed in them.

By the spring of 1912, Cather had all but terminated her association with *McClure's* and had turned her face toward devoting her life to writing.⁴⁴ In March and again in May of that year, she took a life-changing trip to the Southwest, "a journey deep into the American past" which "would have important ramifications in her literary career" (WC:LA 149). The cliff-dwellings of the Arizona mesa spoke of harmony with nature and orderly domesticity, an experience she recounts vividly in the "Tom Outland Story" in *The Professor's House*. Sergeant tells of Cather's rapturous reaction when she saw artifacts in a museum that reminded her of the clay pots she had come across high in the cliff-dwellings:

Willa reminded me of the potsherds she had rather shamefacedly shown me after her first visit to the Southwest. It had seemed a sacrilege to take anything for oneself from those cliff dwellings Hard-boiled archaeologists, however, had dug up the pots in the glass cases--some were whole, others artfully pieced together. [Willa said] you were able to conjure up the women who, under conditions of incredible difficulty and fear of enemies, had still designed and molded them, "dreamed" the fine geometry of the designs, and made beautiful objects for daily use out of river-bottom clay. (WC:AM 123)

It was as if in discovering America's past, Cather discovered her own, for there was much about the houses and artifacts of the old Indian civilizations which could have nudged an unconscious memory. More and more Cather would associate the great love and human feeling in genuine art with the domestic images of nurturing and the orderly

⁴⁴ Wanting to hang on to her services, S. S. McClure had earlier convinced Cather that she would never be much of a writer, that she would only make a good magazine executive. Jewett helped to correct the false view that Cather had of herself. See WC:LA, 133-36.

design one could impose on common life.

Soaking up the sun and quiet in those ancient ruins, Cather determined like Thea in *The Song of the Lark* to get “out of the stream of meaningless activity and undirected effort” and shed “the personality of which she was so tired.” It “seemed to let go of her,” and she felt “completely released from the enslaving desire to get on in the world” (SL 373, 368, 372). As she was “redeemed” from ambition and the need to be accepted in Eastern cultured society, she had a sense of rebirth, of finding an old idealism in a genuine self.

However, Cather’s conversion was progressive, not instantaneous. Even though the epiphanal experience in the Southwest was a turning point for her, she would still experience years of contradictory impulses in her writing. In her ensuing novels she would pursue the ongoing argument that appears in her early fiction, pitting against each other two human types vying for the laurel of excellence: the creative artist (either by profession or by nature)--a chosen member of the race who is outside the ordinary rule of life--and the domestic or personal artist, whose life is characterized by sacrificial service and human feeling which expresses the Christian and artistic ideal through the everyday acts of life.

The first category of characters appear in *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor’s House* (1925), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926) *Lucy Gayheart* (1935) and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), all works which have at their center of consciousness the artist-voice, which is Cather herself (or a combination of Cather and her mother). The second group appear in *O Pioneers!* (1915), *My Antonia* (1918), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), and *Obscure Destinies* (1932; including “Neighbour Rosicky,” probably written in 1928⁴⁵, and “Old Mrs.

⁴⁵ E. K. Brown believes that it was written “in the early months of 1928, when her feelings were so deeply engaged by her father’s illness and death” (WC:CB, 275).

Harris," completed in 1931⁴⁶), works which draw on Cather's feelings for her family elders. As the publishing dates indicate, the two roads are neither straight nor parallel. They merge, then part, then merge again, a fitting paradigm for Cather's vacillation as she struggled toward an ultimate locus of value.

Cather's elders from Virginia and their vision of human life was woven into the very fabric of Cather's being. In the coming years she would variously accept it, reject it, and test it, until eventually she arrived at mature adulthood with a similar vision.⁴⁷ By

⁴⁶ See WCSF, 141.

⁴⁷ There is a fascinating parallel between Cather's life and that of Ernest Hemingway's. Both were obsessed with their past; both were blessed with the gift of recreating place; and both were deeply affected by an evangelical Christian family. However, the final response of each to the religious heritage is quite different. As Daniel Pawley writes in "Ernest Hemingway: Tragedy of an Evangelical" (*Christianity Today*, November 23, 1984, 20-27) Hemingway was nurtured as a child "in the geographical heart of modern evangelicalism--Wheaton, Illinois" (20). His paternal grandparents were students at Wheaton College in its early days in the 1860s, and grandfather Anson Hemingway was a close friend of the evangelist, Dwight L. Moody. As Cather was attached to her grandparents, so Hemingway adored his, and "to his death" called his grandfather "my boyhood hero" (21). Hemingway's father, C. E. (Ed) Hemingway, studied at the conservatively Christian and highly academic Oberlin College in Ohio, later becoming a physician. Dr. Hemingway had inherited his faith from his parents as well as a great love of nature, which he passed down to his son. But his devotion to God was stern, and he "condemned smoking, dancing, and card playing, warning that such activities led to 'hell and damnation'" (23). In spite of his rigorous faith, "he loved his children and lived an unhypocritical life." Hemingway "loved him more than he loved anyone else" (23). Hemingway's maternal grandfather, Ernest Hall, for whom Hemingway was named, "was even more revered for his godly spiritual leadership," and "indeed, his grandchildren called him 'Abba,' as if the Almighty himself were looking at the world through a mortal's eyes and speaking with a mortal's tongue" (21). Marcelline Hemingway Sanford, Ernest's sister, writes that she and Ernest would watch him "gaze upward" as he "knelt each Sunday on the Brussels carpet at the church to lead the evening prayer" (21). Marcelline recalls a typical prayer: "If we expose ourselves to the

the apogee of her writing career, Cather would retrieve the early values and reaffirm their eternal verities in her fiction by increasingly setting her own yardstick of truth by their standard. She once wrote that if a writer is to achieve anything of "inherent, individual beauty," anything "noble" or "enduring," he must "fade away into the land and people of his heart," and "die of love only to be born again" (OW 49, 51).

Ironically, however, Cather's "born again" experience, which reaffirmed the values and the ultimate superiority of the lives of her Virginia elders, had the effect of repudiating her own life of artistic endeavor. David Stouck believes this repudiation is realized in Cather's last books, beginning with *Obscure Destinies*, which suggest a "mood of doubt and uncertainty" concerning her own choices. The stories she wrote in the last fifteen years, Stouck writes, "question the validity of both a life's choice and a lifetime's achievements" in the world of art (*W. C.'s Imagination* 174). In exploring the

flaming purity of Jesus, we are forced to admit that we are in need of cleansing. We feel the sharp lash of his rebuke. Our conscience is forced to quiver in pain, in humiliation and in shame. We may turn from his fury and flee but there is no escape" (22). While Cather found such quaking fear before God a denial of her intuitive sense of him, Hemingway found that it insulted his sense of manhood. A close friend of Hemingway remembers that "[i]t was clear to everyone in the household that they were weak, that because of their weakness they needed the strength which only God could give. If and only if they made a true effort to gain strength from God, only then might they prove strong enough to fight sin" (22). When Hemingway left home at Oak Park to work for the *Kansas City Star*, he stopped attending church but wrote his mother that she should not to fret: "I am just as much [a good Christian] as ever, and I pray every night and believe just as hard You know I don't rave about religion but am as sincere a Christian as I can be I believe in God and Jesus Christ, have hopes for a hereafter, and creeds don't matter" (24). But wanting no one to know his confession of faith, Hemingway asked his mother to keep the letter private. After Hemingway's stories came out, his parents were convinced he had sold out to the devil and cut him off from their lives. Hemingway never found his way back to them or to their faith. For a discussion of the autobiographical elements in Hemingway's fiction, see Millicent Bell, "A Farewell to Arms: Pseudoautobiography and Personal Metaphor."

lives of her elders and the works they inspired in the following chapters, I will show that Cather's "mood of doubt and uncertainty" concerning her choice of art as the superior vocation came much earlier, and that it was precipitated by the example, ingrained deep in her memory, of family elders who had chosen as their vocation humble service to human beings.

In one form or another, Cather's four family elders inform all of her major works, sometimes in great parts, some in small, sometimes in characters, sometimes in mood and theme. Early in her career, she took from them her metaphor for art and the principles for its theory. Later, after she recognized their value as examples for true art, she brought them center stage and made them the leading characters in her best work. Whether early in her career or late, whether by affirmation or denial, whether in image or in "the thing not named," in all of her books they are always "the light behind" (NUF 95).⁴⁸

⁴⁸ The phrase comes from Cather's essay on Sarah Orne Jewett in which she praises her for a quality that is in each writer she is drawn to, "some moral quality, some ideal" which is "the light behind his books" (OW, 49, 51).

Chapter 3

The Long Road Home

*"But grant me passage to my father land.
My home and friends lie far. My life is pain.
'Captain, shake off this trance, and think of
home--if home indeed awaits us. . . .'
They made me feel a pang, and I agreed."*¹

*"The idea of you is a part of my mind; you
influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes,
hundreds of times when I don't realize it. You
really are a part of me."*²

Even though Sarah Orne Jewett died in 1909, her advice to Cather to return to her childhood for creative materials lived on. Cather continued to visit Jewett's New Brunswick home and spent much time at Jewett's desk which "became a sort of shrine" for Cather. As "one of the most prepotent forces in Cather's literary development" during the sixteen months that Cather knew her, Jewett was "an important role model as she struggled to find her authentic voice" (WC:LL 198). That "authentic voice" would be found in Cather's first acclaimed novel, *O Pioneers!*, which she dedicated to her mentor.³

¹ From *The Odyssey*. 7. 163-64 and X. 509-13; trans. Robert Fitzgerald.

² From *My Antonia*, 321.

³ See Woodress's summary of early reviews of *O Pioneers!* in WC:LL, 240. For a discussion of the links "of natural piety" between Cather and Jewett, see Carl Van Doren, "Willa Cather," 13-14.

Jewett's advice was finally realized in Cather's imagination after she made a trip to the Southwest (WC:LL 226). There Cather encountered the remains of an ancient Indian civilization which reminded her of simple people devoted to family and home. Cather viewed the writing of *O Pioneers!* as a turning away from "new" and exciting material that she had experienced in the citadels of the East and a turning toward the "familiar"; she said it "was like taking a ride through a familiar country on a horse that knew the way" (OW, "My First Novels" 92-93). Looking back on the novel's genesis, Cather wrote that when "a writer begins to work with his own material, he realizes that, no matter what his literary excursions may have been, he has been working with it from the beginning--by living it" (OW 91).

However, Cather did not overtly use her family elders in the story. She had not fully escaped "thinking of what 'people might think' instead of what she had to say" (WC:AM 4). Consequently, she was not yet ready to be identified directly with folk back home, who were seemingly unlettered and backward according to Eastern standards, and she was not about to risk her literary reputation with the Eastern literati by associating her own life with those Nebraska farmers from Virginia. Cather was able to maintain a personal as well as an aesthetic distance by costuming her real subjects as European settlers, disguising her family members as Swedish immigrants who closely resembled them in spirit and kind. Cather wrote that

O Pioneers! interested me tremendously, because it had to do with a kind of country I loved, because it was about old neighbours, once very dear, whom I had almost forgotten in the hurry and excitement of growing up and finding out what the world was like and trying to get on in it. (OW 93-94)

Cather did not think anyone "would see anything in a slow-moving story, . . . a story concerned entirely with heavy farming people, with cornfields and pasture lands

and pig yard,--set in Nebraska, of all places!" (94). She thought critics would judge it like one who said, "I simply don't care a damn what happens in Nebraska, no matter who writes about it" (93).

O Pioneers! gets its emotional power from Cather's imaginative juxtaposition of her grandparents' move to Nebraska and the great and heroic taming of the west. But the actual heroism of the pioneer experience is underplayed. T. K. Whipple represents the critical consensus when he asserts that the "land becomes a great antagonist in the dramatic conflict" (46), as does David Stouck when he identifies the subject of *O Pioneers!* as the classical American epic of the "struggle of the common man to subdue the lonely and terrifying wilderness around him" (*W.C.'s Imagination* 24). Actually, the land itself in *O Pioneers!* is there mainly as a backdrop. By the law of proportions, Cather takes relatively little space describing it. The effect is that the land is not a particularly large force in the novel, nor is the heroism of its tamers grandiose. Alexandra conquers it with very little effort, except with her artistic vision and wit.

The space that is brought under control is much more confined and intimate, more of a garden than a country, which gives it its mystical quality.⁴ The narrative stance is much more personal than is usually found in an epic and is concerned mainly with the characters' states of mind. Even though David Stouck claims that the novel rests on the tradition of the epic, he concedes that the controlling center of the novel is a more intimate space, typical of the pastoral mode: the "perspective which controls the narration of *O Pioneers!*" is the

source of the novel's peculiar effectiveness, for it is this point of view which bathes the humble subjects of the book and the simple facts of their lives in an enduring warmth and affection. Such a viewpoint was the

⁴ Granville Hicks suggests that "the very basis of *O Pioneers!* is a mystical conception of the frontier" (139) and does not mention any epical qualities.

means by which Miss Cather was most fully able to transmit her deep sympathy for the figures of her personal past, her almost childlike love and admiration for their humble, faithful lives. (*W.C.'s Imagination* 28)

Even though Stouck sees the significance of the influence of Cather's elders on her work in this novel--the emotion of it stemming from the "desire to return 'home'"--and even though he recognizes the heavy use of Biblical themes in the story, he does not make the connection between these old folk and their religious influence on Cather.⁵ In becoming acquainted with their history, one can begin to see how the concept of the novel came to her.

William and Caroline Smith Cather were a patriarchal pair, deeply religious and endowed with great personal dignity and competence.⁶ "They looked very Biblical," Jim Burden says of his grandparents in *My Antonia*, Cather's autobiographical novel which paints a close portrait of her grandparents (MA 100). William, James Cather's son, did not inherit his father's social gifts or lively personality, unlike his sister Sidney, but he was a widely respected man, reticent and dignified, notable for his "industry, sobriety, and piety" (WC:EV 12). Born with great natural endurance and skills for farming, he so successfully developed the land bequeathed to him by his father that before he left it to move to Nebraska, "he had more than doubled his holdings--increasing his 130 acres to 304" (13).

William Cather was known for his independent ways and strong will, traits that would later emerge in his granddaughter. A strong Northern sympathizer, William alienated himself in Virginia from some of his family and acquaintances by sending his sons to West Virginia to escape conscription and by assuming the duties of a U.S.

⁵ See Stouck's full discussion of *O Pioneers!* in *Willa Cather's Imagination*, 23-32.

⁶ General biographical data is collected from O'Brien, WC:EV; Woodress, WC:LA; and Woodress, WC:LL.

marshall after the war. Because of this alignment with the Union, unlike other Virginians, he suffered no losses and his farm continued to prosper, much to the anger and resentment of his Southern neighbors. In an effort at conciliation, William even used some of his “Northern money” to send some local young people to school, including Virginia Boak, who later became his daughter-in-law (WC:EV 12-13).

William and Caroline Smith were married in 1846, and in 1851, they settled on the Cather farm called Willow Shade. There William built a three-story brick farmhouse that had the same indestructible solidity about it as its builder. William and Caroline had six children in all, four daughters who died before mature adulthood, and two sons, one of whom was Charles, Willa Cather’s father (WC:EV 22, 12). William, like his sister Sidney, rejected his Presbyterian upbringing and became a loyal Baptist, and his strong religious convictions shaped the life of his entire household. Daily prayers and Bible reading were as much a part of family life as tending the sheep or preparing meals. A “taciturn strongwilled patriarch,” William believed worldly amusements were corrupting and forbade “unseemly levity and recreation, forbidding cards and music on Sundays” (WC:EV 12).

To Willa Cather, her grandfather was a man of heroic proportions. A stately patriarch, William Cather was strong and successful in his endeavors as both a Virginian gentleman farmer and a Nebraska pioneer. In *My Antonia*, Jim Burden recalls that his grandfather was kind but “not demonstrative,” and one felt at once “his deliberateness and personal dignity.” Jim was “a little in awe of him” with his “crinkly snow-white beard,” his “bright blue eyes that had a fresh, frosty sparkle,” and the sonorous intonations of his Bible readings (MA 11-13). William Cather had certain and unwavering convictions. Photographs of him reveal the deep-set, penetrating, arresting eyes of a prophet, a characteristic bequeathed to his grand-daughter.⁷

⁷ See photograph in WC:EV, 16ff.

Caroline Cather was a strong but self-effacing woman who believed in the holiness of women's work, like all the memorable homemakers in Cather's fiction. She shared her husband's fervent commitment to a personal expression of Christian faith, and her tasks were God-given duties to be performed with unflagging industry and seriousness. "The Master never intended their [sic] should be any idlers in his vinyard [sic]," she wrote her daughter, Jennie, in one of her many letters.⁸

Caroline Cather had a serious earnestness about her that discouraged undue frivolity or idleness. In this respect, she made a good wife for her husband. She once told her beloved Jennie not to take time out from her household chores even for a kiss from her husband John. If he is bent on getting one, he "will do it without your quitting [sic] work."⁹ Such industry was a part of her piety, her way of living out what she believed to be the Scriptural directive. But as we see in *Grandmother Burden* in *My Antonia*, she was not without humor. Her laugh may have been "perhaps a little strident, but there was a lively intelligence in it" (MA 10-11).

Caroline Cather's faith was tested through many hardships--she was uprooted from her beloved Willow Shade and replanted in the barren wastes of Nebraska, bereaved by the illnesses and deaths of her four daughters, and subjected to the hard life of a pioneer farmer's wife with the responsibility of raising three orphaned grandchildren while she was in her early fifties (WC:EV 22-23). Caroline's prime source of comfort was immersing herself in Scripture, which she did every day when her work was

⁸ Caroline Cather to Jennie Cather Ayre, September 10, 1873, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska; quoted in WC:EV, 23. Caroline asked that her daughter burn her letters because she was embarrassed by their unlettered quality. Fortunately, Jennie did not (23).

⁹ Caroline Cather to Jennie Cather Ayre, August 30, 1873; quoted in WC:EV, 23. I disagree with O'Brien's conclusion from the apparently severe tone of her letters that Caroline was essentially joyless. Rather, there is a droll humor underlying the obvious seriousness that is a trademark of all who have the Puritan stamp on them.

finished (WC:EV 23). She relied on her faith in God's providence to keep her from despair or bitterness. In a letter to Jennie after her first child died, Caroline tried to bring comfort out of her own deeply-felt personal losses. Using the familiar litany handed down from Puritan ancestors who often knew the same tragedy, she reminded Jennie that with the child's death, she and her husband had "one more tie" to bind them to heaven and "one less to earth." Spared the grief his parents were going through, the child, like so many others in Caroline's family, was "done with the sorrows and disappointments of this world."¹⁰

In the novel that marks Cather's personal homegoing, *O Pioneers!*, Cather celebrates both her grandparents' earthly journey and their heavenly aspirations. In 1874 William and Caroline Cather made a trip to Nebraska to visit their son George and his wife, Francis (Aunt Franc) who had earlier set up a homestead there (WC:LL 21). Attracted by the challenge of a new frontier, and preferring the western climate over damp Virginia, William and Caroline joined George and other Virginians on the divide in Nebraska in 1877. In fact, so many Cathers eventually settled there that it was known as Catherton (WC:LL 33).

As Cather journeys backwards in memory, she discovers that her own grandparents are exemplary correlatives for heroic and noble action. Along with son George and his wife, Franc, they "at first lived primitively in dugouts they cut into the prairie and roofed over with sod. [But] despite the grasshoppers the next year and occasional prairie fires, they prospered" (WC:LL 33). They were among the triumphant pioneers celebrated by Whitman and others, who had artistically imposed their imagination and their superior skills in creating a fruitful land out of barrenness.¹¹

¹⁰ Caroline Cather to Jennie Cather Ayre, May 4, 1876; quoted in WC:EV, 24

¹¹ Whitman's "hearty paean to Western emigration," "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" gave Cather her title. O'Brien observes that the "novel's relationship to Whitman's poetry is complex and contradictory." See WC:EV, 421-42. For a discussion of "The Whitman

Through Alexandra, the protagonist in *O Pioneers!*, Cather claims her inheritance of her grandparents' pioneer spirit, their superior intelligence, and their religious view of life. Even though Cather said that she made the land her hero (WC:LL 233), the novel plainly elevates Alexandra to the same heroic level as the historical conqueror whose name she shares. There is much in her of Willa Cather herself. Alexandra, the daughter of a Swedish immigrant who had settled on the divide, is in her earlier years

a tall, strong girl, and she walked rapidly and resolutely, as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next. She wore a man's long ulster (not as if it were an affliction, but as if it were very comfortable and belonged to her; carried it like a young soldier), She had a serious, thoughtful face, and her clear, deep blue eyes were fixed intently on the distance, without seeming to see anything. . . .

(OP 6)

As a grown woman, Alexandra's "figure is fuller, and she has more color. She seems sunnier and more vigorous than she did as a young girl. But she still has the same calmness and deliberation of manner, the same clear eyes" (87-88). Woodress writes that Willa Cather "had a sturdy build and a clear complexion." Her skin was creamy, and "her rosy cheeks indicated boisterous good health." She stood a "good height of five feet six," "had eyes of a distinct blue, and when she looked at one, her glance was open and direct." A pleasant woman to look at, "her mouth was generous and good-humored, and her hands were broad and strong." Like Alexandra, Cather "looked like a person used to getting things done, someone accustomed to giving orders" (WC:LL 3).

Cather is fond of casting herself as a strong, robust Swedish woman with a great head of golden hair. Alexandra has much the same appearance as Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark*, including skin “of such smoothness and whiteness as none but Swedish women ever possess” (88), except, as Elizabeth Sergeant and James Woodress tell us, Willa Cather herself (WC:AM 113; WC:LL 3).

As much as the pioneer experience of Cather’s grandparents and their stalwart heroism inform the novel and its heroine, an even more central influence is the strong if not subtle religious theme that is a direct progeny of the influence of Cather’s grandparents. Alexandra has a pious nature much like that of the elder Cathers’; she is concerned with religion and spends her Sunday afternoons reading the Bible (OP 61). She has a deep fondness for “Crazy Ivar,” a religious hermit given to religious visions and a creedless Christianity. But the most telling religious influence in the novel is the manner in which Cather makes referential links between characters and places that clearly point to a spiritual dilemma within the framework of religion. Given the strong religious emphasis in the novel, it is curious that critics generally have skimmed lightly over it. Most have associated Cather’s religious theme with a land myth and nature gods. While these are certainly included, they are not Cather’s main concern, nor do the allusions to primitive powers take the same prominent place as do references to the Bible and Christianity. David Stouck does make the thematic connection between Alexandra and Genesis, and the connection between Emil’s and Marie’s story and the Garden of Eden (31). The one primary exception to those who have not given Cather’s religious theme enough emphasis is John J. Murphy. His essay on *O Pioneers!* gives considerable attention to its biblical origins in a section called “The Genesis Dimension” (144-77), and in “Willa Cather and Religion,” he notes that religion and the scriptures “give perspective

to *O Pioneers!*" (50). Murphy, however, does not explore the process by which those scriptural sources found their way into Cather's work.¹²

In the novel, Alexandra's father, John Bergson, is near death, his health ruined in his effort to tame a recalcitrant land, and he passes over his sons to give Alexandra his blessing and the charge of the land.¹³ He relies heavily on Alexandra's good judgment, knowing he can expect nothing out of the older boys except hard work. "Alexandra, her father often said to himself, was like her grandfather; which was his way of saying that she was intelligent" (OP 23). The same point is reiterated in *My Antonia* when Jim Burden, in part, attributes his grandparents' successful pioneering efforts to intelligence. Alexandra's mother, although she "had never quite forgiven John Bergson for bringing her to the end of the earth" (30), for eleven years "had worthily striven to maintain some semblance of household order amid conditions that made order very difficult" (28). She aimed to do all she could to "repeat the routine of her old life among new surroundings," and her efforts "had done a great deal to keep the family from disintegrating morally and getting careless in their ways" (28-29).¹⁴ Alexandra has two older ineffectual brothers,

¹² Lionel Trilling also sees that Cather's oeuvre reveals her preoccupation with religion and indicts Cather for what he sees as an improper lack of optimism toward human nature. He concludes that all of Cather's work is an attempt to deal with the failed pioneer, whose ideal is not enough. Consequently, says Trilling, Cather had to seek beyond the pioneer for a new spiritual ideal in the mystery, culture, order, and permanence of religion. Trilling judges this human failure as Cather's own failure to see life aright and to make art aright. See Trilling's "Willa Cather."

¹³ John Murphy makes the connection between this scene and the Genesis account of Issac conferring his blessing on Jacob rather than Esau: "Alexandra's father leaves her the birthright, passes over his eldest son Oscar and middle son Lou, in a scene too dim for the old man to see their faces" ("Willa Cather and Religion," 51).

¹⁴ Cather's theme of the pioneer-artist imposing order on chaos begins in this novel, but continues in everyone thereafter, culminating in *Shadows on the Rock*. Like Mrs. Bergson, Madame Auclair has brought their French culture to Quebec, the sense of their

Oscar and Lou, and one dearly loved younger brother, Emil, who becomes the blessing and bane of her life.

After John's death, Alexandra, her mother, and brothers stay on the farm and prosper for three years. Then come three years of drouth and failure. The older brothers want to sell out, but Alexandra and her mother want to stay. These brothers are examples of those who lack imagination and will, who are "meant to follow in paths already marked out for them, not to break new trails in a new country" (OP 48). But Alexandra, besides having intelligence, has the other necessary ingredient for a pioneer, "imagination," the capacity "to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves" (48).

Oddly enough, Alexandra does not intend for her brothers or herself to do the hard labor. She loves the land from an aesthetic distance; the land exists more in the world of her mind than in the world of real action. She is going to model herself on the "shrewd" men in town "who are buying up other people's land" but "don't try to farm it. They are the men to watch, in a new country," she tells her brothers (OP 68).¹⁵ She loves the challenge of the land, but she has the intelligence to keep her from getting her own hands dirty. After all, as she tells Lou, they are better fixed than any of their neighbors because their "father had more brains." Their people "were better people than

"way," a feeling about life that had come down . . . through so many centuries and that she had brought with her across the wastes of obliterating, brutal ocean" (SR, 25).

¹⁵ Here is an example of how Cather's mix-and-match method of characterization can result in a flawed technique. Alexandra was earlier described as a woman who spent her Sunday afternoons reading the Bible, a woman whose "mind was slow, truthful, steadfast. She had not the least spark of cleverness" (OP, 61). These traits closely match Cather's grandmothers Cather and Boak. Yet here in this account, Cather is revealing Alexandra's obvious cleverness and intelligence in the shrewdness of her farming operations, characteristics more closely associated with Cather herself. Cather did not see this discrepancy produced by her efforts to join herself with her elders.

these in the old country,” and, consequently, they “ought to do more than they do, and see further ahead” (68-69).¹⁶

Patricia Lee Yongue in her article on “Willa Cather’s Aristocrats” notes that even though Cather strongly indicts American materialism, “she nowhere insists that her protagonists, even her pioneers, completely eschew wealth or the luxuries provided by wealth.” Some, like Alexandra, “may even be considered well-to-do,” and “their aristocratic ways represent a true source of beauty and dignity in their lives and in society” (OP 113). However, Cather does attempt to make her heroine more humble by pointing out that Alexandra “liked plain things” (97) and that her house, though big, is “curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort” (83).

Alexandra’s imagination is the place of true wealth, and the idea of seeing her parched land through to fruitfulness grips her with spiritual intensity. For “the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning.” The “Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it,” responds to her love and bends “lower than it ever bent to a human will before” to join her in her endeavor (OP 65).

The cooperative Spirit that moves in and through Alexandra’s successful efforts is akin to an ancient nature god. With her father and others who had first challenged the land, this Genius had been “unfriendly,” a “wild thing that had its ugly moods” (OP 20), but now, as Alexandra responds to the land with a lover’s yearning instead of an enemy’s dread, that same Genius turns benevolent. Cather’s images, however, allude to the God of Genesis as well as the generative force of Dionysus and Demeter. With a radiant face transformed as by a heavenly vision, Alexandra sings an old Swedish hymn of praise as she is moved by the gripping possibilities of a land brought to life (65).

¹⁶ See Patricia Yongue’s “Willa Cather’s Aristocrats” for a complete discussion of Cather’s belief in a natural aristocracy.

To this scene one could ascribe Cather's own inner explosion when she began to remember her past in her grandparents' history. It is both sensual and spiritual. Dorothy Van Ghent makes some pertinent observations along this line:

There is what Proust called "bodily memory," which, because it is physical and sensory, may be at once personal and more than personal, for the impulses of the senses register common qualities of experience, timeless as sun and earth, breath and flesh. And there is what the Greeks call *anamnesis*, memory of "important" things, matters whose significance is part of one's heritage--a kind of commemoration since it involves other and profounder memories than one's own, buried perhaps as deep as instinct and aroused mysteriously as instinct. (81)

I believe Cather's moment of inner illumination was both of these and more. Cather was certainly strongly affected by place; her senses were keen, and nature could imprint itself on her memory and imagination so vividly that it became a palpable presence when translated onto the page. But these natural settings were always associated with some human memory, usually a memory with connections to her family elders and her life with them both in Virginia and Nebraska. It was more than *anamnesis*, however, even though that process may describe what was happening in her imagination some of the time. Her past and its translation into her fiction is too consciously reiterated to be purely "mysterious instinct." The profundity of these memories is in the fact that she herself was deeply intertwined with the experiences of her ancestors, even though the memories were for some time very dim and almost forgotten. Her memories of their shared religious outlook and domestic traditions do not fit into a Jungian explanation of forgotten memories. In her fiction Cather consciously affirms her memories and the realities associated with them. Their presence cannot be explained exclusively as the result of some unconscious instinct.

One thread in *O Pioneers!* that is prominent in the novel's thematic fabric is the colorful Ivar. By creating a religious fanatic, a "fool for Christ," Cather is able to diffuse her hostility toward some aspects of her elders' faith while affirming the essential truth of their religious sensibility. The method also is a shield against any direct association of Ivar's views with herself. "Crazy Ivar" is the John the Baptist of the Divide, a strange hermit who appears to be a religious fanatic, subject to spells which he believes come "from God" (OP 92), a mad voice crying in the wilderness. When Ivar is afraid that the neighbors will act on their threat to put him in an asylum, Alexandra acknowledges their kindred view of things: "We'll start an asylum for old-time people, Ivar," where all the old-time people "can do all the old things in the old way" (95).¹⁷

While others are wary of his strangeness, Alexandra has a deep understanding of him and enjoys his company. She tells her brothers, "Some days his mind is cloudy, like. But if you can get him on a clear day, you can learn a great deal from him" (OP 33). She becomes Ivar's protector, defending him against false accusers and providing for his security in old age.

Ivar, too, is a natural artist who sees visions and isolates himself from the rest of the settlements because "the fewer neighbors he had, the fewer temptations" (34). He has rejected the materialistic, power-driven world of man and lives like a creature of Mother Nature in union with the earth. He hates civilization and its destruction of nature and moves away from it as far as he can, living like a primitive in the ground. His sod house is built right into the dam by his large pond, and except "for the piece of rusty stovepipe

¹⁷ Critics usually associate Ivar with primitive nature gods. Most do not give him a significant place in the novel if they mention him at all. None has explored any connection between him and Cather's Christian heritage except for John J. Murphy. He connects Ivar to Noah, "gentle and protective to all God's creatures" (*O Pioneers!*, 115). Murphy also points out Ivar's thematic connection with the novel's cosmic overtones.

sticking up through the sod, you could have walked over the roof of Ivar's dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation." For three years he had lived there "without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done" (OP 36).

Ivar is just as concerned about not polluting his spiritual nature as he is about preserving his physical nature. "[A]n otherworldly man in communion with universal rhythms" (McMurphy, "*O Pioneers!*" 115), he constantly reads his Norwegian Bible, committing "chapters of the Bible to memory" (OP 37). He worships on Sunday by himself out on his place because he "had a peculiar religion of his own and could not get on with any of the denominations" (37). He explains his "preference for his wild homestead by saying that his Bible seemed truer to him there" (38). The narrator confirms his judgment:

If one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land, the smiling sky, the curly grass white in the hot sunlight; if one listened to the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence, one understood what Ivar meant. (38)

As a caretaker of God's creation, he reverences all created creatures and will not tolerate guns on his place. A natural biologist, he studies the habits of the birds and animals that come around his place and finds in them an orderliness and harmony that the world of men has lost. "He always said that the badgers had cleaner houses than people" (OP 38), and the birds in their flying patterns are "[n]ever [in] any confusion" (43). In a later scene, Alexandra exhibits the same love of order in nature as she looks at the stars "which glittered so keenly through the frosty autumn air":

She always loved to watch them to think of their vastness and distance, and of their ordered march. It fortified her to reflect upon the great

operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security. (OP 70-71)

Cather infuses Alexandra with her own affirmation of a religious order in the universe which matched the view of her elders. As with Alexandra, it gave Cather a deep sense of union with something great, a knowledge that warded off feelings of isolation and insecurity.

Ivar's cave house, like Grandmother Burden's in *My Antonia*, reflects this order in nature. "[C]lean as a cupboard," it held only the simple necessities of life: stove, table, chairs, a clock and calendar, a hammock with a buffalo hide, and a few books. Emil, Alexandra's young brother who possesses, like his sister, the higher sensibilities, finds the "cave a superior kind of house." He recognizes that "[t]here was something pleasantly unusual about it and about Ivar" (OP 42).

Ivar's superior wisdom, learned from nature and scripture, gives Alexandra the clue she needs to set her own failing farm aright and make it prosperous. He proposes to reform her method of caring for pigs. Just as Ivar believes man should not fill his mind with filth and surround himself with degrading influences, so must Alexandra stop feeding the pigs "swill and such stuff" and must put them in a "sorghum patch," build a shed for shade and provide them with plenty of clean water, and "get them off the old stinking ground": "Hogs do not like to be filthy" (OP 45). Alexandra's brothers abhor the idea because they "could never see the use of taking pains" (45), a quality Cather repeats in Antonia Shimerda Cuzak, who is another reflection of Caroline Cather. Alexandra, having the nature of the hero and artist, sees the truth in Crazy Ivar's view of things and builds a new pig corral, which is the thing that turns the failing farm into a prosperous one.

In Part II of the novel, sixteen years have passed. Alexandra has fulfilled her dream. Acting on Ivar's biblical advice as to how man should work with God in nature,

Alexandra brings order and life out of chaos and death. The land is now “frank and joyous,” rising “to meet the sun”:

The air and the earth are curiously mated and intermingled, as if the one were the breath of the other. You feel in the atmosphere the same tonic, puissant quality that is in the tilth, the same strength and resoluteness.

(OP 77)

The marriage of the land and Alexandra’s great love, born from the heavenly realms of “the air,” is consummated, and its child is the powerfully fertile fields which make the “labor easy for men and beasts” (76).

The consummation is also felt in Alexandra’s house. The most pleasant rooms are the kitchen--reminiscent of the kitchens presided over by Cather’s Virginia elders, a noisy, happy place of cooking, pickling and preserving--and the sitting-room, “in which Alexandra has brought together the old homely furniture that the Bergsons used in their first log house, the family portraits, and the few things her mother brought from Sweden” (OP 84). The same fecundity and design are repeated in her flower garden:

[T]here you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds, planted with scrub willows to give shade to the cattle in fly-time. (OP 84)

In creating Alexandra’s Eden, Cather is drawing on her Virginia memories and another great farm accented by willow trees.

Ivar now lives with Alexandra, having lost his land through mismanagement. He has the spiritual qualities needed for great deeds but not the intelligence. On winter evenings, Alexandra “calls him into the sitting-room to read the Bible aloud to her,” and he then retires to his comfortable room in the barn that Alexandra has fixed for him since

he is wary of human habitation and the temptations it brings. "No one has found out what his temptations are," the narrator tells us (OP 87). Maybe no one in the story knows, but Cather reveals it through a subtle tie-in with a secondary plot in the story--the sad tale of Alexandra's brother Emil and Marie Shabata.

Emil has fallen in love with the irrepressible Marie Shabata, wife of a sullen and disappointed Bohemian, Frank, many years her senior. Alexandra is also inordinately fond of her and visits her often, almost as if Marie's vibrant and sensual response to life is a direct stimulant to Alexandra's more staid nature. In spite of the fact that the relationship of Emil and Marie is illicit, Cather makes their story a revision of the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, utterly romantic and idealized. Emil is a later version of Eric Hermannson. His love for Marie is not only a powerful combination of eros and agape but also a realization that religious conviction is helpless to resolve a love born out of time.¹⁸

We first meet Emil and Marie on a golden June morning, prophetically in a graveyard. Emil, "a splendid figure of a boy, tall and straight as a young pine tree, with a handsome head, and stormy gray eyes, deeply set under a serious brow" is cutting the grass (OP 77). He is singing the "Jewel" song¹⁹ to himself when Marie drives up in a cart, her face "round and brown," like a poppy, "with rich color in her cheeks and lips, and her dancing yellow-brown eyes [bubbling] with gayety" (79). They are both

¹⁸ Sharon O'Brien points out what most other critics have observed, that the story of Emil and Marie is merely one of many "parables of passion" in Cather's fiction which reflects one of Cather's "most persistent fictional preoccupations; the insufficiency, even the danger, of sexual passion and the opposing grandeur of passion deflected from the personal to the impersonal object" ("The Unity of Cather's 'Two-Part Pastoral': Passion in *O Pioneers!*"). For another essay on Cather's negative approach to sexual relations, see Blanche H. Gelfant, "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Antonia*."

¹⁹ Woodress identifies the "Jewel" song from Gounod's *Faust*, signaling Faust's seduction of Marguerite, which later ends tragically. See WC:LL, 247-48.

troubled by the attraction, but Emil's stay at college delay its ripening. When he is home, they hide behind teasing banter, which allows them to keep in contact without admitting their feelings, treating them as evidence only of an enjoyable friendship.

Alexandra is oblivious to the budding relationship. She does not see the significance of her brother's attendance at Marie's Catholic church when he is home from college (120), nor is she aware of Marie's inordinate interest in Emil's letters from college. Alexandra is a woman of great feeling who has denied romance or eros. Even though she marries Carl Lindstrum at the end of the novel, it is a love of friendship and a shared history, not of passion. She is an epic heroine whose capacities for love are subsumed in her artistic creation, the fertile, abundant land. Her only erotic thoughts come in dreams. While Marie finds her blond, godlike lover in flesh and blood, Alexandra's lover is only a recurring fantasy. She has the "illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by some one very strong":

It was a man, certainly, who carried her, but he was like no man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat. She never saw him, but, with eyes closed, she could feel that he was yellow like the sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him. She could feel him approach, and bend over her and lift her, and then she could feel herself being carried swiftly off across the fields. (OP 206)

The erotic reverie upsets Alexandra deeply, and after each recurrence, she goes through a monastic ritualistic cleansing: "[A]ngry with herself, [she would] go down to the bath-house," "stand in a tin tub and prosecute her bath with vigor, finishing it by pouring buckets of cold well-water over her gleaming white body which no man on the Divide could have carried very far" (206). Like Ivar, Alexandra cannot avoid temptation no matter how rigidly she arranges her life and how assiduously she avoids romance.

