WILLA CATHER'S PREOCCUPATION WITH FOREIGN CULTURE IN AMERICA

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Weatherford, Oklahoma

1929

Submitted to the Department of English

Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

1940

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Acknowledgment

I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Hans H. Andersen and to Professor George H. White for their very helpful suggestions and valuable advice. My very special gratitude is due to Dr. G. W. Cobb for his kind and wise assistance throughout the writing of this thesis.

A. L. S.

Contents

I. Biographical Background

From some of her very earliest novels down to her last published one, Willa Cather has evinced a decided interest in foreign people and the culture they have brought to America. The purpose of this thesis will be to determine the extent and significance of her preoccupation with foreign culture.

It is not necessary to look very far into Miss Cather's life story to discover the source of her interest in foreign people and the reason for her desire to depict their racial characteristics. When she was just eight years of age, she moved with her parents from the farm near Winchester, Virginia, where she was born, to a ranch near Red Cloud, Nebraska. This act of transplanting a sensitive and thoughtful child and setting her down in the vast, formative prairie country had a great influence in determining the subject matter that should dominate her writings. Such an imaginative child as she was could never be bored in a community like that near Red Cloud, where, as she said, the life of every family was like that of the Swiss Family Robinson. The eternal struggle of the pioneers was adventure and excitement to her.[1]

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[1]Anonymous, "A Biographical Sketch," Knopf Pamphlet, p. 2.

The population near Red Cloud was largely composed of Danes, Norwegians, Bohemians, Germans, and a few Russians. A little farther north was the prosperous French-Canadian colony of St. Anne. Willa Cather spent hours riding on her pony about the country and getting acquainted with this strange mixture of people. She listened attentively to their conversations and was fascinated by their personalities.[2]

In this way she picked up the first, and to her the most valuable, material for her writing. She says that the first two years on the ranch were probably more important to her as a writer than any that came afterward.

> Every story I have written since then has been the recollection of some childhood experience, of something that touched me as a youngster. You must know a subject as a child . . . to instill into it, in a story, the true feeling.[3]

In another place she reiterates:

> I think that most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen. That's the important period.[4]

During this "important period," these "more formative years," foreign neighbors interested her far more than the Americans. To her they were "like the daubs of color on a painter's palette." She used to think them underrated and

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[2]Latrobe Carroll, "Willa Sibert Cather," The Bookman, LIII (May, 1921), 212.

[3]Grant Overton, The Women Who Make Our Novels, p. 261.

[4]L. Carroll, op. cit., p. 214.

wanted to explain them to their neighbors. Their stories used to go round and round in her head at night. "With me," she says, "this was the initial impulse."[5]

Her first efforts in fiction were reflections of this influence. When she had completed her high school work in Red Cloud, she went to the University of Nebraska, where she took her degree in 1895.[6] While she was there some of the compositions she wrote were "perfectly honest but very clumsy attempts to give the story of some of the Scandinavian and Bohemian settlers."[7]

For a number of years following her graduation she wrote very little. During this period she worked on a newspaper, taught school, served on the staff of McClure's Magazine, and traveled extensively in Europe and in the West. Much of this time she was consciously acquiring experience for her writing.

Eighteen years after her graduation, she published O Pioneers (1913), her first really distinguished and original novel.[8] This story is definitely based upon her

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[5] Ibid., p. 212.

[6] René Rapin, Willa Cather, p. 11, also note 8 on Chap. II, p. 105.

[7] Willa Cather, quoted by Carroll, op. cit., p. 214. Though her efforts at this time were clumsy, as she said, she was beginning to hunger for perfection. She continues, "I began to admire, for the first time, writing for writing's sake. In those days no one seemed so wonderful as Henry James; for me he was the perfect writer."

[8] Rapin, op. cit., p. 12; also Henry Seidel Canby, "Willa Sibert Cather," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 14th edition, V, 36.

knowledge of foreign-born Americans. It deals with the Nebraska landscape that she knew so well, and is peopled by Swedes, Norwegians, French, and Bohemians. This novel was followed by The Song of the Lark (1915) and by another immigrant novel, My Antonia (1918). In the former the heroine herself was not an immigrant, but was born of Swedish parents and was characteristically Swedish herself. My Antonia was peopled by Bohemians, Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, Russians, and Poles. The Song of the Lark added Germans, Hungarians, Mexicans, and Indians to the list of foreign peoples which Miss Cather chose to treat with sympathy and complete understanding.

