

THE SENSE OF FORM IN THE  
NOVELS OF WILLA CATHER

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NOVELS OF WILLA CATHER

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

The death of Willa Cather has closed the career of one of America's most distinguished novelists. Her work shows many interests--the intensity of the artist;<sup>1</sup> the contrast of the civilizations involved in a settlement of the frontier by Swedes, Norwegians, Poles, Slavs, Bohemians,<sup>2</sup> and French;<sup>3</sup> the drama of American religious history;<sup>4</sup> the triumph of great personalities over the hardships of American life.<sup>5</sup> These are among her themes, and to these themes she has brought the passion of an artist. Her works gain significance and depth through the contrast of the cultures she has traced and through her beautiful and conscious art. Other novelists have drawn vivid pictures of immigrant life but rarely memorable ones,<sup>6</sup> because these artists have done far less with interpretation, and because few of them have

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<sup>1</sup> Song of the Lark.

<sup>2</sup> O Pioneers.

<sup>3</sup> Shadows on the Rock.

<sup>4</sup> Death Comes for the Archbishop.

<sup>5</sup> Obscure Destinies.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Edna Ferber's Cimmarron, Great Son, So Big, or even Hamlin Garland's work on the Middle West.

had the consciousness of the novel as an art that Willa Cather has had. Like them, Miss Cather has recognized that the struggle with elemental forces is inherently dramatic, but she has carried the struggle into the second or third generation, when the original habit of life is modified by a new set of conventions. She also has contrasted the new way of life with an older, more substantial and more humane tradition, and to this interpretation, Willa Cather has brought an artist's conscience which distinguishes her work above that of many others.

No novelist of Willa Cather's stature can escape adverse criticism. That some of this criticism, especially the criticism of her form, is faulty and without sound critical basis is the subject of this <sup>paper</sup> thesis.

The following quotations will show the line most of the adverse criticism takes:

"The books between Alexander's Bridge and A Lost Lady testify to a diminishing<sup>7</sup> preoccupation with form, and exhibit a consequent decrease in structural strength and clearness of outline: O Pioneers contains two stories never firmly welded together; The Song of the Lark is hampered by divagations which obscure the principal theme and fails to sustain a unified and progressive interest. My Antonia suffers from an introduction structurally superfluous and involved because Miss Cather has not achieved command over the indirect method of presentation."<sup>8</sup>

"Miss Cather's novels are rather frequently loose in structure, apt to fall into separate stories or to give too much time to single incidents. Both at the beginning and the end of her career she had difficulty

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<sup>7</sup> I have purposely underlined the part I especially wish to stress.

<sup>8</sup> Lloyd Morris, "Willa Cather," North American Review CCXIX (May, 1924), 641-652.

with form. Her early novels are apt to break in the middle or to lose centrality through the episodic structure or the over-elaboration of a single incident. Her manipulation of point of view is at all times a bit strained."<sup>9</sup>

"My Antonia suffers from a defective narrative sense. If Antonia were taken out, there would remain, not a composite setting, but a series of pictures.<sup>10</sup> My Antonia is not a novel but a chronicle."<sup>11</sup>

We have here the unqualified statement that in her work is not only a diminishing preoccupation with form but an actual decrease in structural strength and clearness of outline. There is the criticism of stories that are never firmly welded, of divagations that obscure the principal theme, of the failure to obtain unified and progressive interest; there is the bald statement that at the beginning and at the ending, Miss Cather has always had difficulty with form. One notes the statement that My Antonia suffers from a defective narrative sense.

It is criticism such as this that a study of the novels in the light of her own theory can show to be too hasty and too superficial.

Miss Cather has given us, to be sure, no systematic criticism of the novel, (~~but as Goethe has done,~~<sup>12</sup> she has left us scattered throughout her work and in records of

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<sup>9</sup> N. Elizabeth Monroe, The Novel and Society, p. 230.

<sup>10</sup> Again, the underlinings are mine, for emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> Louis Kronenberger, "Willa Cather," Bookman LXXIV, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> In the Eckermann letters, for instance.

many interviews, valuable expressions of her own theory, and a study of the novels in the light of her own theory can show how faulty and lacking in validity is much of this criticism of her form.