However, Alexandra can enjoy romance vicariously--the silly romances of Alexandra's Swedish domestics entertain her (85)--but her eventual marriage to Carl Lindstrum is without sexual passion. Emil cannot even imagine his sister in love: "She wouldn't know how to go about it," he tells Marie (154).

Emil is the source of Alexandra's greatest pride. In her judgment, the taming of the land comes second to making her brother "a personality apart from the soil," a condition that aspires to what Trilling calls "the horizons of the spirit" (9). But Emil himself is fulfilled neither by the college education nor the exposure to culture. He finds his "horizon of the spirit" in romantic love, that deceptive and deadly Siren.

Emil faces the reality of their dilemma long before Marie does. He tires of the little game he and Marie are playing. "I can't play with you like a little boy any more," he tells her:

"Sometimes you seem to understand perfectly, and then sometimes you pretend you don't. You don't help things any by pretending. . . . If you *won't* understand, you know, I could make you!" (OP 156-57)

Marie innocently believes that ignoring the truth will allow her to keep enjoying the relationship without succumbing to sin: "But, Emil, if I understand, then all our good times are over, we can never do nice things together any more," and she refuses to admit that there is anything to understand, anyway (157). She makes the problem Emil's, and urges him to get spiritual guidance: "I wish you were a Catholic. The Church helps people, indeed it does. I pray for you, but that's not the same as if you prayed yourself" (157). Like Eric Hermansson, Emil will not use religion as a smoke-screen to hide his truest feelings, nor will he manipulate it to his own ends: "'I can't pray to have the things I want,' he said slowly, 'and I won't pray not to have them, not if I'm damned for it'" (157):

Marie turned away, wringing her hands. "Oh, Emil, you won't try! Then all our good times are over."

"Yes; over. I never expect to have any more."

Emil gripped the hand-holds of his scythe and began to mow. Marie took up her cherries and went slowly toward the house, crying bitterly. (157-58)

In observing his good friend, Amédée, and his pretty bride, Angélique, Emil is frustrated that he must "hide [from him] the thing that Amédée was so proud of, that the feeling which gave one of them such happiness should bring the other such despair" (OP 163-64). In words reminiscent of Friar Lawrence's speech concerning the "mickle" grace "that lies in plants" and "herbs" (*Romeo and Juliet* II.3.15-16), Emil muses that

[i]t was like that when Alexandra tested her seed-corn in the spring. . . .
From two ears that had grown side by side, the grains of one shot up joyfully into the light, projecting themselves into the future, and the grains from the other lay still in the earth and rotted; and nobody knew why.
(164)

Emil avoids temptation by going on an extended trip to Mexico, and when he returns a year later, Alexandra is delighted with the college boy who has become a man of the world and decides to show him off at a church fair. In this scene, Cather juxtaposes the chance of fate with the certainty of faith. Emil is reunited with Marie at the Church of Sainte-Agnes, which stands, significantly, on a hill "powerful and triumphant there on its eminence so high above the rest of the landscape" with a "blaze of light all about" (OP 211-12). Nothing has changed between them, and when he looks at her with "his steady, powerful eyes, it was impossible not to feel the sweetness of the dream he was dreaming;

it reached her before she could shut it out, and hid itself in her heart" (223). After the lights go out in the hall, he kisses her:

The veil that had hung uncertainly between them for so long dissolved. Before she knew what she was doing, she had committed herself to that kiss that was at once a boy's and a man's, as timid as it was tender; so like Emil and so unlike any one else in the world. Not until it was over did she realize what it meant. And Emil, who had so often imagined the shock of this first kiss, was surprised at its gentleness and naturalness. It was like a sigh which they had breathed together; almost sorrowful, as if each were afraid of awakening something in the other. (OP 225)

Marie begs Emil to go away. He asks her to go with him, and she refuses to even consider it; her duty is to stay with Frank. Emil prepares to leave for law school, but Fate intervenes with the death of Emil's friend, Amédée, delaying Emil's departure.

Amédée's funeral is on Monday, the day after the great confirmation service that had been planned long before. While half the village prepares the "funeral black," the other half is "busy with white dresses and white veils" (251). The symbolism here highlights one of the novel's themes: that inherent in a religious view of life and love are unresolvable elements of dark and light. Amédée, the one character in the story who has a fully satisfying love relationship, dies. Yet concurrent with his burial, the "white dresses and white veils" point to innocent youth which is always hopeful of realizing the impossible, both in religion and love. In this life, Cather seems to say, any realization of bringing God's heaven to earth is always transitory, mixed with bane as well as blessing, yet without it, even life's happiness loses meaning. Her emphasis is made even more explicit in the two scenes that individually describe Emil's and Marie's torment of the soul and the hopeful, if temporary, resolutions.

Believing she has seen Emil for the last time, Marie takes an evening walk down through the orchard to the open fields. Nature herself mirrors death in life, beauty through pain. “[T]he evening air was heavy with the smell of wild cotton,” and wherever “those ashes-of-rose balls hung on their milky stalks, the air about them was saturated with their breath” (OP 247). Marie prepares to live out the long seasons of her life with her secret, perfect love unblemished by infidelity or public shame:

The years seemed to stretch before her like the land; spring, summer, autumn, winter, spring; always the same patient fields, the patient little trees, the patient lives; always the same yearning, the same pulling at the chain--until the instinct to live had torn itself and bled and weakened for the last time, until the chain secured a dead woman, who might cautiously be released. (OP 248)

It will actually be easier with Emil gone. Marie “would not, at least, live in perpetual fear. . . . [and] she would not have the feeling that she was spoiling his life” (249). They could not meet anymore because there “was nothing for them to say.” They “had spent the last penny of their small change; there was nothing left but gold” (249).

Meantime, Marie can live out their love in her imagination; “she could be as rash as she chose,” and no one would “be the worse for it but herself; and that, surely, did not matter” (249). For Marie, imagination is a safe escape from inhibiting moral restrictions made necessary by the fallen human condition. Only there can desire be realized without negative consequences. She rejects the solution of the glittering pond in front of her as “a dirty way out of life” because she has realized pure love, even if only for a moment, and the memory alone would give her life meaning. Cather’s method of suggestion calls to

suggestion calls to mind Keats' Grecian urn.²⁰ The handsome youth moves toward the maiden under the bower, but the artist keeps him from reaching her. Desire is suspended rather than realized, which makes possible the notion that somewhere outside of the temporal world--in the world of art (and by inference for Cather, in religion), beauty is truth, and truth, beauty. Thus Marie turns her love for Emil into a frozen work of art. "She wanted to live and dream--a hundred years, forever!" holding the treasure of their love like the pond holding the moon in its reflection "when it encircled and swelled with that image of gold." That alone--the certainty that such a love can indeed be and that she has experienced it-- was a "sweetness" that "welled up in her heart," and life would be worth living "as long as her breast could hold this treasure of pain!" (251).²¹

Emil's moment of divine relinquishment takes place at the church in Sainte-Agnes during the confirmation service. His letting go of desire is complete; he does not even reserve the right to live it out in imagination. Cather carefully sets a holy stage for his godlike sacrifice:

The new communicants, with their clear, reverent faces, were beautiful to look upon as they entered in a body and took the front benches reserved

²⁰ From her earliest days as a student, Keats was one of Cather's most treasured poets. "Of all the English Romantics, Keats--the poet who demonstrated most fully the sensuous potential of imagery and language--held the strongest attraction for Cather" (Roskowski, *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*, 14). I am convinced she also found in his work a philosophy most similar to her own. On the fireplace mantle in her Bank Street apartment was a Victorian marble bust of Keats by Amy Whitney that she had inherited from Mrs. James T. Fields of Boston. Also see WC:AM, 203; WC:LA, 69, 79; and WC:LL, 164-65, 235.

²¹ In the *Song of the Lark*, Thea expresses a similar feeling after she first hears Dvorak's Symphony and experiences a religious ecstasy. "There was some power abroad in the world bent upon taking away from her that feeling with which she had come

for them. Even before the Mass began, the air was charged with feeling. The choir had never sung so well and Raoul Marcel, in the "Gloria," drew even the bishop's eyes to the organ loft. For the offertory he sang Gounod's "Ave Maria,"--always spoken of in Sainte-Agnes as "the Ave Maria." (254)

As the strains of the emotional paeon to holy womanhood fill the sanctuary, Emil's mind turns to his "Maria." Why was she not in the service? "Was she too unhappy to find comfort here? Had she, perhaps, thought that he would come to her? Was she waiting for him?" In his mind, thoughts of his love for her join with spiritual ecstasy, and Emil is transported into a moment of transcendent revelation:

[T]he rapture of the service took hold upon his body and mind . . . [, and a]s he listened to Raoul, he seemed to emerge from the conflicting emotions which had been whirling him about and sucking him under. He felt as if a clear light broke upon his mind, and with it a conviction that good was, after all, stronger than evil, and that good was possible to men. He seemed to discover that there was a kind of rapture in which he could love forever without faltering and without sin. (255)

Emil realizes that such rapture is only "for those who could feel it," and he no longer covets anything "that was Frank Shabata's." His heart witnesses to his mind that he is at one with the spirit in the "Ave Maria," that the "spirit he had met in the music was his own" (255). Cather makes explicit the connection of this spirit to Christ's by pointing out that "Frank Shabata had never found it; would never find it if he lived beside it a

out of the concert hall," but it "should never have it." She vows that as "long as she lived that ecstasy was going to be hers" (SL, 254).

thousand years; would have destroyed it if he had found it, as Herod slew the innocents, as Rome slew the martyrs" (255).

Emil's revelation of pure love, however, has come through music, that sphere of the Sirens that promises an otherworldly paradise but dashes on the rocks anyone who seeks it. As the narrator puts it, Emil does not realize that music gives an "equivocal revelation" (256). Trusting it completely, the unwary victim makes his way to Marie. "It might be the last time that he would see her alone, and today he could leave her without rancor, without bitterness" (257). Still bathing in the warm light of his revelation, Emil is even able to pass "the brown hole in the earth where Amédée was to lie" and feel "no horror. That, too, was beautiful, that simple doorway into forgetfulness. The heart, when it is too much alive, aches for that brown earth, and ecstasy has no fear of death" (257).

Emil goes to the Shabata house to find Marie to extend one last goodbye, still glowing with his divine revelation of holy love. He finds the house empty, so he heads for the orchard. The light of God's revelation is also there in this new Eden; the "sun was hanging low," and "[l]ong fingers of light reached through the apple branches as through a net; the orchard was riddled and shot with gold; light was the reality, the trees were merely interferences that reflected and refracted light" (258). He finds Marie under a white mulberry tree, lying limp with her eyes closed, having "lived a day of her new life of perfect love." The power of her physical presence defeats him:

Emil threw himself down beside her and took her in his arms. The blood came back to her cheeks, her amber eyes opened slowly, and in them Emil saw his own face and the orchard and the sun. "I was dreaming this," she whispered, hiding her face against him, "don't take my dream away!" (259)

Thus does Frank Shabata find them, and in the flare of unthinking rage, this man who enjoys feeling “like a desperate man” and making others unhappy with him, shoots the shadowy figures under the mulberry tree. Cather takes Keats’ notion one step further. The young man touches the maiden under the tree on the Grecian urn, and art is shattered.

Ivar finds them the next morning: “Merciful God!” he groaned; “merciful, merciful God!” (270). Marie “had lifted her head to her lover’s breast, taken his hand in both her own, and bled quietly to death. . . . On her face there was a look of ineffable content” (269). Fluttering above the dead lovers are “two white butterflies from Frank’s alfalfa-field . . . ; diving and soaring, now close together, now far apart; and in the long grass by the fence the last wild roses of the year opened their pink hearts to die” (270). Part IV of the novel, “The Mulberry Tree,” closes with Ivar sagging at Alexandra’s feet; “‘Mistress, mistress,’ he sobbed, ‘it has fallen! Sin and death for the young ones! God have mercy upon us!’” (271).

Cather makes clear Ivar’s connection to the story’s Christian theme at the opening of the next part called “Alexandra.” Ivar is “sitting at a cobbler’s bench in the barn, mending harness by the light of a lantern and repeating to himself the 101st Psalm” (275). Even though Cather makes no mention of the contents of the Psalm, she uses the scriptural text to connect the events of the previous chapter to this one. The first verse of that Psalm, spoken by King David who was caught in adultery and repented, reads: “I will sing of mercy and judgment: unto thee, O Lord, will I sing.”²² The implication is that God has shown both mercy and judgment toward Emil and Marie, judgment because they have sinned, mercy because they have been taken to a place where love can survive untainted.

²² See Bernice Slote, “Willa Cather: The Secret Web,” 9-10, for a discussion of Cather’s scriptural associations in this passage.

As Cather does herself, Ivar intuits the eternal in the temporal. For him, the Bible and nature are companion texts, complementing each other in their affirmation of an eternal spirit running through all things. This spirit is not Emerson's transcendental and nameless force but the personal God of the Psalmist, who not only has created a natural world and called it "good," but who also loves and guides the affairs of men. Ivar's God has established a moral universe with immutable laws of justice and love toward man and nature and holds men accountable for their adherence to or rejection of these laws.

But Ivar's God is also merciful. The peace that Cather imputes to the dead couple links them with Amédée and orthodox Christian beliefs. Amédée's life may have been cut short in an evil world, but he is ultimately victorious. His days had been played out under the shadow of the church, the "scene of his most serious moments and of his happiest hours." By a parallel connection to Emil's moment of epiphany in the same church, Cather implies "that that invisible arm" which "was still about Amédée" was also around Emil and Marie, and as Amédée had passed "through the church on earth . . . to the church triumphant" in heaven (252), so had the tragic couple.²³

Cather seems to imply that whether Emil and Marie could have lived out separately their vision of pure love is a moot question in a world where hate and unbridled passions can kill holy dreams. Cather is obviously working out a personal dilemma with her understanding of the claims of the Christian faith, especially within the evangelical tradition, and even more particularly, with the Baptists. As Cather reveals

²³ Cather focuses her religious themes in the novel within the contexts of both Catholic and Protestant Christianity. For her, creeds and fine points of doctrine were irrelevant. They shared a common truth as far as the relationship of God to man was concerned, in their emphasis of self-sacrificing love in human relationships as an evidence of piety, and in their deeply felt expressions of religious devotion to God. Cather was early introduced to Catholic worship on the Divide in Nebraska, when her family visited the French church, and in Red Cloud, as we see in *My Antonia* where Jim Burden attends various functions at the Catholic Church.

through Claude in *One of Ours*, she had a problem with the doctrine of faith and works; that one's acts accurately reflect the state of one's heart.²⁴ Sinful acts denote sinful hearts; righteous acts, pure hearts.²⁵ Making a thematic connection to Ivar's advice concerning the care of pigs, Cather rejects the notion that external purity automatically denotes interior purity. One might be clean on the outside and be as filthy as swine on the inside; one might be a respectable pig, but he is still a pig.²⁶ In *O Pioneers!* Cather exposes the contradictions she sees in the doctrine of her elders' church through the example of Emil Bergson and Marie Shabata. In that Emil's and Marie's love for each other is selfless and filled with religious feeling, it is holy and righteous. Such is Cather's judgment of her characters in the novel. She absolves them of mortal sin by implying they have been translated to the "church triumphant." In so doing she deconstructs the church's view that the outward necessity of circumstance makes the consummation of their love under the mulberry tree sinful.

Cather further illustrates her point in the story of Frank Shabata. After he kills his wife and her lover, he is convicted and sent to the state prison. Alexandra is inspired to visit her brother's killer after she again has a vision of her godlike lover. This time, however, "for the first time in her life, she saw [her lover], saw him clearly" (OP 282). Cather describes him in imagery more closely resembling the resurrected and enthroned Christ of Revelation, the Bridegroom of the Church, than a pagan god:

²⁴ Claude's dilemma is discussed in Chapter 5.

²⁵ This Baptist doctrine derives from the Calvinists who believed that one's acts verified one's election.

²⁶ Cather's pig metaphor as representing mankind's need for reform anticipates a later story by Flannery O'Connor. In the short story, "Revelation" (1965), O'Connor makes the point that even with outward orderliness and cleanliness, a pig is still a pig, just as Ruby Turpin's swine-like attitudes are still as obnoxious even if she herself is outwardly neat, clean, and respectable.

He was standing in the doorway of her room. His white cloak was thrown over his face, and his head was bent a little forward. His shoulders seemed as strong as the foundations of the world. His right arm, bared from the elbow, was dark and gleaming, like bronze, and she knew at once that it was the arm of the mightiest of all lovers. She knew at last for whom it was she had waited, and where he would carry her. That, she told herself, was very well. Then she went to sleep. (282-83)

Filled with the supporting power of her Divine Lover, Alexandra visits the poor man in prison to forgive one who knew not what he did. Alexandra believes that he “had been less in the wrong than any of them, and he was paying the highest penalty” (284). To her it “seemed unreasonable that life should have landed him in such a place as this” (296). His crushing guilt had turned him into something almost inhuman. Alexandra’s offer of forgiveness and help barely breaks through his fog.

But Alexandra’s vision does not satisfy her questions. She is left bewildered over the whole episode, and her bewilderment is Cather’s own. How could someone with such a “happy, affectionate nature” as Marie bring “destruction and sorrow to all who had loved her” (296)? Alexandra hates to think that there was “something wrong in being warm-hearted and impulsive” (296), and, we could add, sexual.

Could a God of love, Cather seems to ask, who implants the instinctual as well as the spiritual need for love in man, condemn one who responds to it, even if the circumstances are wrong? Has He created an impossible world where desire and divine law are forever enemies? Should not His plan for man’s redemption as taught in the Gospel of Christ include a means by which one can be wholly fulfilled in spite of chance or circumstance? And how can one’s deeds be judged unrighteous if they are the result of a disordered mind and not a wayward will?

Cather's resolution seems to be that one can be pure only by separating one's self from the world, as Ivar does, or by sublimating and denying one's sexual self, as Alexandra does, or by dying, as Emil and Marie do. One could deduce an even more chilling conclusion in the story: that man has been left unprotected, that Christianity offers no real hope for fulfillment or redemption in this life, that man has been given the desire and capacity for great love, both spiritual and physical, without the power to recreate the Eden which is required for its fulfillment.

Cather could have left her dilemma there and discarded faith as impossible at best and misleading at worst. But the examples of her Virginia elders continued to haunt her. They seemed to have found resolutions that she had not. So her quest continued, but not without difficulty and resistance.

After *O Pioneers!*, Cather continued to express a strong aversion to her elders' view of life. Writing Elizabeth Sergeant after *O Pioneers!* was published, Cather declared with iconoclastic fervor that "she no longer cared at all about the holy and sacred peculiarities of the people she had known when she was little" (WC:LA 260).²⁷ Cather makes sure that Sergeant, her friend associated with Eastern privileged culture, knows that she disdains those she had left behind and then hides her doubts behind the screen of artistic invention. Considering how much those "holy and sacred peculiarities" shape *O Pioneers!* and give it its power, one is struck by the deep division in Cather's own consciousness. For a woman of such directness and forthrightness, her contradictory duplicity in publicly denying the people to whom privately she is deeply drawn demonstrates just how troubling were her questions about their faith. It also demonstrates just how deeply she was torn between the need to be accepted by the Eastern intellectuals and the need to keep her attachment to her religious elders back

²⁷ A Woodress paraphrase of Cather's letter.

home.²⁸ That she is conscious of such duplicity and feels some guilt over it may be indicated in the name she gives to her divided professor in a later novel, *The Professor's House*. St. Peter in the Bible is the disciple who denies Christ three times out of fear that if he is associated with him, it will go badly for himself.

* * *

In her next novel, *The Song of the Lark* (1915), Cather puts herself on stage more directly and more undisguised than she has dared before.²⁹ Even though in many respects Cather idealized herself in *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra is much different from Willa Cather. Not so Thea Kronborg. She is vintage Cather, a driven, brilliant artist who escapes the bonds of a parochial childhood. As if to reinforce her alleged disdain for her religious heritage, Cather takes some smarting jabs at the petty and lackluster religious crowd back home. Yet even in this novel that most glowingly celebrates the Catherian artist, Cather cannot ignore the influence of her past, nor can she ignore the consequences of turning her back on a type of life represented by her humble religious elders. As Van Ghent suggests, the “end of Thea’s story explores both the splendors and the penalties of success, the bleak asceticism [sic] which the artist pays for the presumptions of his gift” (80).

Thea Kronborg is ostensibly patterned after the opera singer Olive Fremstad, but “there is much of Willa Cather’s artistic childhood in Olive Fremstad’s, just as there is

²⁸ Susan J. Rosowski identifies Cather’s narrative mode of creating two selves for her central characters, the outer, public self, and the second inner, creative self. She observes that Cather’s characters experience growth as they more fully realize the inner, hidden self. I am suggesting that these characters reflect Cather’s own division which, at bottom, is a result of her contrary reactions to the religion of her elders and her alternating acceptance and rejection of their place in her life.

²⁹ Dorothy Van Ghent believes that the “ponderously bulky novel” unfortunately “suffers from autobiographic compulsion” (80).

much of the writer's view of art in the singer's statements." The "complex meshing of Willa Cather's personal experience and attitudes with the great accomplishment and career of Olive Fremstad constitutes the substance of *The Song of the Lark*" (Giannone, "The Lyric Artist" 131).³⁰ Discovering Fremstad produced another one of the many shocks of recognition for Cather which freed her to further explore her own life. Eudora Welty observes that recognition "was for Cather a learning process that didn't stop; and Willa Cather was a born learner" (153). In this autobiographical novel that most closely traces Cather's early life, Thea Kronborg endures the depressing and lifeless meetings of her father's church to please him, dead meetings attended by deadened old people, whose stolid and acquiescent silence creates an even more deadening atmosphere. Yet there is something below the surface that grips young Thea, an underlying truth of their lives, that sounds a responsive note in her being. As the narrator tells us, for all of Thea's life, those old people at the prayer meetings haunt her thoughts.

This short paragraph in the novel makes direct reference to Cather's old folks back home and significantly foreshadows not only Cather's future direction in her work, but it also makes a critical connection to Thea Kronborg's life-changing experience when she visits the Indian ruins in the Southwest. Young Thea Kronborg has just returned home from a dreary prayer meeting, bored, exasperated, and impatient to get back to reading her thrilling *Anna Karenina*, when the narrator reflects that

Thea would have been astonished if she could have known how, years afterward, when she had need of them, those old faces were to come back to her, long after they were hidden away under the earth; that they would seem to her then as full of meaning, as mysteriously marked by Destiny,

³⁰ Cather's friend Elizabeth Sergeant writes that Cather "was deeply--by her own account--identified with her character [Thea Kronborg], who had many of her traits and had undergone many of her own experiences" (WC:AM, 137).

as the people who danced the mazurka under the elegant Korsunsky. (SL 165)

Cather's changing attitude toward "those old faces" from her past parallels her vacillating views of Tolstoi during the same period. The similarities and the incongruities between Cather's and Tolstoi's views on religion and Christianity are intriguing. In her rebellion against her Protestant heritage, Cather loved the early Tolstoi and despised the later one. *Anna Karenina* had more of moral purpose in it, she said when she was twenty-two, than all the "prosy tracts" that Tolstoi had written since his religious conversion. "He may not have been so good a man when he wrote for the pleasure of mankind as now when he writes for the glory of God, but the saints themselves would confess he was a better novelist."³¹ Besides, art in its best form "is the highest moral purpose in the world," and if "God is at all a literary God *Anna Karenina* will certainly do more toward saving its author's soul than all the prosy tracts he has written since, from *The Kreutzer Sonata* . . . to the *Master and Man*."³² Willa Cather, the college student, sees Tolstoi as an example of one who later in life let his religion destroy his art, and she is fiercely determined to not let the same thing happen to her. Hence, she throws Jonah overboard, and with him also goes the common, homely arts and religious values associated with her own heritage, an association she makes explicit in her outburst against Tolstoi: "When Count Tolstoi . . . was a wicked man, he wrote one of the greatest novels of his country," but now "that he lives like a recluse and makes pea soup for Russian peasants he writes some of the most wearisome stuff that is published" (*Journal* 13; KA 378).

³¹ One of Cather's more interesting contradictions is that during this time of viewing religion as an enemy to art, she never did abandon her belief that the *Pilgrim's Progress* was art of the highest sort. (See KA, 323 and 337.)

³² *Nebraska State Journal*, May 17, 1896, 13; rpt. in KA, 378.

Even though Willa Cather never reversed her opinion about *Anna Karenina*, she did ameliorate her scorn of Tolstoi's making "pea soup for Russian peasants" by herself embracing her older family members' example of Christian servitude.³³ By the time she wrote *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in 1927, she reversed her opinions so dramatically that then she maintained that the best in art was represented by those who have accepted a religious vocation. Willa Cather would eventually deflate the glamour of "danc[ing] the mazurka under the elegant Korsunsky" and would lift "those old faces . . . hidden away under the earth" to heroic heights in all the fiction in which homemaking is lifted to the realms of highest art.

The narrator's prophecy that Thea Kronborg would be haunted by "those old faces" back home is subtly but unmistakably fulfilled even in *The Song of the Lark*. An early indication of it comes after Thea hears for the first time Dvorak's *Symphony in E Minor*. As she listens rapt and fully engrossed, the sounds call up memories of home. The home Cather describes, however, refers to an earlier home than Moonstone (Red Cloud). It is of "first memories, first mornings long ago; the amazement of a new soul in a new world; a soul new and yet old . . . ; a soul obsessed by what it did not know, under the cloud of a past it could not recall" (SL 251). The connection is even clearer in Part IV. Titled "Ancient People," it records Thea's experience of what could be called a

³³ One wonders what biases Lionel Trilling brings to his readings of Cather's works when he calls her celebration of the everyday a "mystical concern with pots and pans," or how he could be referring to the humble service of Grandmother Burden or Mahailey or Neighbour Rosicky or Old Mrs. Harris when he claims that Cather's praise of domesticity comes close to "an oblique defense of gentility" or "the gaudy domesticity of bourgeois accumulation glorified in the *Woman's Home Companion*" (12). Trilling grossly misjudges Cather's backward look "to the ideals of a vanished time" as "the weary response to weariness," a "weariness which comes . . . from an exacerbated sense of personal isolation and from the narrowing of all life to the individual's sensitivities" He fails to see that when Cather looks back to her heritage, she is more specifically looking back to a religious world view in which there is no backwards or forwards (12).

religious conversion among the remnants of a simple, religious culture in Panther Cañon. The Indians' orderly, neat houses and the artistically designed water pots connect in Cather's imagination with the old culture she knew in Virginia and to people who were "full of meaning."

In the cañon, Thea "was getting back to the earliest sources of gladness that she could remember," and "she felt completely released from the enslaving desire to get on in the world" (SL 369). With her mind freed of false values, "it was as if she were waiting for something to catch up with her" (372-73), memories that "had once been a part of herself" (374). The ancient dwellings emit "a dignified, unobtrusive sadness" (375), qualities Cather always associated with her grandparents, a sadness for the lost condition of humanity. "[T]hat peculiar sadness" was as a "voice out of the past, not very loud, that went on saying a few simple things to the solitude eternally" (375).

The fragments of pottery speak to Thea in revelatory tones. "[A]ll [the ancient people's] customs and ceremonies and their religion went back to water," and the carefully designed pots, made by the "cleverer ones," were "the envelope and sheath of the precious elements itself" (377). Cather here makes direct use of Christian typology. Christ is the water of life. For one to give a cup of water in charity, or to offer the "living water" of truth, is to participate in divine activity. Cather connects her act of artistic creation--the holding of truth in her fiction--to the domestic service of giving water in a beautiful vessel. Thea is thunderstruck when she sees the relationship of those water pots to her own artistic vessel, her voice. Just as the "strongest Indian need was expressed in those graceful jars, fashioned slowly by hand, without the aid of a wheel," so her greatest need would be expressed in her singing. Both the pots of the domestic artists and her voice of a professional artist are chalices containing the holy water of life.

Thea then associates the water pots with the stream in the cañon, the precious substance for which the pots are made. The image of the stream flowing through the dry

rocks recalls a passage in Isaiah 35 which prophesies the flourishing kingdom of the coming Messiah:

1. The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. . . .
4. Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God . . . will come and save you.
5. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.
6. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.

Thea's "dumb tongue" is loosed by the experience, and Cather associates her voice with this "stream in the desert" of Panther Cañon.

In the stream, "there was a continuity of life that reached back into the old time," and when Thea bathes in it, she does so ritualistically with "ceremonial gravity" (378). Cather's baptismal imagery, along with Christological metaphor, clearly associates her notions of art with her grandparents' religion. Even more significantly, however, the revelation of her own artistic vocation is linked with the religious vocation of her own "ancient people." Like Thea, she was bound "to a long chain of human endeavor" (380). The world seemed "older and richer" now, and Moonstone (Red Cloud) and Chicago (New York) "had become vague." As Thea thinks on things as they "had been in childhood" (not the childhood of Moonstone), "everything was simple and definite The things that were really hers separated themselves from the rest. Her ideas were simplified, became sharper and clearer. She felt united and strong" (380).

But in spite of the obvious connections she makes to her Christian past, especially her Christian elders, Cather again seemingly undercuts her approbation of it. "Only by

the merest chance" had Thea "ever got to Panther Cañon. There was certainly no kindly Providence that directed one's life" (382). It is significant, however, that Cather associates this uncaring Providence with Thea's parents, who "did not in the least care what became of one, so long as one did not misbehave and endanger their comfort" (382). Thea "had seen it when she was at home last summer--the hostility of comfortable, self-satisfied people toward any serious effort" (382). One might interpret this as Cather's indictment of her mother, but she also includes Thea's father, who thought that Thea's earnest and serious efforts at her vocation were "indecorous" (382). Neither of those censures would fit the Virginia elders, as Cather amply shows in the work that celebrates their lives.

Cather's glowing discovery of the twinlike nature of her elders' religious vocation and her own would not last. The concluding section of *The Song of the Lark* is a telling statement of Cather's judgment of the life of the professional artist, like herself, versus the more common kind, like her elders. Critics have generally wished that Cather would have ended the novel just as Thea reaches her goal as an artist because they see a downward movement after that section which results in an anticlimatic ending. Even though Cather later agreed with their analysis (WC:LL 272-73), she was not careless in putting in the last period of Thea's life. If analyzed in the light of the thesis I have been setting forth, the ending of the novel makes a great deal of sense.

Cather was exploring the consequences of a life given to art, the life she had chosen for herself. As Thea Kronborg gives herself more and more completely to art, she sinks deeper into a world that saps her of human relationships and human feeling.³⁴ The choices for the artist seem irreconcilable: in Michael Klug's words, it is either "Red Cloud" or "Byzantium."³⁵ Through her heroine, Cather is imaginatively living out the

³⁴ See Leon Edel's discussion of Thea, vis á vis Cather, in "Willa Cather: The Paradox of Success."

³⁵ See Klug's article for a discussion of Cather's internal pull between humanity and art.

consequences of her own choices and confirming what she is already discovering about her own life--that the artificial world of art is not for human habitation. It may be nice to visit there, but it is not nice to live there.³⁶ Frost's birch-swinger discovers the world is "the right place for love"; Cather concludes that it is the only place for love. Art without divine love shared between human and human is ultimately not art at all.³⁷

Thea Kronborg turns out to be a rather unappealing character after she achieves artistic fame. Cold and shriveled unless performing, divorced from humanity, she fits right in with the conclusion of Cather's other works which explore the life of the artist. Like her public, Cather would have liked to have kept the story upbeat and given it a happy ending, but her drive to find out the truth of things prevented her from such contrivance. However, by winding out the thread of the narrative to its inevitable end, Cather came to a turning point in her life and in her art. In her next novel, Cather overtly affirms her grandparents' religious views and the values of life that ensued from them, and henceforward, their presence in her fiction represents divinity in man.

* * *

³⁶ Louis Auchincloss in "Willa Cather" claims that the failure of the novel is not that in the end the heroine loses herself in her art, but that Cather loses her, and the book becomes a book about opera instead of an opera singer. I believe the two things are the same, because as much as Cather had infused herself into Thea, she was demonstrating that when one loses oneself in art, it is self-immolation, and all that remains is cold art. The thing that would have kept the opera singer alive in the book as well as the writer alive in human feeling was to continue close contacts with other humans through the ordinary acts of love and service.

³⁷ Ernest Earnest notes that as an artist Thea Kronborg lacks a capacity for lasting human affection, but he believes that Cather accepts Thea's values. I would agree that on the surface of the narrative, this is true. But there is a dark undertone that denies the surface text.

In *My Antonia* (1918), Cather turns her face homeward, and her family elders again become a locus of value. No longer is their influence something to escape from as it is in *The Song of the Lark*. Certain events in Cather's life may have contributed to her shift in point of view. In November of 1915, Isabelle McClung's father died, which precipitated the sale of the McClung home. The spacious home, which had so many of the qualities and amenities of her beloved home in Back Creek, Virginia, had been her haven for fifteen years. An even sharper disappointment that knocked the comfortable props out from under Willa was Isabelle's announcement that she would marry Jan Hambourg, a concert violinist. Isabelle was the love of Cather's life, and what must have appeared to her a betrayal of that love left her stunned (WC:LL 276-77). In reaction, Cather turned to those who had demonstrated faithfulness, not only towards herself, but to all other commitments in their lives.³⁸

During this dark period, Cather worked on what she called "something rather hard and dry," perhaps for the same reasons, she said, "that violinists play Bach after they have been working hard on very romantic modern things" (WC:LL 277). The "hard and dry" short stories were probably "The Bookkeeper's Wife" and "The Diamond Mine," the first another in a long line of stories concerned with unhappy marriage, and the second about the survival of art in a Philistine world (WC:LL 278-80). It is significant that in *My Antonia* Cather portrays one of the only two or three happy and completely fulfilling marriages in her fiction based on a real-life couple.

My Antonia gives a faithful portrait of Cather's Grandmother Caroline Cather and

³⁸ Critics have generally considered *The Professor's House* rather than *My Antonia* the result of Cather's reaction against the McClung upheaval. (See WC:LL, 371 for a summary of these views.) I am suggesting that *The Professor's House* was rather the culmination of her anguish, in which she vents her anger at Isabelle through the character of Lillian St. Peter. In *My Antonia*, Cather is showing by contrast examples of true faithfulness.

Grandfather William Cather (WC:LL 291). As Grandfather and Grandmother Burden, their values and character provide the touchstone for all that is worthy in human life generally as well as individually in the life of Jim Burden.

In this novel Cather's quest for meaning is emotional, not intellectual. This approach makes it possible for her to take the first step in redeeming the central place her grandparents inhabited in her affections and consciousness. By presenting Grandmother and Grandfather Burden and their religious world view through the perception of an adoring young grandson, Cather avoids having to face the intellectually troubling aspects of their creeds and practices. Only in a brief moment when the teenage Jim bumps against his grandparents' standards of conduct does Cather indicate any confrontation, and it is so mild as to be inconsequential.

Critics have generally ignored the place that Cather gives to Jim Burden's grandparents in the novel. The neglect is puzzling considering they are the prime movers and shapers of Jim's character in Book 1, which covers one third of the book. Their presence is felt on every page and in every circumstance. Even though they fade into the background after Book 1, they continue to hover throughout the remaining chapters, like the Holy Spirit, enlightening and illuminating Jim's experiences throughout his life. At times their influence seems to him restrictive, and their ways backward and unimportant. But in his mature analysis, the values he finds so enduring in Antonia at the end of the novel actually originate in his grandparents. Thus, the Burdens set the all-important framework of the novel's point of view and shape the tone of the novel's theme.

The novel is highly autobiographical and recounts Willa Cather's uprooting from Virginia and her early years in Nebraska. Elizabeth Sergeant observes that the novel contains the "pristine experience" of Cather, "remembered in maturity with meanings no child could fully apprehend" (WC:AM 15). Jim Burden is a male alter ego for Willa Cather (WC:LL 290), and even though Antonia Shimerda is pointed to in the title, the

central character is really Jim Burden. All others, including Antonia, are presented to illuminate his development and to be the vehicles by which he progresses.

My Antonia begins in the epic tradition of *The Odyssey*, the classic narrative which celebrates the universal yearnings for home. Cather's Odysseus is Jim Burden, who, in the Prologue, is a world-weary and time-battered businessman. Burden's material ventures and empty marriage have left him spiritually and emotionally depleted. He now turns homeward to find something valuable he has lost. The book is his narrative of memory, recounting how as an orphan, he journeyed from civilized Virginia to the vast unknown and blank prairie of Nebraska. Like a young Odysseus, young Jim sails on a wine-red sea longing for the warm hearth of home. Cather makes a direct connection between her novel and *The Odyssey* when she writes that Jim Burden finds himself in a country whose red grass "made all the great prairie the colour of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up" (15).³⁹ His introduction to this vast sea of grass was at night. Like Odysseus' bumping into rocks and shoals in his desperate ship, Jim bumps in a cart over the rough prairie on his way to his grandparents' home. He feels lost, "erased, blotted out." His faith in a kindly, overseeing Providence is gone, the kind of faith he knew back in Virginia, and out of a numb resignation to his plight, he assumes a fatalistic attitude of "what would be would be" (8).

As soon as Jim reaches his grandparents' home, all is well again. It sits in the middle of the vast ocean of grass as serene and secure as "a tight little boat in a winter sea" (65). Jim finds that his grandparents have brought his long-lost home with them and have created a new Virginia. When he wakes up in the morning in grandmother's warm house, it is full of light and order and comfort. The kitchen, especially is "heavenly safe and warm" (65) a welcome change from the dark and terrifying prairie.

³⁹ Bernice Slote was the first to discover the allusive significance of Cather's "prairie the colour of wine-stains." See *Kingdom of Art*.

From the evidence of the novel, we can see that Willa's grandparents retrieved for her the sense of home that was lost in the break from Virginia to Nebraska. Their home on the vacant prairie was like some protected medieval sanctuary in the center of a dangerous and disordered world, and her grandparents were like a ministering abbot and abbess. Cather's portrait of her grandparents makes careful use of details, but they do more to suggest than to describe. Although the narrator, Jim, exhibits great feeling and affection for his subject, his narrative is not sentimental nor does it ever point to itself.