These early novels were not the only ones that Miss Cather peopled with immigrants or with the children of immigrant parents. In short stories as well as her novels she has continued to devote her attention, wholly or in part, to the history, cultural traits, and accomplishments of persons of foreign extraction. In Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927), the two principal characters are foreign missionaries, natives of France; in Shadows on the Rock (1931) the content is devoted to the experiences of French colonists in Quebec; and in Obscure Destinies (1932) the story of Neighbor Rosicky is the sympathetic portrayal of a Bohemian immigrant farmer.

Even when the protagonist of her novel is not himself a foreigner, as in One of Ours (1922), the influence of foreign characters upon the hero is very noticeable. Claude

Wheeler in this novel learned from foreign friends how to look on life and how to live.[9] And in Miss Cather's latest novel, Lucy Gayheart (1935), the heroine, though typically American, is the daughter of a German musician, and many of her most sympathetic friends are foreigners.

Willa Cather has been classed as one of the novelists of revolt--a crusader against dullness, vulgarity, and standardization.[10] She voices in her works a decided dissatisfaction with American restraint and the rigid observance of conventions and proprieties. She regrets the evident lack of tolerance for other people and the woeful absence of appreciation for the artistic and cultural contribution that other races have brought with them to America.

> Unfortunately their American neighbors were seldom open-minded enough to understand the Europeans or to profit from their traditions.[11]

She herself has always felt that the foreigners have a colorful and fruitful gift to offer to America. Her evident purpose has been to present them in such a light that they will no longer be so "underrated" as she has felt them to be in the past. She feels that

they brought with them something that this

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[9]One of Ours, pp. 40-43; also Stuart P. Sherman, Critical Woodcuts, pp. 44-45.

[10]Carl Van Doren, Contemporary American Novelists, p. 116.

[11]Cather, "Nebraska: The End of a Cycle," The Nation, CXVII (September 5, 1923), 237.

> neutral new world needed more than the immigrants needed land.[12]

She wants to make sure we do not reject any contribution these people have to offer. Over and over again she has shown how the immigrants "have utilized what we 'Anglo-Saxons' have suppressed and rejected."[13] In her Nebraska essay she tells of the pleasant little theatre near Wilbur, Nebraska, where the boys and girls were trained to give the masterpieces of Czech drama in the Czech language, and she declares:

> 'Americanization' has doubtless done away with all this. Our lawmakers have a rooted conviction that a boy can be a better American if he speaks only one language than if he speaks two.[14]

Miss Cather's method in her novels is chiefly objective. That is, her works are concerned with objects or subjects outside herself. Her own ideas and feelings in the matter do not color her material to any noticeable extent. This is more especially true in the novels written since 1918.[15]

She has a theory concerning her art wherein she states that the novelist must find and select in the actual stream of what happens in this life about us, that which is really material for art, and then that material must be presented

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[12] Loc. cit.

[13] Sherman, op. cit., p. 45.

[14] "Nebraska Essay," The Nation, CXVII (September 5, 1923), 237.

[15] Russell Blankenship, American Literature, p. 675.

as if unconsciously by the reserved, fastidious hand of an artist. She says:

> Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there--that, it seems to me, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed that gives high quality to the novel or the drama. . . .[16]

She follows this theory of art so consistently in her novels, that when we feel that we have discovered a certain attitude of hers, such as her respect for Catholicism, for example, her appreciation of great art, or her preoccupation with foreign culture, we have to expect to find proof for our contentions in very indirect statements of hers, perhaps expressed only through the voices of her more admirable or more deep-sighted characters. Elizabeth A. Drew states:

> A careful artist never formulates his philosophy or social criticism too directly. He makes it implicit in dialogue and incident.[17]

Dialogue and incident, for the most part, supply the evidence I shall offer to show that Miss Cather had a very definite and decided belief--<u>the belief that the foreign contribution to our American culture or civilization is a matter that deserves our thoughtful attention and our appreciative interest</u>.

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[16]Willa Cather, "The Novel Demeuble" in <u>Modern Essays, Second Series</u>, p. 292.