Every young writer must learn his craft somewhere. Willa Cather, at the beginning of her career, turned to Henry James--Henry James, who as much as any novelist, attached importance to perfecting the form of the novel.<sup>13</sup>

*omit* For the seventeen years between her graduation and the publication of Alexander's Bridge, Willa Cather persevered in her resolution to write--"her growing, despairing admiration for Henry James but confirming her in it."<sup>14</sup>) She knew that the delicate perfection of Henry James would not always serve as a medium for the epic of the West in which she was interested, but it would be strange indeed if the effects of such an apprenticeship as this would ever be cast aside so completely that Miss Cather "always had difficulty with form."

I wish to take two lines of approach to the defense of Miss Cather's sense of form. First, many of her adverse critics apparently think of form only in the obvious sense of a dramatic plot which Miss Cather used in her first

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<sup>13</sup> The insistence on form even in a periodical publication.

<sup>14</sup> "Henry James - - - was for me the perfect writer." Willa Cather interview by L. Carrol (Quoted in Modern American Writers).



novel. That Miss Cather in her later novels depended on a far more subtle unity does not seem to have occurred to them. We have her own statement of this subtler unity at which she was aiming:

"In some books I have done more careful planning than in others, but always the end was seen from the beginning,<sup>15</sup> and in each case it was the end I set out to reach, that is the feeling of the end, the mood in which I should leave my characters and in which I myself should say goodby to them. But practically everything besides the central purpose or the central feeling comes spontaneously and unexpectedly, though all grow out of the main theme and out of the feeling and experiences that made me choose that theme.

Whatever is felt upon the page without being especially named there--that is created. It is the - - - overtone divined by the ear but not heard of it, - - - the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed that gives high quality to the novel or the drama."<sup>16</sup>

The same ideas are found scattered throughout all of the novels.

The second line which I want to take is to point out that the epic structure in a narrative may be as admirable a form as the dramatic.<sup>17</sup> This structure, as I shall show, is admirably illustrated in Death Comes for the Archbishop.

The fact that in her first novel Miss Cather shows her mastery of form makes more curious the criticism that she later lost it. Moreover, the fact that all the critics unite in praising the form of Alexander's Bridge seems to

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<sup>15</sup> Again, the underlinings are my own, for emphasis.

<sup>16</sup> Robert H. Footman, "The Genius of Willa Cather," American Literature, X (May, 1938), 134-138.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Hardy's Jude the Obscure and Tess of the D'Urbervilles, which are intentionally epic in form and which have caused critics the same trouble.

be further proof that these critics thought of form only in that narrower sense.

An analysis of Alexander's Bridge will show this early mastery of form.

## Chapter II

Plot is the most important of the several elements which influence the form of a novel; in fact, without plot the novel is formless, but it must be remembered that there are many types of plot.<sup>1</sup> Of the qualities which distinguish a good plot, the first to be noted is a shapely definiteness achieved by a clear-cut beginning, middle, and end.

The beginning of Alexander's Bridge is clear-cut and definite. The novel begins with a conversation between Alexander's wife and his old friend, Professor Wilson, which reveals that there is in Alexander a deep dis-unity of personality. The conversation reveals, too, that both the old professor and Alexander's wife are conscious of this gap between the two sides of the man. There is a hint of prophecy, a little later, in Professor Wilson's remark to Alexander, "I did you justice in the matter of ability. Yet I always used to feel that there was a weak spot where some day the strain would tell."<sup>2</sup> Here we have sharply given us the beginning, out of which the action grows. The struggle between the two sides of Alexander's personality is symbolized by the bridge, which gives the title to the novel.

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<sup>1</sup> Dramatic, epic, episodic, linked fable, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander's Bridge, p. 15.

The first part of the story presents a clear and economical picture of one side of Bartley Alexander's life--his happiness in his home, his wife, his success as an engineer. Underneath the surface is his wife's groping for an understanding of her husband's past, and Alexander's vague dissatisfaction with what he thinks should be an almost perfect existence.