For Grandmother and Grandfather Burden, all of life is religious. From morning prayers to evening devotions, everything is to be done on earth as it is in heaven. To Jim this practice of daily piety seems perfectly natural and proper. There is no hint in Jim Burden of the rebellion toward this religious upbringing that would later emerge in the adolescent Willa.

Grandfather Burden is "not demonstrative" but "deliberate and dignified," like a Biblical patriarch with a "beautiful crinkly, snow-white beard," yet his eyes are of a young man, "bright blue" with a "fresh, frosty sparkle" (12). Like Abraham, Grandfather Burden brought his God with him from Virginia to this Nebraska "promised land" and established his altar of worship in the wilderness.

Young Jim especially enjoys his grandfather's daily Bible readings to the family, as do the hired hands: "His voice was so sympathetic and he read so interestingly that I wished he had chosen one of my favourite chapters in the Books of Kings" (13). Jim is particularly "awed by his intonation of the word 'Selah,'" and even though he has no idea what the word means, his grandfather's utterance of it "became oracular, the most sacred of words" (13). According to the evidence of *My Antonia*, one of Cather's sharpest memories of her own Grandfather Cather was his Bible reading. Jim mentions that he especially likes a chapter in one of the Book of Kings, and a likely candidate for that favorite passage would be the story of David, the visionary poet-shepherd whose heroics

and kingly destiny match those of the hero-poets who underlie all of Cather's most memorable artists.

Caroline and William Cather, along with the other Virginia elders, gave Willa Cather a literary legacy through constant exposure to the Bible. It informs all her work. Their daily speech as well as their more formal religious observances reiterated scriptural cadences and teachings to the receptive child and drove the King James Version deep into her center of image and language making. It is woven tightly into her fiction, and the Bible's language, images, and themes become in themselves Cather's metaphor for her religious view of human life, creating what John Murphy calls Cather's "scriptural dimension" ("W.C. and Religion" 50).⁴⁰ Cather could hardly turn a phrase without a biblical allusion, and she was an avid reader of the Bible all her life (KA 60).

Grandfather Burden's prayers are "simple and moving." They are prompted by a deeply personal sense of a loving and concerned God, a divinity intimately involved in the common and everyday affairs of man in general and of persons in particular. Prayer releases his usual reticence, and through religious activity, he can express genuine feeling. His prayers "reflected what he was thinking about at the time," and his family "got to know his feelings and his views about things" chiefly through these prayers. They included "thanks for . . . food and comfort" and concern "for the poor and destitute in great cities, where the struggle for life was harder" than it was for them on the prairie. Jim's grandfather is naturally taciturn, so when he does talk, "his words had a peculiar force; they were not worn dull from constant use" (84-85).

Grandmother herself does not say prayers at the more formal family devotionals; they are, rather, as continual and as unpremeditated as breathing. She likes to visit, and if no one is around to listen, she talks "to the Lord," who seems as much a friend to her as

⁴⁰ See Woodress' essay for a summary of Cather's use of scriptural motifs. See Audrey M. Fetty, "Biblical Allusions in the Fiction of Willa Cather," for a detailed examination.

any neighbor. Jim notices that she is often in an attitude of inner attention, “as if she were looking at something, or listening to something, far away” (10). Her faith is rooted in a kind Providence who, she believes, will unobtrusively work his will and turn all things to good, and who will also remember people’s kind deeds to their credit and help them “out of many a scrape” when they don’t “realize that [they are] being protected by Providence” (70). Neither her faith nor her personality is the morbid sort. She is a cheerful woman who laughs at a hired hand’s story “until she cried” (68) and often sees the humor in life’s uncomfortable moments.

Both grandparents are artists by Willa Cather’s definition. They both have that gift of sympathy for humanity that not only recognizes the tragedy of man’s existence but transcends it. Their powerful love for people pervades the atmosphere of their home. Grandmother often cooks up dishes to keep destitute neighbors fed or to show them some time-tested method to make their lives more comfortable. Through her homemaking arts, she is a cheerful warrior against the cold, “man’s strongest antagonist,” and the warmth comes not just from her stove but from the fire of her heart. Like Demeter and the God of Genesis combined, she is creative and ingenious, yet practical and provident. Out of the chaos of wasted prairie, she has created a garden sheltered by a draw, tended with industry, and guarded with a snake stick for keeping the numerous reptiles out.

In an early moment of epiphany for Jim, which is one of the brightest moments in the novel, he is alone in this fertile Eden. Sitting in the middle of the warm yellow pumpkins, Jim feels “entirely happy”:

Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.

When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep. (18)

Cather connects Jim's sense of union with the universal to the religious feeling represented in his grandmother. Her sense of attachment to the divine is translated into her garden, which, in turn, communicates its mystical message to Jim.

Cather invests Grandfather Burden with qualities she saw in her own. He is a man who moves civilization along with Christian charity and superior skills. He feels a humane obligation to give others the benefit of his farming experience and knowledge, and he almost single-handedly pulls the unfortunate Shimerdas out of their pit of ignorance about farming ways. He believes, as does his wife, that for reasons not to be questioned, Providence has given to them more of the intelligence and "horse-sense" required for pioneering than to some others (78), and as Christians it is their duty and privilege to help others along.

Grandfather's mission, however, goes beyond sharing his skills and resources with those more poorly equipped than himself. He is a visionary, seeing with his penetrating eyes the great future for this virgin, uncultivated land. Just as Abraham and Alexander Bergson in *O Pioneers!*, he has been called out of the comfort and wealth of a familiar homeland to be a part of a grand scheme to tame and civilize a wild territory. It "took a clear, meditative eye like . . . grandfather's to foresee that they would enlarge and multiply until they would be, not the Shimerdas' cornfields, or Mr. Bushy's, but the world's cornfields . . ." (137).

In the novel, Cather makes Grandfather Burden's epic dream of conquest and of missionary endeavor, guided and empowered by a wise and loving Providence, a metaphor for her own artistic mission. As his crops will feed the world, so will her art. They differ only in substance, not nature. They both nourish, one with material sustenance, the other with artistic. They are both born out of a religious impulse, and both feed the spirit; they both require self-abnegation, and both are tied to an eternal reality but are realized in the temporal world.

In Cather's final analysis, however, in this novel as well as others, the art of service is the better art because it feeds both body and spirit. More important, it is given out of an unprideful heart, a claim that none of her artists, including herself, could make. The art of her grandparents is in harmony with both themselves and with mankind, with spiritual beauty and natural beauty. Theirs is not an escape from hard realities but rather a transformation, and the transformed material of their art--the land--will continue to grow and flourish for coming generations, unlike Willa's which, while perpetually beautiful, is perpetually frozen. Theirs, too, is more risky. Like a plucky spider, they have to recklessly throw out a filament of faith, depending on the coming generations to catch their vision; they cannot ensure its continued success. In this, they accomplish what Willa Cather never could--they let go the control of their art.

Is their faith vindicated in the novel? It would appear not. The Wick Cutters of the world move in; the snakes invade the garden, materialists and mercenaries take control, polluting and destroying all the painstakingly nourished fruit. So is the risk worth it? Paradoxically, Cather's answer is yes. Even though the whole world seems destroyed by avarice and materialism, as long as there are some, like her grandparents, to keep the faith, there will always be those few--those sensitive beings with a soul of the artist--who will listen and hear the sad music of humanity and know its duty.

Cather creates an unforgettable image to symbolize common artists like her grandparents. In a second moment of epiphany for Jim, he is on a picnic in the country outside of Black Hawk when, toward evening, he sees the arresting sight of a simple black plough high on a rise, and behind it, the huge red disk of the setting sun. The two images are telescoped, and against the sun, the plow becomes "heroic in size, a picture writing" (245). In the act of creating the scene in the novel, Cather joins her artistry with her grandparents'. Just as the sun, a symbol of divine transcendence, enlarges and gives significance to the humble plow, so do art and religion give the everyday and mundane features of human existence an enlarged meaning. Set against a

heroic and divine backdrop, these ordinary duties, homely necessities, and small kindnesses are raised to their proper significance. The soul is moved, and the imagination is stirred. This has always been the controlling metaphor behind religious service, and Cather makes it the metaphor for art.

Even when the Burdens leave the farm and relocate in Black Hawk, Jim feels closest to the people there who hold values most like those of his grandparents. Like the Burdens, Mr. and Mrs. Harling, their neighbors, had been “farming people,” and their place “was like a little farm, with a big barn and a garden, . . . even a windmill” (147). Mrs. Harling has the same creative power over the earth as the Burdens. When she makes her spring garden, the very ground seems to rumble, and Jim “could feel the stir of her undertaking through the willow hedge that separated our place from hers” (149). The whole matter of contentedness, however, goes beyond family or rural traditions. Jim is drawn to the lights of Mrs. Harling’s house just as he is to the lighted church windows. Their warmth and color and music have the same religious aura that the Burdens’ home does (174). Antonia, who now is in town working as a hired girl for the Harlings, also thinks the house is “like heaven” (175).

As with Willa Cather herself, Jim Burden never escapes the imbedded influence of his grandparents. When he goes off to the university and begins his love affair with the new “world of ideas,” everything fades for a time, and “all that went before [was] as if it had not been.” Yet the memory of the past survives, and “some of the figures of [his] old life seemed to be waiting for [him] in the new” (258). Invariably, in the midst of this new and impersonal “mental excitement,” his mind would “rush back to [his] own naked land and the figures scattered upon it” (262). He explains:

While I was in the very act of yearning toward the new forms . . . brought up before me, my mind plunged away from me, and I suddenly found myself thinking of the places and people of my own infinitesimal past.

They stood out strengthened and simplified now, like the image of the plough against the sun. (262)

Even though these memories included others besides his grandparents, it is clear that the memory of his elders was underneath all others. Just as their faith and innate intelligence brought fertility and civilization to a wild and barren land, so Jim Burden dreams of being “first to bring the Muse into his country.” As a budding university student learning of the great classical bards, Jim Burden, like Willa Cather, is inspired to become the twentieth-century Vergil, singing the creation poem of a great land in its transformation from chaos to garden. But the spiritual heritage that nourished the endeavor came from Virginia, not Nebraska.

Even when Jim Burden is introduced to the delights of the theatre, his enjoyment of it is heightened by the same emotion he experienced in the religious activities of his family’s earlier days. Watching a play with Lena Lingard “was like going to revival meetings with someone who was always being converted” (271). The emotion that springs from an artistic experience or a religious one comes from the same well and produces the same sense of youthful renewal and excited energy.

The further Jim moves away from his family roots, the more lost he becomes, as does Antonia Shimerda. But unlike Antonia, Jim does not find his way back, except in memory. Antonia is never very lost. Even though her great passion and love for life is betrayed by a shiftless man and a narrow little town, and even though for a time she endures hardship and shame, like *The Prodigal*, she eventually makes her way back to the land and finds the life that is suited to her spirit. Her calling is religious. “Father Kelly says everybody’s put into this world for something,” she tells the admiring Jim, “and I know what I’ve got to do.” In the city--the place of debilitating and lifeless aims--she would be miserable and “die of lonesomeness.” She has to be where she knows “every stock and tree, and where the ground is friendly” (320).

Antonia catches the spirit of Grandmother Burden, and in spite of some of her unfeminine ways, becomes the quintessential earth mother. "She is gentle and confiding; service to others is the very breath of her being" (Van Doren 18). Cather is careful to show the correspondences between Grandmother Burden and Antonia, an effort that has totally escaped critics' notice. When Jim returns years later and finds Antonia with a good husband and a brood of happy children, he sees a reincarnation of the type of home and family life he knew as a child. Like Grandmother Burden, Antonia is now an older "stalwart brown" woman who "has not lost the fire of life" (221, 336). Her years have been full with giving. She is a part of a great "human effort" that was now reaping the harvest in "long, sweeping lines of fertility." To Jim, the changes seem "beautiful and harmonious," like a great work of art; "it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea" (306).

Cather shows through the parallel examples of Antonia's marriage and Grandmother Burden's that a good marriage, just as good art, must be a classical balance of reason and passion. Antonia's disastrous affair with Larry Donovan is the inevitable result of the dangerous powers of eros unchecked by reason and friendship. But with Anton Cuzak, Antonia finds an equilibrium, and their combined strengths achieve harmony: "she was the impulse, and he the corrective" (MA 358). Like the Burdens, they have a common dream that turns their view outward instead of being directed only toward each other.

Cather clearly is positing that such a marriage, albeit rare, is art itself, and its realization is in the fruitfulness of the garden and the nursery, and results in harmony in the home. Seeing Antonia with her children grouped about her, Jim is "conscious of a kind of physical harmony" (349). The Cuzak children proudly show Jim the fruit cave where Antonia has stored provisions for her family--barrels of pickles and watermelon rinds, shelves of glass jars filled with cherries and strawberries and crabapples. Out of

this dark womb of the earth, as with Antonia's own, comes abundant life. Her kitchen is as enticing and warm as Grandmother Burden's was to young Jim.

Cather creates another thematic connection by paralleling the gardens of Antonia and Grandmother Burden. They both create order out of chaos, in Antonia's case, with an orchard, half cherry and half apple. Antonia and Anton jointly break the hard earth and plant the trees. They nurture them as if they were their own children, carrying out buckets of water even after a wearing day of work. Protected by a veritable fortress of hedges, "the orchard seemed full of sun, like a cup," and Jim feels "the deepest peace," a mirror experience of the one he had in the hedge-lined garden of his grandmother (341).

Antonia Shimerda Cuzak, not Jim Burden, is the most realized heir of Grandmother Burden, just as Annie Sadilek--the "real" Antonia-- was a realization of Caroline Cather, not Willa. When *My Antonia* was published, Willa Cather's friends and family in Red Cloud, including the Miner family--the Harlings in the novel--for whom Annie worked, were amazed that Cather had been so inspired by a girl whom they thought quite ordinary. "They never saw anything at all remarkable in Annie Sadilek. She was a good, trustworthy, industrious girl, and people were fond of her; but it would never have occurred to them to regard her as a romantic character" (WCL 25). But romantic she was to Willa, who saw in Annie a quality of character and spirit akin to her grandparents' and to all who she thought had dipped into the deepest reservoirs of life. Antonia

lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true. . . . [S]he still had that something which fires the imagination, could stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. (353)

Caroline Cather and Annie Sadilek are examples of the fully realized artist. They accomplish what Alexandra or Thea Kronborg--or Willa Cather--do not. They create the

finest art without sacrificing their contact with humanity. In fact, their art gets its power from service to humanity, and the more selfless it is, the more powerful it becomes. That is why in old age both Grandmother Burden and Antonia are so vital; the more they give of themselves in this artistic venture, the more they have to give, unlike Alexandra, who has no creative outlet after the land is tamed and Emil is dead, and unlike Thea Kronborg, whose energy is sapped the longer she exercises her art. Their art is static; Caroline's and Antonia's is dynamic. Their labors in the home and in the garden and in the community are passed down to the next generation, not in the form of a permanent artifact, but in human lives who have been enriched by their endeavors, and who in turn, will pass it on to succeeding generations. The paradox is that the art that Cather implies is inferior--her own kind--is the art that has created such memorable characters as Antonia Cuzak and Grandmother Burden and is the vehicle by which they will be kept alive for succeeding generations.⁴¹

Having made the connection between Antonia and Grandmother Burden, Willa Cather gives tribute and full credit to the influence that Caroline Cather had on her own life. With the following words Cather could as well have been expressing these sentiments to her own Grandmother and Grandfather Cather as Jim Burden does to Antonia: "The idea of you is part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don't realize it. You really are a part of me" (321).

James Woodress claims that "[f]ew novels are likely to be read longer than *My Antonia*. . . . [It is] a narrative of great emotional power" (WC:LL 293). Cather herself said of this book that "[it is] the best thing I've done. . . ." In it she felt that she had made "a [significant] contribution to American letters" (WC:LL 293).

⁴¹ See Mary E. Rucker, "Prospective Focus in *My Antonia*," for a discussion of Cather's mission in writing the story. Rucker suggests that the novel reveals a duel conflict in Jim, that of a pull toward both the ideal of agrarian life and a literary destiny.

In her next novel, *One of Ours* (1922), Cather makes a distinction between a faith that produces noble and admirable people, and a type of false faith that acts as a cover for mean-spiritedness and small-mindedness. This novel marks for Cather another subtle yet unmistakable advance toward home for evidences of religious reality and true faith, in this case found in the examples of Claude Wheeler's mother and the housemaid, Mahailey. But instead of making her Cather grandparents the models of true faith, she turns to her Grandmother Rachel Boak.

It is significant that Cather took time out from working on *One of Ours* during the Christmas of 1919 to write a long story "just for fun, an uncharacteristic act but one that turned out well" (WC:LL 309). The story, "Coming, Aphrodite!," is one about Eastern artists, as far removed from the prairie or the themes of the Nebraska novels as she could get. It is almost as if Cather had to reassure herself as she was writing *One of Ours* that she had indeed escaped the backward prairie and was truly an accepted part of that world of culture she had worked so hard to enter, the world her young cousin (as Claude Wheeler) had so yearned for yet never achieved. It is an irony of her literary life that this story inspired a volume of stories all about the world of art and artists, *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920), over which the reviewers raved. One anonymous reviewer for the *Nation* wrote better than he knew when he called the volume "the triumph of mind over Nebraska" (WC:LL 312), for that is exactly what Cather was attempting to do. But this dubious triumph was not to last.

In Cather's next novel, she deals with her religious heritage and her Virginia elders only by negation. In *A Lost Lady* (1923), Cather appears on the surface to present universal truth, the human ideal, and moral failure only within the philosophical framework of art, not religion. Turning her back on the more orthodox treatment of sin, as in the tragic story of Emil and Marie in *O Pioneers!*, she defines sin in this novel as an artistic gaff. When young Niel Herbert discovers his ideal woman, Marian Forrester, in a sexual indiscretion, "[i]t was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal"

(LL 87). Thus, Marian Forrester is omitted from the rolls of the honored pioneers, say most critics, not because of moral failure, but because she lacks the artist-pioneer vision that her venerable husband possesses.⁴² I believe, however, that Cather strongly suggests that Marian Forrester's aesthetic failure is quite different from a failure of a pioneering vision (unless one is referring to a certain strength of character required of both). Rather, Marian is indeed guilty of moral failure, the narrator's comment notwithstanding, because she prostitutes her feminine beauty and charm in order to advance her own fortunes in a male-dominated culture, an act which Cather certainly condemns as morally deficient in her other work. Given Cather's notion at the time of the writing of this novel that art is the highest religion, an aesthetic failure would certainly be a direr "sin" than whatever society or the church might call a moral sin. Marian Forrester is one more of Cather's natural artists who sells her soul for material security.⁴³

* * *

Willa Cather returns more specifically to her Cather grandparents in the next novel. Cather paid the most direct tribute to Caroline Cather in *My Antonia*, but in 1925, she created a character in *The Professor's House*--a novel which maps her own dark night of the soul--who alone shines out from an otherwise very dismal backdrop. "Nothing," writes Woodress, "can hide the spiritual malaise of Professor St. Peter/Willa

⁴² For opposing views to the common one, see Patricia Yongue, "A Lost Lady: The End of the First Cycle" and Gail Eifrig, "Willa Cather: An Introduction."

⁴³ John Hollander in "A Lost Lady" makes the following comment which, for anyone fully acquainted with Cather's themes, would find impossible to make: "For Mrs. Forrester is far from 'lost,' if we take the title to denote a lady bewildered, a lady who has lost her way or her condition. . . . [S]he ends her life in wealth and only faintly clouded dignity" (172). See Patricia Lee Yongue, "Marian Forrester and Moll Flanders: Fortunes and Misfortunes," for a discussion of two female characters who exemplify

Cather from anyone in adequate command of her personal history and public statements” (WC:LL 367).⁴⁴ In the novel, Cather creates Augusta, a character modeled on one close to home who might have an answer for her *angst*.⁴⁵

Augusta, St. Peter’s old sewing woman, is one of Cather’s quiet saints of superior and unquenchable faith.⁴⁶ A devout German Catholic, Augusta looks a great deal like the narrator’s description of Grandmother Burden in *My Antonia*, “tall, large-boned, flat and stiff, with a plain, solid face, and brown eyes not destitute of fun” (PH 23). Although her faith is sometimes grim like Caroline Cather’s, it is ultimately stabilizing and full of truth.

Augusta occupies a comparatively small but prominent place in *The Professor’s House*, like so many other of Cather’s domestics. She and Godfrey St. Peter share a Spartanlike workroom in St Peter’s old house for a few weeks every spring and fall. They enjoy an uncommon camaraderie, and St. Peter has a particular fondness for this “reliable, methodical” woman (16).

Just as Caroline Cather is a mirror for Cather, reflecting her own history, so is Augusta for St. Peter: “How much [Augusta] reminded [St. Peter] of, to be sure!” (25). She was there with him when the desire for his life’s work first came on him, that “dazzling,” “beautiful,” “utterly impossible thing!” (25), and when his dream would

woman’s predicament when either emotionally or economically dependent on powerful men.

⁴⁴ See Woodress, WC:LL, 368-70, for a list of the many striking resemblances between Willa Cather and Godfrey St. Peter.

⁴⁵ That the writing of the novel was painful for Cather is evidenced by the fact that she said it “was certainly not her favorite among her books” (WC:LL, 366), and she thought it “a nasty, grim little tale and wondered why it seemed to be selling better than any of her books so far” (367).

⁴⁶ John J. Murphy identifies the religious nature of the novel and places Augusta at the center of its framework. See “Willa Cather and Religion,” 55-60.

flounder or his energy lag, the briefest contact with her lifted him out of depression and gave him renewed vigor. Here Cather makes a connection between Augusta and St. Peter's original boyhood self. The implication is that Augusta's presence reminds Peter of his best self that was evident in his earliest years, and that somehow the same power for living that is in her now he had experienced as a boy.

In his psychological probing of St. Peter, Leon Edel notes that St. Peter's attachment to his study and to the motherly Augusta is decidedly "infantile" ("A Cave of One's Own" 207). Edel also points out that St. Peter's study has some resemblance to the study which Isabelle McClung prepared for Cather in the McClung home and in which Cather was able to feel inspiration and write prolifically. (Here Cather "put together her first book of verse, began to publish short stories, and finally her first volume of tales" [212]. Even after moving to New York, she would return often to Pittsburgh to write.) After Isabelle McClung married Jan Hambourg and moved to France, the couple prepared a study in their home for Cather's use, but she could never write there (213), just as St. Peter cannot write in the new study in the strange house. In the novel, Cather imaginatively replaces the "unfaithful" Isabelle in her writing study with her faithful grandmother.

Augusta's presence revives St. Peter's youthful experience which had been obscured by time and hurtful experiences and which clothed him in a false persona. In turn, Augusta's influence reconnects him in memory and imagination to an authentic self which he had almost forgotten. The bare dress forms in St. Peter's study together with his attachment to Augusta suggest that she holds the identity of his most natural garment. Therein does Cather make her own connection to Caroline Cather. She seems to recognize by an elemental, almost unconscious method, that reattaching herself to whatever her grandmother represents will revive her spirit. That "something" she represents is indeed "protected from the vicissitudes of time" because it is of a religious nature, the "thing not named."

Cather makes double metaphoric use of the dress forms. St. Peter “had grown to like the reminders of herself that she left in his work-room--especially the toilettes upon the [dress forms].” Augusta’s artistry with the cold, wire cages transforms them into something of color, warmth, and shape. They even transform St. Peter’s feelings of disappointment with his wife and daughters: “Sometimes she made those terrible women entirely plausible!” (101). One of the dress forms is in the likeness of St. Peter’s wife, Lillian, whose character in some respects resembles Willa Cather’s mother.

The inset narrative of the novel, “Tom Outland”’s Story,” serves as an important contrast to the other parts of the novel in working out the religious theme. Tom Outland reminds St. Peter of his younger self, at first unpolluted by false values but later guilty of the sin of unforgiveness. John Murphy notes that perhaps “more than anything, Tom’s story is confessional literature” (“Willa Cather and Religion” 58) and reveals a slice out of Cather’s own life that was painful for her to face. In this story, which could be a novella on its own, Tom Outland has an epiphanal experience in the Blue Mesa similar to Thea Kronborg’s in Panther Cañon. But more than that, the story is of “youthful defeat,” something that Tom keeps to himself for many years.

Tom finds some valuable Indian artifacts in the Mesa, and while he is in Washington, D.C. seeking financial backing for further exploration, his buddy, Roddy Blake, sells the priceless artifacts to an opportunistic foreign dealer, not knowing their true value. He has done it out of a pure heart, though; he planned to give the money to Tom for his college education. But Tom does not care about motives; he is furious and inconsolable and hates Roddy for his ignorance, for being too stupid to not recognize the value of true art when he sees it. Tom withholds forgiveness even after Roddy expresses his regret and breaks off their friendship. Even though Tom feels “an ache in [his] arms to reach out and detain [Roddy],” his pride in his superior values makes him “absolutely powerless to do so” (247).

Cather follows this scene with Tom's regeneration. He visits the Canyon of the ancient Cliff Dwellers, the same setting that had put Thea Kronborg back in touch with her ancestors. Lying "down on a solitary rock that was like an island in the bottom of the valley," Tom looked up and above him, the "Cliff City lay in a gold haze against its dark cavern." It "all came together in [his] understanding" (250). Tom explains what happens next:

For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion. I had read of filial piety in the Latin poets, and I knew that was what I felt for this place. It had formerly been mixed up with other motives; but now that they were gone, I had my happiness unalloyed. (251)

Tom's discovery of "filial piety" produces in him a flood of creative energy and a determination to find Roddy and restore their relationship. But Roddy cannot be found, and Tom discovers that "[a]nyone who requites faith and friendship as [he] did will have to pay for it" (253). Immediately from this scene, Cather returns us to St. Peter, the older representative of herself, who, like Tom, is still paying for a similar betrayal. Cather links Tom's betrayal of his friend to St. Peter's betrayal of the better self he had known as a child. The connection between both of these to Cather's own life is in her adult betrayal of the love and communion she had as a child with her grandparents. Her pride in her superior intelligence and artistic gift made her dismiss the worth of her elders and condemn their seeming backwardness and cultural ignorance. She fictionally redeems herself in the next scene by having her alter ego saved by the woman who most resembles her Grandmother Cather.

In the last section of the novel, Augusta rescues Godfrey St. Peter from accidental asphyxiation. He reflects that Augusta had always been a "corrective influence," much the same way that Caroline had been in her letters to Jennie, or as Grandmother Burden is for Jim in *My Antonia*:

Very often she gave him some wise observation or discreet comment to begin the day with. She wasn't at all afraid to say things that were heavily, drearily true, and though he used to wince under them, he hurried off with the feeling that they were good for him, that he didn't have to hear such sayings half often enough. Augusta was like the taste of bitter herbs; she was the bloomless side of life that he had always run away from--yet when he had to face it, he found that it wasn't altogether repugnant. (280)

Like Caroline Cather (and also like Rachel Boak and Sidney Gore), Augusta was at various times called away to assist a family touched by death, and St. Peter

didn't mind hearing Augusta announce these deaths which seemed to happen so frequently along her way, because her manner of speaking about it made death seem less uncomfortable. She hadn't any of the sentimentality that comes from a fear of dying. She talked about death as she spoke of a hard winter or a rainy March, or any of the sadnesses of nature. (280)

At this time of his own crisis of the soul, as he looks in the face of his own mortality,

[i]t occurred to St. Peter . . . that he would rather have Augusta with him just now than anyone he could think of. Seasoned and sound and on the solid earth she surely was, and, for all her matter-of-factness and hard-handedness, kind and loyal. (280-281)

Like Augusta, Caroline Cather also came to terms with life under the auspices of faith, and as a great rock in a storm, she stood unmoved. Whatever questions she entertained concerning the ways of God to man, she reserved them for some eternal day.

As a “poor short sighted mortal,” she wrote to Jennie, she could not understand or give reasons for life’s tragedies, but she trusted that some day in the next life her Saviour would make it “all plain.”⁴⁷

In her portrayal of Augusta, Willa Cather fuses realism and romanticism. For Augusta, religious faith is not a deterrent to nor an escape from clear thinking; rather, it is the necessary agent for a balanced view of life. She of all people known to St. Peter understands the deepest meanings of human existence, sees a higher and truer reality than could ever be guessed at by just looking at the twisted waste and unrelenting pain of the temporal world.

As we see in *My Antonia*, Cather associates Caroline Cather with the faithful clothing and feeding of those in her charge. In this novel, Augusta and St. Peter share a common workroom upstairs, he for his writing, she for her sewing. In St. Peter’s mind, Augusta and her endeavors are so intertwined with his own that when he is readying to move to the new house, he cannot bring himself to part with the dress forms. He finds “some difficulty in separating [their] life work” from each other--his artistic endeavors in the writing of the historical volumes, and her art of dressmaking.

With these images, Cather joins religion to art, and again by inference, her grandmother and herself. Cather associates as she often does, the painstaking homecrafts with her own careful craft of writing. The tools for the execution of St. Peter’s art and for Augusta’s self-giving service are in the same attic study: Augusta’s dress forms, the symbol of the homely arts, and St. Peter’s writing desk and materials, the symbols of artistic expression.

St. Peter himself affirms their twinlike functions in a passionate lecture he delivers to his class at the university. In it he condemns modern technology and science for distracting modern man with superficial comforts and impoverishing him with counterfeit

⁴⁷ Caroline Cather to Jennie Cather Ayre, January 22, 1875; quoted WC:EM, 23.

pleasures, for turning sin into a psychological phenomenon and making individual action of no consequence:

We were better off when even the prosaic matter of taking nourishment could have the magnificence of a sin. I don't think you help people by making their conduct of no importance--you impoverish them. As long as every man and woman who crowded into the cathedrals on Easter Sunday was a principal in a gorgeous drama with God, glittering angels on one side and the shadows of evil coming and going on the other, life was a rich thing. 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. (68-69)

But Cather's notion of religion here revealed through St. Peter is not one born of revelation, like Augusta's Christianity. Its dogma claims that it was conceived and designed totally outside of man's efforts, even outside the efforts of artists. St. Peter's religion is in nature closer to the ancient Greeks', which, as Edith Hamilton suggests, was brought into being by their own powers of intellect to serve the necessity of their own highest aspirations (13-23). That this is Cather's view at this juncture is plain in St. Peter's lecture:

The Christian theologians went over the books of the Law, like great artists, getting splendid effects by excision. They reset the stage with more space and mystery, throwing all the light upon a few sins of great

dramatic value--only seven, you remember, and of those only three that are perpetually enthralling. With the theologians came the cathedral-builders; the sculptors and glass-workers and painters. They might, without sacrilege, have changed the prayer a little and said, *Thy will be done in art, as it is in heaven*. How can it be done anywhere else *as it is in heaven*? (69)

But as fervently as St. Peter believes in the efficacy of a religion of art, in the end it fails him. As with the Hellenistic Greeks whose disintegration of faith in the truth behind the myths brought about the destruction of any real function for the myths in either society or individual lives, so St. Peter's claims for a manmade religion either in myth or art ultimately crumble without a belief in the underlying truth of the myth.

Merrill Skaggs believes that St. Peter's near-suicide is the turning point in his search for value, and he now lets go his intellectual approach to religion. Cather later told Robert Frost that the novel is about "letting go with the heart,"⁴⁸ implying that she is letting her heart take precedence over her head. Skaggs puts it thus: that Cather is advocating "jumping in or committing oneself with one's heart" in a "leap of faith."

Such a leap, we surmise Cather knew as well as Kiekegaard, St. Augustine or Jonathan Edwards, is not an act of the rational intellect but of the emotions. At least what saves St. Peter is not the highly trained rational faculties which have already surrendered, but his visceral responses, aided by Augusta, who has more wisdom and religion, if not more learning, than he. (397)

⁴⁸ In the copy of *The Professor's House* which Cather gave to Frost, she wrote, "This is really a story about 'letting go with the heart,'" (Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination*, 100).

Cather concludes that Augusta's religious feeling is superior to St. Peter's reason. Augusta has been given the gift of faith, a gift that, to this point, neither St. Peter nor Cather can claim. It is the same gift Cather witnessed in the Christian beliefs and practices of Caroline Cather. To Augusta--and to Caroline--the holiness and mercy of God and the sins of man are not mere inventions to make life seem more meaningful. But in spite of Augusta's efforts to breathe more life into St. Peter--literally and figuratively--St. Peter finds neither Augusta's religion nor his art sufficient to give him future happiness. And neither would Cather for some time to come.

Because of her faith in the truth of the creeds, Caroline Cather had Augusta's same untroubled acceptance of life's dark and unfathomable realities. In the novel, Cather reveals that Augusta's calm resides in a deep well of faith that believes in a benevolent and just God who would eventually make right the wrongs of fallen nature. The task, until that time, was to love well in this world while keeping one's inner eyes fixed on another. In "Willa Cather and *The Professor's House*," David Stouck suggests that the novel itself shows the superiority of serving humanity over seeking power through self-fulfillment or in acquiring possessions, and that Augusta is an example of one who can relinquish power without relinquishing human sympathy. Robert McGill points out that in Augusta, Cather creates one whose views can counter the heartbreak encountered by St. Peter, but more than that, she is one who embodies the qualities that create an enduring civilization. Evidently to Willa, so was Caroline Cather.⁴⁹

My Mortal Enemy, published in 1926, is a fitting coda to *The Professor's House*. It is Cather's darkest novel, "the most bitter piece of fiction she ever wrote" (WC:LL

⁴⁹ James Maxfield poses the question that, if St. Peter comes to believe in Augusta's view, why does he not take her as his model? Maxfield believes that given his nature, that would be impossible for St. Peter, even though he seems ready to do so. He has spent his life celebrating romances of the imagination and solitude; Augusta has spent her life in service to her fellow mortals. Maxfield recognizes Cather's central dilemma.

380). The central character is Myra Henshawe whose nature reflects a continuation of St. Peter's *angst* and who embodies the last throes of Cather's own desperate search for faith. Myra is a novel mix of Cather's mother and Cather herself, a sufficient reason for Cather to have been more secretive concerning the provenance of this novel than with any other. Woodress confirms that "Cather made a greater effort than usual to cover her tracks in creating this character" (WC:LL 380). There is no character in this stark novel who closely resembles Cather's elders, but Myra does make a desperate return to the religion of her family before she dies.

The denouement of Myra Henshawe marks the end of Cather's dark days and points to a resolution that appears in her next novel written just one year later, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927).⁵⁰ That novel, considered by many to be Cather's best effort, realizes the goal that she had been working towards so doggedly from the beginning--to reidentify herself both personally and artistically with her Virginia elders. Cather found in the story of two French priests the perfect vehicle for the reunion.

⁵⁰ See Merrill Skaggs' essay, "*Death Comes for the Archbishop*: Cather's Mystery and Manners," for one answer to the question, "How did Willa Cather write both *My Mortal Enemy* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* within a single year's span" considering the complete reversal of point of view and tone in the later novel? (395).

Chapter 4

“The Priest Who Makes God Into Bread”

*Men's eyes, once seeing
The broken isolated beauty turn
Back to God's work and find it there forever.
So God makes use of poets; teach me then,
To fashion worlds in little, making form
As God does, one with spirit--be the priest
Who makes God into bread to feed the world.¹*

As we have already seen, Willa Cather's search for ultimate human value and purpose took her back to her Virginia home, most particularly to the doors of her family elders. Cather's odyssey is not only chronicled in her fiction but also in her personal life. As Leon Edel has observed, the books of true artists like Willa Cather have interior patterns that follow the designs of the writer's deepest life ("WC: The Paradox of Success" 17). One of the most significant patterns of all those that wound themselves around the center of Cather's being is to be found in the person of Willa Cather's great-aunt, Sidney Cather Gore.

Early in September of 1913, Willa Cather planned a two-week visit to her birthplace in Virginia. Taking Isabelle McClung, for Cather always a force for inspiration, Cather went to Winchester, the county seat near her old home of Back Creek. But she "found the place dull." She wrote Elizabeth Sergeant that she had decided against going to Back Creek

¹ From Richard Hovey, *Taliesin: A Masque*, 1896, slightly misquoted by Cather in the *Nebraska State Journal*, March 1, 1896, p. 1. See KA, n, 168.

because all the people she really loved were dead. But she changed her mind and returned to Back Creek Valley, now named Gore in honor of her great-aunt, “its leading citizen for half a century.” There, memories long dormant awoke in all their original power. Seeing her beloved mountains once again, “she was revived, and she stayed at the Valley Home Inn, which her aunt once operated” (WC:LL 250-51). The visit resurrected all the old sensations and deep feelings associated with her early home. I am convinced that, along with other influences, Cather also experienced a spiritual reunion with her dead aunt, a reunion later inculcated into her great novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

Sidney Gore is barely mentioned in most of Willa Cather’s biographies. (Even James Woodress in his recent biography mentions her only peripherally, and Elizabeth Sergeant leaves her out altogether.)² Sharon O’Brien correctly points out that Sidney Gore was one of Cather’s strongest models of an independent-minded and industrious woman who used the force of her personality and the power of her words to overcome restrictions imposed on females (WC:EV 18-22). However, O’Brien stresses this aspect of Sidney Gore’s influence on Cather to the near exclusion of others, leaving relatively untouched other elements equally important and critical to Cather’s development. The most pervasive influence can be described as Sidney’s single-minded, faithful commitment to Christian obedience and holy living.

Sidney Cather Gore, born in 1823, was the sister of Willa Cather’s grandfather, William.³ Their father, James Cather, was the local magistrate in the Back Creek region of Virginia and a successful farmer and stock raiser. A staunch Presbyterian, James Cather was opposed to slavery and secession (although he remained a sympathizer with the

² It was not until I read the short study of Sidney Gore’s life in Sharon O’Brien’s biography of Cather that I discovered evidence that clearly suggests a significant influence from Sidney Gore on Cather’s life, her perspectives, and her gift of expression.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all general biographical information concerning Sidney Gore is taken from WC:EV, 16-40.

Southern cause) and was given to deeds of charity for “the orphan and the deserving poor.” He refused to sell his grain to speculators if “he had reason to think the poor in his neighborhood had need of his supplies” (Norris 611; rpt. WC:EV 12). However, James Cather was also a firm believer in the work ethic for all able-bodied folk and believed that self-respect as well as the common good was nurtured through a commitment to industry. Consequently, when the sheriff held sales, James would buy up the household goods of the unfortunate widows and hold them until they could repay.