[17]Elizabeth A. Drew, <u>The Modern Novel</u>, p. 146.

If a direct statement of her feelings is needed, I find that she has expressed herself directly on the point, not in a novel, but in the essay already quoted, the one entitled "Nebraska: The End of a Cycle." There her sentiments are summed up in the hope that in the Middle West we may see "the hard molds of provincialism broken up," and that from the fusion of these pioneer immigrants into our population may come "sturdy traits of character," "elasticity of mind," "an honest attitude toward the realities of life," and "certain qualities of feeling and imagination."

In the following chapters of this treatment, I shall show with what groups of foreigners Miss Cather was more preoccupied and with what qualities, traits, or attributes she felt each racial group was best endowed. The particular races with which I shall have to deal are the Slavs (mainly Bohemians), Scandinavians, Germans, French, and Spanish-Mexicans. These are not the only foreign people in whom Miss Cather has shown an interest, for one sees frequent mention in her stories of Italians, Hungarians, and Jews. Her interest in Indian culture has also colored several of her novels. But I have chosen to discuss only those five races which appear most prominently.

It will be necessary at this point to limit the meaning of two rather broad terms in my subject--the words 'foreign' and 'culture.'

It is really in its broader meaning of complete social heritage, rather than in its more restricted meaning, that

the word 'culture' shall apply here. People often think of culture as a more specific term applying to the refinements of an advanced civilization, refinements such as art, music, sculpture, and literature. These, of course, together with the language, are an integral part of the social heritage of any civilized race. But in addition to these, there is a certain amount of scientific knowledge, achievement, skills, artifacts, and all that accumulated fund of resources upon which a civilization is built.[18]

When I speak, therefore, of 'culture' in this treatment of Miss Cather's work, I have in mind this broader meaning of the term and not mere refinement or sophistication. In the term 'foreign culture' I have reference to the rich and varied fund of knowledge and tradition, the social heritage which our later immigrants have brought with them to America.

The term 'foreign people' or 'foreigners,' used rather freely in these pages, is Miss Cather's own designation for those people whom she wishes to distinguish from the more typically American citizens, who are usually descended from the earlier colonists. These latter she often designates as 'Americans,' 'Anglo-Saxons,' or 'native stock.'[19] Her distinction is very similar to that of the U. S. Census

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[18]Bronislaw Malinowski, "Culture," Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, IV, 621.

[19]Cather, "Nebraska: The End of a Cycle," The Nation, CXVII (September 5, 1923), 236-238.

Bureau, which includes under the classification 'foreign stock' both foreign-born inhabitants and native inhabitants who have one or both parents foreign-born.[20]

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[20]Henry Morgenthau, Jr., "United States of America--Racial Composition," Encyclopaedia Britannica, 14th edition, XXII, 734.

II. Slavic Peoples--The Bohemians

The Slavic race, though not so widely known, perhaps, as other foreign elements, has not failed to make its contribution to American culture. Especially since 1880, large numbers of these people have helped to increase the immigrant population of this nation.[1] Among the Slavic people whose characteristics Miss Cather has discussed in her novels are the Bohemians, the Russians, and the Poles.

In any discussion of Miss Cather's interest in the Slavs, one's attention has to be turned almost entirely to the Bohemians, for she has made them more prominent in her fiction than she has any other Slavic peoples. In her novels and short stories there is just a mention now and then of some Polish singer, musician, or dancer, or a brief treatment of some Russian immigrant to show she was aware of these other Slavonic groups. Perhaps the reason for this apparent neglect is that Miss Cather had fewer contacts with other Slavs when she was young and was living close to the Bohemians. Or perhaps the ones she met were less communicative. She does have Jim Burden say of the two Russian characters who appear in My Antonia that "of

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[1]Henry Morgenthau, Jr., "United States of America--Racial Composition," Encyclopaedia Britannica, XXII, 734-735.

all the strange, uprooted people among the first settlers, those two men were the strangest and most aloof."[2]

Supposing she has taken these two from life, as she did Antonia,[3] we might judge that young Willa Cather, like Jim, found these particular neighbors less approachable than the others. Even as their surnames were unpronounceable, perhaps their very language and customs were more alien and less assimilable. These two, Peter and Pavel, went about making signs to people and did not try to learn the American language, as Antonia at once set about to do. The Shimerdas could understand them a little and were the first with whom they were friends. They came from a part of Russia (the Ukraine) where the language wasn't very different from Bohemian. The story of Russian Peter and Pavel leaves a very deep impression upon the reader. It is a tragic story, stark and bitter as the dark, cold winter on the Russian steppes where it began. But as for evidence of any racial contribution given us by the Russians, we would look through Miss Cather's stories in vain.