The middle of the story introduces what is to bring out the other side of Alexander's life. While he is in London on a business trip, he hears of Hilda Burgoyne, whom he had known and loved long ago. It is sometime before he actually meets her again, but during that time Alexander comes to realize that success has brought him nothing but responsibilities and a loss of freedom. He who as a young man was little given to reflections now finds "a seductive excitement in reviewing old experiences in imagination."<sup>3</sup>

The action moves back to New York, where a conversation between Alexander and Professor Wilson reveals that Alexander has made several trips to London since his rediscovery of his old love. He tells his friend, too, of the Mearlock Bridge, his biggest commission, which is a continual anxiety to him. This fear for the bridge, a fear which mounts steadily throughout the story, parallels his conviction of the disunity in his own mind. The fear of weakness in the bridge intensifies his growing fear of the weakness within himself.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

The pull between the two halves of him grows more insistent, and Alexander is again on his way to England.

"He intended during the voyage to decide upon a course of action - - - but deep down in him somewhere his resolution was weakening and strengthening, ebbing and flowing."<sup>4</sup>

This ebbing and flowing, strengthening and weakening continue as the plot weaves closely the double themes, the flaw in the bridge and the flaw in the man, each of which, in the final analysis, fails. Alexander's bridge crumples and destroys itself, and with it, Alexander, too, is destroyed.

This novel shows attention to a form worthy of Henry James, himself. Here is a well integrated plot in which the central idea, the flaw in Alexander's character, is hinted at in the first chapter and expanded and developed as the character of Alexander moves steadily toward his ultimate destiny. The two themes, the destruction of the bridge and the destruction of the personality, are sharply defined, closely woven together, with the destroyed bridge being at one and the same time the evidence of Alexander's external career and the symbol for the joining of the two sides of his personality which he never achieved. The form of this novel is almost as clear as architectural form.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

My Antonia is the second of Miss Cather's books dealing with the old West. I have chosen this book rather than O Pioneers because much criticism of the book has been directed against its form.

My Antonia deals with a Bohemian family forced to live almost like animals in a dugout in Nebraska. The introduction may seem, to the too casual reader, to be somewhat superfluous, and the book may appear to such a reader less a novel than a chronicle. Critics have said that if Antonia were taken out, there would remain not a composite setting but a series of pictures. But in this book we see Willa Cather beginning to use a different device, the unity of mood, to give form to her novel. She says in her preface to Alexander's Bridge that the book does not deal with the kind of subject matter in which she later felt at home. She believes that it is not always easy for the inexperienced writer to distinguish between his own material and the material which he would like to make his own. She writes:

" - - - There is a time in a writer's development when his 'life line' and the line of his personal endeavor meet. This may come early or late, but after it occurs, his work is never quite the same. After he has once or twice done a story that formed itself inevitably in his mind, he will not often turn back to the building of external stories again."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Willa Cather, Preface to Alexander's Bridge.

As she began to get into her own stride, it was natural for her as it is for any artist to choose the forms which best expressed the meaning of the life which she was trying to reveal.<sup>6</sup>

She secures, in this novel, a specific mood primarily through the use of the land or countryside as a background. To gain the mood which broods over the whole novel she seems to immerse herself in a landscape she knows and loves. The whole of My Antonia is filled with the feel of the country. Jim Burden expresses his feeling and love for the land, when, as a small boy newly come from Virginia, he goes with his grand-mother to the garden:

"I can remember exactly how the country looked to me. - - - I felt motion in the landscape, in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself. - - - I wanted to walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world which could not be far away. - - - The earth was warm as I crumbled it through my fingers. - - - I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be more. 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."<sup>7</sup>

Antonia Shimerdas represented to Jim the country he loved and all the happiness of his boyhood. In her story one finds the selfless generosity exemplified also by Jim's grand-parents--their patience and tolerance toward people like the Shimerdas, who were so unlike themselves. There

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<sup>6</sup> "The best form is that which makes the most of its subject." Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> My Antonia, pp. 17, 18, 20.

was no snobbery among these people. They judged by worth, not appearance. When Antonia came back to them with her baby, she was no outcast--pitied certainly but not condemned. Willa Cather makes a nice distinction between the girls in town who were too good, too proud, to work, and the girls from the farms who came into town and worked at all kinds of jobs. These farm girls had been reared to hard work and privation, but the country had given them something the town girls did not have. Jim said of them:

"Those girls had grown up in the first bitter-hard times, and had got little schooling themselves. But the younger brothers and sisters for whom they made such sacrifices and who had 'advantages' never seem to me - - - half as interesting or as well educated. The older girls who helped to break up the wild sod, learned so much from life, from poverty, from their mothers and grand-mothers."<sup>8</sup>

The beauty of this country, a beauty which became a living part of both Jim and Antonia, is brought out in such passages as Jim's remembrance of spring:

"When spring came, after that hard winter, one could not get enough of the nimble air. - - - There were none of the signs of spring for which I used to watch in Virginia, no budding woods or blooming gardens. There was only spring itself; the throb of it, the light restlessness, the vital essence of it everywhere; in the sky, in the swift clouds, in the pale sunshine, and in the warm, high wind. - - - If I had been tossed down blindfolded on that red prairie, I should have known that it was spring."<sup>9</sup>

The tenderness and love which the country engendered in its people are illustrated in the description of Mr. Shimerdas' grave:

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 137.



" - - - the grave with its tall red grass that was never mowed was like a little island; and at twilight under a new moon or the clear evening star, the dusty roads used to look like soft grey rivers flowing past it. I never came upon the place without emotion, and in all that country it was the spot most dear to me. - - - I loved the spirit that could not carry out the sentence--the error from the surveyed lines, the clemency of the soft earth roads along which the home-coming wagons rattled after sunset. Never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, I am sure, without wishing well to the sleeper."<sup>10</sup>

Opposed to the tolerance, freedom, and generosity of the country was the attitude of the people of the town toward the girls of foreign birth who came into town to work. As Jim said, it made no difference that Lana Lingard's grand-father was a much respected clergyman in Norway, or that Antonia's father had had more cultivation and personal distinction than the men of the town. None of these things mattered--"all foreigners were ignorant people who couldn't speak English."<sup>11</sup> It was natural that Antonia, with the largeness that the land gives to those who love it, should have been unashamed of her fatherless child--determined to give her a better life than she, herself, had had--but determined, too, that that life should be a part of the land.

As one looks back on the novel, one is always conscious of the land and what it does to the spirit of men. To say that this novel is merely a chronicle without the clearness of outline is to misread the book. The form here

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

is far more subtle than the conventional form of Alexander's Bridge, but it nevertheless is form. As Elizabeth Drew, a modern critic of the novel, says:

"To the eyes of the modern, it appears as if, in the present day, the bulk of civilized mankind has become increasingly self-conscious and critical towards its general and human environment, and that the main problem of communication has been to adapt the instrument of language to this enlarged and sharpened vision. The history of the serious novel during the last fifty years is the history of more and more subtle means of presenting the intricacies of human relationship, of accenting the element of the unseen and the unexpressed in the affairs of life."<sup>12</sup>

The introduction which has been criticized as superfluous, serves to show the strength of the attachment to the land which lasted in Jim Burden all the years he was away from it. The real action, which only illustrates that strength, the appeal of the land, began with the meeting of the two children, whose attachment to the land was always so deep.

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Drew, The Modern Novel, p. 246.

The Professor's House is believed by some critics to be Miss Cather's most subtle book, but again criticism is directed against the form of the novel in that she dared to pause and insert Tom Outland's story. Even a favorable critic has said that to interrupt Dr. St. Peter's story for almost eighty pages, to inject the story of Tom's account of his explorations, was a daring literary experiment.<sup>13</sup> Even this favorable criticism fails to see that Tom Outland dominates the story, although he had died before the story begins. It was the Tom Outland in the Professor, who, too, was an adventurer, an explorer of the past, that makes the incident not an interruption but an integral part of the novel.

The Professor's House is rich in meaning and achieves a single mood of grave and restrained melancholy. Miss Cather strikes at what may be called a problem of modern life. Dr. St. Peter is successful but finds himself out of harmony with life. In the first pages of the novel, the new house to which the St. Peter family is moving, is symbolical of more than a turning point in St. Peter's life; it marks the passing of an era. The old house to which he stubbornly clings, stands for the values he has

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Wagenknecht, "Willa Cather," The Sewanee Review XXXVII (April, 1929) 221-239.

always been guided by; the new house, with all its material comforts, points up the ever-widening gap between him and his wife. Money and success are the new social criteria; education has turned from the classics and the life of the mind to modern short cuts and to material advancement.