Widely respected for his compassion and judiciousness as magistrate, James Cather’s “decisions were so manifestly just that no appeal was ever taken nor did feelings of disappointment of plaintiff or defendant lessen his circle of friends” (Gore 3). James Cather, with great intelligence and lively wit, made his household a social center in the community: “nowhere else in the district was there such talk, amusing, thoughtful, informed, alive” (WC:CB 6).

James Cather’s daughter, Sidney, was the natural heir of her father’s talents. She inherited “the most liberal share” of his “intellectual energy, his power of speech, his happy unresented dominion over others” (WC:CB 7). Sidney Cather strongly resembles all the characters in Cather’s fiction whose lives are heroic but whose destinies are obscure. Willa Cather saw in the life of her great-aunt an example of the simple, the true, and the beautiful that no attraction to the world of art or the privileged would dim.⁴

Sidney Gore was a strong-willed and independent woman. After her husband Mahlon Gore died in 1860, she chose not to remarry.⁵ She wanted to raise her three young

⁴ James Gore subtitled the memoir, “Despise Not the Day of Small Things,” a sentiment that summarizes the focus of Cather’s mature fiction.

⁵ It is interesting that Sidney Gore believed until her husband’s death that she had a “dependent nature” (Gore, 35), and later wrote, “There was a time when I was the most timorous of mortals; now I am amazed at my fortitude” (80). She attributed the transformation thus: “. . . [T]he Lord my God was watching over me. How could I live were it not for this sweet trust in Him who rules the universe!” (80).

sons by herself rather than risk compromising her aspirations and plans for them. She even refused her father's offer of shelter and financial assistance, and further staked her independence by turning her back on her family's Presbyterian heritage and joining the Baptist church. Her strong and individualistic frame of mind most certainly was a powerful model for Willa Cather.

Practicing biblical virtues, Sidney Gore became such a force in her community that eventually the folk at Back Creek named their town Gore in her honor. A woman with a great natural ability for management, Sidney Gore increased her land holdings and the wealth of her farm "by the exercise of rigid economy, unwavering industry, unceasing toil, adding advantage to advantage and losing no opportunity for acting wisely and well" (Norris 595; qtd. in WC:EV 18-19). She attributed her good fortune to God's help and God's will and proceeded to share her abundance with others, returning much of her income to the community in charitable causes.

Willa Cather remained deeply devoted to her Aunt Sidney all of her life, and it appears this attachment went deeper than most since she made several trips to Virginia to see her.⁶ It is impossible to estimate the effect of this remarkable woman on her young grandniece, but the evidence shows that it must have been great. Sidney Gore's religious devotion, her passionate zest for living, her hatred of all social injustice, her untiring service to humanity, and her love of books and language were all qualities that Willa Cather placed in her catalog of heroic necessities.

Living just a mile down the road from Willow Shade, Sidney Gore was an integral part of Willa Cather's early years, making frequent visits to the Charles Cather household and playing a part in that active household for as long as the Cathers remained in Virginia.⁷ She must have captivated young Willa with her sharp and unconventional interest in the

⁶ See WC:LA, 260 and WC:EV, 22.

⁷ See WC:EV, 22.

world around her and the great sympathy and energy she invested in it.

As her journal reveals, Sidney Gore believed her task in life was to be the hands and feet and voice of God. Much as a commissioned missionary, she was to bring comfort to the needy and the way of salvation to the fallen. She made part of her home into an unofficial Christian social service center, where she housed and cared for young ministerial students as well as orphaned children and reforming alcoholics. “[S]he welcomed anyone requiring food, shelter, and a healthy Christian atmosphere” (WC:EV 19). As a woman of enormous energy, she lived by the motto, “A change of work is rest” (Gore 133).

Sidney Gore’s deep religious convictions and evangelical piety shaped and buttressed her own natural strength of will, giving her an iron sense of purpose and fearless resolve. An incident during the Civil War illustrates. Twenty Union soldiers had commandeered her home, and while they were decent chaps and well-behaved, unfortunately for them they indulged in a pastime that Sidney could not tolerate. They “commenced *playing cards*,” Sidney sputtered in her diary. Along with intemperance, playing cards, she believed, was “the acme of human degradation and misery . . . and the curse . . . of our land” (Gore 44). An abominable male practice that was “God-dishonoring [and] soul-destroying,” card playing only led to other horrid vices. She “could not, and would not tolerate it.” So after “seeking guidance from above,” she asked the young men to cease. They ignored her completely and continued at their game. Nonplussed and a bit afraid of the formidable force of twenty men, she hesitated. But not for long:

My heart told me that God was stronger than they, and the sweet promise, “I will be the widow’s God,” gave me courage, and I returned again to express again my disapprobation of the proceedings in stronger terms, and to the circle collectively, thinking that some of them might be able to understand, at least a portion, of what I said. (Gore 79)

Unable to resist such a barrage of sincere righteous fury, one of the Yankee boys threw down the cards and said, "Tis right, I stop, I stop." And so did they all.

Prior to Willa Cather, Sidney Gore was the most prolific writer of all the Cathers. Besides her extensive personal journal, she left an abundance of letters and a contribution to a local history. Like many nineteenth-century women, Sidney Gore was a dedicated letter writer, sending hundreds of them over the years to public officials as well as family members. For her, all words divinely inspired had the force of The Word itself. Language was an arsenal for morality and religious conviction, and she used her pen to right the wrongs that she read about in the daily papers or the Congressssional Record. Many a Congressman was the privileged target of her letters, some of them supportive, some of them critical, but all of them convinced that he deserved to hear her opinions. Her sincerity and zeal earned her a hearing, and "occasionally her views were incorporated in subsequent speeches" (Gore 149). On one occasion, after learning that an acquaintance had been unjustly imprisoned, she immediately wrote a letter to the Governor, asking for a pardon with such force and "efficacy that [the acquaintance] was liberated" (147).

Willa Cather inherited her great-aunt's gift for impassioned expression, as witnessed in Cather's journalistic writings, especially her reviews. She brought to bear in her writings all the moral force for the defense of true art that her aunt exercised in defending the Christian faith. Cather could praise an artist with unchecked passion if he or she met her high standards; but she could use the same passion incisively and mercilessly in judgment of a slovenly performance.⁸ For years, Cather was known in Lincoln as the "meatax," and performers nationwide were sensitive to, if not fearful of, her bloody pen. Like her aunt, Cather did not shrink, as Slote tells us, from "a good fight," "good" meaning

⁸ One does not have to read very far into Cather's entries in the *Hesperian* or the *Nebraska State Journal* or the *Lincoln Courier* to find the acid that accompanied her convictions. See essays printed in KA.

one that had the moral purpose of defending the best in art (KA 17).⁹ While Sidney Gore's fervor promoted and defended a universal moral law as expressed in her religion, Cather used the same fervor to defend what she considered the divine expression of art which she too believed was governed by a universal Genius. Her God of art set standards for creative endeavors every bit as exacting, if not more so, as the standards her Aunt Sidney's God set for other human behaviors.¹⁰ However, Cather lacked her aunt's sensitivity and tact. Consequently, her criticism created tension (WC:LL 94), whereas her aunt's fostered harmony.

Sidney Gore also used letter writing as an act of mercy of a different sort. During the Civil War she was the neighborhood scribe, transcribing dictated letters to the sons of illiterate parents. Sidney also did a bit of merciful editorializing; her son James remembers that "the awkward broken sentences sounded quite differently when she read the finished letter, and the grateful father or mother showed their pride" (Gore 95). Sidney tried with all her natural powers of language to use good form and style while preserving the character

⁹ Following are samples of Cather's bloody pen: "Mademoiselle Celeste is a dream of beauty. There are few handsomer women to be found in either the higher or lower walks of the profession, but her acting is weak, insipid and pointless. She is innocent of all art or even of a clever imitation of it, and her voice was a continual and painful surprise. It rather startles one to hear the tones of a cavalry officer issue from such very bewitching lips"; or: "Lillian Lewis . . . will next year stage a magnificent spectacular production of *Cymbeline*, in which she will play Imogen. . . . When one knows Lillian, her nose and her emotion, one hopes that they dug Shakespeare's grave very deep" (KA, 139; WP, 62).

¹⁰ In her column in the *Journal*, March 1, 1896, Cather wrote: "In the kingdom of art there is no God, but one God, and his service is so exacting that there are few men born of woman who are strong enough to take the vows. There is no paradise offered for a reward to the faithful, no celestial bowers, no houris, no scented wines; only death and the truth" (KA, 77). Further, in her college essay on Carlyle, Cather wrote, "Art of every kind is an exacting master, more so even than Jehovah. He says only, 'Thou shalt have

and personal voice of the parents. "To have written, as I would have written myself," she explains in her diary, "would have been so foreign to their everyday intercourse, that neither could have understood it" (97). This gift of Sidney's also re-emerged in Willa--the gift of sympathy--not just in heart but in language. Woodress notes that "[o]nce the image was recorded on [Cather's] brain, it never left her," just like her ability "to remember mannerisms, turns of phrase, idioms, and all sorts of verbal nuances" (WC:LL 39).

With a bit of difference, Cather's writing of *One of Ours* mirrored her Aunt Sidney's sympathy for speaking through letters. Cather was inspired to create "Claude Wheeler" after her Aunt Franc gave her the letters written by her son after he was killed in 1918 at Cantigny. After reading the letters, Cather wanted to be the voice for her sensitive and "inarticulate" cousin, and she wrote a story that puts in memorable language what G.P. Cather had so haltingly said in his letters (WWC 16).¹¹

Cather would come to recognize one important difference between her aunt's impulse to write and her own. Sidney Gore seemed to have one pristine motive in using her gift of language--to help her fellows. Her gift of sympathy was never an end in itself, nor a tool for self-aggrandizement, but a means to an end, always under the mandate of service to God and man. In Cather's fiction, especially in the works that explore the nature of the artist, one easily detects Cather's own uneasiness about the motives she observes in artists, including herself. She is committed to writing truth--to producing art of only the highest type--but she also recognizes her pride in her gift and the need to gain worldly recognition. The underlying question for Cather and her artists like Godfrey St. Peter is: What does it profit a man if he should gain the whole world, but lose his own soul?

no others gods before me.' Art, science, letters cry, 'Thou shalt have no other gods at all.' They accept only human sacrifices" (KA, 423).

¹¹ Interview by Flora Merrill, "'A Short Story Course Can Only Delay, It Cannot Kill an Artist,' says Willa Cather."

Sidney Gore's diary reveals that her everyday language was filled with biblical rhetoric--not just quotations, but tropes and phraseology shaped by scripture. She was familiar with more than the Bible, however; Milton and the poems of Moore, Byron, and Burns were frequently quoted to her children in letters. "Whether she is speaking of family ties, the beauties of nature, or God's will," Sharon O'Brien writes, "her voice is submerged in conventional rhetoric" (WC:EV 20).

However conventional it may have been, it was empowered by an individual reverence and conviction. She saw the religious in the everyday, and she viewed the progress of her life as correspondent to scripture. Beginning every New Year's Day, Sidney read the Bible through, completing the New Testament by Christmas. Filled with the stories and teachings from the Bible, religious tracts, and sermons, her diary is a testimonial to the impact that frequent readings of one work can have on shaping language and thought.

Sidney Gore transmitted this legacy of a religious and Christian world view to her grandniece. Like her, Cather became, in Brent Bohlke's words, a "sacramentalist who saw the entire world as a possible vehicle for the action of God in his creation" ("Willa Cather's Nebraska Priests" 265). One does not have to read the numerous critical articles detailing the religious nature of Cather's art to be aware of the influence. As we have already seen, the works themselves shine with it.

In the many years of close contact and mutual sharing of intimate family life, both in her childhood and in her visits back to Virginia, Willa Cather saw in Sidney Gore an example of one who was both devout and lively, one who was convinced of moral and religious absolutes yet self-sacrificing and elastic in dealing with human suffering. Even though Willa Cather turned away from some of the creeds of the Baptist church and what she perceived as the unjoyful aspects of her aunt's evangelical Christianity, she never rejected the life of faith demonstrated in her aunt nor the essential truth of the Word that she

so assiduously lived by. Rather, Willa Cather reshaped the legacy from Sidney Gore. For Cather, art was just another expression of the same religious commitment she witnessed in Sidney Gore, a vocation that not only required every bit as much devotion and religious zeal as her aunt's Christian activism, but that also rested on the same underlying and universal truths.

In many respects Sidney Gore was Willa Cather's truest progenitor. She not only embodied the virtues that Cather affirmed as the essence of man's highest nature, but she also demonstrated many of the natural gifts evidenced in Willa Cather herself. Sidney Gore somehow tapped a direct line to Willa Cather's moral sensibility as well as her affections, and in a unique way became a role model for her. Her influence on Cather is pervasive but subtle. The thread of evidence is so deeply woven into the fabric of Cather's sense of life and destiny as to be invisible at first glance. It can be perceived, however, by association and suggestion, based on what we know about the Cather family generally and Willa Cather specifically. The extent of the influence might have gone undiscovered altogether if Sidney's son, James Howard Gore, had not published his mother's journal in 1923 in a memoir called *My Mother's Story*.¹²

Most of this small volume is a transcription of selected portions of Sidney Gore's journal, a record which spans much of her adult life. In it emerges a revealing portrait of a woman whose religious fervor, passionate sense of duty, and sympathy with all humanity, mirror the qualities found in Cather's most memorable and admirable characters. Her

¹² I owe my own discoveries of Sidney Gore's influence on Cather exclusively to Sharon O'Brien and her biography of Cather published December, 1986. Her biography is the only one that gives proper emphasis to the extensive influence that Sidney Gore had on Cather. In it, O'Brien takes several pages to tell of Sidney's connection to Cather's life, especially in relation to her example of an independent-minded woman, and she quotes briefly from Sidney's journal. Without that bit of evidence, I would not have known of the journal, and my own discoveries and conclusions would not have been possible.

precepts and codes for living also match to a remarkable degree the themes repeated in Cather's mature fiction. The one overriding and all-inclusive theme that is the foundation of both Sidney Gore's writings and Willa Cather's fiction is an unswerving belief in a universal order, divinely inspired and directed, and a commitment to design one's life following that order.

As a Christian, Sidney Gore believed that man is out of joint with divine order because of his sin, and only through conversion--which involves repenting and turning away from one's rebellious attitudes--could one's mind and heart be set aright. She experienced such a transformation soon after she was married. She wrote in her journal that in spite of her happy marriage, she felt "an aching void," and like all others who were "at enmity with their God," she longed "for that peace of mind which this world can never give, nor take away" (Gore 11). She attended a local revival meeting merely out of curiosity, but when the minister preached from the text, "Awake, thou that sleepest," and when he "represented the sinner as being asleep upon the bank of an awful precipice, whilst a never-ceasing. . . stream was gradually sweeping the sands from beneath him," for the "first time in [her] life, [she] saw the awfulness of [her] situation" (13). She "trembled lest these convictions should become less vivid" and she would die and "be driven from [God's] presence forever!" (14). After much doubt and soul-agony, she finally felt assured that she "was indeed reckoned a child of God" (16).

In her fiction, Cather's artists also go through a conversion that is both similar to and very different from her Aunt Sidney's. Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark* will serve as an example. Thea has a spiritually vitalizing experience which Cather describes in words very similar to Sidney Gore's. Young Thea hears the music of Dvorak's *Symphony in E Minor*, and when

the first movement ended, Thea's hands and feet were cold as ice. She was too much excited to know anything except that she wanted something

desperately, and when the English horns gave out the theme of the Largo, she knew that what she wanted was exactly that. (SL 251)

Thea recognizes in the music an “immeasurable yearning” that reflects her own, “the amazement of a new soul in a new world” (SL 251). When she leaves the concert hall, she is dismayed at the sordidness of the city life around her:

There was some power abroad in the world bent upon taking away from her that feeling with which she had come out of the concert hall. Everything seemed to sweep down on her to tear it out from under her cape. If one had that, the world became one’s enemy; people, buildings, wagons, cars, rushed at one to crush it under, to make one let go of it. . . . They might trample her to death, but they should never have it. As long as she lived that ecstasy was going to be hers. She would live for it, work for it, die for it; but she was going to have it, time after time, height after height. (SL 254)

Thea’s “conversion” is not completed until her experience in Panther Cañon, after she goes through years of struggle and doubt, but it begins here. She responds to a spirit in the music which she associates with her soul “before it was born” (251). The experience reveals to Thea her own gift of music, and her selfhood, which she had felt so divided, is integrated.¹³

The difference between Sidney Gore’s conversion and Thea Kronborg’s is that Sidney’s is in response to a message of warning, or to a wrongness inside of herself. She feels a void because of an indifference to spiritual things and a carelessness in assuring she was in right relationship with God, and she is brought to the edge of change through a fear

¹³ See William Curtin’s provocative analysis of Thea’s religious experience in which he uses William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) to explain what happens to Thea.

of retribution. In Thea's case, conversion is a response to a message of joy through music, and rather than making her see any sin within herself, it reveals the sordidness of the world without. She feels a sense of new power within, something wonderful and precious just for her. But unlike Sidney Gore who relies on a power outside of herself to make her "born again," Thea believes, in the words of her music teacher, that "[e]very artist makes himself born" (SL 176).

In spite of Cather's distaste for the kind of religious experience described by her great-aunt, there was something in the fruits of that experience that attracted Cather greatly. Sidney Gore's clear-cut and well-defined model for life gave her and her household an orderliness and serenity the likes of which her niece searched for and craved all her life, both privately and in her fiction. As has already been noted, one frequently recurring theme in Willa Cather's art is man's need to recognize and live within a divinely designed order. Regardless of what influences or needs produced her own craving for order, it is eminently evident that her Aunt Sidney's life and writings illuminate much of what is felt and left unnamed on the pages of Willa Cather's fiction.

Critics have noticed Cather's great admiration for faithfulness. It is a common quality of all her great characters, and it is a quality she saw firsthand in Sidney Gore. For Sidney, faithfulness is doing one's duty. "Duty" is the one byword throughout all of her journal. "I like to ascertain, if possible," Sidney Gore wrote in 1862, "the path of duty, put my feet directly in it, then without turning to the right or left in quest of pleasure, or stopping by the wayside to consult the whims of Madam Inclination, push steadfastly onward with the sweet assurance . . . that in due season I shall reap my reward, if I faint not" (100). Willa Cather translated this philosophy into her sense of duty toward her vocation, art. She repeatedly speaks of the single-minded devotion required for the high-minded duty of the artist.

Sidney Gore's conception of duty does not appear to be one motivated out of necessity or coercion or fear. Rather, it is born of trust in a wise Providence that "doeth all things well," whose great design, if followed, will prove to be in everyone's best interest. "Oh! that I may ever fearlessly do my duty, trusting the consequences to God," she writes. And even if such a course brought hardship or sadness, Sidney Gore believed that the "consciousness of having done [one's] duty" gives a peace "such as the world can neither give nor take away" (79, 19). Willa Cather was obviously influenced by her aunt's devotion to religious duty, but her own search for peace through her adherence to the duties of the artist was not marked by the same kind of confidence in success.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher has said that the central fact behind Cather's fiction was her painful uprooting from Virginia to Nebraska. Whether this is true or not, there is no question that through her whole life Willa Cather raged against any changes that altered her family's situation or her personal world in which she had found stability and comfort. The theme of the anguish of physical separations and especially death appears repeatedly in her fiction. It is also a theme in Sidney Gore's journal. "Why is it," she asks, "that there seems to exist a 'needs be' for the separation of friends? Pleasant associations seem to be formed here, only that they may be broken" (31). After she had met someone for whom she "formed instantaneously so warm an attachment," she bemoaned that, "soon he too will leave me, as 'other friends have done before.' How sad the thought! Oh, what will the reality be! I almost wish we had never met" (131).

However, Sidney Gore differed from her grandniece in that she accepted with a certain equanimity life's imperfections and vicissitudes; she believed that perfect order can only exist in the mind of God, and hence, for man, only in that part of him directly connected to the mind of God, his eternal soul. She was able to adjust to her various crises--including her husband's death and the terrors of the Civil War which were literally played out in her backyard--primarily because she believed that, regardless of how bad

things appeared, “how afflictive . . . this dispensation of Providence appear[s] to us short-sighted mortals, . . . [d]oubtless He whose ways are not as our ways and whose thoughts are not as our thoughts, has a noble purpose in view” (25).

Sidney Gore never pretended that believing in “a noble purpose” made life easy, nor did her piety assume a false certainty when she was faced with personal pain. Neither was her acquiescence to the divine will always an unquestioning one, especially when it involved the death of a loved one or friend. Like Willa Cather, she was equipped with a critical mind as well as a passionate one, and her journal records with unaffected honesty how she wrestled with life’s paradoxes and seeming inconsistencies. In the entry for June 11, 1861, she records the fragments of her pain on the death of her husband after eleven years of marriage:

A blank in my book--a blank in my *heart* --a vacant seat at the table--the family altar torn down--Hebron robbed of its brightest ornament--our Pastor, of a faithful friend--the neighborhood of an exemplar worthy of imitation--and above all, three boys bereft of a tender Father’s watchful care. Oh! cruel Death, how could’st thou thus afflict! Were there not scores whom thou mightest have taken whose loss would not have been thus keenly felt? (Gore 32-33)

And in her seventy-fourth year, the loss of her oldest son, Perry, made the questions louder and more insistent:

Again and again my heart cries out, Oh, why was he taken from those who loved him so tenderly?

Dear Perry was so much to me! . . . [T]he way seems lonely and the burden so heavy! . . . Say what you may, feel what you can of the resurrection and of eternal life, *death is a terror!* (153-54)

James Gore adds the note that Perry's death was especially hard on Sidney since the "home circle had remained unbroken so long." There was an "unexpressed hope that it was immune from attack," and now "the rude hand of death showed the futility of such hopes and plainly prophesied the ultimate end of all things" (154). In a very personal way, Sidney's certain faith had run headlong into the test of an uncertain life. But, as her journal clearly shows, she was able "with an eye of faith" to submit to that great unknown design that she believed transforms evil to good and suffering to joy:

But, now, after many years have passed, I can with an humble, grateful heart look upon all the way the Lord has led me. And should any, dear to my heart, be called upon to tread Adversity's rough and thorny way, I would say to such, "Be of good courage, God giveth the victory!" And I will tell you whereof I speak. (35)

Cather never could give such a glowing recommendation for the thorny path of Art that she chose to walk, nor could she ever say that the good fight for Art ever brought her victory.

Left financially destitute after her husband's death, Sidney Gore had to assume household chores that had always been done by hired help, and she was obliged to take a teaching position that seemed to her "onerous." An entry written at this time reveals a philosophy that marked her whole life, an approach to living that Willa Cather herself never was able to emulate in her personal life. Although Sidney "was at first very rebellious" about the uncomfortable fractures in her life, she resolved to change her attitude:

Right then and there, I said to myself, if there is to be any reconciliation of matters, *I must adapt myself to circumstances, they will never adapt themselves to me!* . . . Just then foolish pride took its everlasting departure. [I] worked with a purpose, and cared not who knew it. (37)

Willa Cather railed against changing circumstances and often refused to adapt to changes with any significant amount of grace. Her stories often lash out in rage at a changing world and one's inability to control the direction and changes in one's own life. For most of her life, she had little of the confidence of her great-aunt that all would be turned to good in the grand design. Consequently, she turned to art for some control. But, ironically, her art celebrates the very kind of self-relinquishment and trust that her great-aunt exhibited.

There are other elements in Sidney Gore's life that bear an uncanny likeness to Cather's interests and preoccupations. Sidney's attachment to and awareness of nature was intense. She expressed the same romantic sentiment for the Virginia countryside that appears so often in Cather's work. In nature one finds a spiritual home that works on the inner man:

I sought a quiet spot this morning, far up the mountainside, where my feet have often wandered in "days lang syne." Sometimes that I might shut myself out from the busy, bustling, *outer* world, and turn my thoughts to the *inner* one. . . . And sometimes when my heart has been overwhelmed with grief, I have gone there and sat me down to meditate and pray. And as my eyes would intuitively rest upon "happy Valley Home" and my ear instinctively catch the rippling of the laughing stream beneath me, my heart has been calmed and my soul been made tranquil as the moonlit lake. (63)

In her journal Sidney Gore often associates human events with natural events, and the effect is, in each instance, symbolic. In one account she tells of a "protracted meeting" held in the newly completed church which "had been the subject of many prayers" and many hopes for a large attendance. Writing that only "a few, a very few were assembled,"

Sidney noted that the “winds were wailing a sad requiem and a boisterous farewell to March” (26).

Reflecting the romanticism of the writers who imprinted themselves on her own language--Moore, Byron and Burns (she did not have “a taste for fiction” [5])--Sidney Gore saw nature as a *figura* of divine imminence, pointing to the source of all things, and in its functions she sees an allegory for the transforming power of God in the lives of men:

Night. How sweet and soothing the hour when night throws her arms around the busy world and folds all within her sable grasp!

It calms the sorrowing, subdues the vicious, and woos the stricken one to repose.

And when the gentle queen of night sheds her timid rays on mountain and valley, leaving that beautiful which it found so, and making that which never had been, attractive to all beholders, the mind is lost in contemplation, and the soul fills and overflows with silent worship. (64)

Sidney wonders how, with the horrid acts of men in war raging below, the moon can “continue to glide in her heavenly way.” Yet as a symbol of the imperturbable and changeless divine order, “still she shines . . . regardless of the stir and strife of this low, sinful world”:

And the twinkling stars still continue to wink us lovingly upward to the bright and joyous world above. Like true friends, they never forsake us, but shine the brighter and darker the heavens appear. How much there is in Nature to woo us to Nature’s God, and yet how prone are we to admire and enjoy these beauties and mercies without thinking of the source from whence they came. (64)

Willa Cather's love of the heroic has been amply documented, including her admiration for her own family members who had died in war. But a strong example of heroism surely must have come from Sidney Gore, whose accounts of her own experiences during the Civil War must have gripped the young and romantically impressionable Willa. However, Sidney Gore was just as aware of the paradoxes of war as Willa Cather, and her journal reflects the same duality as Cather's only war novel.

In writing of the war being waged in her own front yard, Sidney Gore wonders "how a reflective mind can exult over a conquest gained by *rage* and *death*. My heart sickens at such inhuman joy! And the wish to be among the dying preponderates over every other feeling" (70). Yet even though she has "no gust for war--a horror of battles, and perhaps a lack of respect for military movements generally," she finds that "there certainly is something romantic, to say the least, in having a courier to bear [her] letters to and from Camp," and she finds it "flattering" and "cheering" that her ministrations to the soldiers are remembered and appreciated (65). In short, she both hates the conflict and enjoys participating in the great human feeling it fosters, much the same as Homer does in *The Iliad*. The same could be said of the narrator in *One of Ours*.

Another preoccupation of Willa Cather's in her fiction was also her Aunt Sidney's in real life--a special sympathy for children and, particularly, for a mother's close attachment to a son. The mother-son motif appears frequently in Cather's fiction, beginning with her short stories (e.g. "The Burglar's Christmas"), and there is something of Sidney Gore's love of children in general and her fierce love for her own boys in particular reflected in Cather's characterizations.

Sidney wrote of children thus:

How I love to gaze upon their happy, joyous, and confiding countenances! Their dispositions are unmasked. Children, *only*, are what they seem.

They are all candor and frankness. And how sensitive their young hearts are. And how susceptible of either good or bad impressions! (29-30)

Such a description could very well fit young Jack-a-boy, or Jim Burden, or Antonia Shimerda, or the young boys sitting by the fire in *Alexander's Bridge*, or especially Cécile Auclair and her young charge, Jacques in *Shadows of the Rock*. In the cases of both Jim Burden and Jacques, the connection extends to another common interest of Cather and her aunt--orphans. (Even though Jacques' mother, a prostitute, is still living, he is for all intents and purposes an orphan.) Sidney Gore's parents often took in orphans, and she herself in later years accepted the responsibility of raising two boys. Asking herself in her journal "if it was wise to have burdened [herself], so late in life, with this additional care and labor," she replies:

As my dear mother once said, after having taken a puny little friendless orphan under her maternal wing, "The child may never be of any service to me, but I humbly trust I may be of much service to her. . . ." (Gore 151)

This is exactly what Cécile does for Jacques in *Shadows on the Rock*. And as Sidney sees herself as the guide to salvation for her boys, hoping "to assist them in steering their tiny barks until impelled by stronger oars" (151), so Cécile is for Jacques. "When he came to their house to play," writes the narrator of *Shadows*, "they endeavoured to give him some sort of bringing-up, though it was difficult . . ." (SR 51).

Much of Cather's theory of art finally came to rest on a dependence on tradition and ritual, on a love of social stability based on spiritual order, legacies certainly transmitted in part by her Aunt Sidney Gore. Cather pays particular tribute to this contribution in *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), a novel primarily focused on her father, but whose theme--the preserving of time through tradition--celebrates her aunt. Madame

Auclair has been uprooted from her native France to come with her husband and daughter to Quebec. She brings with her household goods and especially all the fine traditions from the old world in order “to make the new life as much as possible like the old” (SR 23). Fatally ill, she carefully instructs her young daughter Cécile in the French ways of homemaking so that “a feeling about the life that had come down to her through so many centuries” would be carried on, ensuring that “life would go on almost unchanged” (25). Everyone who calls at the apothecary’s shop witnesses that Cécile fully realizes her mother’s wishes; her loyalty to orderly and refined French customs inspires one of them to remark, “*C’est tranquille, chez vous, comme toujours*” (139).¹⁴

Cather connects Sidney Gore to this story even more closely in the character of Cécile’s dead mother, Madame Auclair. Before she dies, Madame Auclair admonishes Cécile in words that could have been lifted out of Sidney Gore’s journal:

[I]n time you will come to love your duties, as I do. You will see that your father’s whole happiness depends on order and regularity, and you will come to feel a pride in it. Without order our lives would be disgusting, like those of the poor savages. (SR 24)

It is not hard to imagine that Cather had her aunt and possibly herself as Cécile in mind when writing of these two.

The example of Sidney Gore as mother appears in yet another work. Critics have generally associated Claude Wheeler and his mother in *One of Ours* with Willa Cather’s cousin killed in the war and his mother, Cather’s Aunt Franc Cather. Circumstantially, this is true. However, the depth of feeling of mother for son that comes through the narrative

¹⁴ Cather would have had ample time to read Sidney Gore’s journal by the time she planned *Shadows on the Rock*. Such a reading would have reminded Cather of Sidney’s interest in orphans as well as her earnestness in maintaining order and Christian decorum.

matches closely the sentiments that Sidney Gore expressed for her own sons:

My boys are the pride of my life. Yet with God's help I will not idolize them. Their advancement in all that is ennobling is my great concern Through much tribulation and exertion, I have seen my boys grow up to men. . . . Thankful to see so much that was noble and so little that was malicious, appearing. (140)

When her boys were all at home again, "how joyous [did] the earth appear!", and she dreaded the time when they would leave home, "scattered like the leaves of autumn." But "should adverse winds oppose, and strength fail them--and life be spared their mother--they can . . . flutter back to their home nest, still warmed by a mother's love" (141).

In *One of Ours*, Cather writes of Mrs. Wheeler's attachment to Claude with much the same quality of "passionate human feeling." Like Sidney and her boys, the spiritual ties of Claude to his mother are almost palpable. When Claude hurt, "something ached in her. On the other hand, when he was happy, a wave of physical contentment went through her" (62). When Mrs. Wheeler tells Claude of her dreams for him, her hopes have the same grand vision of nobility that Sidney had for her sons: "As I get older, I leave a good deal more to God. I believe He wants to save whatever is noble in this world . . ." (76).

After Sidney Gore's son Perry died, she wrote, "Again and again my heart cries out, Oh, why was he taken from those who loved him so tenderly? Dear Perry was so much to me." Like Mrs. Wheeler and Claude in *One of Ours*, Sidney Gore felt that Perry was "her home boy, the comfort of her heart." Often "listening for his buggy and watching for him," she writes that she will never again hear "the rattle of wheels nor see the beloved form at the gate." Her "whole being cries out for some return, . . . some token of his enduring love," and her "poor heart cries, Will he never come? Is my precious one indeed

dead! I cannot, oh I cannot--*dare* not, realize it!" (152). As Mrs. Wheeler watches Claude leave for what she intuits is the last time,

[s]he fell back against the windowsill, clutching her temples with both hands, and broke into choking, passionate speech. . . . "Old eyes," she cried, "why do you betray me? Why do you cheat me of my last sight of my splendid son!" (225)

As close as Willa Cather was to her aunt, she must have witnessed Sidney Gore's deep emotional attachment to her sons, and perhaps even read the passionate expressions of it in Sidney's journal before it was published. They emerge unmistakably in Cather's descriptions of Mrs. Wheeler's intimacy with Claude.

Willa Cather's most direct fictional portrayal of Sidney Gore is in Mrs. Bywaters in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). It is Cather's last novel, written when she was sixty-six years old; the memory and influence of her aunt lived with her a very long time. In the novel, the village postmistress--a position held by Sidney Gore in Back Creek--is Mrs. Bywaters, who acts as the community's voice of moral conscience, a woman who believes in putting her faith and its convictions into practice. She subscribes to a northern paper, the *New York Tribune*--an act of boldness for a southern woman--and learns through it of the progress of the Underground Railroad. This information aids her in contacting by letter an influential abolitionist and arranging for the escape of the black slave, Nancy Till.

In Mrs. Bywaters--by way of Sidney Gore--Cather presents an objective example of her own conviction of the inviolability of the self, the sovereignty of the human will. In the story, Rachel Blake, Sapphira's daughter, is much like Willa Cather herself, even though her circumstances are much like those of Rachel Boak, Willa's grandmother. Rachel Blake, like Willa Cather in real life, is "deeply attached to the postmistress" (SSG 135). When Rachel was just a girl, she overheard a conversation between Mrs. Bywaters

and her father, Mr. Cartmell, “which coloured her thoughts and feelings ever afterward” (134). Mrs. Bywaters’ father is drawn along the familiar lines of Willa Cather’s father, Charles, described as a “handsome old gentleman” whose “talk had a flavour of old-fashioned courtesy” and who addressed Mrs. Bywaters the same way Charles did Willa, as “Daughter” (135). Their discussion concerns Mr. Cartmell’s desire to help his widowed daughter, wondering if he--even though he’s never done it before--should buy her a trained slave to ease her heavy work load. Mrs. Bywaters is quiet but firm in her reply:

“It’s kindly thought of you, Father, and kindly spoken. But neither you nor I have ever owned flesh and blood, and I will not begin it. I am young and strong, . . . Peace of mind is what I value most.” (SSG 136)

Overhearing this, Rachel experiences a “feeling long smothered.” It now “blazed up in her” and became “a conviction.” She realizes it “was the owning” of slaves “that was wrong, the relation itself, no matter how convenient or agreeable it might be for master or servant.” Rachel hears put into words what “[s]he had always known . . . was wrong. It was the thing that made her unhappy at home, and came between her and her mother” (SSG 237).

Rachel Blake’s reference to her mother has parallels to Willa Cather’s own mother, Virginia. Rachel Blake, vis à vis Willa Cather, has a reverence for the sovereignty of the individual that Cather admired and that her own mother lacked (WC:EV 38).¹⁵ Even though Virginia Cather did not own slaves, she had an imperious way with people that was a type of slaveholding, especially with family members, and it inevitably clashed with

¹⁵ There is one small bit of evidence that Sidney Gore may not have entirely approved of her niece. Virginia Cather enjoyed the attention she got from her doctor that her “illnesses” gave her, and when Sidney helped diagnose one such illness as merely the early stages of pregnancy, and decided that further visits from the doctor were not needed, Virginia was evidently touchy about it.

Willa's own strong will and keen sense of individual identity. To have conformed to the type of person her mother wished her to be would have been a type of enslavement, a bondage that would have robbed her of her rightful sovereignty. Willa Cather identified closely with her Aunt Sidney's forthright individualism and must have received from her, by example if not by word, support for her own. Behind Rachel Blake's impassioned words lies the smoldering resentment of a young girl who would not and could not fit herself into her mother's prescribed mold.¹⁶

Willa Cather memorializes her lifelong attachment to her Aunt Sidney through Rachel Blake's tribute to Mrs. Bywaters: "The postmistress, whom she had so loved as a child, was the only neighbour with whom she ever talked freely. They were drawn together by deep convictions they had in common" (SSG 145). This commonality between Willa Cather and her aunt went to the deepest levels of what they considered to be life's eternal verities, and for both of them, those resided in a religious world view. The novel that most fully celebrates this world view is also Willa Cather's, as well as America's, most recognized "religious" novel.

* * *

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), published thirteen years before *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Willa Cather drew a more extensive but much more disguised portrait of Sidney Gore. Perhaps the most significant of all Cather's prototypes, Sidney Gore is a near-model for Father Joseph Vaillant. His companion, Bishop Jean Latour, is a male, idealized version of Willa Cather herself.¹⁷ Cather's narrative of the shared life of

¹⁶ See Chapter 5 for a full discussion of Cather's relationship with her mother and its effects on her art.

¹⁷ In "The Uses of Biography: The Case of Willa Cather," James Woodress claims that the Bishop is full of Cather herself. Dennis Mayes notes that even Latour's lonely

these two priests revealingly illustrates her mature philosophy concerning human purpose and destiny.

In the summer of 1925 on one of her several trips to the Southwest,¹⁸ Willa Cather encountered an historic document that triggered another one of her creative “inner explosions,” as James Woodress calls it (WC:LA 218). The book was *The Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf* by Father Howlett, a history of two French priests, Bishop Lamy and Father Joseph Machebeuf, who had come to Santa Fe in the mid-nineteenth century to revitalize the Church there. Cather was so entranced by the account that she stayed up most of the night to read, and by morning, “she saw her own work of the imagination in complete form” (WC:AM 223).

Some critics have credited this flash of creative insight to Cather’s special power of recreating history with sympathetic verisimilitude even though she had not lived it herself.¹⁹ Elizabeth Sergeant expressed what so many others came to believe, that “one had to know Willa to realize her power to live into, feel into, an ecstasy of relationship with such characters: with the factual and the sensory world they lived in, as well as with the areas of thought and feeling that tormented or sustained them” (WC:AM 213-14).

The truth of the matter is that the only way that Cather could feel a strong sympathy with any character, in history or out of it, was to have indeed lived the history herself, or more accurately, to be attached to it in some deeply personal way. James Woodress

journey through the Southwest is a paradigm for Cather’s lonely journey to literary recognition.