But she was able to study the Bohemians closely and in large numbers. She tells us that near where she lived in

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[2] Op. cit., p. 37.

[3] "She was a Bohemian girl, who was good to me when I was a child. I saw a great deal of her from the time I was eight until I was twelve. She was big-hearted and essentially romantic." Quoted from Willa Cather by Latrobe Carroll in The Bookman, LIII (May, 1921), 215.

Nebraska there was a whole township settled by them.[4] Many of these Czech immigrants were people of a superior type. There were brilliantly intellectual young men among them, and artistic young people trained in the drama, in music, and in dancing. Skilled artisans had brought their crafts from the European homeland. Cather stoutly declares:

> I could name a dozen Bohemian towns where one used to be able to go into a bakery and buy better pastry than is to be had anywhere except in the best pastry shops of Prague or Vienna. The American lard pie never corrupted the Czech.[5]

Influenced by an early liking and admiration for these people, she has used individuals of this race as major characters in her two outstanding novels, O Pioneers (1913) and My Antonia (1918). In short stories, too, they have served her as protagonists from as early a story as The Bohemian Girl (1912) to such a late story as Neighbor Rosicky (1932). Her interest in the Bohemians has certainly not been a transient one, and she has always written about them with a particular sympathy.

The Czechs are, as a whole, a sturdy agricultural people. Their spoken language is considered very musical and has a wide variety of sounds. Like the other Slavic races they are naturally artistic and lovers of music and poetry. The percentage of illiteracy in their country is

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[4]Cather, "Nebraska: The End of a Cycle," The Nation, CXVII (September 5, 1923), 237.

[5]Ibid., loc. cit.

very low and they have given the world some very talented individuals.[6]

Miss Cather's Bohemian characters strongly manifest intelligence, sturdiness of character, musical ability, and other talents. But they also evidence a certain geniality that belongs to them more than to any other class of foreigners with which Miss Cather has dealt. There is a happy blend of almost all these qualities in each of her major Bohemians. But in some of them one of these qualities may be more striking than in others.

An intelligent outlook on life that makes one accept its problems and make the most of them is one quality that Miss Cather has admired in other races as well. This quality she noticeably emphasizes in many of her Bohemians. Albert Tovesky, the father of Marie Shabata, was "one of the more intelligent Bohemians who came west in the early seventies. He settled in Omaha and became a leader and adviser among his people there."[7] He was wise enough to see that Marie would do a very foolish thing if she married anyone as arrogant and immature as Frank Shabata.

Another of Cather's more intelligent Bohemians was Ernest Havel in <u>One of Ours</u>. Some of the American neighbors sneered at Ernest because he was foreign. They did not take

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[6]Peregrin K. Fisa and J. F. M'Keon, "Czechoslovakia--The People," <u>The World Book Encyclopaedia</u>, II, 1800-1801.

[7]<u>O Pioneers!</u>, p. 143.

the trouble to understand him. But Ernest was one who could look at life with steady common sense. He was not troubled with the vague unrest and useless worries that made Claude Wheeler's life miserable. Ernest planned his life in a sensible way and looked at his problems in a calm, reasonable manner. Claude Wheeler, in his impatience, at times thought Ernest's outlook too reasonable. For Claude was the type of young American who was impatient of restraint. He was always looking for something big--"something outside himself to warm him up." Miss Cather shows that Ernest's reasonableness was not caused by peasant stolidness, but by quiet serenity and faith. "We foreigners," Ernest said, "have learned to make the most of little things."[8] The naturalness and forthrightness of Ernest's statement reflects an outlook fostered by generations of Europeans who have had to subsist on very little. Because the lower-class Europeans have had no great prospect of material prosperity, they have had to make the most of simple, natural pleasures. Frequently in her stories Miss Cather tells how the Bohemians, and the French and Germans as well, find their pleasure in nature, or in the rare flavor of old wine, or in the savour of a well-cooked dish. For example, Antonia's family, the Cuzaks, had brought some dried mushrooms with them from Bohemia, and with these they made many a savory rabbit stew when there was little else

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[8]*One of Ours*, p. 53.

they could find to eat. Food was one of "the little things" of which they had "learned to make the most." That statement Ernest made exhibits practical common sense mixed with a certain sensitivity of perception. Such an intelligent and sensitive outlook makes the Bohemians an asset in the communities where they have settled.