Here one sees how integral a part of the whole scheme is the story of Tom Outland. Mrs. St. Peter spoke more truly than she knew when, after Outland's first appearance in their home, she said to her husband, "Well, this is something new in students, Godfrey. We ask a poor perspiring tramp boy to lunch, to save his pennies, and he departs leaving princely gifts."<sup>14</sup> In Tom Outland, the Professor saw all his own values, his own ideals. As St. Peter loved France and his life as a young man there, so did Tom have the same love for his mesa. Tom's reverence for the cliff dwellings, his horror and shock when he returned to find all the remains of these ancient peoples sold, even the impulsive action which led to his death--these were the values which the Professor lived by, and which he felt were fast slipping away, values which the modern materialistic world no longer wanted.

The marked difference between the two sets of values, symbolized by the two houses in the story, is emphasized by the fortune left to Rosamund St. Peter by Tom Outland, to whom she had been engaged. Rosamund, now Mrs. Louie Marsellus, has none of the ideals of her father. As the

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<sup>14</sup> The Professor's House, p. 121.

story progresses, one can see the dominating of the real values by the material ones. In this book, also, is a strong sense of form; the two sets of values stand out against each other like two strong towers. The two houses, the old one with its memories and its French garden, embodying all the real values, the new one with its expensive surface beauty, symbolize the values which St. Peter's world has cast aside and the crasser ones which have taken their place.

It is not too much to suspect that Willa Cather was aware of what her critics would miss in this book. Dr. St. Peter had found that in his Spanish Adventurers, in which he had been wholly and happily absorbed for many years, he had awakened little interest in the world. And when Miss Cather says, "Nobody saw that he was trying to do something quite different--they merely thought he was trying to do the usual thing and had not succeeded very well"<sup>15</sup>--it is not too much to suspect that she was thinking of the misinterpretation of her own forms.

This is an exact statement of Miss Cather's position. She had not lost her old sense of form, but in attempting "something quite different" to reveal her own sense of life, she developed new forms, which as she suspected were misunderstood when not totally ignored. The Professor's House is not a failure in form. On the contrary, it is a revelation of the mastery of a far more subtle form than most of her critics are aware of.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

There are, in modern literature, few more complete studies of the spiritual life than the study found in Death Comes for the Archbishop. This novel is done in the style of an epic, and the incidents are designed with care and economy so that the priests may live their own stories. The contrasts are many and subtle. The prologue introduces three Cardinals and a Missionary Bishop from America, who are met to found an Apostolic Vicarate in New Mexico. As they sit together, surrounded by the beauty and color of the Roman countryside, sipping the rare wine served by their host, Maria de Allande asks what the new Vicar Apostolic will eat and drink in this wild new country.

"He will eat dried buffalo meat and frijoles with chili, and he will be glad to drink water when he can get it. - - - That country will drink up his youth and strength as it does the rain."<sup>16</sup>

"The Cardinal led his guests up the narrow stairway. The long graveled terrace and its balustrade were blue as a lake in the dusky air. Both sun and shadows were gone. The folds of russet country were now violet. Waves of rose and gold throbbed up the sky from behind the dome of the Basilica."<sup>17</sup>

Thus the fate of Jean Marie Latour is decided, but in his mind was another landscape " - - - heaped up into monotonous red sand-hills - - - exactly the shape of

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<sup>16</sup> Death Comes for the Archbishop, pp. 10,11.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 14, 15.

Mexican ovens, red as brick dust, and naked of vegetation except for small juniper trees."<sup>18</sup>

No scene could have more sharply emphasized the difference between the highly civilized, highly ordered life of the church in the old world and the epic struggle that Father Latour faced in the new. No scene could have given a sharper sense of a beginning.