¹⁸ In an interesting twist of fate, on this trip Willa Cather had contact once again with D.H. and Frieda Lawrence, whom she had met in New York in the spring of 1924 and who had twice come to tea at her apartment on Bank Street. Here in the Southwest met two writers who were both inspired by the area and whose work exemplifies the understanding of self through the writing about one’s past.

¹⁹ See Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, “The Genesis of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.”

expresses some awe that Cather was able to “breathe life into [these] historical figures” who were so far outside her own experience (WC:LL 404). Actually, they were not outside her experience at all. Cather’s imagination latched onto very familiar configurations in these historical figures. In these two clergymen, Cather, by her method of creative association, had found characters whose situations and lives precipitated a flash of understanding and insight into her own relationship with her past, specifically through her Aunt Sidney Gore. The bishop and his vicar merely provided the “skins” and the masks to disguise the two characters who become the pivotal protagonists in Cather’s fictional search for a reconciliation with her Virginia heritage.

According to Father William J. Howlett’s biography of Father Machebeuf, Lamy and Machebeuf had been friends from childhood and had been seminarians together, bound by an “almost jocund togetherness of feeling” yet “separated by their gifts and tasks and temperaments” (WC:AM 229). The comparisons between the two men and Cather and her Aunt Gore are everywhere implicit.²⁰

In a letter to the *Commonweal* Cather explained her method in the novel. The method she described is characteristic of the imaginative process by which she created many of her memorable characters. Cather would come in contact with someone who exhibited traits that reconnected her in memory with her past, most often with her Virginia family. She identified the novel as a “work of the imagination in which a writer tries to present the experiences and emotions of a group of people by the light of his own” (OW 12-13). The connection in this novel between the “group of people” she met up with in

²⁰ In the novel, Cather reversed the order in which the real archbishop and vicar actually died--Father Machebeuf outlived Bishop Lamy. Woodress says Cather changed it “for artistic purposes,” to keep Latour the central character (WC:LA, 222). But Cather had no such compulsion in *Lucy Gayheart*, whose main character dies before the whole third section of the book. If Cather did have Sidney Gore in mind for Father Vaillant, it fit with Cather’s own chronology that he die first.

Howlett's biography and her Virginia people is Cather's most fully realized one, and it is no surprise that it gave her the most satisfaction. As she told Ida Tarbell in a letter, writing the book provided the "most unalloyed pleasure of her life" (WC:LA 225). After the novel was published, Cather said that its writing only took a few months "because the book had all been lived many times before it was written," and she knew "she had achieved something remarkable" in it, assured that, unlike with most of her other publications, "it would have a long and continuing sale" because, in her opinion, "*Death Comes for the Archbishop* was her best book" (WC:LA 220-221).

Published when Cather was fifty-four years old, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a pivotal novel in Cather's artistic career and a watershed in her personal life. It is the culmination of and the resolution to what had been for Cather a lifelong search for true religion and spiritual reality. In her previous two novels, *The Professor's House* (1925) and *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), the protagonists are lapsed Catholics who confront a crisis of faith with uncertain and unsatisfactory resolution. But, as Woodress notes, "the writing of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was for Willa Cather something of a spiritual journey towards redemption," and the "novel gave her the peace she had been seeking and the serenity to face her last two decades" (WC:LA 225).

It took a reconnection with her past, reflected in a family member, to bring Cather home to herself.²¹ In this novel, by her usual method of disguise and displacement, Cather explores more directly than in any other her own religious heritage exemplified in her Aunt Sidney Gore, and in that context, also confronts her own artistic ambitions in relationship to her personal faith. In spite of years of skepticism and questioning, she discovers she never really abandoned a Christian faith.

²¹ In "Cather's Archbishop and Travel Writing," David Stouck notes the travel form of the book parallels its religious vision in which the return from the journey is a return to an eternal home. For Cather, the road to her Virginia home and her heritage became the same road as the one to an eternal paradise.

Critics examining Cather's works of fiction published prior to 1922 note that they have a religious penumbra that is a riotous mix of pagan and Christian images as well as worldly gods. Bernice Slote adds that Cather's God "may be also the Muse, who is also Our Lady (Our Lady of Art, Our Lady of Beauty, Our Lady of Genius); we may worship at the altar of Artemis and listen to the oracle of Apollo," or we may bow before the "two King Williams," Shakespeare and Thackeray (KA 44).

What Slote does not do is identify the change that comes in Cather's fiction after 1922 when she breaks with pagan themes and leans exclusively toward Christian ones. In 1922, Cather returned to Christianity as an expression of her own religious faith by joining the Episcopalian Church in Red Cloud. In her subsequent fiction she works out the implications of that personal confirmation of faith in her art. The progression shows an approaching fusion of art and Christianity--and by extension, a progressive refusing of herself with her religious elders. Her protagonists in this later period are evidence of Cather's eroding faith in art as the demonstration of man's highest and best nature.²² In *The Song of the Lark* (1915), Thea Kronborg depletes her own humanity as she isolates herself in the Kingdom of Art. Godfrey St. Peter in *The Professor's House* (1925) experiences the same deflation of experience, both personally and socially. Not until *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) does Cather find a satisfactory solution for her dilemma. As a weary pilgrim in search of the Grail and a prodigal in absence of home, she journeys full circle and arrives at the place she began, at the doorstep of her Virginia home. Waiting

²² See Catherine M. McLay, "Willa Cather: The Search for Order in Her Major Fiction" for a complementary view. However, McLay would not include *The Song of the Lark* as strong evidence for Cather's growing disenchantment with art. Kazuko Inoue, in "Willa Cather: The Development of Her Art," agrees that Cather shows in her fiction that a life dedicated to art is selfishly limiting.

to receive her is her Aunt Sidney. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the return is made explicit.²³

“Life began for me,” Willa Cather said when she was nearing fifty in 1923, “when I ceased to admire and began to remember” (WC:AM 107). That was the time in her life after she had achieved success and acceptance in the circles of art and eastern culture. Her adolescent admiration of the people who represented these aspirations, and her own desire to be one of them, prevented her for a time from seeing that sphere with a clear eye. She could not write *A Lost Lady* until she could strip away the glowing aura she had vouchsafed to Mrs. Silas Garber of Red Cloud, nor could she write *My Mortal Enemy* or *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* until the mist of romanticism around her mother and herself had evaporated. Conversely, she could not find the dearest subjects of her art in her Virginia elders until her prejudices and youthful misconceptions were replaced by a mature viewpoint. Cather could have just as well said, life began for me when I ceased to reject the past and began to truly remember.

In Father Joseph (*Blanchet*) Vaillant, Willa Cather fully remembers her aunt Sidney Gore and finds a perfect match for her personality and religious zeal. Vaillant is Sidney Gore in the costume of a scrawny French Catholic priest with a very great heart. And in Bishop Jean Latour is Willa Cather herself, the worldly artist with a religious calling, idealized yet very real.²⁴

²³ John J. Murphy in “Willa Cather and Religion: Highway to the World and Beyond,” notes the change in Cather’s fiction after *One of Ours*, but sees the turn primarily from a rejection of the Protestant ethic and revivalism to an affirmation of the Catholic past. What he does not see is that Cather rejects only certain aspects of Protestantism and that her affirmation of Catholicism is a more acceptable vehicle, artistically and intellectually, for a reaffirmation of her family’s traditions and beliefs.

²⁴ Joan Younger Dickinson examines Latour against his model, Bishop Lamy, and concludes that Latour is more like Cather herself than he is like Lamy.

The fact that both priests are French and try to perpetuate French culture in the Southwest through their daily routines of cooking and preparing gardens corresponds to Willa Cather's own Virginia family who brought their culture to Nebraska, as described in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*. As I have already noted, Cather's attachment to French culture was very much influenced by her Virginian beginnings, not only through her early contacts with French books and with people whose French connections interested her, but also because the South resembled France in its customs and traditions. In a 1921 interview, Willa Cather reveals by implication the connection between French tradition and her own Southern heritage, and in so doing, reveals how her work and the work of her Aunt Sidney Gore (as well as her grandparents) are both art:

The Frenchman doesn't talk nonsense about art, about self-expression; he is too greatly occupied with building the things that make his home. His house, his garden, his vineyards, these are the things that fill his mind. He creates something beautiful, something lasting. When a French painter wants to paint a picture, he makes a copy of a garden, a home, a village. The art in them inspires his brush. . . . Restlessness such as ours [in America], success such as ours, do not make for beauty. Other things must come first; good cookery, cottages that are homes, not playthings; gardens, repose. These are first rate things, and out of first rate stuff art is made. It is possible that machinery has finished us as far as this is concerned. Nobody stays at home any more; nobody makes anything beautiful any more. (qtd. in WC:CB 226-227)²⁵

²⁵ George [William] Greene, in "*Death Comes for the Archbishop*," points out that DCA is an expression of the good life that is celebrated and inhabited in the everyday, whose forms reveal meaning and spiritual enlightenment.

This is an exemplum of the art of simplicity. Homemakers and land workers create elemental art that is religiously potent; in turn, artists--painters, writers, musicians--record, celebrate, and make a permanent artifact of those creative acts that in human life are necessarily temporal. This is the cooperative artistic effort that Cather eventually envisioned for herself in conjunction with her Aunt Gore, her grandparents, and all others like them. It is the cooperative effort that is revealed in the characters of Archbishop Jean Latour and Father Joseph Vaillant in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

Bishop Latour, the central character in the novel,²⁶ comes to the American Southwest with his assistant, Father Vaillant, to evangelize and to cleanse the "Augean stable" (DCA 7), a diocese long neglected and administered by reprobate priests. Latour is the intellectual captain, and Vaillant his industrious first mate. Latour is the isolated poet, Vaillant the social mingler.²⁷ Latour has visions, and Vaillant puts legs to them. Latour enjoys and appreciates the amenities of everyday life, such as superb cooking, and Vaillant provides them for him.²⁸ Their complementary roles suggest a correspondence between

²⁶ Most early criticism of the novel places Bishop Latour as the central character. Several critics, however, have noted that his place is uncertain. Curtis Whittington, Jr., in "'The Stream and the Broken Pottery': The Form of Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*," puts time itself at the book's center because he believes the Archbishop does not develop in the course of the novel.

²⁷ Richard Giannone, in discussing the importance of music in DCA, shows that it is Father Latour who can perceive spiritual harmony in the fractured and unorganized Southwest, and it is Father Vaillant who sees harmony in human terms. "The Southwest's Eternal Echo: Music in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*," 5-18.

²⁸ Cather had a life-long desire to prove herself in the domestic arts, especially cooking and making quilts. Her Eastern friend, Elizabeth Sergeant, was "astonished" when Cather wrote her in 1916 to tell her that, during a visit home in Red Cloud, "she had taken over the cooking . . . and was devoting herself to learning the mysteries of a kitchen range," and that she would never be intimidated by a kitchen range again. Sergeant notes that this particular homecoming gave Cather "a blessed moment of reconciliation." She not only came home as a novelist, but she was proving that she

Cather herself, the artist who feels deeply the religious nature of her calling, and Sidney Gore, God's own evangelist and doer of good works.

In his untiring missionary efforts to bring God's kingdom to earth, Father Joseph Vaillant resembles Sidney Gore more than any other of Cather's elder family members. Like St. Paul himself, ailing from several physical defects, Father Vaillant "had the endurance resulting from exhaustless enthusiasm" (DCA 120), and traveled out from the home base of Santa Fe on several exhausting missionary journeys to bring wayward Catholics back into the fold, "harangu[ing] them in such Spanish as he could command" (54).²⁹ James Woodress notes that the mood of the novel is the "cheerful acceptance of the physical hardships and the joyful energy of the missionary labors" (WC:LA 221). Nothing could better describe Father Joseph--or Sidney Gore.

A man of simple but intense faith, Father Vaillant does not trouble himself with the theological or intellectual intricacies of formalized religion but is deeply moved by a people who need help both spiritually and physically. He explains to Father Latour why, after just a short rest, he must be off on another mission trip:

"To hunt for lost Catholics, Jean! Utterly lost Catholics, . . . I want to go from house to house this time, to every little settlement. They are full of devotion and faith, and it has nothing to feed upon but the most mistaken

could shine in the kitchen as well. "One never saw Willa, in an intimate moment, without realizing how deeply she desired to be of use to her blood-kin, in simple human ways," writes Sergeant. "She, too, [wanted to be known as a] 'plain family woman'" (WC:AM, 143). In an interview in 1925, Cather confirmed her belief in the primacy and superiority of the domestic arts exemplified by her elders and by her fictional characters such as Vaillant by declaring, "I think the preparation of foods the most important thing in life. And America is too young a nation to realize it" (WC:LL, 379).

²⁹ Brent L. Bohlke, in "On Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*," compares St. Paul to Latour rather than to Vaillant. In truth, different aspects of the apostle's life can be associated with each man.

superstitions. . . . They are like seeds, full of germination but with no moisture. A mere contact is enough to make them a living part of the Church. . . . A word, a prayer, a service, is all that is needed to set free those souls in bondage. . . . I desire to be the man who restores these lost children to God. It will be the greatest happiness of my life.” (DCA 206-07)

We have no direct evidence that Cather read Sidney Gore’s journal either before it was published in 1923 or after—even though it seems very likely she did since she kept contact with the Gore family.³⁰ But one entry in Sidney’s journal reads very much like Vaillant’s impassioned exhortation to Latour. On a mission of her own, Sidney Gore once wrote to a friend “haranguing” him in her own irresistible way to repentance and salvation:

I beseech you, trifle not with the interests of your never-dying soul. It is not your intention to die unprepared, is it? Then why delay? . . . Can you not now look back to the days of your youth, when your heart melted within you when listening to the man of God as he touchingly told the story of the Cross and plead with sinners to fly to the outstretched arms of bleeding mercy? . . . Would that I had time and ability, and you patience to listen to all the reasons that might be urged why you should turn from the evil of your ways. No doubt you wonder why I should feel so deeply interested in your spiritual prosperity. The great reason is I know in part the worth of that immortal soul that has been entrusted to your keeping. And I know too something about the danger to which this poor soul is exposed. . . . Had I the tongue of an angel I would not cease pleading until convinced that you had determined by the grace of God to *repent and live*. (Gore 45, 46, 47)

³⁰ See James Woodress, WC:LL, 135, 138, 147-48.

After the conversion of her own husband, Sidney Gore expressed a Vaillant-like joy: "Oh! that this poor unworthy heart of mine could ever feel the same degree of thankfulness that swelled it almost to bursting on this happy, happy day. My heart ran over with the fulness of content" (Gore 22).

Both Sidney Gore and Father Joseph have an irrepressible love for people. As a boy in France, Joseph believed he "wished to lead a life of seclusion and solitary devotion" (DCA 227), and when he was in Seminary, he had made "a resolve to lead a life of contemplation" (41). But in truth, Joseph "could not be happy for long without human intercourse," and "he liked almost everyone" (227). So, even though in the early days in New Mexico he begged Bishop Latour to "go no farther," to slow down his dogged efforts to embrace the vast area in one sweep, Father Vaillant eventually realizes that it is his "destiny to serve [the Holy Mother] in action" (41). Sidney Gore's journal is brimming with accounts that show her religion in action. Her house became known to people in the region as well as to soldiers during the Civil War as a place of warm hospitality and comfort, always accompanied by fervent moral and religious admonitions. In 1898, when reminiscing about her active life of service, Sidney wrote:

Why is it that the lame and the blind, the dissipated and the unbalanced, the friendless and the homeless, so readily find me nestled as I am among the mountains?

Surely the hand of the Lord must lead them after weary wanderings and rough sailing to the harbor of safety at Valley Home!

It must be so. And it is also a fact that He who leads, *provides*; for my "cruse of oil and barrel of meal" have *never* been empty. Have sometimes scraped the bottom, but meal has always been there.

The strongest proof to me that our heavenly Father leads them here--no matter of what nationality--is, that all, without an exception that I can recall, go away better people for having sheltered beneath our humble roof.

I sometimes think this is one reason why God permits me to live and be strong. (Gore 145-46)

Joseph Vaillant has the same devotion and singleness of purpose as Sidney Gore. He repeatedly subjects himself to discomfort and danger for the sake of religious principle or his calling. Once, when he needs to buy fresh horses from the Indians on one of his trips, he declines because he is afraid they would suspect his motives. "If we are to save them," Vaillant contends, "we must make it clear that we want no profit for ourselves" (DCA 58-59). Similarly, during the war, Sidney Gore repeatedly gave bed and board to Union soldiers, the "avowed enemies" of her Southern soldier friends. "Is this right?" she asked herself, and her conscience said "yes" because "the Bible bids be *kind*" (Gore 80).

Father Joseph Vaillant also can be a master of manipulation if the situation calls for it and if it is for a heavenly purpose. In a scene filled with high humor, Father Joseph wheedles and maneuvers a rich Mexican into giving him and Father Latour a pair of matched white mules for their missionary journeys, an hilarious example of sanctified blackmail. Neither was Sidney above putting pressure on people she had helped and sent on their way to success in order to fund some worthy project, such as building a parsonage for the Baptist Church in Back Creek:

Of course I know this neighborhood of itself could hardly be expected to build this house. But I think of all who have left us, after having grown up here with industrious, correct habits, free from the vices they might have engendered elsewhere, who are now able to assist those they left behind, to do something for the lasting (we hope) benefit of the old neighborhood--the

seedbed, which I venture to say . . . has sent forth more noble, upright young men and women who are not an honor to their communities as well as to this little Valley, than any other neighborhood I have ever known or heard of! (Gore 157).

She records that she sent out some four hundred letters requesting help, and “success crowned [her] efforts” (Gore 158).

Father Joseph Vaillant and Sidney Gore are cut from the same cloth. They share the same religious passion, the same simple, childlike faith, the same sense of holy purpose to live life as God’s emissary here on earth, the same vigor and relentless activity, and both possess a great heart. But Cather’s portrayal of Joseph Vaillant is more than just an affirmation of her Aunt Sidney and her active Christian faith. By making Father Vaillant a companion personality to Bishop Latour, Cather unites her own mission as an artist with her Aunt’s mission as a saver of souls.³¹ Each in an individual way brings God’s truth to man.

Bishop Jean Latour has much of Willa Cather in him, an idealized version of what Cather saw herself to be--or wished to be. Cather so closely identified with him that working on him was like working with him. After the novel was finished, she wrote in a letter to a friend that “she missed her Archbishop awfully” (WC:LA 225).³² Her creation of this character brought to her, in Victor Frankl’s words, a “shock of recognition.” By indirection and association, Willa Cather was able to get a full look at herself, and at the

³¹ In Father William J. Howlett’s biography, he quotes from a letter written by Joseph to his sister in which he explains that, in the Bishop’s words, they together “shall try to make one good pastor” (WC:AM, 229). Cather could have very well seen their partnership in mission as well as life as a prototype for her own with Sidney Gore.

³² James Woodress agrees that Bishop Latour is full of Cather herself. See “The Uses of Biography: The Case of Willa Cather.” Also see Joan Younger Dickinson, “Willa Cather and the Priest.”

same time, create an imaginative ideal.³³ In creating Bishop Latour out of Bishop Lamy, and by juxtaposing him with a person who embodied her religious Virginia heritage, Cather opened up for herself a long perspective into her own history and development. It proved to be her deepest and most revealing journey.

Bishop Jean Latour is first and foremost a creator, bringing order and beauty out of chaos. As a son of France, he is the superbly cut jewel out of a fine and lengthy cultural tradition. When the prelates in Rome are considering who they should send to the untamed and wayward diocese of the American Southwest, they are less concerned that their candidate has zeal than great intelligence: "He will have to deal with savagery and ignorance, with dissolute priests and political intrigue. He must be a man to whom order is necessary--as dear as life" (8). These qualities required of Jean Latour--intelligence and a love of order-- are the same as for all of Cather's genuine artists who are infused with so much of herself, qualities already observed in Alexandra Bergson, Grandmother Burden, Antonia Shimerda, Thea Kronborg, Godfrey St. Peter, and Tom Outland. The only difference between Latour's art and Cather's is that Latour's vocation is attached to historical and organized religion, whereas Cather's is to the religious act of writing.

"A priest in a thousand," Jean Latour is not "an ordinary man." Like a medieval knight of "gentle birth," he has a "fine intelligence," is "brave, sensitive, courteous" with distinguished manners and handsome features, though "somewhat severe." As a young man he dreamed of a great destiny and was inflamed with the challenge of missions in the West, quickly volunteering when the opportunity came. Foregoing without a thought the genteel comforts of his home in France, he had "pledged himself" to his calling and "knew

³³ Dennis Halac, in "Novel or Biography?", compares Cather's novel to Paul Horgan's biography of Bishop Lamy and concludes that Latour is a product of Cather's imagination who can be recognized through a familiarity with her other characters in other works. Latour is invested with traits that Cather admires.

no wavering” (284).³⁴ Cather makes him another Aeneas, foresaking all to meet his destiny.

Noble and heroic, making treacherous and solitary journeys through hostile territory, Bishop Jean Latour is the questing wayfarer, a “Vicar Apostolic, lacking a Vicarate . . .; thrust out; his flock would have none of him” (DCA 19-20). Like Willa Cather in pursuit of her artistic calling, Latour separates himself from the world like a Christ-figure rejected of men, leaves the materialistic comforts and rewards of worldly ambition (save in the case of his Cathedral), and like a great river pushing toward the sea, moves steadily and confidently towards his destiny. He is transported by the challenge of creative power, bringing into being something out of nothing, and just as God created the world out of chaos, so he will make a new Eden.³⁵

Also like Willa Cather, Bishop Jean Latour has a reverence and passion for nature,³⁶ and his sensuous appreciation for its detail almost challenges his reverence for the Holy Mother. Latour is often “overcome by a feeling of place,” is “carried out of the body . . . to a place far away” merely by the stimulus of a sound or a smell, often to a place in his childhood (43). As Cather earlier in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* had through her protagonists transformed the Nebraska wasteland into a place of beauty and fecundity, so

³⁴ James M. Dinn, in “A Novelist’s Miracle: Structure and Myth in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*,” points out that, structurally, Cather blends the literal world with the spiritual in presenting Latour as a mythical questing knight who also fulfills the fertility myth as he brings to fruition God’s creative purposes in the Southwest.

³⁵ Maynard Fox, in “Proponents of Order: Tom Outland and Bishop Latour,” identifies the garden as the chief symbol in the novel, suggesting a paradise where order and peace is the accepted norm.

³⁶ Elizabeth Sergeant believed that Willa Cather’s “intimacy with nature lay at the very root . . . of her power to work at all” (WC:AM, 120). Cather once told Sergeant that she had to dissolve herself daily in nature as an act of rebirth in order to confront her task of writing (49).

Latour's lyrical descriptions of the southwestern landscape transform that harsh and vacant land into something of great beauty.

Because he has achieved a fusion of religion and art, the Bishop has a comprehensive and transcendent grasp of life's meaning. This timeless perspective, in turn, enables him to be at ease with himself and others. There is nothing in him false or mannered. That certain sense of himself liberates him to meet anyone different from himself with affable acceptance. His "right tone" and "good manners are unconscious and effortless," unlike those of most "white people, [who] when they addressed Indians, always put on a false face" (94). Part of this is owing to his good breeding, part of it to his fine intelligence. His expansive mind is global, not bound to the ordinary limits and prejudices of most people.

In spite of his social ease, however, the Bishop is like Cather's other true artists, and herself, in yet another respect: he is a loner.³⁷ He sets himself apart from normal human interaction. Father Vaillant remarks on this difference between Jean Latour and himself :

Wherever he went, he soon made friends But Jean, who was at ease in any society and always the flower of courtesy, could not form new ties. It had always been so. He was like that even as a boy; gracious to everyone, but known to a very few. (253)

³⁷ See WC:AM, 188, 130 and WC:LL, 455 for Cather's sense of removal from normal society and self-imposed isolation. See Dennis Mayes, "Willa Cather's Lonely Road," for a treatment of how Latour's lonely and individual journey is a fitting representation of Cather's own journey.

Bishop Latour is a Catherian pioneer, responding intensely to people who share his passion for the heroic and daring.³⁸ Hearing the stories of such men of the West as Kit Carson or Don Manuel Chavez, Latour in himself feels the same “madness,” the “recklessness, the call of wild countries which all these men had felt and followed in one way or another.” Latour in a deeply personal way experiences “the electric quality under [Chavez’s] cold reserve; the fierceness of some embitterment, the passion for danger” (DCA 82-83).

However, the passion of Bishop Latour’s artistic temperament is controlled by an incisive mind. Like Willa Cather aimed to be, he is a true classicist whose rationality is the guiding light to faith as well as art.³⁹ While he understands the need and even the necessity for some people to believe in the more fantastic and dramatic claims of religious experience --in bleeding statues and other supernatural signs and wonders--he himself, on the wings of his analytical mind, believes he has risen above it. On the evolutionary scale of man’s understanding of religious things, he has reached a more advanced stage--because of his superior understanding and intelligence has outgrown the need for supernatural signs. Throughout most of the novel, Cather makes his view the superior one.

Latour and Vaillant discuss the subject of miracles several times. Vaillant, like Sidney Gore and others of the Baptist faith in which Cather was raised, believes in the old-fashioned kind of miracle--when nature is momentarily countermanded by God for the expressed purpose of answering the prayers of believers, usually rescuing them from some

³⁸ John J. Murphy compares Latour to two other Western American frontier heroes, the Virginian and Natty Bumppo in “Willa Cather’s Archbishop: A Western and Classical Perspective.”

³⁹ See Donald Sutherland, “Willa Cather: The Classic Voice,” for a full and representative discussion of Cather’s classicist approach, which sought, like Vergil’s, to enhance the effects of energy and passion by controlling them with flat, pale statements of concentrated realism.

dire trouble. As the Bishop explains, “his dear Joseph must always have the miracle very direct and spectacular, not with Nature, but against it” (DCA 29). For example, Father Vaillant is “deeply stirred” when an elderly local Padre, pious and devoted, relates the “one absolutely authenticated appearance of the Blessed Virgin in the New World,” and how she at one time, through a personal visitation, had healed an uncle “sick unto death” and made roses bloom in the desert out of season. Father Vaillant argues for the miraculous: “Doctrine is well enough for the wise, Jean,” he tells the Bishop, “but the miracle is something we can hold in our hands and love” (48-50).

It is “just this [innocent faith] in his friend that [is] dear” to the Bishop, and he responds to Vaillant with the sympathy and understanding of a parent whose wisdom exceeds the child’s yet is not necessarily superior to it. His explanation of so-called miracles is the same as Cather’s of art: they both are conceived out of a “great love.” He tells Vaillant,

“[w]here there is great love there are always miracles. . . . One might almost say that an apparition is human vision corrected by divine love. I do not see you as you really are, Joseph; I see you through my affection for you. The Miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.” (50)

Faith, like art, by means of agape transforms the ordinary to the extraordinary, the natural to the supernatural. Both require the infusion of divine love and the creative use of imagination. For Cather, human imagination is charged with a divine force in the Wordsworthian sense, and its inspirations are as attached to universal truth as any other claims of divine revelation. Just as her Aunt Sidney believed her heart to be in tune with

God, so Cather believed her imagination was in tune with the power of the eternal. The difference between the two is in their respective views of the role of the mind in the act of receiving revelation. The evangelical traditions of Sidney Gore's frontier Baptist faith would have placed mind in opposition to revelation, whereas Cather makes them cooperative. Consequently (until near the end of the novel), Cather lets no miracle go unexplained no matter how comforting it would be for the believer.

In one narrative sequence, Bishop Latour calls back Father Vaillant from his mission to Tucson. Vaillant returns exultant, believing that the Bishop has miraculously been "an unconscious agent in the hands of Providence." It was not, as they had thought, "for no reason at all":

"You did not know why, and I did not know why. We were both acting in the dark. But Heaven knew what was happening on Cherry Creek [Colorado], and moved us like chessmen on the board. When the call came, I was here to answer it--by a miracle, indeed." (252-53)

With a bit of exasperation, Latour deflates Vaillant's excessive reliance on facile miracles by informing him that he sent for him simply because he wanted his companionship and used his "authority as a Bishop to gratify [his own] personal wish" (253). However, Cather undercuts the superiority of Latour's position by making us aware of the questionable use of his ecclesiastical power. His action is prompted by a lower love than that which Vaillant uses to claim the act is a miracle. Through the incident, Cather is illustrating what Latour means, and we can assume what all other intellectual artists mean, by "human vision corrected by divine love." Yet, ironically, it is Vaillant's kind of love that emerges as more genuine and, therefore, more true. Through this careful manipulation of point of view, Cather is foreshadowing the thematic reversal that is to come.

From all surface appearances—including the narrative focus which points to Latour as the central hero of the novel—the credit for the monumental work of reorganizing a diocese, reforming a clergy, and reviving a people belongs to Bishop Jean Latour.⁴⁰ However, these projects have been joint efforts with Father Vaillant; they would not have happened without Father Joseph's energetic help and his faithfulness in following the orders of his superior. The only great achievement that Bishop Latour can claim as truly his own is his cathedral.

Much like Cather's Nebraska novels, the great stone edifice of the cathedral rises out of a flat desert. It is modeled after the towering medieval Romanesque churches in France.⁴¹ Bishop Latour bequeathed a lasting artistic monument that would bring for coming generations timeless beauty and majesty. It is a treasure born out of his own imagination; he could see it complete long before the first stone was laid, just as Willa Cather's books fell into her mind of a piece.⁴² As Latour's cathedral is Father Vaillant's answer to the puzzle as to why God would send a man with such exceptional qualities to such a forlorn part of the world, so is Cather's artistic gift the answer to why her destiny lay in an unshrunken and uncultured land. "Perhaps it pleased Him to grace the beginning of a new era and a vast new diocese by a fine personality. And perhaps, after all, something would remain through the years to come; some idea, or memory, or legend" (254).

Latour's cathedral, however, is more than "some idea"; it is imagination materialized, an artifact born of his own artistic vision, just as is Cather's fiction. In other

⁴⁰ Henry C. Haskell, in "Cather's Archbishop: Truth from Her Intuition," gives the consensus of critical opinion that, in spite of Vaillant's appealing character, Cather keeps Latour in the forefront of the novel.

⁴¹ For a discussion of Cather's use of medieval sources in her other works, see Evelyn Hall, "The Iconography of Vice in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*" and Leo Vincent Jacks, "The Classics and Willa Cather."

⁴² See WC:AM, 166 and WC:LL, 393.

of a moment, which might have been a lost ecstasy, is made an actual possession and can be bequeathed to another. (SR 137)

Even here, however, art is the superior miracle, presumably the creation and preference of the complex-minded rather than the simple-hearted.

The shift from this thematic point of view to quite another comes with an incident that precipitates Bishop Latour's spiritual renewal.⁴⁴ Bishop Latour has not always been so averse to profound religious feeling and ecstasy as his comments to Father Joseph might indicate. He had experienced it often as a young man. But with time and with long continual use of his corrective rationality, the original passion has been dulled. It is revived through the example of another's devotion, through an old devout woman who, because of her personal circumstances, has been forbidden to exercise her faith. In telling the incident, it is as if Cather has made one of her trips back to to see another sainted Virginia elder, her Grandmother Rachel Boak, and is reminded of the deep religious feeling that was her birthright.

One night, going late to the cold church to pray, the Bishop encounters Sada, an old Mexican who is a slave in an American family.⁴⁵ As Protestants hostile to the Catholic church, her owners forbid Sada to attend a mass or visit a priest. On this one bitterly cold night, Sada heroically risks discovery and slips away to the church where the Bishop finds

⁴⁴ For an opposing view, see Curtis Whittington, Jr., "'The Stream and the Broken Pottery': The Form of Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*." Whittington claims that Latour does not develop or change in the course of the novel. Henry C. Haskell, in "A Character Willa Cather Made Human at Christmas," sees the following incident as a vital part of the novel simply because it does reveal that the Bishop is subject to a self-doubt which precipitates change.

⁴⁵ Rachel Boak, as revealed in "Old Mrs. Harris" (*Obscure Destinies*), was virtually a love-slave in the Charles Cather home from the earliest days in Virginia until her death in Red Cloud. However, her situation was much different from Sada's in that she did it voluntarily and did not have to endure a hostile environment.

her saying her prayers through frozen, chattering teeth. "It seemed to him that he had never seen pure goodness shine out of a human countenance as it did from hers." When Sada finally sees once again the "holy things of the altar," she falls to her knees shedding "tears of ecstasy." Later, the Bishop tells Father Vaillant never "had it been permitted him to behold such deep experience of the holy joy of religion as on that pale December night," and with the old woman Latour again experiences "those holy mysteries as he had done in his young manhood" (213-214, 216).

In the Bishop's spiritual renewal, Cather transforms Baptist fervency into Catholic devotion, and imaginatively experiences, through Latour, the redemptive beauty of personal faith. Jean Latour, for all his intellectual and artistic fineness, had not often "come so near to the Fountain of all Pity as in the Lady Chapel that night; the pity that no man born of woman could ever utterly cut himself off from." The "beautiful concept of Mary pierced the priest's heart like a sword" and "through [Sada's] eyes," he "received the miracle in her heart into his own" and "knew that his poverty was as bleak as hers" (217-18).

In this pivotal incident, Latour recognizes that his rational intellectualism and selfish aspirations have resulted in a spiritual poverty--have killed his ability to experience the higher emotion of religious ecstasy--which is a much worse deprivation than material poverty. Through Sada's example, he once again knows the rapture that in his mature years he relegated to the more ignorant, childlike, and emotional people of the world. And when he gives Old Sada a silver medal blessed by the Pope, his words echo those used earlier by Vaillant when he described the efficacy of a miracle: "Ah, . . . for one who cannot read--or think--the Image, the physical form of Love!" (218-19).

The Bishop's spiritual vision is transformed by this rapturous revelation. It forever alters his rationally superior explanation of "miracles," and in the novel, it also drastically alters the narrative attitude toward such events. In his last years, the Bishop's primary duty is to train a new crop of young priests to carry on the work in the Southwest. Besides transmitting to them "certain facts about the old missions in the diocese" which he "feared

would be forgotten"--the "truths and fancies relating to a bygone time," the "old legends and customs and superstitions"--he especially wants to convey to each young prelate "the fortitude and devotion of those first missionaries, the Spanish friars" (276-77). These narratives include an abundance of "little miracles" associated with their "blessed experiences." The Bishop is now fervent in his effort to relate how the early missionaries had thrown "themselves naked upon the hard heart of a country that was calculated to try the endurance of giants" (277), and instead of the rational explanations he had earlier pressed onto Vaillant, he now tells his young charges that the missionaries truly did need the protection of Divine intervention to complete their mission.

Significantly, this series of miracles is narrated through the consciousness of the aging Bishop, and this time, Cather inserts no corrective rational explanation, either through Latour or through the narrative voice. In the entire novel, the only other purely credulous account of a miracle is delivered through the consciousness of Vaillant (256-57), which is a corrective all its own given the fact that the narrator has already established Vaillant's predisposition to the irrational in religious matters. But these later accounts are from the Bishop, and there is no question that he is now accepting them as a form of higher reality.

From the crossing of a treacherous river with the help of a mysterious and disappearing stranger, to being fed in the wilderness, not by ravens, but by a young horseman appearing out of nowhere (279), the Spanish friars were miraculously aided in establishing God's kingdom on earth in circumstances that were "beyond any conception St. Paul and his brethren could have had" (278). But the account for which Bishop Latour has the strongest "affection" is a telling one, considering it is apparently Cather's choice as well. It concerns a miraculous appearance of the Holy Family.

The story goes thus. The legendary Father Junipero Serra and a companion arrive at a remote Californian monastery on foot and without provisions. The Brothers are astonished, "believing it impossible that men could have crossed so great a stretch of desert

in this naked fashion." But Father Junipero tells the Brothers that he and his companion "had fared very well" having been "entertained by a poor Mexican family on the way." They run out of food and water, when, immediately, standing before them is a little Mexican house and a clump of trees with an ass tied to one. To greet them is "a venerable Mexican, clad in sheepskins," his wife, "a young woman of beautiful countenance," and her child, "scarcely more than an infant" who is "playing with a pet lamb" (280-81). The priests are entertained and housed for the night by these "gentle, pious, and well-spoken" people, but when they awake in the morning, the family has vanished.

The Brothers at the monastery are understandably amazed at the story, especially since they know of no settlers in that region:

So Father Junipero and Father Andrea, his companion, with some of the Brothers and the scoffing muleteer, went back into the wilderness to prove the matter. The three tall trees they found, shedding their cotton, and the dead trunk to which the ass had been tied. But the ass was not there, nor any house, nor the oven by the door. Then the two Fathers sank down upon their knees in that blessed spot and kissed the earth, for they perceived what Family it was that had entertained them there.

Father Junipero confessed to the Brothers how from the moment he entered the house he had been strangely drawn to the child, and desired to take him in his arms, but that he kept near his mother. When the priest was reading the evening prayers the child sat upon the floor against his mother's knee, with the lamb in his lap, and the Father found it hard to keep his eyes upon his breviary. After prayers, when he bade his hosts good-night, he did indeed stoop over the little boy in blessing; and the child had lifted his hand, and with his tiny finger made the cross upon Father Junipero's forehead. (281-82)

The Bishop not only hears the story with sympathy but repeats it twice, finding “something charming in the idea of greatness returning to simplicity--the queen making hay among the country girls.” But even

more endearing was the belief that They, after so many centuries of history and glory, should return to play Their first parts, in the persons of a humble Mexican family, the lowliest of the lowly, the poorest of the poor,--in a wilderness at the end of the world, where the angels could scarcely find Them! (282-83)

In these “miraculous” narratives, in particular this one about the Holy Family, Willa Cather allows for herself a degree of sentimentality and an unrestricted religious passion found nowhere else in her fiction. Even the passages describing religious ecstasy in *Shadows on the Rock* are formal and controlled by comparison. It is as if this particular narrative broke through her artistic reserve in some unconscious and elemental way, and through the account of the Holy Family, she made connection with her own family, holy and sanctified in her memory.⁴⁶

There has been some critical speculation over why Cather chose the Catholic church and not the Protestant to be the frame for her most explicitly religious novel. When the novel first appeared, its Catholic sentiment appeared so authentic that many who did not

⁴⁶ John J. Murphy, in “Willa Cather and Religion,” observes that “Cather’s handling of Latour’s spiritual aridity shows significant insight and is informed perhaps by her own personal struggle.” The “peace that comes to Latour’s soul” in the scene with Sada “recalls the effect of seamstress Augusta on Professor St. Peter,” which associates Sada with Augusta and all others like them “‘with whom one was outward bound’ [PH, 281]” (64). The only thing Murphy misses here are the links between these women and Cather’s elders.

know Cather assumed she herself was Catholic.⁴⁷ Actually, it was fitting that she chose the mother church of Protestantism. Besides staying historically true to the account which inspired the book, Cather had long associated the amalgamation of religion and art with Catholicism. Both had been part of the Catholic tradition since Emperor Constantine legalized the religion and poured the state's money into making its churches the wonders of the medieval world. The Baptist denomination of the Protestant faith in which Cather was raised had no such history, much less artistic grandeur. Indeed, for Cather, there was much in evangelical Protestantism that was the enemy of the beautiful. Its pockets of blind narrowness, dullness, pessimism, and excessive restrictions would kill the very soul, qualities that she pointedly criticizes in her Nebraska novels. In the legends and rituals of the Catholic church she found a reverence for art and time-honored traditions and an appeal to the imagination which Protestantism generally condemned.

One must also consider that Cather's first exposure to religion was not at the Baptist Church in Red Cloud but at Back Creek, Virginia, with the people to whom she remained closest for the rest of her life. Even though Sidney Gore, Rachel Boak, and the William Cathers were also Baptist, Cather's reaction to their pietism was in no way like that toward other Red Cloud worshipers. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, the references to the Back Creek church have none of the negative overtones that appear in the Nebraska novels. Even in *My Antonia*, the homely piety of Grandfather and Grandmother Burden, in contrast to the hypocritical church deacons in Black Hawk, is presented with great understanding and sympathy. In all of Cather's fiction, if religion is presented sympathetically, it is through characters who either directly or indirectly represent her family elders. Even if her family communicated their religious sentiments in pious mouthings or small-minded restrictions, their strength of character, their simple acts of kindness, their profound store

⁴⁷ See Francis Talbot, S. J., "Willa Cather Eulogizes the Archbishop"; Michael Williams, "Willa Cather's Masterpiece"; and Rev. Mark Barron, "Communication: The Catholic Novel."

of human feeling, and all the various intimacies that tie a young child to the clan, cancelled her condemnation.

The Boak family was apparently Episcopalian (which is also the church of Sapphira and Henry Colbert in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*), and even though Charles Cather was raised a Baptist, there is evidence that he was more in sympathy with his wife and mother-in-law's Episcopalian standards than the Baptists'. Charles and Virginia Cather loved to dance, go to parties, imbibe socially, and play music on Sundays, which were all prohibited in the William Cather home. They attended the Baptist Church in Red Cloud, but as soon as the Episcopal Church established a parish there in 1922, they, along with Willa, became official members (WC:LL 337). The Episcopal church's tradition and practice are closely aligned with the Catholic church, and Willa Cather found them compatible with her own preferences.

Other readers have expressed surprise that Cather could communicate so effectively a genuine Catholic feeling for religion and faith in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Actually, it is not surprising at all given the fact that there is little distance between the ardor and emotion elicited by devout Catholicism and that of devout evangelical Christianity--the kind expressed by Cather's grandparents and great-aunt in Virginia. The creeds are different; the religious sentiment, personal commitment, and all-absorbing passion are the same. Willa Cather did not have to read about the early missionaries to the Southwest to know about a personally-felt religious experience with all the accompanying supernatural associations. If she did not experience it herself, she saw it first hand in Sidney Gore and William and Caroline Cather and Rachel Boak. That she had similar feelings of religious ecstasy in nature and art is everywhere documented in her fiction.

Through the characters of Bishop Latour and Father Vaillant, Willa Cather imagines herself and all those like her Aunt Sidney Gore as partners in an earthly mission born of a

heavenly vision.⁴⁸ They are both true artists. In her years as critic of the arts, both in Lincoln and in Pittsburg, Willa Cather formulated her theory of the artist in language that fuses an artistic vocation with a religious one.⁴⁹ Bernice Slote summarizes by saying that Cather's true artist has a "natural nobility" reflected in genius "which is of God" and which is "made complete through human achievement, in the particular human accent of body, voice, hand, or word" (KA 115).

As with all Cather's characters who give of themselves unreservedly and with great passion to a worthy cause, Joseph Vaillant has the unmistakable marks of a true artist. But his art is fired in the kiln of personal activity and deep involvement with the lives of others. His acts are his art. Jean Latour's art is more imaginative and intellectually remote, born of a great and transcendent idea. As Vaillant says concerning the Bishop's work at Santa Fe, "It is work that can be done by intelligence" (DCA 208). But the missionary work that Vaillant wants to do right in the midst of the lives of the unevangelized people requires a "particular sympathy"--it is "work for the heart" (208).⁵⁰

Here, Cather is not only acknowledging the two-pronged nature of accomplishing a great mission--requiring both head and heart--, but she is also revealing what ultimately becomes her theory of art: that to transform life into art requires two functions, intelligent imagination and selfless loving. A great idea or a beautiful object is not enough to make life

⁴⁸ Ann Moseley, in "The Pueblo Emergence Myth in Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*," sees a thematic parallel in this novel with a Pueblo Indian myth in which the Pueblo Twins enable their people to rise to higher levels of spiritual being and harmony. Moseley connects the Pueblo Twins to Latour and Vaillant.

⁴⁹ See introductory essay to KA by Bernice Slote for a full and enlightening treatment of this subject.

⁵⁰ Jeanny Ross Pontrelli, in "The Archetypal Hero in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*," compares Latour to Aeneas and the knight of romance who achieves a blending of intellect and heart--represented by Vaillant/Galahad--which allows him to fulfill both the practical and spiritual aspects of his mission.

valuable; it requires the accompanying great acts of service, the self-sacrificing accumulation of deeds both great and small, forgotten and remembered. And while it appears in the novel that Latour's brand of art and his image as an artist are the superior, actually the reverse is true.

The conclusion that Cather draws concerning the relative success and validity of the efforts of each of her priests turns out to be a rare assertion that countermands Cather's frequent efforts, to present her own chosen vocation as the "superior" art. This qualification has been unrecognized by other critics, resulting in the common view that, in the words of Merrill Skaggs, even though Cather presents "two equally admirable priests," in the final analysis, "as so many have asserted," Latour "is the more important and central figure" (402). What critics have missed is Cather's retraction in the novel of her earlier claim for the superiority of Latour and his kind of art. Her turnaround conclusion is couched in the Bishop's own end-of-life assessment, and it can reasonably be interpreted as Cather's own.

As Bishop Latour reminisces on his life with Father Vaillant, he realizes that "he had easily surpassed his friend in scholarship, but he always realizes that Joseph excelled him in the fervour of his faith" (226). None of Joseph's ambitions were for himself. He was a man of one desire--to exhaust his life in the service of others, bringing them hope through the Church for this life, and an assurance of the life to come. He was willing to pour out the oil of his best gifts on the very doubtful feet of humanity's lowliest, a very risky business indeed if one wants to insure worldly immortality for himself.

Latour's fondest desires are not so pristine; he knows that the one accomplishment that he believes is his finest, the building of the cathedral, is born of "one very keen worldly ambition" (175). His protestations that he is building for the future notwithstanding, the construction of the Cathedral at Santa Fe is worldly because it is for himself. It had been his burning passion even through the busy years of reclaiming the New Mexico diocese. He had "cherished this wish and meditated upon it," and he had

believed that “such a building might be a continuation of himself and his purpose, a physical body full of his aspirations after he had passed from the scene” (175). He repeatedly calls it “my Cathedral” (241-242), sharing credit for it with neither God nor man.⁵¹ The special stone he finds for it gratifies his “personal taste” and his “vanity” (245). He is very anxious about getting it finished before he dies, because he does not want to leave it for more vulgar hands to shape: “I wish to leave nothing to chance, or to the mercy of American builders” (242). And his own personal stamp is further hammered on the project when he insists that the Cathedral reflect his French culture, not the Mexican or Spanish or American one in which it will reside. It is to be a Midi Romanesque, not a simple adobe church and certainly not a western one.⁵²

The cathedral, Latour’s one purely artistic achievement in the conventional sense, is the one enterprise that gives him the most pause. In an honest self-examination of his motives in building it, he recognizes they are inconsistent with the claims of his vocation. “Worldly ambition” is an uncomfortable bedfellow for self-abnegation. Father Vaillant points out the spiritual enmity between worldly ambition and obedience to God’s will: “No worldly success can take the place of that,” he tells the Bishop. Latour’s response to

⁵¹ For an alternate view, see Mary-Ann Stouck and David Stouck, “Art and Religion in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.” These writers argue that the cathedral is a symbol of communal enterprise, of personal ambition given way to selfless service. Latour’s cathedral, they say, resolves the conflict between desiring art for personal gratification and desiring it for its social and moral significance. I believe the evidence shows strongly otherwise.

⁵² Mary Austin, in whose home in Santa Fe Cather once enjoyed an extended stay while she was working on DCA, complains in *Earth Horizons: Autobiography* that Cather’s sympathy with the Archbishop’s desire to build a French cathedral in the midst of Spanish culture was a terrible insult to that culture. Cather had given Austin a copy of the book and inscribed it with, “For Mary Austin, in whose lovely study I wrote the last chapters of this book. She will be my sternest critic--and she has the right to be.” After Austin took Cather’s directive and published her criticism of the book, Cather “took umbrage”

Vaillant is heavy with suggestive meaning for Cather as, through her Bishop, she fictionally compares herself with one of her family elders: "*Blanchet*, . . . you are a better man than I" (261).

If one compares Bishop Latour's life in the Southwest to a pilgrimage, as several have,⁵³ then we are invited to look at the novel in light of one of Willa Cather's favorite books, *Pilgrim's Progress*. In that allegory, one pitfall that Christian must avoid at all costs is Worldly Ambition, a temptation that if succumbed to, will rob Christian's soul as quickly as any other. Latour, as Christian, would have a difficult time reaching his goal and receiving his eternal reward since he has admittedly succumbed to the less than noble worldly ambition of building the cathedral. That Cather herself struggled with the same temptation is clear. While she wrapped her theories of art in a holy covering of high purpose, she recognized that all of her aims were not as holy. Woodress notes that Cather occasionally "could not help doing a number of things for fame" (WC:LA 244), and even her father, Charles, in a letter in which he pays "tribute to her genius and success" admonishes the daughter he knew and loved so well to be "modest" (WWC 26-27).

Even though Latour's cathedral will be a thing of noble beauty to be cherished in a land meager in that commodity, Latour comes to believe that his cathedral and his mission are mere backdrops for men like Joseph Vaillant:

Of the two young priests who set forth from Riom that morning in early Spring, Jean Latour had seemed the one so much more likely to succeed in a missionary's life. He, indeed, had a sound mind in a sound body. During

and began "denying that she had done any writing at all in Austin's house" (WC:LL, 394-95).

⁵³ See Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, *Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy*, and James M. Dinn, "'Only Two or Three Human Stories': Recurrent Patterns of Action in the Major Fiction of Willa Cather" for treatments of Cather's thematic use of the pilgrimage.

the weeks they spent at the College of Foreign Missions in the rue du Bac, the authorities had been very doubtful of Joseph's fitness for the hardships of the mission field. Yet in the long test of years it was that frail body that had endured more and accomplished more. (286)

In his last thought before he dies, Jean Latour's mind travels back to his native land and a scene that took place years ago. "[He] was trying to give consolation to a young man who was being torn in two before his eyes by the desire to go and the necessity to stay." Latour's success in pulling Joseph Vaillant away from the comfort of home and setting him on the road to his destiny was like "trying to forge a new Will in that devout and exhausted priest" (299). It is as if Latour recognizes that, ultimately, his purpose in the mission was to get Joseph Vaillant's to his, that Latour was to use his vision and artistic comprehension --however proud or self-centered--as the inspiration and spiritual propulsion for the real work to be done. He must have had some sense of this earlier when he said goodbye to Joseph for the last time:

"*Blanchet*, . . . [y]ou have been a great harvester of souls, without pride and with shame--and I am always a little cold--*un pedant*, as you used to say. If hereafter we have stars in our crowns, yours will be a constellation. Give me your blessing." (261-62)

Here is Willa Cather abnegating her throne; her art is of a lesser kind than Sidney Gore's, or that of any others like her. The superiority of the traditional artist so celebrated in much of her earlier fiction will never again appear. There is a selfishness and egotism inherent in that kind of art that, by Cather's own standards, put the mark of Cain on it. The art of simple and devoted service, as represented in Monet's *Reapers*, or in the faithful and sacrificial service of Sidney Gore or Caroline Cather or Rachel Boak, is the pure and

efficacious art.⁵⁴ It is art born of a pure heart and of pure motives. Without it, the other art would not be possible; the painters and the singers and the writers would have no worthy subject.

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather presents both kinds. Bishop Jean Latour represents the artistic and intellectual side of religious fervor, heroic in scope and imaginative in method. Father Joseph Vaillant's simple devotion, energetic service, and great heart are religion and art acting in the everyday. His efforts may seem less permanent and less spectacular to the natural eye, but to the one who truly sees, they may be more heroic than the other.⁵⁵ Cather identifies this method of fictional construction as raising the normally trivial things of the world to a higher level, and deflating normally momentous things to the ordinary. Cather got this idea, she said, from a literary analogue in *The Golden Legend*, in which accounts of saints' martyrdom are given no more importance than their ordinary, everyday activities: "[I]t is as though all human experience, measured against one supreme spiritual experience, were about the same importance" (OW 9). But it is not quite the same. The everyday takes precedence over the sublime. And, of course, *The Golden Legend* was hardly Willa Cather's first prototype. She had grown up with the example of people whose living was founded on the Christian axiom that a cup of water given in love outranks any treasure given in pride.

⁵⁴ Gail M Eifrig, in "Willa Cather: An Introduction," says that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* communicates Cather's "primary understanding about life, that it is faithfulness that redeems it," faithfulness that is in the quality of the actions rather than the actions themselves (25).

⁵⁵ Sister Peter Damian Charles, in "*Death Comes for the Archbishop*: A Novel of Love and Death," 389-403, attributes the narrative tension between Latour and Vaillant to Cather's contrasting the basic conflict between Thanatos and Eros, and argues that it is left to Latour, as the intellectual artist, to reconcile the split through the power of Agape. It is true that Latour does this mentally toward the end of the book, but he could not have done it without Valliant's example of Agape working in his life.

Cather's portrayals of Jean Latour and Joseph Vaillant in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* give an answer as to why her natural artists are the most beloved. Given her judgment of the superiority of the common person,⁵⁶ certainly Antonia Shimerda outstrips Thea Kronborg and Neighbour Rosicky surpasses Godfrey St. Peter. The countless "little people" in her stories, who live simple lives of quiet devotion, more fully match Father Vaillant than Bishop Latour.⁵⁷ As heroic and grand as Cather creates her artists--and by inference, herself--she deliberately celebrates the superiority of people like her Aunt Sidney Gore, who is the exemplum of the true poet. Through humble religious service, all such artists "fashion worlds in little" and "make form / As God does," serving as the "priest / Who makes God into bread to feed the world."

⁵⁶ For representative articles on Cather's elevation of the common, see René Rapin, "Willa Cather (1875 [sic]-1947)," George Greene, "*Death Comes for the Archbishop*," Joanna Lathrop, "On the Title," and Stephen Tennant, "The Room Beyond."

⁵⁷ Patricia Lee Yongue points out, in "Willa Cather on Heroes and Hero-Worship," that Fathers Latour and Vaillant are fashioned in the manner of Thomas Carlyle's Hero and Ordinary Man in *On Heroes*, but that they go beyond Carlyle's limits in that both are heroes in their own right. Latour is the quintessence of the artist's nature, perfect in his spiritual disembodiment from daily concerns--complete, finished, immortal, permanent. As Latour's vicar and underling, Vaillant is Ordinary man, but in his passion for his vocation, he is also a hero. Yongue sees in them a representation of Cather's "immense design": lord and servant, the ideal and real. I am adding to the argument that Cather does not give the separate types of hero equal ranking.

Chapter 5

The “Rod of Measure”

*Grandmither, think not I forget, when I
come back to town,
An' wander the old ways again an' tread
them up an' down.
I never smell the clover bloom, nor see the
swallows pass,
Without I mind how good ye were unto a
little lass.¹*

*“Jacob is the rod of measure. . . . Take
Jacob out of the history of Joseph, and it
becomes simply the story of young genius;
its cruel discipline, its ultimate triumph and
worldly success. A story ever new and
always gratifying, but one which never
wakens the keep vibrations of the soul.”²*

The last of Willa Cather's Virginian Keepers of the Grail was her maternal grandmother, Rachel Seibert Boak. Born in Back Creek Valley, Rachel Seibert was only

¹ The poem from which these lines are taken (1-4) appeared in *April Twilights* (1903), which was Cather's first and only volume of poetry (reissued under *April Twilights and other Poems* with some changes and additions, 1923). Mildred Bennett notes that “Willa's devotion to her grandmother [Boak] found voice in the poem” (WWC, 22).

² From “*Joseph and His Brothers*” (OW, 122), Willa Cather's review of Thomas Mann's book. In it Cather suggests direct parallels between Joseph's and her own dependence on the faith and vision of family elders for success.

fourteen years old in 1830 when she married William Lee Boak.³ A man distinguished by his career, William Boak was a justice of the Berkeley County Court, a three-time member of the Virginia House of Delegates, and in later years a Washington official of the Department of the Interior. He died in Washington D.C. on November 2, 1854, leaving Rachel with five children, three sons and two daughters, one of whom was Virginia, Willa Cather's mother.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl chronicles this time in Rachel Boak's life. Though many narrative details are fabricated, it is clear that while in Washington, Rachel Boak gained a wider experience and sophistication than one would have later guessed. When her husband died, Rachel returned to Back Creek and moved into a house given to her by her father. There she raised her children and tended a community with her natural nursing skills. Her daughter and son-in-law, Virginia and Charles Cather, moved in with her in their first year of marriage, and it was in her house that Willa Cather was born in 1873. When Virginia and Charles moved to Willow Shade after William and Carolyn Cather left for Nebraska, Rachel Boak moved in with them.

As did many Southern widows who were not financially independent, Rachel Boak attached herself to her daughter's household and became Virginia's helper, managing the house and children, cooking, doing the myriad tasks required of a homemaker on a Southern farm, and generally relieving Virginia of domestic chores that she found tiresome and boring. Rachel was uprooted from her native Virginia along with the rest of the Cather household when they left for Nebraska in 1883, and she continued in the role of family domestic until her death in 1893 in Red Cloud.

Rachel Boak's influence on Willa Cather was enormous. She not only was a major force in Cather's early development, but she appears as a continuing model in

³ Unless otherwise indicated, biographical information on Rachel Boak is taken from WC:EV, 24-28.

Cather's mature fiction of characters who are meek in nature and obscure in destiny but who also exemplify everything that makes life valuable and beautiful.⁴ Portraits of her appear most conspicuously in Rachel Blake of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and as the title character in "Old Mrs. Harris." But the spirit of Rachel Boak is in all the characters who, like Neighbour Rosicky, virtually lose their own lives in the life of others.

One non-fictional memorial to Rachel Boak appears in a May, 1897, article printed in the Pittsburgh *Home Monthly* when Cather was managing editor. Cather titled the article, "Nursing as Profession for Women," and in it she outlines the criteria for a good nurse which read like Cather's requirements for a good artist or a good priest: "An aptitude for nursing is inborn. You cannot manufacture it by any process whatsoever. The profession is as old as the history of pain and compassion" (WP. 1. 320).

Cather continues with a tribute to her Grandmother Boak, "who knew instinctively what to do" to give medical succor, and who did it "without recompense" simply "from the mere love" of doing it:

She had a host of little children and cares enough of her own, poor woman, but when a child was burned, when some overworked woman

⁴ Sharon O'Brien claims that "Rachel Boak contributed more to Cather's fiction than Sidney [Gore] or Caroline [Cather] simply because she was more important in her granddaughter's life" (WC:EV, 24-25). James Woodress agrees about the influence but does not elaborate: "Rachel Boak was a remarkable woman who left an indelible impression on her granddaughter" (WC:LA, 21). Elizabeth Sergeant barely mentions her in her *Memoir*. Even in her discussion of "Old Mrs. Harris," Sergeant names only the adolescent Vickie as being "frankly autobiographical" (WC:AM, 249). Surprisingly, Cather's long-time companion, Edith Lewis, makes scant mention of Rachel Boak, choosing rather to discuss at length another household member who, like Rachel, "served the family with perfect self-forgetfulness and devotion"--Margie Anderson (WCL, 11). Cather's first biographer, E. K. Brown, only refers to Rachel as a footnote in Cather's life.

was in her death agony, when a man had been crushed under the falling timber, or when a boy had cut his leg by a slip of the knife in the sumach field, the man who went to town for the doctor always stopped for her on the way. Night or day, winter or summer, she went . . . alone on foot across the snow-drifted fields and through the frosty pine woods in the dead of night, with a stout hickory stick in her hand and a basket on her arm. I have often heard the old folks tell how, during those dreadful diphtheria scourges that used to sweep over the country in the fifties, she would go into a house where eight or ten children were all down with the disease, nurse and cook for the living and “lay out” the dead. (320)⁵

Rachel Boak’s compassionate resignation in the face of mortality is similar to Caroline Cather’s; consequently, Augusta of *The Professor’s House* has some of Rachel Boak in her. Both women are like a rock of refuge, a symbol Cather used often, culminating in *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). In this novel the healing arts are celebrated in the person of Euclide Auclair, “the philosopher apothecary of Quebec” (SR 3), who gives the same kind of motherly comfort demonstrated by Rachel Boak. Whatever lessons Willa Cather learned of the Christian virtue of losing one’s life to save another’s she learned firsthand from Rachel Boak.

Grandmother Boak was also the primary force behind young Willa’s love of books. Among her many other duties, Rachel Boak was put in charge of Willa’s education and was the one to teach Willa to read and write. Rachel was not formally

⁵ In the article Cather also notes that, in spite of their service of love and dedication, those nurses like her grandmother were not properly educated and made some disastrous errors in their homemade care. Cather makes the point that an active heart without a trained head is ultimately insufficient, a common theme in her fiction reflected in the tension between naturalism and civilization, instinct and education, feeling and fact, West and East, art and nature.

equipped for such a job; she had attended boarding school for only a short time, and unlike Sidney Gore or even Caroline Cather, she apparently did no writing, not even letters. But she had an innate love of books that she faithfully planted in an eager little girl whose mind and imagination were like waiting soil.

Grandmother Boak's story-telling sessions with the Cather children aroused in Willa a passion for narrative.⁶ In "Old Mrs. Harris," Rachel Boak, in spite of suffering and old age, continues to share with the children her love for the printed page. The children had only to ask, and no matter how her tired body ached, Grandmother reached for her "old-fashioned silver-rimmed spectacles" and with the little children sprawled on her lounge or at her feet, she "began to read" the Bible or "the continued story in the Chicago weekly paper" or *Tom Sawyer* or *Pilgrim's Progress*, "which she had read aloud to the children so many times" (OD, "Old Mrs. Harris" 89, 183).

Rachel Boak introduced Willa Cather in her earliest years to three works which I call "The Virginia Books." These books resonate in all of Cather's writing; she cut her literary teeth on them, and her work would forever bear their imprint. We have already seen the impress of biblical form and rhetoric on her work. The other two are Peter Parley's *Universal History* and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (WC:EV 26). When Grandmother Boak read to her young charge out of one of these, Willa's imagination was fired by the elevated language and heroic tenor, and they provided the model for Cather's own narrative mode--that of a symbolist and allegorist.⁷ Along with the Bible, these

⁶ In Virginia, there were four Cather children: Willa (1873), Roscoe (1877), Douglass (1880), and Jessica (1881); three more came in Nebraska: James (1886), Elsie (1890), and John [Jack] (1892).

⁷ For representative works on Cather's symbolic and allegorical method, see Georgette Cox, "The Allegorical Mode in American Fiction"; Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, "Willa Cather's Novels of the Frontier: The Symbolic Function of 'Machine-made Materialism'"; E. K. Brown, *Rhythm in the Novel*; Philip L. Gerber, "Willa

books were also the foundation for the all-pervasive religious aura and moral conviction that envelops Cather's fiction, and Cather would forever link the artistic act of writing with acts of devotion and heroism.

Parley's *Universal History* gave Willa her first written connection to the past (WC:EV 26). Why Rachel Boak chose this volume to read to a five year old is hard to say. It may have been suggested by Willa's parents, or she may have herself been a lover of history, or the book may have just been handy on the shelf. We know the Cather family library was varied, and Rachel's tastes eclectic (KA 38-39). Even though she evidently did not have Willa's skill to articulate the deeper implications of her reading, Rachel had the same thirst for reading books and absorbed them with the same eagerness.

In the *History*, Willa learned the meaning of "hero" and "heroic action." She listened to tales of great men and their noble exploits and thrilled to the elevated feeling that such grand visions and deeds elicited in her. These historical accounts, written with the romantic flair of the nineteenth century, were the early hot coals that flamed into a life-long conviction: that human life means nothing if it is not splendid, if it is not lived on a grand scale of values and deeds that lift men above the mundane.⁸

One of the stories read to Willa by Grandmother Boak out of Parley's *History* was the account of the Roman Cato (presumably Marcus Porcius, the Elder). This account imbedded another eternal verity into Cather's consciousness: that the universe is moral, and all human action should be judged on that basis. There is right action, and there is wrong; and there are consequences to be reaped in both instances. However, even though heroic action is admirable, one must be cautious. Even the heroic man has his dark side--he tends to ignore his fallibility and falls into the error of pride. We know

Cather and the Big Red Rock"; and William M. Curtin, "Willa Cather: Individualism and Style."

⁸ See Bernice Slote, KA, 33, 37-38, 42-48, 63-64 for discussion of Cather's insistence that life and art celebrate splendor and high passion.

that both these impulses took root in Willa even at this very early age; we even have a record of how they were played out in her imagination.

Willa's parents often recalled with fond amusement (and probably with not a little pride) a childhood game young Willa invented and played often, inspired by a scene from the account. She would place one straight-backed chair upside down on another and climb to the uppermost one. There, perched high in her "chariot," she became the imperial Cato. Alongside ran Cato's imaginary slave. Willa, already a child of the theatre, played both parts, but only the slave had a speaking part. Willa kept repeating his line at intervals as she viewed her realm: "Cato," the running slave would say to the imperitor perched on the chair, "thou art but man!" (WCL 10). No scene could be more suggestive of the essential Willa Cather.

Here is a child of a mere five years who already demonstrates a fascination for and a primitive understanding of the basic paradox of man: his godlike potential for greatness, and his satanlike predisposition to pride. The contradiction grips young Willa; she is enamoured with the first but cannot help but be cautioned by the second, emphasizing the warning by putting it into words. Cato, like all men, and like Willa herself, needed much cautioning.

What other connections the child was making we can only guess. As a study of her works show, the adult Cather frequently stumbles over the paradox she discovered as a very small child, and she struggles with it as the ancient poets did before her. Why is there such a strong tendency for a person of high intelligence, acute sensibilities, and creative power to abuse those gifts? How does one balance, on the one hand, the legitimate delight in the use of the surging creative power which results in fruitful action, and, on the other, the necessity for continual awareness of one's fallibility? The balancing act is precarious. In Cather's imagination, her own artistic genius and ambition on the one hand and the self-effacing humility of her family elders on the other provides the paradigm for her investigation. Too much pride in one's powers leads to a false sense

of divinity and insults the truly Divine; too little pride results in stagnation and slothfulness. Too much humility degrades humanity and sinks it into a mire of ineffectuality; too little leads to damnation and death. In short, how can one be mortal and immortal at the same time? Willa Cather's art ultimately begins and ends with these questions, and her introduction to Cato helped start her down that road.⁹

Cather's notions of heroic action, however, are quite different from Parley's. Very early she rejected the secular view and took the religious one: that the great shall be small and the small, great. She elevated ordinary human kindness and the everyday duties of love to a mythic grandeur, like a plow glowing in the sun. Once writing a defense of sorts of *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather explained her choice of heroic types:

An orderly little French household that went on trying to live decently, just as ants begin to rebuild when you kick their house down, interests me more than Indian raids or the wild life in the forests. And, . . . once having taken your seat in the close air by the apothecary's fire, you can't explode into military glory, any more than you can pour champagne into a salad dressing. (I don't believe much in rules, but Stevenson laid down a good one when he said: "*You can't mix kinds.*") And really, a new society begins with the salad dressing more than with the destruction of Indian villages. (OW 16)

⁹ It is interesting to note correspondences between Marcus Porcius Cato, the Roman statesman, (234-149 B.C.) and Willa Cather. Just as Cather opposed the growing materialism and decadence of the modern century, so did Cato firmly oppose the encroaching influences of Hellenistic Greece on Republican Rome, believing they would certainly corrupt his people. As Censor of Rome, an office he occupied in 157 B.C., he adopted so severe a policy in his effort to restore high morals that he became known as "Cato the Censor." Like Cather's, his ancestors were independent farmers, and he admired and respected their stern, plain way of life.

Stephen Tennant remarks that Cather “is a great writer, not because we feel that she deals with epic themes, passions at white heat, or noble dramas,” but rather because “with a few mild sentences and rather uneventful narrative she convinces us that our own lives have given, and received, happiness” (OW xii). The kind of happiness Tennant is referring to is the kind generated by Cather’s simple and humble characters--Mahailey and Claude’s mother in *One of Ours*, or Grandmother and Grandfather Burden, or Neighbour Rosicky, or Mandy in “Old Mrs. Harris,” or Grandma Harris herself. Theirs is the only unmixed kind, unlike Marian Forrester’s or Godfrey St. Peter’s, or Myra Henshawe’s. It is a happiness that comes from the self-forgetting discharge of the most ordinary duties in the most extraordinary way.

But Cather had not always seen the heroic in the simple. She did not find her grandmother or any of her other family influences a grand enough subject for art until she was influenced by Sarah Orne Jewett, who helped her see that greatness most often resided in the parish, not the world. However, perhaps that idea first took root in the reading of Parley’s *History*.

The second Virginia book that was to become a touchstone for Willa Cather’s art was one that Rachel Boak read to her many times--*Pilgrim’s Progress*. Willa Cather remembered reading the classic herself at least eight times in the first year after moving to Nebraska, and she never tired of it. She once wrote that any child who had not read it had “missed a part of his or her childhood” (WP. I. 336), and indicated that she and her brothers and sisters “literally wore out copy after copy of Bunyan’s blessed *Pilgrim*”:

[T]hey [including herself] even dramatized and played it, and went about the house with rolls and staffs in all seriousness, climbing over Hills of Difficulty, floundering through Sloughs of Despond, wandering by the pure waters of Beulah Land and viewing afar off Delectable Mountains that the big folks of the house couldn’t see. But the children saw them

really enough, and the sweet vision of them has blessed and refreshed many a hard place in life and will linger with them until they go down into the Valley of the Shadow in earnest. (WP. I. 336-37)

Cather goes on to say that whenever she meets “a child who likes Bunyan,” she feels “drawn toward him at once.” That child “has the first essential elements of literary taste” (WP. I. 337). What Cather meant by those “essential elements” we already have examined from her many statements on the art of fiction.

Bunyan’s allegory, whether directly or by inference, appears everywhere in Cather’s fiction.¹⁰ The most direct use of *Pilgrim’s Progress* is in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather’s last novel. Cather chooses to highlight a spiritual battle going on in the mind of Henry Colbert, Sapphira’s husband. Like Cather herself, he finds “a comforter in John Bunyan, who also had been troubled” (66) and often reads *The Holy War* because in it “an honest man, who had suffered much, was speaking of things about which he could not unburden himself to anyone” (211). The thing troubling Mansoul, the town (allegorically, every human being)--and, hence, also troubling Henry--is that Diabolus has “entered her gates and taken up his rule there,” bringing with him “a

¹⁰ Besides SSG, Cather’s early story, “The Prodigies” mentions *Pilgrim’s Progress* as a book enjoyed by the children in the story. The journey/quest motif is one of Cather’s most used. Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, in *Willa Cather’s Gift of Sympathy* identify Cather’s themes as a quest for the ideal through various obstacles, a quest undertaken by both pioneer and artist. Theodore Stanford Adams, in “Six Novels of Willa Cather: A Thematic Study,” also notes that pioneers, artists, as well as religious seekers on a quest dominate Cather’s fiction. Ann Moseley, in “The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather’s Mythic Quest,” says that Cather’s novels constitute an archetypal quest for artistic and spiritual truth wherein she struggles in a series of confrontations with various dualities such as reason and passion, order and disorder. Frederick T. Griffiths, in “The Woman Warrior: Willa Cather and *One of Ours*,” points out that in this novel Cather reverses the quest myth, moving from the new world back to the old.

burning instead of a beauty" (210). Fortunately, Mansoul is redeemed when she is reclaimed by Prince Emmanuel, the Son of God; but unfortunately, Carnel-sense escapes His efforts to cleanse Mansoul of all residue of Diabolus, and the "bold villain will not yet quit the town, but lurks in the Diabolonian Dens at days, and haunts like a Ghost, honest men's houses at nights" (211).

There is no explicit explanation as to why Henry Colbert is in anguish or why he seeks comfort in Bunyan's work. Again, Cather uses mere suggestion to imply more than what is said. Even though it is clear in the novel that Henry's behavior toward the black slave, Nancy, is morally impeccable, this instance of private revelation hints at an internal struggle with "burning" lust or some deep unfulfilled need that to him seems ugly. By quoting this passage from *Pilgrim*, Cather suggests that he is at a war in his inner life, and that, like Mansoul, he is plagued by carnal tendencies.¹¹ Like a Bunyanesque character, Henry knows that, even though his outward behavior is blameless, the lust of the mind, in the end, is no less condemning than lust acted out by the body.

In this instance, Cather uses *Pilgrim's Progress* not only as a mirror of man but also as a measuring stick of Christian morality. Bunyan's allegorized treatment of Christian dogma and the vivid images he creates took hold of Cather's imagination in a way that the Bible itself never did. Its strong images and allegorical narrative fed her love of story and symbol. It spoke to her on the deepest levels, both personal and artistic. Given Cather's complex emotional and personal makeup, and given the struggles her alter egos had in her fiction, we can assume, as for Henry Colbert and Christian himself, that she found it no easy task to square herself with the biblical standard she was early taught

¹¹ James Woodress believes Henry turns to Bunyan's *Holy War* because he is "agonizing over Nancy's danger," and because he associates Bunyan's "holy war" with the war against slavery (WC:LL, 487). I do not believe the passage that Cather's chooses to quote from Bunyan even slightly supports this view.

by her family elders.

Pilgrim's Progress is an apt metaphor for Willa Cather's own life. The quest for ultimate meaning with which so much of her writing is concerned, and the various wanderings and temptations encountered along the way, and the final reconciliation and discovery, are reflections of her own journey toward spiritual reconciliation that, to a great degree, she discovered through her art. This well-loved piece of literature was so ingrained in her developing imagination that it became a tool for unraveling and discovering not just humanity's journey but, more specifically, her own. She very well could have had Bunyan's masterpiece in mind when she so often quoted the French historian Michelet with his now famous words, "*Le but n'est rien; le chemin, c'est tout*"-- "the end is nothing; the road is all" (WC:LA 158).

In *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, Cather used her Cather grandparents as models for human excellence. At that time in her life, they had the public stature with which she could proudly identify. It was not until she wrote *One of Ours* (1922) that Cather turned to her most humble elder, her Grandmother Boak, and even then it was in disguise. Cather indicated that Mrs. Wheeler, the mother of the protagonist, Claude, was patterned after the mother of the real Claude, Cather's Aunt Franc (WC:LL 326). While there are some surface parallels between the two, there is a more insistent likeness to Grandmother Rachel Boak.¹² Mrs. Wheeler's strength of character, her quiet piety, and the great feeling that Cather infuses into her get much of their power from Cather's devotion to the grandmother who lived with her from her earliest memories.¹³

G.P. Cather, Willa's young cousin, was killed in France in the First World War,

¹² As I pointed out in Chapter 4, the deep feeling between mother and son in this novel also reflects Aunt Sidney Gore's feeling for her sons.

¹³ Even if Cather used her Aunt Franc exclusively as the model for Mrs. Wheeler, the conclusion reached here would remain the same. Franc Cather had the same religious faith and piety of Cather's other elders.

and the news of his death triggered in Cather an explosion of memory. Earlier in their talks together, he told Cather of his “despair over being stuck on the farm”; he had her same yearning to escape Nebraska prairie life and do great things, but all his efforts “turned out either ugly or ridiculous” (WC:LL 304). He made “wistful inquiries about France and the larger world Cather moved in” (WC:LL 304).

Cather’s reaction to her reminiscences shared with her cousin is most revealing. She wrote Dorothy Canfield Fisher that the conversation pained her considerably, and she tried fiercely to forget G.P. “To get away from him and his kind . . . was why she wrote at all” (304). Writing fiction, then, was Cather’s way to escape what she still viewed as a backward family and to create a grander, more socially admirable clan for herself in her fiction. The great irony is that the harder she tried to escape, the closer she came to her own roots. In writing *One of Ours*, the struggle was conscious.

Cather’s powerful identification with her cousin was like looking straight on in a mirror, seeing herself without any fictional disguise or the veiled interference of time. In her reunion with her younger cousin, she was confronted by the Willa Cather she used to be as a girl, tied in blood to a family and a personal history to which she felt estranged. It was an image she did not want to confront and yet was helplessly pulled toward. “Her cousin was in her blood so long that some of her was buried with him, some of him left alive in her” (WC:LL 304).¹⁴

The novel is an important watershed in her quest for personal reconciliation and religious reality. Cather goes to battle one last time with the more unsavory elements of revivalist Christianity with which she was raised. After the process was completed, like fire burning chaff, she would be able to separate the more negative aspects of her elders’

¹⁴ Cather made this comment in a letter, which is paraphrased by Woodress.

religion from the genuine religious forces that would not let go their imaginative hold on her.¹⁵

Cather called the three long years it took her to write *One of Ours* lovely and tormented. Much of the torment must have been in confronting her own self more directly than in any other work to date. Was she aware of what she was doing? The closest she came to admitting the notion was when she told an interviewer that she knew her character better than herself (WC:LL 326). Woodress believes that “there is a lot of herself in the characterization” (326). Whether Cather was conscious of the close identification or not, we cannot know, but the act of articulating her cousin’s bitterness and unhappiness vented her own troubling memories that had been locked away since her earliest stories. As with all Romantics, however, her torment was mixed with joy, and nothing could better describe the nature of the religious theme in the novel.