The story of Father Latour, the new Vicar Apostolic, and his friend, Father Joseph Vaillant, unfolds simply as these two men of God live it. Miss Cather's intention seems to be to present them and let them live their stories rather than to describe or analyze them, or to comment on their actions. (In her method of characterization and of conducting the narrative, she withdraws completely from the story, yet her attitude is not aloof because the story is loved by a deep sympathy for people whose only capacity is to love or serve.

The epic plot does not demand a continuous narrative. It admits of episodes; in fact, it consists of episodes. Although Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, prefers the dramatic plot, he emphasizes the fact that the epic, though it has less obvious unity, may have perfection of form. When the narrative is an imitation of a single action, no matter how long, where each episode has a certain magnitude of its own, the epic structure may have its own perfection.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *The Poetics*, Section 26, Translated by S. H. Butcher.

Here the single action is the heroic struggle of the priests against tremendous odds. It is true that this struggle is longer than the usual action of an epic, but one must remember that the novel admits much slower movement and more detail than does an epic poem.

Father Latour and Father Vaillant are in New Mexico for one purpose, to spread the truth of the Church. To this purpose, other events are more or less subordinate. Potentially dramatic scenes are not filled out, but are only touched upon and passed over. Yet the short tales are positive and dramatic. While the main and unifying action is the struggle for the church, this unity is deepened by the mood arising from the land. In each book, the first part is given over to developing a basic mood. ✓ This desert country becomes a third character, greater than either of the two men, yet subservient to them, since they interpret and appreciate it. Plot in a novel like this could not be dramatic, but the episodes, all of them illustrating and furthering the main action, create a design as clear as any dramatic plot, though obviously different. A few of these episodes will illustrate their place in the epic structure.

Father Latour and his Vicar, riding through the rainy<sup>st</sup> night toward Mora, were forced to seek shelter at a wretched adobe house. To their surprise, an American came to meet them. He seemed not more than half human, but the two priests had no choice. On entering the house, they found a half-wild Mexican woman. Obviously she had been brutally treated and was frightened almost out of her wits. As she



turned to leave the hut with her husband, she seemed to be warning the priests that they were in terrible danger. Father Latour, having no desire to tarry longer, went immediately to the stable and, with Father Joseph, took leave of their uncivil host. The next morning, they found that the Mexican woman, Magdalena, had followed them to Mora through the rain and the cold. After listening to her story of unspeakable brutality at the hands of this white man she had married, Father Latour had the women bathe her and dress her properly. The Bishop realized that girls like Magdalena were part of his responsibility in this wild new country. To take care of them he brought from Baltimore, five nuns who were willing to join him in his heroic task for the church. Santa Fe had, for the first time, a school for girls.

During his first year at Santa Fe, Father Latour had been able to spend so little time in his diocese that he felt that it was still an unimaginable mystery to him. Eagerly he set out in October with Jacinto, his young Indian guide, to visit with and know his people. Westward they traveled toward the isolated Indian missions of Santa Domingo, Isleta, Laguna, and Acoma. The old church of Acoma was at the very edge of the mesa, and the Bishop felt an overwhelming depression as he held service there.

"He felt as if he were celebrating Mass at the bottom of the sea, for antediluvian creatures; - - - those shell-like backs behind him might be saved by baptism and divine grace, as undeveloped infants are, but hardly through any experience of their own. When he

blessed them and sent away, it was with a sense of inadequacy and spiritual defeat."<sup>20</sup>

Here he heard the story of Fray Baltazar, who, in the early years of the <sup>17th</sup> eighteenth century, had been priest at Acoma. He had been cruel and tyrannical to his people, taking the best of their meat and vegetables for his table. He had forced them to bring dirt from the plain, up the straight steep side of the cliff, to his garden. The women had been forced to water that garden from their scanty water supply. One summer night, in the fifteenth year of his priesthood, he had given a dinner party for the Padres who were his neighbors. During the dinner party, Baltazar, furiously angry with his serving boy, had struck him down with a heavy pewter mug. His visitors, realizing what the death of the boy would mean, had fled, leaving him alone. With the rising of the moon, the Indians had come to exact their simple justice. No sacrilege of the church or defiling of holy vessels had followed the execution; they had only divided the Padre's stores and household goods. This episode is used definitely to show the forces even within the Church which were part of Father Latour's struggle. Other episodes of weakness and disloyalty within his own priesthood advanced the conflict.