Claude Wheeler is a country boy with finely-tuned natural sensibilities. His father, a pioneer Nebraska farmer more interested in reaping profits than crops, understands his son not a bit. Claude and his pious mother, like Cather and her Grandmother, enjoy a relationship of deep understanding, and other than the affectionate servant Mahailey, not one other person in his family is remotely like him or in sympathy with his uniqueness. He finds life on the farm deadening, expressing his dissatisfaction in a way that identifies him with Cather as closely as anything could: “It seems like there ought to be something--well, something splendid about life, sometimes” (OO 48).

Just as the youthful Cather found little to admire in her Grandmother Boak’s simple faith, so it was for young Claude. There is nothing splendid about his mother’s religion, even though his distaste for it is aimed at others, not at her. He sees her as an innocent dupe for others, like the sanctimonious Brother Weldon, who takes advantage

¹⁵ John J. Murphy in “Willa Cather and Religion: Highway to the World and Beyond,” recognizes Cather’s criticism of the Protestant ethic and revivalism in her early fiction. Murphy sees a shift toward religious struggles in the novels after *One of Ours*.

of the hospitality commonly extended to clergy. "Claude's mother was not discriminating about preachers. She believed them all chosen and sanctified, and was never happier than when she had one in the house to cook for and wait upon" (OO 28).¹⁶ Brother Weldon represents a certain religious type which Cather could not abide, one of limited intelligence and learning, not by chance but by choice, who is adept at hiding a mercenary, manipulative heart behind pious platitudes.

Even though Mrs. Wheeler's heart is sanctified, her notions about education, which stem from a religious fear of human knowledge, are unbearably limiting to Claude:

According to her conception of education, one should learn, not think; and above all, one must not inquire. The history of the human race, as it lay behind one, was already explained; and so was its destiny, which lay before. The mind should remain obediently within the theological concept of history. (OO 24)

Such blind acceptance of someone else's interpretation of history or the Bible is anathema to Claude, as it was for Cather.

Claude's experience at a church-related college, at which Brother Weldon is a teacher, is the "cure" for his "morbid religious fears" (OO 45). Cather's explanation of this cure--especially her careful wording--provides a clue to her own eventual solution to her spiritual dilemma and shows she was already separating the chaff from the grain. She describes Claude's fall from faith:

¹⁶ In "Old Mrs. Harris," one of the very few things that raised the ire of Grandmother Harris was the decision of her daughter, Victoria, not to invite "one of the visiting preachers who came to the church conference to stay with them" ("Old Mrs. Harris," 147). Richard Gionnone's essay, "Willa Cather as Psalmist," includes an enlightening discussion of the historical connections to Southern hospitality and why Mrs. Wheeler or Mrs. Harris would have felt it a breach of manners and charity to not entertain the clergy. See 6-8 of the essay.

Now he dismissed all Christian theology as something too full of evasions and sophistries to be reasoned about. The men who made it, he felt sure, were like the men who taught it. (45)

What Claude discovers, just as Cather did, is that “the men who made it” and “the men who taught it” are fallible and that they sometimes falsely represent the reality behind the doctrines. Through Claude, Cather is pointing to Carlyle’s notion in *Sartor Resartus* that the traditional teachings need to be dressed in new clothes, the “tailor [needs to be] re-tailored.” The narrator tells us that even though Claude

wanted little to do with theology and theologians, Claude would have said that he was a Christian. He believed in God, and in the spirit of the four Gospels, and in the Sermon on the Mount. He used to halt and stumble at “Blessed are the meek,” until one day he happened to think that this verse was meant exactly for people like Mahailey; and surely she was blessed! (46)

Cather, like Claude, revolted against creeds and dogmas. It is also obvious that through Claude she is expressing, by inference, some skepticism as to all the claims of Christ; she affirms Him only in the spirit He represents. However, Cather also makes clear, through the bound girl, Mahailey, that she has seen genuine examples of a holy life.

In a scene full of signs and signifiers, Cather develops more explicitly her Christology and her philosophy of religion through the incisive thinking of Claude, whose real-life counterpart, G. P. Cather, never had such powers. Mrs. Wheeler is reading to Claude from *Paradise Lost*, the scene of the “dungeon horrible” and “sights of woe,” all of it familiar to her and “full of meaning”:

Her voice groped as if she were trying to realize something. The room was growing greyer as she read on through the turgid catalogue of the heathen gods, so packed with stories and pictures, so unaccountably glorious. (75)

Claude wonders if Milton could "have got along without the wicked," a question his Mother takes as a joke. He assures her it is not. "It just struck [him] that this part is so much more interesting than the books about perfect innocence in Eden." His mother implies she agrees, but with uncharacteristic hedging: "'And yet I suppose it shouldn't be so,' Mrs. Wheeler said, slowly, as if in doubt" (75):

"The fact remains that it is, dear Mother. And if you took all the great sinners out of the Bible, you'd take out all the interesting characters, wouldn't you?"

"Except Christ," she murmured.

"Yes, except Christ. But I suppose the Jews were honest when they thought him the most dangerous kind of criminal."

"Are you trying to tangle me up?" his mother inquired, with both reproach and amusement in her voice.

Claude went to the window where she was sitting, and looked out at the snowy fields, now becoming blue and desolate as the shadows deepened. "I only mean that even in the Bible the people who were merely free from blame didn't amount to much."

"Ah, I see!" Mrs. Wheeler chuckled softly. "You are trying to get me back to Faith and Works. There's where you always balked when you were a little fellow. Well, Claude, I don't know as much about it as I did then. As I get older, I leave a good deal more to God. I believe He wants to save whatever is noble in this world, and that He knows more ways of

doing it than I." She rose like a gentle shadow and rubbed her cheek against his flannel shirt-sleeve, murmuring, "I believe He is sometimes where we would least expect to find Him,--even in proud, rebellious hearts." (75-76)

Through Claude, Cather offers herself absolution for what she often considered to be her own "proud and rebellious" heart. The scene ends with Claude and Mrs. Wheeler clinging "together in the pale, clear square of the west window, as the two natures in one person sometimes meet and cling in a fated hour" (76). The significance of this spiritual union between characters so much like Cather and her grandmother becomes clear in a small scene after Claude goes to France to fight in the war. In it, Cather carefully lays some subtle parallels to this earlier scene.

The account tells of Claude's spiritual renewal--conversion, if you will--which results in a spiritual reunion with his mother and her faith. The narrative is quiet and understated, almost hiding its significance, as most of Cather's "conversion" scenes do until *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Claude is approaching his "fated hour" of death. One morning he finds himself alone in the Cathedral of St. Ouen. The church is empty except for a few "solitary women" lighting tapers and praying. When Claude reaches the choir, he turns and sees "far behind him, the rose window, with its purple heart." As he stands staring at it,

a great bell, up aloft, began to strike the hour in its deep, melodious throat; . . . The revelations of the glass and the bell had come almost simultaneously, as if one produced the other; and both were superlatives toward which his mind had always been groping,--or so it seemed to him then. (291)

Claude's revelation has something of science in it as well as religion. He remembers from an astronomy lesson that the light coming through the stained glass window has been traveling for hundreds of years, and that the "purple and crimson and peacock-green of this window had been shining quite as long as that before it got to him" (292). Cather carefully juxtaposes the deep, melodious message of the bell with the heavily weighted symbols suggested in the rose window: color, light, and time. "[S]imultaneously" they speak the message that ultimate reality has been revealed to man throughout a long history, and the vehicle for the message is religion. This, then, is the truth "toward which his mind had always been groping." The cluster of images fuses in Claude's mind with his own history, centered in his mother, and he feels "as if [she] were looking over his shoulder" (292). Again by suggestion and indirection, Cather creates for herself yet another fictional religious conversion precipitated by the influence of a family elder.

In order to fully understand the strong affirmation Cather gives to her grandparents in life and in art, one needs to understand by contrast the dynamics of Cather's relationship with her parents and the manner in which she viewed them at the various stages of her life. As I have already suggested, the relationship was complex and contradictory, and Cather spent a lifetime sorting out her feelings about her parents and, by turns, extricating herself from and attaching herself to them. In an essay on Katherine Mansfield, Cather's explanation of Mansfield's situation with her family echoes much of what Cather frequently indicated about her own, especially as it appears in her fiction:

One realizes that even in harmonious families there is this double life: the group life, which is the one we can observe in our neighbour's household, and underneath, another--secret and passionate and intense Always in his mind each member . . . is escaping, running away, trying to break the net which circumstances and his own affections have

woven about him. One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them. (NUF 136)

Even though Willa's close relationship with her father has been mentioned in the biographies, critics have tended to dwell on Cather's difficult relationship with her mother to such a degree that the impact her father had on her has not been stressed enough. Willa was her father's special companion; she his. They enjoyed each other immensely. A frequent motif in Cather's fiction is a young girl's relationship to an older man.¹⁷ Cather had several such real life companions when she was a girl, including her beloved Dr. Love in Virginia and Dr. McKeeby, William Drucker, and Mr. Schindelmeisser in Red Cloud (WC:LL 53-54), but the first was with her own father.¹⁸

Charles Fectigue Cather, born in 1848 on his ancestral land in Back Creek Valley, Virginia, was a "Southern gentleman refined almost to the point of delicacy" (WWC 23). Edith Lewis, who knew him in his old age, remarked that he "must have been very attractive as a young man, for he was very attractive as an old man" (WCL 5). In person he was tall, fair-haired, and blue-eyed, with extremely gentle, courteous manners.

¹⁷ The long list of stories with this motif include the novels *The Song of the Lark*, *Lucy Gayheart*, *Shadows on the Rock*, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

¹⁸ In *Lucy Gayheart*, there is a small scene between Lucy and her father that calls attention to itself because of its unconnectedness to anything else that develops Lucy's relationship with her father. Because of the many likenesses between Lucy and Cather, the quasi-erotic scene poses some interesting biographical questions. After Lucy's domineering sister has ordered Lucy's beloved trees cut down, Mr. Gayheart, "freshly shaven, in a clean shirt, with bay rum on his greying hair and goatee . . . took [Lucy] in his arms. He kissed her with love, as he always did when he kissed her at all, on her lips and eyes and hair. He said not a word, but, keeping his arm around her, went with her to her own door, carrying the coffee" (LG, 161-62).

Before his marriage he had read law in Washington; and because of his kindly and equitable nature, his neighbors in the Back Creek district used often to come to him for help in settling their disputes and advising them in family difficulties. He had a hopeful, friendly disposition.

Charles Cather's easy-going nature made him ill-fit for a society becoming increasingly driven by economic competition. Like Mr. Templeton in "Old Mrs. Harris," he is "too delicate to collect his just debts," and "[h]is boyish, eager-to-please manner, his fair complexion and blue eyes and young face, made him seem very soft to some of the hard old money-grubbers on Main Street" (OD 112). In a sketch of a "Southern gentleman" based on her father, written during her years in college, Cather suggests--as she does with Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours*, or with Tom Outland in *The Professor's House*--that a man with delicate sensibilities will never flourish or be successful in the conventional sense in a world that demands hardnosed drive and competitiveness (WP.I. 20-21). "He was a Virginian and a gentleman and for that reason he was fleeced on every side and taken in on every hand," said his daughter (WP. I. 20).

The tender and gentle elements in her father's nature must have reminded Willa Cather of the Good Shepherd of the Gospels that her Grandmother Boak read to her so often. After his death in 1927, Willa Cather bequeathed a stained glass window to the Episcopal Church in Red Cloud to his memory. The multi-colored glass figures depict Christ with his lambs and his shepherd's crook.

Characteristically, it took the unassuming Charles some time to recognize the literary fame of his daughter. Finally, in 1920, after the popular reception of *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, he heard Sinclair Lewis lecturing in Omaha: "Miss Cather is Nebraska's foremost citizen. The United States knows Nebraska because of Willa Cather's books." Hearing this, Charles wrote his daughter a "loving letter in which he paid tribute to her genius and her success." But he also admonished her to remain humble. This was the only part of the letter that Cather commented upon: "Father is a

very modest man and he wants me to be modest" (WWC 26-27). Willa conformed to her father's wishes in that "she was always modest about her work," but, as her companion Edith Lewis writes, she was also a "person of great pride" (WCL 116). Cather always found that her father's influence was a corrective for her egotism and ambition.

Cather also found in her father a kindred love of nature. He had the artist's appreciation for its beauty, viewing it as a spiritual conductor and never as a source for material gain. In a letter to his sister Jennie after he had made a visit to Colorado, Wyoming, and New Mexico in 1870, Charles records a poetic response to the land that is reminiscent of Willa's: "The Prairies here are beautiful beyond description," he wrote, "whilst in full view are the Snow capped peaks of the Rocky Mts. On the prairies the Antelope feed in abundance; they are the most beautiful thing you can imagine." Entranced by this virgin Western Eden, Charles' romantic spirit immediately set on it, and he determined to resettle. "It is a splendid country," he told Jennie, and "[I] think of making my home here next Spring" (WC:EV 41).¹⁹ His plan to move West was thwarted for thirteen years, and he did not end up in any one of those three states, but his passionate love for the area was communicated to his daughter. When she visited those Southwestern states years later and made them the locus of some of her most highly regarded fiction, her heart had already been primed to love those places.

Even though Charles Cather had strong nurturing qualities, there was nothing effeminate about him. He showed a balance of sensibilities that is reflected in the recurring "sensitive man of integrity who places aesthetic, intellectual, or spiritual values above commercial" ones (WC:EV 16). The characters who have these qualities include Neighbour Rosicky, the loving Bohemian with the drooping mustache (OD, "Neighbour

¹⁹ Charles Cather to "My Dear Sister," October 30, 1870. Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Rosicky”);²⁰ Carl Linstrum, Alexandra’s sensitive friend who cannot succeed in business (OP); James Fergusson, the inept farmer with “the grave good manners” (OBO, “The Best Years” 105); Jacob Gayheart, the music teacher, who, like James Fergusson, is not a good manager and whose unconventional ways are the butt of neighbor’s jokes (LG);²¹ and Oswald Henshawe, the long-suffering husband of the volatile Myra, who “fronted the world with courtesy and kindness” but whose “courage and force” were asleep (MME 52). All of these men have some physical, personality, or spiritual likeness to Willa Cather’s father. Other characters are more directly patterned after him: Hillary Templeton, the courteous Southern gentleman (OD, “Old Mrs. Harris”) and Euclide Auclair, the sweet-mannered apothecary (SR).

Charles Cather seemed to be, in some mystic, unconscious way, at Willa Cather’s emotional center. He not only represented to her what is admirable in a human spirit, but he also acted as her own personal Vicar on earth, a spiritual link as well as a biological one to some eternal life principle. When he died in 1927, there was no stone-rolling resurrection to comfort her, or any garden where she would hear him call her “Daughter” in his gentle way. Mildred Bennett describes the effect of his death on Cather:

The death of her father was a blow that Willa could scarcely accept. She paced frantically back and forth between the house and the little Episcopal church where his body lay, wringing her hands, apparently unable to conquer the grief and panic which overwhelmed her. Acquaintances felt that her grief was not unmixed with still another emotion--fury--and a resentment that time, her greatest enemy, could effect such changes. She

²⁰ James Woodress agrees that “Neighbour Rosicky” gets its “emotional power” from “Cather’s feelings about her father,” and Rosicky himself is infused with Cather’s memories of him (WC:LL, 438).

²¹ In the novel Jacob Gayheart even dies the same year that Charles Cather died, in 1927 (LG, 205).

knew that her home would never be the same again. Her close friends, trying to help her regain some of her lost control, talked with her for hours to convince her if they could that the beauty and fullness of his eighty years was all that one could expect from a well-spent life. (WCL 28-29)

Even though Willa Cather once said that she was most like her mother of all her family members, she felt much closer to her father than to anyone else (WC:LA 22). She found in him a model for true spiritual goodness and refinement. And if one examines the qualities of character and human value that Cather championed all her literary life, they are closely aligned with Charles Cather.

However, Cather's lifetime view of her father was not of unmixed approbation, if one can judge by an occasional comment and especially by evidence in her fiction. A few of Cather's male characters are ineffectual not just because their natures are too fine for a materialistic world, but because they are timid and weak or lack vision.²² Even though Charles had the spiritual qualities his daughter admired, he lacked the intelligent vigor and the forceful sense of purpose exemplified in his own father, William Cather, and in all Cather's heroic figures. At various times, Cather expressed some disdain for the type of man represented by her father. In a letter to Elizabeth Sergeant after Cather made a trip back to Virginia in 1913, Cather wrote that "she was eager to get away from the romantic southern attitude" and the "southern male" whom she found to be "cowed and housebroken and good for nothing but to carry wraps and dance" (Woodress paraphrase, WC:LA 160-61). Some of the characters in Cather's stories who reflect her father's traits are presented with either an apologetic tone--as in the case of James Fergusson or Jacob Gayheart--or, in the case of others, with downright scorn. In *A Lost Lady*, young Niel Herbert of Sweet Water (another fictional Red Cloud) has much in him of the young

²² See John J. Murphy's discussion of Cather's weak males in comparison to her strong ones in "Willa Cather: The Widening Gyre."

Willa Cather. Niel is “proud, like his mother,” a woman who “had hated the West, and used haughtily to tell her neighbours that she would never think of living anywhere but in Fayette county, Kentucky,” a close approximation of Back Creek, Virginia (LL 30). Niel is ashamed of his home, “a frail egg-shell house set off on the edge of the prairie where people of no consequence lived” (LL 29). His thoughts about his father reveal some of the negative feelings Cather herself must have struggled with in regard to her own:

. . . Niel hated to have anyone come and see them. His father was at home very little, spent all his time at the office. He kept the county abstract books and made farm loans. Having lost his own property, he invested other people's money for them. He was a gentle, agreeable man, young, good-looking, with nice manners, but Niel felt there was an air of failure and defeat about his family. (30)

Charles Cather's timidity, his ineffectual efforts, his constant lack of money, his easy-going ways, and his acquiescence to the stronger will of his wife, all threatened at times to discolor Cather's otherwise golden feeling for him. It may very well have affected the confusion of her own sexual identity and her struggle to accept her own driving and dominating personality.²³ In many respects, Charles exhibited the same gentle and supportive qualities shown by the female elders that Cather admired so much, but in them, they were seemly. These women, however, had more vigor and drive and effectiveness than Charles did.

Virginia Boak Cather, Willa's mother, is a study in contrasts to her gentle, kindly husband. The elements of her nature were contradictory and, hence, more difficult to adjust to and to understand. Willa Cather's relationship with her mother was complex,

²³ See Sharon O'Brien's biography for an exhaustive study of Cather's personality development and sexual orientation. See also James Woodress, WC:LL 55-56, 69, and 122, for confirmation, and 141 for refutation of O'Brien's conclusions.

fraught with both admiration and resentment, loyalty and rejection, respect and scorn.²⁴ According to Edith Lewis, it took years for Willa Cather to understand her mother, whose paradoxical nature was reproduced to a great degree in her daughter: “quick to resent, quick to sympathize, headstrong, passionate, and yet capable of great kindness and understanding” (WCL 156).

Lewis, the only biographer who was intimately acquainted with Cather’s family, said that Virginia Boak Cather was a woman “with a strong will and a strong nature”:

She was always the dominating figure in the family, and her personality made a deep impress, not only on her children, but on her grandchildren as well. In both she seems to have inspired great devotion and great deference--her will was law, to show her disrespect was an unthinkable offense, and her displeasure was more dreaded than any other catastrophe that could happen. (WCL 6)

Contrary to the aristocratic, queenly role Virginia assumed, her consuming interests appeared to Cather rather superficial--her clothes, hair, and adornment were her constant concern. Like the imperious Sapphira Colbert in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Virginia Cather was “always meticulous in appearance, never stepping out of her bedroom without first being perfectly groomed, [and she] allowed no one to see her until her lovely hair had been pinned up” (WCC 29). All of her seven children, however, were proud of their mother’s fine appearance, her erect carriage and dignified bearing. A “handsome woman,” who “maintained the strictest standards of poise,” Virginia Cather always “carried a small parasol to match her costume, and whenever possible, wore fresh violets” (WWC 31). A direct opposite of Willa’s pious and industrious grandmothers

²⁴ For the most extensive study of Willa Cather and her mother, see Sharon O’Brien, WC:EV, especially Chapter 2. Also see David Stouck, *Willa Cather’s Imagination*, 150-51 and 228, and James Woodress WC:LA 22 and WC:LL 19, 122, 414, and 436.

and great-aunt, Virginia was “the charming and vain Southern lady,” who never liked domestic chores and was more than happy to leave those responsibilities to her mother and other household workers (WC:EV 35). “She had her own absorbing life,” and as long as her children followed the rules of the household, she let [them] have theirs” (WCL 6-7).

Virginia Cather had the artist’s ego without the artist’s gift, and the prima donna role she assumed can be detected in Cather’s developing notions of the artist. In her fiction and essays on art, Cather repeatedly calls for special treatment for the artist, just as her mother was especially treated because of her role of mother and grand lady (WC:CB 187). Cather “believed, she always had believed, that the artist is not amenable to the standards by which other folk may rightly be judged” (WC:CB 187). Her contention that the artist deserves special treatment because God has elected him to be especially marked with divine-like gifts has a parallel to the manner in which Virginia Cather demanded and got special treatment simply because she was given the gifts of female charm and beauty. Especially in her earlier years, Cather identified closely with her mother and saw much of herself in her (WCL 7). She transferred her mother’s specialness on the domestic scene, which relieved her of the traditional service-oriented role of wife and mother, to the artist’s own specialness in the realm of relationships and society, which relieved the artist of any requirement of self-sacrifice in nurturing human relationships.

The wrenching move from Virginia to unsettled and uncivilized Nebraska made Virginia Cather miserable. The gay life was gone; the genteel traditions and the bustling social life and the big house with its conveniences had all passed. Her husband had the romantic’s vision of the West but, unfortunately, not the skills required to realize it. Life was hard and not very lucrative, and Virginia’s disappointment was not kept quiet. Willa heard her mother’s dissatisfactions often, and they played a part in Charles’ moving the family to the nearby town of Red Cloud after only one year of farming on the prairie (WC:LL 36, 43).

Living in a cramped little house in Red Cloud, Virginia longed for their spacious house at Willow Shade and the bright life they lived there and kept its history and genteel customs alive in her children (WWC 19-20; WC:EV 67).²⁵ All her life, Virginia made sure her daughter Willa was never far away in memory from Back Creek Valley, Virginia.

Unlike the generation of family women before her, Virginia Cather did not view the world or her own life within religious dimensions. Her life, including home and church associations, was bounded by social and egocentric concerns. If she found no success in that realm, she felt cheated and belittled. Unlike her elders, who believed that they were partakers in a divine purpose through their most ordinary acts, and unlike her daughter, who believed the divine was imminent in all nature and that the smallest acts performed with care and true human feeling were art, Virginia saw the common as just common.

As in most family relationships, Willa and her mother were both compatible and incompatible, but given the strong personalities of both, the conflicts between Cather and her mother seemed more pronounced and painful than usual. By the time that Willa reached adolescence in Red Cloud, her antipathies with her mother became expressions of open rebellion. Not allowed to countermand her mother with words, she chose action. When Willa was about thirteen, her mother was quite ill after the birth of Willa's brother James. (Virginia often took to her bed as an invalid for extended periods during and after childbirth. Having babies made her depressed and angry [WC:EV 41].) During this time, Virginia could not tend to Willa's long curls, a daily and fixed ritual. Willa took the opportunity to embark on what became one of her most memorable revolts: she went to the barber shop and had her long curls cut off into a man's cut. To complete her

²⁵ Both the "Childhood Friends" section of *The Song of the Lark*, and "Old Mrs. Harris" give faithful descriptions of the Cathers' home in Red Cloud.

metamorphosis, she donned boy's attire, complete with hat. This masquerade was no momentary whim. She kept the costume and the haircut all through high school and into the first two years of college. It is not hard to imagine the horror and mortification that Virginia Cather must have felt--much less expressed--when she saw her transformed daughter (WC:LL 55-56, 69).

The friction between Virginia and Willa Cather continued for years. Willa's standards concerning dress and social life remained the primary subjects of contention. Even after Cather had achieved national acclaim, her mother--in stark contrast to her father-- sighed "in exasperation over [her] famous daughter." Virginia wanted to give parties in her daughter's honor when she would come home, but Willa, becoming more and more reclusive and suspicious of public acclaim, wanted no part of it. This must have been a disappointment of no small proportion to this Southern lady, conscious of society's expectations and rituals. As to Willa's attire, Virginia, "who prided herself on her knowledge of high fashion, frequently objected to Willa's way of dressing and particularly her violent color combinations." Mildred Bennett concurs that Cather's "rebellion against fashion was perhaps as much a revolt against maternal interference as it was an intense dislike of the corseted discomfort of 'civilized' apparel" (WWC 30-31).

Willa Cather's insistence on being true to herself against her mother's wishes was paid with a price because she wanted her mother's approval desperately. Willa once told a college friend that "she was the disappointment of her mother's life" because "she had never lived up to her mother's definition of a lady" (WC:EV 45). Bernice Slote claims that Willa Cather

had three not wholly compatible drives: one was to win out with a career, to be a success in a world of mostly men, in a time when women rarely tried and even more rarely succeeded; another was to be an artist, as great

an artist as she might be; and a third was to be a Virginian lady, like her mother. (UV xiii-xiv)

Willa did go through a long period in which she seemed to be living out her desire to become an aristocratic, cultured, Virginian lady, in fashion as well as in social life. After her second year in college, she discarded her male attire, and photographs indicate a complete turnaround--hair grown out and elegantly styled on top of her head, ball gowns and opera coats trimmed in fur, elaborate hats with ostrich-plumes, all fashion necessities in proper society.²⁶

Throughout the years in Pittsburgh and New York until she resigned as Managing Editor of *McClure's*,--the years of her greatest public visibility--Cather's wardrobe reflected the social and literary high society in which she mingled. She did not have the public acclaim that she did later after her novels became popular, but if her mother ever saw her in her fashionable clothes, Willa must at least have had her approval. But when she left *McClure's* to be a full-time writer, her costume immediately became simple again --plain waists and skirts, "loose and comfortable," with sensible shoes. Even her street clothes, while "expensive," were "tailored" and "modest" (WWC 224). This period also coincides with her return in memory to her family elders in the writing of *O Pioneers!*. It was as if the closer she came to being her real self, the more remote was her need to become the fashionable lady her mother desired her to be. The outer and inner selves were becoming one.

That Virginia Cather followed her daughter's literary fame with pride, we know. One of her favorite gifts to friends was an autographed copy of one of Willa's books (WWC 31). Whether she read her works with sympathy and understanding, or appreciated the degree to which Cather was contributing to American letters, we do not know. If we may make inferences from the facts we do have, it seems likely that the

²⁶ See photographs in the O'Brien and Woodress biographies.

signed copies were valued more for the social recognition they brought than their literary or artistic merits.

Willa Cather never could quite extricate herself from the powerful hold her mother had on her or from her desire to separate from her, simultaneously seeking her and pulling away. In *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather may have been expiating some long-standing guilt over her lifelong rebellion towards her mother since the idealized Madame Auclair is the mother of Cécile, an idealized young Willa.²⁷ But Madame Auclair has more in her of Cather's female elders, especially Sidney Gore, than she does of Virginia Cather. Madame Auclair's concern for establishing careful order in the home and taking pains with ordinary duties in the kitchen and the washroom is not at all in the realm of Virginia Cather's interests. Unlike the other stories in which Virginia-like characters appear, there is not a breath of criticism in the portrait of Madame Auclair. But, then, she dies before Cécile is out of childhood.

In spite of everything, however, Willa Cather admired and loved her mother fiercely. After Virginia Cather's death in 1931, Cather wrote a friend that she "had come to appreciate her mother more and more as she grew older, and the sharp clash of personalities that once had struck sparks had long since given way to mutual love and respect" (Woodress paraphrase, WC:LL 434). Even though Virginia Cather "remained an imperious, demanding mother to the end," Willa Cather came to feel in her own old age that she had not been a thoughtful daughter and had often misjudged her (WC:LL 423). To the end of her life, Willa Cather would occasionally buy a bunch of violets to wear on her lapel.

²⁷ See David Stouck's discussion of this theory in *Willa Cather's Imagination*, 149-52.

* * *

The contrast between Cather's response to her Virginia elders and her response to her parents is sharply delineated in her fiction. What follows is a discussion of two works which use material directly from Cather's memories of her parents and her Grandmother Boak. Both figure prominently in Cather's literary and personal development, and significantly, both were written at the end of her writing career. The first, "Old Mrs. Harris" (1931), was written while Virginia Cather was dying, and the second, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* came out nine years later. The death of both parents unlocked in Willa Cather an unexamined room of her past, releasing a "long train of associations and memories [which] their death set in motion" (WCL 182).²⁸ Since the focus of the first story is on Rachel Boak, we will look at it last.

Cather began writing *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* "with her whole power and concentration," and decided in 1938 to visit Winchester County to confirm her now flooding memories. It turned out to be "as memorable an experience, as intense and thrilling in its way, as those journeys in New Mexico, when she was writing the *Archbishop*" (WCL 182). Back Creek Valley was considerably changed. The present owner of Willow Shade, unsympathetic to its history, had cut down all the great willow trees and the high box hedges that seemed so wonderful to the young Willa. She stayed back, not going very close, but looking "through and through" the ruinous and forlorn house, "as if it were transparent, to what she knew as its reality." The cruel changes, "instead of disheartening her, seemed to light a fierce inner flame that illumined all her pictures of the past" (WCL 181).

²⁸ Jane Lilienfeld, in "Reentering Paradise: Cather, Colette, Woolf and Their Mothers," points to these two stories as Cather's effort to work through and rediscover her feelings for her mother.

In turning her mind toward her early years in Virginia, Willa Cather experienced such a “flooding force” of impressions that it was all she could do to exercise artistic restraint. She said she had enough material for “two or three Sapphiras,” writing in her first draft “twice as much as she used” (WCL 183).²⁹ She told Stephen Vincent Benét, “I weighed what I cut out--and it came to a good six pounds” (qtd. in WWC 233).³⁰

Two of Cather’s major novels have at their center a family triangle made up of a father, mother, and daughter. One I have already mentioned, *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). In that novel, however, the mother is dead, and we only see her in the memories of her daughter and husband. As a character, Madame Auclair is one-dimensional, idolized and sainted by an adoring family who worships her memory and keeps her alive in the traditions of the home. In the second novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), we have a complete picture of a family trio, whose complex interrelationships provide the emotional center as well as the narrative tension in the story.³¹

²⁹ It is to critics’ sorrow that those discarded chapters are gone because “she always said it was what she left out that counted” (WCL, 183). Given her artistic integrity, this decision is a puzzling one, until we consider why she made it. In her “zest for the novel *démeublé*,” she told Elizabeth Sergeant, she “threw out many, many pages and chapters” because she wanted “to give Sapphira the central place” (WC:AM, 170).

³⁰ The original source is Stephen Vincent and Rosemary Benét, “Willa Cather: Civilized and Very American,” *New York Herald Tribune Books*, Dec. 15, 1940. Benét also wrote that in SSG, “[i]t is as though [Cather] had looked back affectionately at her childhood and thought, ‘Why, there is something I have never used!’ and recalled it with the clearness of morning air. So clear was this part of her life that the speech of the people, white and black, as she had heard it as a child, came back to her as if it had been stored on phonograph records in her brain.”

³¹ One of the most psychologically revealing photographs I have seen of Willa Cather is in James Woodress’ biography, WC:LL, 17. A middle-aged Willa is sitting between her parents (her brother Douglass is on the other side of Virginia), and she is leaning into her mother, who could be sitting for the imperious Sapphira, while her father, whose large hands and drooping mustache make him look like the twin of Rosicky, but whose meek

Unlike the "Holy Family" in *Shadows on the Rock*, the Henry Colbert family is flawed. Consequently, it has a sure-handed authenticity missing in *Shadows*.

Significantly, this last novel, published when Cather was sixty-six years old, contains the least-idealized portraits of the many she had done of her mother and father. And it is also of great significance that she would return to the original family trio in Virginia for her final inspiration.³² Unlike some of her other relationships, she had not yet gotten this one written out; there were remaining some troublesome areas yet to be analyzed and explained at a distance in fiction.

The novel's framework is based on the history of Back Creek and Cather's Virginia ancestors. Willa had repeatedly heard their stories as a child, and we know the "Epilogue," which excludes any mention of Sapphira, is a true account from Willa's childhood (WC:LL 483). The descriptions of the land, the Mill House, the daily life of ante-bellum Virginia, must have been an intermingling of folklore and history. All of the story's sources were eventually filtered through Cather's imagination, and like all human historical or biographical accounts, were subject to imaginative reshaping. Below the surface story of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*--under the outer protective shell--is an embryonic Virginia family, just three persons, father, mother, and firstborn, as vulnerable and susceptible to a complex of influences as is any living thing getting its start. They not only have to deal with who they are as individuals, but with all the influences of generations past, each exerting its own insistent force to ensure its continued life. Cather travels back to her earliest memories and focuses her fictional

and somewhat forlorn appearance make him a model for Henry Colbert, sits off to the side of the others.

³² I believe it is significant that in two of her novels, in which the character who most resembles herself is an orphan, it is the mother who is dead. This is true for *Shadows on the Rock* and *Lucy Gayheart*. In *My Antonia*, however, both parents are dead and Jim Burden's close relationship is with his grandparents.

microscope on a scene which, it appears, she had been avoiding for some time.³³

Actually, Cather had been using this material all along, however unconsciously. It was as if Back Creek, Virginia, and the person she was then were locked in a dark room of Cather's subconscious, hiding an important but dangerous truth.

Sapphira Colbert is not a sympathetic heroine. She is even less so than two other heroines who resemble her mother, Myra Henshawe and Marian Forrester. There is very little to admire in Sapphira until near the end of the novel, and there the point of view changes so abruptly as to be unbelievable. Nothing theretofore in the narrative prepares the reader for such a complete reversal. As we shall see, this is accomplished only by switching the center of consciousness to the character whose emotional attachment to Sapphira transcends all her deficiencies--her husband.

Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert is the Back Creek matriarch who rules her household of slaves with an iron hand, shaped by generations of aristocratic tradition. She countenances no challenge to her magisterial will, and all is ordered by her command. Her husband of twenty-five years, Henry Colbert, a miller by profession, is acquiescent by nature and common-born. The mill-house is his domain, and he respectfully withdraws from anything associated with Sapphira's. The house, land, and slaves are hers by inheritance.

Sapphira and Henry have one daughter, Rachel Blake, now a widow with two little girls. Sapphira's comments about her daughter could just as well have come out of the mouth of Virginia Cather concerning Willa. To Sapphira, "Rachel had always been

³³ Charles Cather had wanted Willa to write a Virginia novel (WC:CB, 308), and she had often been urged by others to do so (WCL 182), but as Edith Lewis notes, Cather for a long time had an inhibiting reluctance to do so, a drawing back from "break[ing] through to all those old memories that seemed to belong to another life" (WCL, 182).

difficult, rebellious toward the fixed ways which satisfied other folk. [Sapphira] had been heartily glad to get her married and out of the house at seventeen" (SSG 15).³⁴

In an early scene in the novel, Rachel walks in on her mother before she has completed making herself ready for public scrutiny. Sitting "at a dressing-table before a gilt mirror," Sapphira is petulantly annoyed that Rachel would "disturb her at her dressing hour, when it was understood she did not welcome visits from anyone." Rachel cannot understand the fuss since her mother's hair, instead of being "frowsy," as she complains, seems "in perfect order" to Rachel, "combed up high from the neck and braided in a flat oval on the crown, the wavy wings coming down on either side of her forehead" (SSG 13).³⁵

Sapphira is an invalid confined to a wheelchair and suffering from a worsening case of dropsy, an "affliction . . . all the more cruel in that she had been a very active woman, and had managed the farm as zealously as her husband managed his mill" (SSG 10). Rachel, out of conscience, helps her mother's yellow slave girl Nancy to escape. The only thing she regrets is "the hurt this would be to her mother's pride"; after all, she knows how much her mother "hated to be overreached or outwitted."³⁶ She regrets having "brought another humiliation to one who had already lost so much: her activity on horse and foot, her fine figure and rosy complexion" (SSG 246). Through her last

³⁴ There is some evidence that Virginia Cather was mightily relieved to send Willa off to college at seventeen, probably hoping the university life would influence Willa to more closely conform to conventional female ways, including letting her hair grow again. In fact, this did indeed happen. See WC:LL 55-56, 70.

³⁵ In her biography of Cather, Mildred Bennett writes, "Always meticulous in appearance, never stepping out of her bedroom without first being perfectly groomed, Virginia Boak Cather allowed no one to see her until her lovely hair had been pinned up" (WWC, 29).

³⁶ This is yet another trait of Virginia Cather's noted especially in Victoria Temptleton in "Old Mrs. Harris."

illnesses, Virginia Cather experienced much the same diminution of her faculties. Suffering the effects of a stroke, she was confined to a wheelchair and became dependent on others for her care (WC:LL 417, 435).

Critics have most often aimed their attention at a peripheral concern in *Sapphira*, seeing it as a novel of social criticism which condemns the aristocratic ideal of the Old South, indicts slavery, and celebrates individualism. Brown says "the action of the novel turns" on the theme of slavery (WC:CB 313), and Philip Gerber in *Willa Cather* praises Cather for choosing a subject "well worth treating": slavery--"the dark secret of Virginia . . . , the ultimate crime of private ownership" (131).³⁷ John H. Randall, III, correctly sees that Cather makes the slavery issue subordinate to the conflict in the family, but he amazingly criticizes her choice, believing that the social issue rather than the personal one merits the central place in the novel ("The Protestant Past: *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*"). Any social concern in the novel merely highlights the story's central issue of slavery of a more personal kind: the rule that Sapphira exercises over her meek husband, and the quiet but strong rebellion of Rachel over Sapphira's rule which produces an undercurrent of antagonism between them.³⁸

Bound to a wheelchair, Sapphira suspects that Henry is too fond of the slave girl Nancy, who serves him down at the mill house with innocent admiration. Sapphira's spiteful jealousy results in her cruel treatment of the girl--including a lashing with a hair

³⁷ See also Paul C. Wernuth, in "Willa Cather's Virginia Novel," for an example of a typical essay on this work that wrongly makes Cather a critic of social and political issues rather than personal ones. Wernuth calls SSG significant for its examination of southern social customs prior to the Civil War, especially the institution of slavery.