Bishop Latour suffered from periods of doubt and confusion during which he seemed an alien to his surrounding. One night before Christmas, a sense of failure

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

weighed on him so heavily that he was unable to sleep. Memories of his beloved France haunted him as he got up and crossed the court to the church. In the deep doorway of the sacristy he found a huddled figure. It was Sada, the slave of an American Protestant family, forbidden the comfort of Mass and the visits of the priests. She had risked punishment to slip into the church. She was ragged and half-frozen, but "it seemed to him that he had never seen pure goodness shine out of a human countenance as it did from hers."<sup>21</sup> He afterward told Father Vaillant that he had never beheld such deep experience of the holy joy of religion. "He was able to feel, kneeling beside her, the preciousness of the things of the altar to her who was without possessions."<sup>22</sup> This episode measures up to Aristotle's demand. It has its own magnitude--a magnitude so greatly marked that the episode has been printed separately for Christmas editions.

Throughout his life in New Mexico, Father Latour had an overwhelming ambition to build a cathedral in Santa Fe, worthy of a naturally beautiful setting. This church came to stand for a continuation of his lifelong purpose and devotion, after he had departed from the scene. The dream became a reality, and Father Latour, one evening at sunset, looked upon his Cathedral.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

"The steep cornelian hills drew up so close behind the church - - - the tawny church seemed to start directly out of those rose-colored hills."<sup>23</sup>

He had waited for sunset, for it was at sunset, from that same hill, many years ago, that the young Bishop had first looked at Santa Fe. The cathedral was a visible and tangible landmark in his struggle for victory.

During the years of devotion and sacrifice, Father Latour had kept his dream of his native France in his heart. The memory of the beautiful surroundings, the society of learned men, and the beauty of a gracious mode of life were with him always. After the death of Father Vaillant, Father Latour returned to France. He expected to spend his last years there, but he found the Old World too small. Once there he yearned for the new world. He loved his native village but

"he sometimes closed his eyes and thought of the high song the wind was singing in the straight pine trees in the Navajo forests. - - - In New Mexico he always awoke a young man. - - - His first consciousness was a sense of the light dry wind blowing in through the windows. - - - The air would disappear from the whole earth in time perhaps; but long after his day. He did not know when it had become so necessary to him, but he had come back to die in exile for the sake of it."<sup>24</sup>

The Bishop had come to New Mexico to spread the truth of the church. Now he was dying, and the Cathedral was full of people praying for him.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 308, 309.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 312, 313.

"When the Cathedral bell tolled just after dark, the Mexican population of Santa Fe fell upon their knees - - - . Many others who did not kneel, prayed in their hearts. - - - the next morning the old Archbishop lay before the high altar in the church he had built."<sup>25</sup>

Death had come for the Archbishop, bringing with it no fear nor distress. He had accomplished that which he had set out from Rome many years ago to do.

To say that Miss Cather has abandoned plot in this novel is surely to ignore completely what she was attempting. From the sharp sense of a beginning in the contrasting scenes between the old world and the new, to the deeply satisfying conclusion, the narrative is a single action. The unity of this action, the heroic struggle of the priests, is deepened and intensified by the mood arising from the land. The episodes, each one, further and illustrate this single action. Potentially dramatic as each is, the episodes, as a whole, contribute to the main action. The sense of form in this novel is as strong and clear as the towers of Father Latour's Cathedral.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 303.

### Conclusion

I have chosen these four novels from all that Willa Cather has written for two reasons. First, these four, or at least three of them, have borne the brunt of most of the criticism against Miss Cather's sense of form. Second, the factors in these novels which can prove that Miss Cather had not lost her sense of form are also present in other of her novels. Here in the body of her work against which the severest criticism has been aimed, one can see a sense of form, which, once one understands it, is as clear-cut and as justifiable as the older, more obvious forms. Like the modern architect, faced with more complex forms of modern living, Miss Cather has evolved her forms to give shape to her own angle of vision. As in the case of modern architecture, one may or may not like it, but it is form.

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