³⁸ James Woodress thought Cather made less of the slavery issue because it was the 1940s and past the day of appropriateness. But this would hardly be an inappropriate focus for a historical novel. Woodress misses the point that Cather's interest was in personal issues, not social or political ones. See WC:LL, 485.

brush, and a resolve to be rid of her.³⁹ When Henry uncharacteristically defies Sapphira and refuses to sign papers that would sell Nancy off (as her husband, his signature is required), Sapphira schemes to have Henry's young nephew, Martin Colbert, an indolent rake with "a dash of impudence" come for a visit (SSG 153).

Martin Colbert behaves true to form and pursues the girl Nancy like a slobbering hound dog, to the moral outrage of both Henry and Rachel. Rachel devises a plan for Nancy's escape via the Underground Railroad with the help of the abolitionist postmistress, Mrs. Bywaters, a character patterned after Sidney Gore.

"Did her mother really want to ruin Nancy? Could her spite go so far as that?" Rachel puzzles (SSG 169). She "could not for the life of her" say for sure whether her mother "had invited this scapegrace to her house with the deliberate purpose of bringing harm to Nancy, or whether she had asked him merely for the sake of his company. . . ." Rachel realized that she was "by nature incapable of understanding her mother":

Ever since she could remember, she had seen her mother show shades of kindness and cruelty which seemed to her purely whimsical. . . . Mrs. Colbert, though often generous, was entirely self-centered and thought of other people only in their relation to herself. She was born that way, and had been brought up that way. (SSG 219-220)

Even though Henry refuses to sign the sale papers, he cannot actively defy Sapphira by helping Rachel plan Nancy's escape. For him it would have not only broken

³⁹ That Virginia Cather was an extremely jealous woman is documented by more than one of Cather's biographers. See WC:LA, 230-31, WC:AM, 117-18, and WWC, 221-22. One striking bit of evidence is the fact that "Cather once told [Dorothy] Canfield that she couldn't stop off to see [her] when she returned to Nebraska because her mother was ill and jealous of the attention Cather might devote to the immigrant women" whom she always liked to visit on her trips home (WC:EV, 72). Jealousy is a strong characteristic of another Virginia/Willa character, Myra Henshawe in *My Mortal Enemy*.

a civil law but also a law written on his own heart. In spite of Sapphira's meanness and self-centeredness, his own identity is inextricably tied to hers, and, unlike Rachel, he cannot ultimately separate himself from her.⁴⁰ His conscience is in deep opposition to his Sapphira on the slavery issue, yet he cannot overcome his own emotional slavery to her. No mention is made of his challenging the note that Sapphira sends to Rachel after she learns of Nancy's escape and in which she severs their relationship: "'Mistress Blake is kindly requested to make no further visits at the Mill House,' signed 'Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert'" (SSG 245). As fond as he is of his daughter, Henry cannot allow her to come between him and his wife.

To this point in the novel, the irony created by the narrator's disinterested voice has insured a harsh judgment of Sapphira, despite Rachel's daughterly qualifications. Sapphira Colbert is a shallow, self-centered elitist who is ruled by unworthy motives and passions, and whose acts of kindness even seem prompted either by social custom or personal gain rather than love. She is not just a slave-owner--she is a people-owner, treating everyone as property, including her husband and daughter, and she manipulates them to conform to her whimsical and stubborn will.

Cather works through the consciousness of Henry Colbert to make the final assessment of Sapphira. When it appears Sapphira will soon die, the narrator--through Henry's consciousness--makes a complete turnaround. Cather the novelist becomes Cather the daughter trapped inside her own contradictory feelings for a character with whom she had grappled her whole life.⁴¹ Her feelings are Henry's. The thought of losing Sapphira "struck terror to his heart," and he

⁴⁰ Jane Lilienfeld correctly identifies the main power struggle of the novel as that between Sapphira Colbert and Rachel, rather than any other social or personal struggle, and believes that it is the central issue of the novel.

⁴¹ The same shifting of narrative voice occurs in "Old Mrs. Harris."

seemed in a moment to feel sharply so many things he had grown used to and taken for granted: her long illness, with all its discomforts, and the intrepid courage with which she had faced in inevitable. He reached out for her two hands and buried his face in her palms. She felt his tears wet on her skin. For a long while he crouched thus, leaning against her chair, his head on her knee.

He had never understood his wife very well, but he had always been proud of her. When she was young, she was fearless and independent, she held her head high and made this Mill House a place where town folks liked to come. After she was old and ill, she never lowered her flag; not even now, when she knew the end was not far off. He had seen strong men quail and whimper at the approach of death. He, himself, dreaded it. But as he leaned against her chair with his face hidden, he knew how it would be with her; she would make her death easy for everyone, because she would meet it with the composure which he had sometimes called heartlessness, but which now seemed to him strength. As long as she was conscious, she would be mistress of her situation and of herself. (SSG 267-68)

However, after Henry spills out this torrent of confession under stress, Cather qualifies the confession, which flies in the face of all that has gone before, and has Henry push the praise beyond belief. "You are a kind woman," he says to Sapphira:

"There are different ways of being good to folks," the miller held out stubbornly, as if this idea had just come to him and he was not to be teased into letting go of it. "Sometimes keeping people in their place is being good to them." (SSG 268)

It is unclear whether Harry's ability to transform evil into good is a result of divine love or childish dependency. (Cather uses the same unique *deus ex machina* in "Old Mrs. Harris.") Yet Cather will not allow such a transformation of perspective for the narrator. By putting that speech into the mouth of Henry, she avoids associating herself with the complete denial of all the moral force she had put heretofore into the novel. Cather does, however, allow redemption of sorts for Sapphira. One of Sapphira's last statements is, "[w]e would all do better if we had our lives to live over again" (SSG 269).

Cather imputes to Henry Colbert much of what she herself felt at the time of her own mother's death. With Charles Cather already dead, Willa was left feeling abandoned and without protection. In spite of her strong sense of independence, Cather was unusually tied to her parents. Woodress tells us that three weeks after Virginia Cather died, Cather wrote to Blanche Knopf that "she was trying to get used to the strange feeling of having nobody behind her, nobody to report to" (WC:LL 433). Cather was fifty-eight years old. Cather continued, however, to struggle with ambivalent feelings for her mother. She did "not return to California for the funeral, nor did she go back to Nebraska when the body was brought to Red Cloud for burial" (WC:LL 433). And as *Sapphira* reveals, the nine years that had passed between Virginia Cather's death and the writing of the novel did not alleviate Cather's need to expiate her lifelong pain and resentment.

But the end of Sapphira's story is not the end of the novel, nor is it the end of Cather's portrayal of her parents. Cather wrote an "Epilogue" which is an actual account of an incident Willa witnessed as a young child, an incident that had been the germ for the whole story.

Nancy Till, the slave girl, returns to Back Creek for a reunion with her mother, Aunt Till, after a twenty-five year separation. In this account Cather comes full circle, narrating an event that, as Sharon O'Brien notes, must have been an allegory for Cather's

desire for a "reunion" with her own mother (WC:EV 44-46). The narrator is five-year old Willa:

Ever since I could remember anything, I had heard about Nancy.
My mother used to sing me to sleep with:

*Down by de cane-brake, close by de mill,
Dar lived a yaller gal, her name was Nancy Till. . . .*

Suddenly my mother hurried into the room. Without a word she wrapped me in a blanket [Willa was sick with a cold], carried me to the curved lounge by the window, and put me down on the high head-rest, where I could look out. . . . The actual scene of the meeting had been arranged for my benefit. When I cried because I was not allowed to go downstairs and see Nancy enter the house, Aunt Till had said: "Never mind, honey. You stay right here, and I'll stay right here. Nancy'll come up, and you'll see her as soon as I do." (SSG 281)

When Nancy, now a middle-aged woman in "a long black coat and black turban," entered the bedroom, "Till had already risen," and taking "a few uncertain steps forward,"

[s]he fell meekly into the arms of a tall-gold-skinned woman, who drew the little old darky to her breast and held her there, bending her face down over the head scantily covered with grey wool. Neither spoke a word. There was something Scriptural in that meeting, like the pictures in our old Bible. (SSG 283)

Even though Nancy's circumstances are not parallel to those of the Prodigal Son, the reunion has the aura of a great separation and return, of alienation and reconciliation. The little girl who witnessed it, whose destiny was to narrate dramatic human stories,

was so deeply moved by the scene that sixty years later she could recall every detail with amazing clarity (WC:EV 44-45). If a spiritual reconciliation and union with her mother could not happen in real life, Willa Cather could make it happen in fiction.⁴²

* * *

In writing the story "Old Mrs. Harris," Willa Cather is the pilgrim in search of ultimate value who finally arrives home.⁴³ Written in the last decade of her writing career, the story helped Cather to bring into focus not only the dynamics of her early family life--particularly her relationship with her mother and father as well as with her grandmother--but also the distorted and misunderstood perceptions of herself and her family that had shaped her early adult years.

As I have shown, these perceptions, which included Cather's affirmation of elitist and artistic values over common and religious ones, were reversed over a period of years with various degrees of sharpness and clarity. Beginning with *O Pioneers!* (1913), Cather had begun her journey back in time to her family roots, and with *My Antonia* (1918), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), she drew closer and closer to home. In "Old Mrs. Harris" (1932), she arrives.

Cather not only allows herself straightforward use of autobiographical material for the whole story, but more significantly, she places at its center, unencumbered by any disguise, the humblest member of her family. The contrast between Grandmother Harris and Sapphira Colbert fully exposes the dichotomous nature of the themes in all her work

⁴² This is one case where approaching a novel biographically is the only way one can ascertain the novel's unity. Many critics have criticized Cather's choice to tack on the Epilogue, not understanding the personal reasons Cather included it. One of the few critics who did not condemn Cather for the ending was Alexander Woolcott. When he "wrote that he liked the epilogue, [Cather] was very glad and explained to him that a little thrill went through her whenever she thought about that scene" (WC:LL, 488-89).

⁴³ This work could more properly be called a novella since it covers 115 pages.

to date, and fully identifies the sources from which it springs.

The story was one of Cather's favorites, which she ranked above the others in *Obscure Destinies*, even "Neighbour Rosicky." In it we discover the dynamics of Willa Cather in relation to her family, which, together with the story of her relationship to her family elders, becomes the master key that unlocks the riddle to what most forcefully influenced her imaginative processes. We also find in it the foundational principles by which Cather ultimately judged human destiny and worth. "[I]n ['Old Mrs. Harris'] the right things came together in the right relation," Cather confirmed to a friend.⁴⁴

Essentially, "Old Mrs. Harris" is a slice out of the life of the Charles Cather household in Red Cloud the year before Willa Cather left the University of Nebraska. Edith Lewis said the story could just as well be called "Family Portraits" (WCL 6).⁴⁵ The household consists of Templeton and his wife Victoria; Vickie, their eldest; four young boys; Mandy, the "bound girl;"⁴⁶ and Grandmother Harris. The central character

⁴⁴ The quote is from James Woodress, paraphrasing a letter from Cather to Zoe Akins, September 16, 1932 (WC:LA, 239).

⁴⁵ Even though Mildred Bennett cautions readers against seeing Cather's characters as real people, she admits that in the story Vickie is Willa and that "there is more than a suggestion of Grandmother Boak and her loyal friend Margie," as well as "something of Willa's parents in Mr. and Mrs. Templeton" (WWC, 22). Bennett has no trouble labeling *My Antonia* autobiographical, or Rachel Boak as the prototype for Rachel in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (WCC 2, 6). Perhaps Bennett's reluctance to admit too close a resemblance in the case of "Old Mrs. Harris" is because she recognizes that the story is "a bitter account of the indifference of young people to the very old in which Willa, clearly 'Vicky' in the story, indicts herself perhaps more scathingly than she does anyone else" (WWC, 22). One wonders why Bennett judges Vickie, the young Willa, as the prime culprit in that story when the evidence so clearly points to Victoria, modeled after Virginia Cather.

⁴⁶ Mandy is fashioned after Margie Anderson, the retarded and loving girl from Virginia whom the Cathers had brought with them to Nebraska to be their house help. She is also

is Grandmother Rachel Boak in the person of Grandmother Harris. The Cathers become the Templetons, Southerners from Tennessee who have moved west to Skyline, Colorado, because Mr. Templeton "got the idea of bettering himself" (132).⁴⁷ Victoria Templeton is Virginia Cather, the only portrait of her mother that Cather acknowledged.

Next door to the Templetons live Mr. and Mrs. David Rosen, quietly cultured, rich, and Jewish.⁴⁸ They are obviously superior people, not only in the eyes of Grandma Harris and Vickie but also in those of the townspeople. The Rosens are practically alone in recognizing Vickie's unusual mind and her craving for learning and an education. Mrs. Rosen is alone in perceiving the superior qualities of Mrs. Harris.

The structural framework for the whole piece is a triangle, and at the three points are the three generations of women in the Templeton household: Mrs. Harris, her daughter, Victoria Templeton, and fifteen year old Vickie.⁴⁹ Each has her own place in the house, both literally and figuratively. The front parlor is Victoria's, where she can see and be seen as the transplanted Southern belle, a feudal princess in a prairie town--whose role in life is to be petted, courted, admired, and have babies. The attic is

Mahailey in *One of Ours* and "Poor Marty" in a poem published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1931 (see WC:LA, 24).

⁴⁷ Actually, Charles Cather moved his family to Nebraska after the barn burned on the Back Creek farm. It appears he could not keep the family farm in Virginia going without the more able assistance of his father and brother.

⁴⁸ The Rosens are fashioned on Willa's friends in Red Cloud, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wiener, who first introduced her to French and German literature. (See WC:LA, 39-40). The European flavor of their home and their lives further developed in Willa Cather a life-long love of that culture that had begun in Virginia. It is puzzling that Cather has been accused of anti-Semitism considering the loving portraits she draws of some of her Jewish acquaintances in her fiction. For James Woodress' response to these critics, see WC:LL, 283-84.

⁴⁹ When the story first appeared in serial form in *Ladies Home Journal*, it was called "Three Women," evidently because the editors thought that Cather's title would not be as appealing to public tastes (WC:LL, 441).

Vickie's, her place for dreams of great expectations and an escape from a family who does not understand her and whose domestic demands are tiresome. The back kitchen and bedroom is Mrs. Harris' domain. It is ugly, cluttered, spartanly furnished, but it is the place that the grandchildren love to come most, usually looking for a cookie, a story, or comfort.

The narrative framework, however, does not accurately reflect the thematic focus. The three women do not play equally prominent roles in developing the story's theme. Contrary to the room she occupies in the home, Mrs. Harris' position in the story is at the peak of the pyramid. Radiating out and down from her on one side is Victoria, and on the other side, Vickie. The scenes in the story alternately juxtapose Victoria with Mrs. Harris and then Vickie with Mrs. Harris. Only by unstated suggestion are Victoria and Vickie contrasted. The narrator focuses the brightest spotlight on the stark contrasts between this very different mother and daughter--the dynamics of their relationship and the accompanying effects that each has on the rest of the family. On the narrative's surface, young Vickie's role is primarily to mirror the selfishness of Victoria and to reflect the virtues in Grandma Harris. But Cather also wants us to see the unusual qualities in Vickie and the budding potential of a future artist.

Why is it, then, that most critics treat these three female characters as if each one carries equal weight in the story?⁵⁰ Simply put, they are interpreting the story biographically and are misled by Cather's own machinations. They know that the young Vickie in the story and the adult narrator is the same person, Willa Cather herself. The first is naive and undeveloped, and the second is mature and knowing. Consequently, since the narrator/author herself is a character, it is she who is truly the third side of the triangle, not the young Vickie.

⁵⁰ For representative essays, see David Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination*, 209-210 and Richard Gionnone, "Willa Cather as Psalmist."

The method by which Cather the narrator develops the point of view, then, is the key to understanding her purposes and theme. It could be called a narrative technique of discovery. Cather very cleverly keeps shifting the point of view, not just from one character to another, but from one voice to another within the omniscient narrator herself. The method is a paradigm for how Cather's own point of view developed and became more fully informed over the years through the various narrative voices in her fiction. Hence, not only does the reader discover the greatness of old Mrs. Harris and the narrow self-interest of Victoria or Vickie; more to the point, he witnesses the unfolding revelation going on in the consciousness of the narrator. Whether Cather planned it this way from the outset in order to show how she came to an understanding of the situation in her family, or whether the discovery occurred as she was writing, cannot be known. In either case, the reader becomes privy to a mind in process, grappling with and reconciling memory and adult perceptions.

In the series of scenes that comprise the story, the narrator leads us from one to the next by way of several narrative voices, which sometimes complement each other, at other times, contradict. Together, they add up to a rich and complex perspective on the story's situation as well as the writer herself. The shifting point of view becomes a debate of sorts. The central question has two parts: one deals with the degree to which Victoria--and in some sense also Vickie--is culpable for the neglectful and even shameful treatment of Grandma Harris; the second and more important question concerns the nature of Grandma Harris' character and the reasons why this lowliest of persons is in truth a model of human greatness.

At the beginning of the story, Grandma Harris will not let any chance go by to praise her daughter, repulse her detractors, or advance her causes. In spite of Victoria's self-centeredness, Mrs. Harris believes she has "a good heart." Mrs. Harris takes pride in the fact that gentlemen find Victoria attractive, and she tells Mrs. Rosen that her daughter "was always much admired" (87-88). While Victoria, who still "treated her

husband as if he were her 'beau,'" goes off with him "down town to the ice-cream parlour," or runs off on various errands and shopping sprees, Grandma makes Victoria's carefree excursions possible by minding the children and tending the house. While Victoria is "entertaining guests in the parlour," Grandma reads to the little boys and darns their stockings in her tiny, cluttered bedroom (92, 90).

At first, the narrator informs us that even though Grandmother Harris is aware of how others view the subservient place she has in her daughter's home, she herself finds nothing untoward about it. In fact, she "didn't know why the neighbours acted so; she was as much in the dark as Victoria." Grandma was nurtured in the ways of Southern feudalism, even though her family no longer had the money or the land to lay claim to nobility. In this tradition, "young girls . . . were supposed to be carefree and foolish"; and when the "foolish girl married and began to have children, everything else must give way to that. She must be humoured and given the best of everything, because having children was hard on a woman, and it was the most important thing in the world." Back in Tennessee, "every young woman in good circumstances had an older woman in the house, a mother or mother-in-law or an old aunt, who managed the household economies and directed the help" (129-30). Back home in Tennessee, the narrator argues through Grandma's consciousness, such an arrangement with a widowed mother was "perfectly regular":

[A]mong the middle-class people and the country-folk, when a woman was a widow and had married daughters, she considered herself an old woman and wore full-gathered black dresses and a black bonnet and became a housekeeper. She accepted this estate unprotestingly, almost gratefully. (132)

The difference in Skyline is that "Mrs. Harris was no longer living in a feudal society, where there were plenty of landless people glad to render service to the more

fortunate" (133). Consequently, there is no help other than Mandy, the bound girl brought with them from Tennessee, and Grandma has to do much of the labor herself. But she is more than willing in order to keep up appearances of southern gentility, for her own sake as well as her daughter's. "To keep Victoria different from these 'ordinary' women meant everything to Mrs. Harris" (135). "She believed that somebody ought to be in the parlour, and somebody in the kitchen," and "she certainly valued respectability above personal comfort" (134-35).

Almost every critic whose work I have read has taken Mrs. Harris' view as the controlling one in analyzing Victoria's character and role in the novel's overall theme.⁵¹ They conclude that, through a sympathetic narrator, Cather justifies and sympathizes with (if not condones) Victoria Templeton's self-centeredness, and in so doing, rectifies what others in the story think of her. They evidently assume that Mrs. Harris' explanation for her daughter's behavior is also the narrator's, and by implication, Cather's. I am convinced, however, that the narrator ultimately indicts Victoria Templeton as if she were on trial by giving evidence that strongly refutes Grandmother's defense of her daughter and that even contradicts at times the narrator's own tone.

The point of view at the opening of the story is that of Mrs. Rosen, the cultured Jewish neighbour. The narrator leads us to believe that Mrs. Rosen's perceptions are accurate because Mrs. Rosen is indeed a person of superior sensibilities, even in the eyes of the less enlightened people of Skyline. She has roots in and has been nourished by an unfailing Catherian locus of value, European culture.⁵²

⁵¹ One notable exception is Henry Seidel Canby, who reviewed the story in 1932. See "The Last Four Books," *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*, 280.

⁵² For an opposing view, see David Stouck in *Willa Cather's Imagination*, 209. I fully disagree with Stouck's opinion that Cather intended to show that Mrs. Rosen's view is limited and inaccurate because of an aristocratic bias.

From the start, it is apparent that Mrs. Rosen openly disapproves of the Templetons' treatment of Grandmother Harris, especially Victoria's, and Grandma knows it from "comments she occasionally dropped" (OMH 97). In the first scene, Mrs. Rosen pays a surreptitious visit to her shy next-door neighbor. She finds Grandma Harris standing "with her feet wide apart, in an attitude of profound weariness" (77). Mrs. Rosen has come with some freshly baked coffee-cake and intends to "get past the others" of the house to get "to the real grandmother" (83). The old woman's daughter has established the rule that Grandma is not to receive visitors alone, and Grandma follows the rule scrupulously, fearful of defying Victoria's wishes. Mrs. Rosen deliberately waits until after Victoria, a "tall, handsome woman" who is "dressed in white broadcloth and a hat with white lilacs" leaves the house (76). Mrs. Rosen had brought cake frequently, but

she knew that Grandma merely tasted it and saved it for her daughter Victoria, who was as fond of sweets as her own children, and jealous about them, moreover,--couldn't bear the special dainties should come into the house for anyone but herself. (79)

The visit makes Mrs. Harris "uncertain and apprehensive." "Receiving a visitor alone, unsupervised by her daughter" and "having cake and coffee that should properly be saved for Victoria, was all so irregular that Mrs. Harris could not enjoy it" (79-80). As hard as Mrs. Rosen tries, she cannot bring Grandma out. She asks Grandma if she misses her old home in Tennessee with its comfort, trees, and flower gardens, and Grandma answers with particular care not to say anything that could be construed as criticism of Victoria or her treatment of her. The only time Grandma relaxes her guard is when Blue Boy, the Maltese cat, comes in and jumps in her lap. Mrs. Rosen notices that Grandma Harris comes "more alive, as if some missing part of herself were restored" (84).

The fact that Mrs. Rosen's "Jewish people had an altogether different attitude toward their old folks" is "disturbing" to Grandma. She didn't want Mrs. Rosen to think that she was "put upon," that "there was anything unusual or pitiful in her lot. To be pitied was the deepest hurt anybody could know" (97). But it is not pity that Mrs. Rosen feels. Grandma Harris is too full of "quiet dignity" for that, the kind of dignity "that comes from complete resignation to the chances of life" (78). She "was always impressive":

Perhaps it was the way she held her head,--so simply, unprotesting and unprotected; or the gravity of her large, deep-set brown eyes, . . . always direct, [which] seemed to ask nothing and hope for nothing. . . . There was the kind of nobility about her head that there is about an old lion's: an absence of self-consciousness, vanity, preoccupation--something absolute. (81)

Even though Mrs. Rosen is struck by the queerness of having cake and tea in such "a hideous, cluttered room," she was "glad of an opportunity to sit quietly and look at Grandmother, who was more interesting to her than the handsome Victoria" (80). Her values of human worth, like Cather's, are based on a standard of character and deep human feeling rather than social rank or wealth.⁵³

By the end of this scene, the narrator, through Mrs. Rosen's sensitive eye, has fully convinced us that there is something terribly wrong in the Templeton household which allows such unfeeling and unjust disregard for old Mrs. Harris. We are also convinced that Victoria Templeton is at the root of the wrong. For some reason, she is

⁵³ Mrs. Rosen is demonstrating the same heightened perceptions that Willa Cather herself showed when she saw something special in Annie Pavelka (Antonia) when no one else did. Elizabeth Sergeant mentions in her memoirs that when Cather lived in New York, she seemed friendlier to the local shop owners than anyone of note.

deliberately isolating her mother and treating her in a manner inhumane by any standards.

However, the narrator later complicates the point of view by enlarging the early one-dimensional view of Victoria and the Templeton family, and this larger view is also through the perception of Mrs. Rosen. To Mrs. Rosen they are a "puzzle." In spite of the place the old grandmother is assigned in the home, Mrs. Rosen feels "a pleasantness in the human relationships" of the family. Regardless of the fact that she had to send an admonition with her cookies--"they are for Grandma, remember, not for your mother or Vickie"--, and notwithstanding the fact that Victoria is irresponsible and "selfish" (101), Mrs. Rosen believes that "there was something warm and genuine" about Victoria, that she "would give away anything she had," and that she never manipulated people "for favours" (111-13).⁵⁴ Mrs. Rosen astutely observes that Victoria's imperious manner is tempered with "a shade of diffidence, . . . as if she were trying to adjust herself to a new group of people and to do the right thing" (113-14).

Unlike Mrs. Rosen, Mrs. Jackson--a typical Catherian portrayal of the shallow small-mindedness she so often found in the early prairie towns--is not a reliable observer. Her "testimony" concerning Victoria and her mother is immediately suspect because she "didn't like the Templetons" (125). The only apparent reason for her animosity is that, in their Southern ways, the Templetons are different.

Cather uses Mrs. Jackson's viewpoint to arouse legitimate sympathy for Victoria's confusion and bewilderment in a society of alien customs. At the Ladies Aid Society's annual ice cream social, Mrs. Jackson uses her acid tongue to say "the most cutting things in calm, even kindly, tones" (125) to publicly insult Victoria Templeton. Victoria, dressed in her "new dotted Swiss, with many ruffles, all edged with black ribbon, and wide ruffly sleeves," enjoys her role as the beautiful hostess as she moves

⁵⁴ In this last observation, however, Mrs. Rosen is mistaken. The narrator herself mentions how Victoria Templeton uses her charm on the male merchants to get what she wants by "ordering [them] about" (85).

gracefully among the guests, even showing extra attention to some unfortunate urchins who have showed up. Her own children “thought how much prettier their mother was than any other other women,” and they “got as much satisfaction as Mrs. Harris out of Victoria’s good looks” (124-25).

Mrs. Jackson observes “Mr. Rosen’s pleasant attentions to Mrs. Templeton,” and with her face “smooth and placid as a mask,” asks Victoria if she would like some of her own cake, adding, “I don’t know but I’d like my cakes, if I kept somebody in the kitchen to bake them for me” (126). Even though Mrs. Jackson hits on the truth about Mrs. Harris’ lot and the compliance of Victoria, her subtle charge against Victoria has no force because she judges out of cruel motives. Cather’s narrative mode invites us to be sympathetic with Victoria in her public humiliation. She adds to the effect by pointing out Victoria’s denseness in discerning the accusation behind Mrs. Jackson’s boorish remark. Her southern training has taught her that “to cause anyone embarrassment is a frightful and humiliating blunder” (127), yet “it kept growing clearer to her that this was another of those thrusts from the outside which she couldn’t understand.” However, she does deduce that if the neighbors “came often to see her mother,” they “were sure to take sides against her” (128), but for what reasons, she seems ignorant.

However, the sympathy aroused in the reader is at once undercut by the description of Victoria’s petulant reaction to the insult. When she gets home from the social, she is “severe and distant” with the children, and when her mother, intuiting the situation, offers to make her tea as a comfort, “Victoria [throws] up her chin” and archly replies, “I don’t want anybody waiting on me. I just want to be let alone.” She then withdraws without her usual “good-night, or ‘Are you all right, Ma?’” (128). The narrator comments:

Nothing ever made Victoria cross but criticism. She was jealous of small attentions paid to Mrs. Harris, because she felt they were paid “behind her

back” or “over her head,” in a way that implied reproach to her. Victoria had been a belle in their own town in Tennessee, but here she was not very popular, no matter how many pretty dresses she wore, and she couldn’t bear it. She felt as if her mother and Mr. Templeton must be somehow to blame; at least they ought to protect her from whatever was disagreeable--they always had! (129)

By this point in the story, even though the reader may not like Grandma’s being relegated to the back kitchen and bedroom and being overworked and taken for granted, the narrator has led him into a sympathetic understanding of why Victoria allows it and why Grandmother helps perpetuate it. Any earlier harsh judgment of Victoria is somewhat assuaged. Other details are more damning.

In her cluttered back room, Grandma Harris sleeps on a lounge with no springs; “only a thin cotton mattress [lies] between her and the wooden slats.” She would awake about four o’clock, feeling “the hard slats under her” and the cold because her quilts add weight “but little warmth.” At such times, she would “reach under her pillow for her little comforter,” a ragged sweater of “very soft brushed wool” given to her by Mrs. Rosen who thought Grandma could use the yarn for mending (94). Grandma “concealed it under her mattress” because “Victoria couldn’t bear to have anything come into the house that was not for her to dispose of,” and she is afraid she will take it away from her:

[The] little sweater had become the dearest of Grandmother’s few possessions. It was kinder to her, she used to think as she wrapped it about her middle, than any of her own children had been. (95)

By turns, the narrator has led the reader to admire Victoria, feel indulgent toward her, pity her, and condemn her. But the emotional effect of these details, narrated in the most disinterested manner, is so strong as to obliterate any sympathy felt for Victoria earlier.

Neither Grandma, nor the narrator directly, faults Victoria for her social attitudes, but something deep in both of them stirs in condemnation when Victoria reacts to a circumstance with a gross lack of human feeling and sympathy. And on that point turns the whole implication of Cather's method of utilizing more than one point of view. It happens when Grandma's beloved cat dies.

Grandma Harris is cut to the quick when she discovers Blue Boy has distemper and is dying. She sits in the coal-shed watching over him through his spasms. "Everything that's alive has got to suffer," she tells her young grandsons (141). But she herself "had seen so much misery that she wondered . . . why it hurt so to see her tom-cat die" (143).

She does not realize that he is the one living thing in her life that gives love unconditionally and undemandingly and that, in a sense, is hers. Even though Vickie claims him as her own, she does not really care for him and is not all that concerned about him when he gets sick. When the little boys protest at Vickie's neglect, Grandma sighs, "Vickie's got her head full of things lately; that makes people kind of heartless" (142).

However, Grandma can find no such excuse for Victoria's heartlessness toward her pet. After the cat dies, Victoria, without consulting Grandma, peremptorily arranges for him to be picked up by the garbage man and to be thrown out in a gully with other refuse. Mrs. Harris is indignant and deeply hurt. Victoria is not only completely insensitive to Grandma's feelings for the cat, but she does not even consult Grandma as to her wishes concerning what to do with him. Of course, Grandma before this had always encouraged Victoria's imperial rule over household matters, but now, the narrator makes clear, Victoria is trampling over matters of the heart. For the first time in the story, Grandma rebels and openly defies her. After Victoria goes up to her room for the night,

Mrs. Harris followed [the boys] into the kitchen, shut the door behind her, and said indignantly:

“Air you two boys going to let that Mexican take Blue Boy and throw him onto some trash-pile?”

The sleepy boys were frightened at the anger and bitterness in her tone. . . .

“You git up early in the morning, and I’ll put him in a sack, and one of you take a spade and go to that crooked old willer tree that grows just where the sand creek turns off the road, and you dig a little grave for Blue Boy, an’ bury him right.”

They had seldom seen such resentment in their grandmother.

(144-45)

Victoria whips the boys for going off without telling her, but their greatest sorrow is in believing what Grandma has implied--that their mother was indifferent about Blue Boy. However, when Victoria tells them that she is sorry about their cat, and appeases them by suggesting they make a circus in the back yard, they are convinced that “their grandmother had been mistaken” (146-47).

For the narrator, however, and for the reader, the explanation does not suffice. Nor does it for grandmother. The next scene in the story suggests that the incident forever changes Grandma Harris’ unquestioning compliance with Victoria’s word and rule.

To this point in the story, the narrator has given no indication of tension between Victoria and her daughter. Indeed, they have not been seen together at all; their paths have barely crossed. By omission rather than inclusion, the narrator has hinted that this is not a close mother-daughter relationship. The issue that precipitates Grandmother’s revolt, significantly, is over Vickie’s future.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ For a comparison of this story to Mary Freeman’s “The Revolt of Mother,” see Jean M. Tucker, “The American Mother in Three Stories--Freeman, Cather, and Gates.”

The first indication of Grandmother's revolt is when Victoria invites Mrs. Rosen into the house for some lemonade on a hot day, and Grandmother stays "in the parlour with them," rather than going meekly back to her room, as was her custom (148). The second indication is when Grandma comes to the defense of Vickie's unusual ways. Determined to go to college, Vickie is "at her books all the time," which inspires admiration in Mrs. Rosen but scorn in Victoria: "There's such a thing as overdoing it, Mrs. Rosen . . . ; Vickie's very apt to run to extremes" (148). When Mrs. Rosen protests in her broken English that Vickie "can hardly be too extreme is dis matter," and admonishes Victoria that, instead of criticizing her, they should "encourage her" (149), Victoria bristles.

Unlike Victoria, Grandma Harris sympathizes with Vickie's dreams, and together with Mrs. Rosen, understands that Vickie is a special girl, not at all attracted to conventional female pursuits. Victoria complains that "[t]here ain't a particle of romance in Vickie" (150) and thinks it would be more natural if Vickie were concerned about a love-affair rather than an education (162). Mrs. Rosen, with her more refined perceptions, observes that "there are several kinds of romance" and Vickie "may not have [Victoria's] kind." Mrs. Harris agrees and thinks that Victoria has said "a hard word" about Vickie (150). Grandmother's mild-mannered revolt culminates in her swallowing her strong sense of family pride and asking Mrs. Rosen if her husband might provide a loan to help Vickie go to college.

This done, Grandma senses her mission in life is almost complete. She has been fulfilled by a type of religious transcendency, pouring out her unassuming ego into the lives of her family. As one who had taken "thought of human destiny" (112), who had "ceased to be an individual" as she "became part of a group, became a relationship" (136-37), Grandmother Harris found great meaning in losing her life in the life of others. Her mind turns to

a passage from the second part of *Pilgrim's Progress*, which she had read aloud to the children so many times; the passage where Christiana and her band come to the arbour on the Hill of Difficulty: "*Then said Mercy, how sweet is rest to them that labour.*" (184)

This passage is thematically linked to Psalm 23, the scripture that frames the whole story. Mrs. Harris reads the psalm to herself at the beginning of the story and quotes from it at the end just before her death. As Richard Giannone observes in his very fine essay, "Willa Cather as Psalmist," the "old stories of faith guided Cather in her lifelong search for form," and scripture "provided specific material for her to achieve new artistic patterns which we could call typological" (2). As the Lord is Mrs. Harris' merciful shepherd, so is she to her self-absorbed daughter and granddaughter, even though they are too spiritually blind to see it. The narrator through her perceptive eye may condemn them, the reader may condemn them, but Grandmother Harris understands, forgives, and unconditionally loves them both. "She remains a hidden force of reconciliation whose mercy instinctively leads her to a saving way out of crisis, and her creative responses give the story bearing her name its deepest unity" (Giannone 4).

Cather takes yet another thread of this Old Testament theme of God the Shepherd and makes a link to The Good Shepherd of the New Testament. In an early scene, old Mrs. Harris is utterly spent after a hard day of caring for the family. Mandy, the faithful, slow-witted bound girl "who [has] nothing else to give," offers to "rub Mrs. Harris' swollen legs in a tub of hot water." The scene glows with the scriptural suggestion of Christ's act of humble service toward his disciples before his Passion:

The kitchen was quiet and full of shadow, with only the light from an old lantern. Neither spoke. Mrs. Harris dozed from comfort, and Mandy herself was half asleep as she performed one of the oldest rites of compassion. (93)

In this remarkably executed story, Cather comes out clearly in favor of whatever Grandma Harris represents. One might feel compassion for Victoria, but not admiration. As for Vickie, at least her self-centeredness can be excused by her youth. And if we consider the fact that the narrator is the adult Cather looking back at a time when her youthful preoccupations blinded her to the truth of the great value represented in her grandmother, the story itself is a type of self-incriminating confession. However great her regret, however, Cather subtly advances Vickie in the mind of the reader by pointing out that, even though she is exasperatingly “dense and unperceptive” of the circumstances and people around her, and even though she possesses much the same self-absorption as her mother, Vickie is unlike her mother in that she has a “streak of sensibility” that presages potential greatness. There is no such qualification for Victoria.

In this story, as well as later in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather is making a clear if not astonishing end-of-life indictment of her mother's character and her choices, despite whatever sympathy she felt for her. The assessment of herself is mixed--she recognizes her early selfishness but somewhat excuses it because of her special gifts and calling. But even the greatness that is anticipated for young Vickie falls short of the ultimate value of a life like that of Grandmother Harris'.

The greatness that the adult Willa Cather achieved as a literary artist is ultimately judged by her fiction to be inferior to the greatness of people like her Grandmother Boak and her other pious family elders. We have seen Cather coming to this conclusion gradually from the beginning. In these last works, Cather's tone suggests that she is almost remorseful that she chose the path she did, not so much the path of the artist, but the self-centeredness and, occasionally, false values to which it led.

In all of Cather's works, the only happy and fulfilled characters are those whose lives are based on “the thing not named,” or in David Stouck's words, on the “selfless, impersonal love of Christian teaching” (“Willa Cather's Last Four Books” 296). These characters are the ones patterned after her beloved family elders; they alone survive and

transcend the downward pull of the world, the wayward human emotions and self-gratifying will. For Cather, her elders were her living Bible. In "*Joseph and His Brothers*" (1936), a review of Thomas Mann's book, Cather compares by indirection the Old Testament patriarchs to her own. Their first concern was "the nature of man," something within that was "real life, consciousness; where it came from and what becomes of it" (OW 96-97). One, Jacob, had received a divine blessing to be passed on to the visionary Joseph for fulfillment. Jacob was the keeper of "one great idea" embodied in a "conception of God" that was the "burning purpose of his inner life" (103). For Joseph, Cather writes, Jacob is "the rod of measure" (118):

He is the compass, the north star, the seeking mind behind events; he divines their hidden causes. He knows that even external accidents often have their roots, their true beginnings, in personal feeling. (118).

The inevitable conclusion toward which Cather almost unconsciously worked affirmed her own "rod of measure." Her last books show clearly her own sense of despair in reconciling her life; she suspected the motives behind her own craft. But as Cather may have come to see in her last years, her artistic expressions of a lifetime, if looked at as a whole, remarkably preserve and confirm the lives she came to value. In Willa Cather's fiction, one feels unmistakably "the deep vibrations of the soul," a worthy legacy for any artist. As David Stouck assesses it:

[a]n artist's abandonment or renunciation of his craft . . . does not invalidate his life's work. On the contrary it places it in the more meaningful context of experience achieved, for the artist's path is a circuitous one which returns its pilgrim to life. ("Last Four Books" 303)

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