Neighbor Rosicky was another wise and reasonable Bohemian. Tough and bitter circumstances did not baffle him. He looked into the future and studied how he could make things better for his loved ones.

Of course not all of Miss Cather's Bohemians exhibit this characteristic of reasonable and wise intelligence. For example, Marie Shabata in O Pioneers and Antonia were often influenced far more by emotion than by reason. Marie unwisely married Frank Shabata, and Antonia placed a mistaken trust in Larry Donovan.

For the Bohemians were not staid and serious only; they furnish the best example, perhaps, of those "daubs of color" with which Miss Cather says the foreigners have brightened the drabness of the western prairies. With their gay music, charming dances, and genial good manners they have lent color and charm to this "neutral new world."[9] The Rosicky family strikingly illustrates the wholesome, genial attitude of people whose lives are ruled by more

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[9]Cather, "Nebraska: The End of a Cycle," The Nation, CXVII (September 5, 1923), 237-238.

genuine emotions than bigotry or selfishness. The striking thing about the Rosickys was their warm-hearted joy in living and their unselfish desire that others might share in that warmth.

At the age of 65 Neighbor Rosicky, the genial old Bohemian farmer, was not at all old-looking, nor did he appear sickly, even though his doctor was finding it necessary to warn him to be very, very careful because of his bad heart. His eyes were large and lively and his smooth-shaven cheeks ruddy in color. His lips, too, had a good color under his long, brown moustache. His brown face which was creased, but not wrinkled, wore an expression of contentment, evincing a nature that was reflective and gay, rather than grave.

There were fine, handsome boys in Rosicky's family, too, all with what Dr. Burleigh called naturally good manners. They "hadn't a bit of the painful self-consciousness he himself had had to struggle with when he was a lad."[10] Their mother was a comfortable, warm-hearted creature. On one occasion the doctor had driven eight miles in his buggy after leaving a case, in order to reach the Rosickys' for breakfast. "He didn't know another farmhouse where a man could get such a warm welcome, and such good strong coffee with rich cream."[11] The Bohemians were

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[10] Obscure Destinies, p. 11.

[11] Loc. cit.

very fond of good coffee, and Mary's was always of the best.

This genial, warm-hearted attitude toward life and people was not confined to the Rosickys either. Marie Shabata is a marked example. Impulsive, gay, and very much alive, she wanted everyone to be happy as she was. She grieved over the fact that she and Emil had thoughtlessly snatched the wild ducks from their happy existence.[12] What she had she shared unselfishly with others. She showed Alexandra how to put rosemary leaves in the clothes chest for fragrance. She cooked the things she knew old Mrs. Lee would like and had her over for dinner. In the middle of the cold northern winter she had potted plants in bloom when no one else could. She took all sorts of trouble to keep them from freezing. Sensitive, too, and easily excited, she seemed "to kindle with a fierce little flame if one but breathed upon her."[13] She was incapable of being lukewarm about anything that pleased her. She always ran when she tried to walk, and when she talked her eyes sparkled and danced. At the dances the French people gave in the neighboring settlement, she was very much in demand. If she presided over a booth at the fair, it was sure to be a popular place.

Not only did the Bohemians in Miss Cather's novels reflect a high degree of intelligence and a certain warmth

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[12] O Pioneers, p. 128.

[13] Ibid., p. 136.

and color, but with these and other more sensitive qualities was blended a decided sturdiness of character. As a representative of this quality we have Antonia Shimerda in My Antonia (1918).[14] In devoting a complete novel to this character, Miss Cather was able to give a more thorough delineation of all the qualities that made up this striking peasant girl. Like other characters of her race already discussed, she had the sensitive fineness, quiet serenity, calm and reasonable faith and intelligence, and the warm-heartedness that were typical in the more admirable Bohemian settlers that Miss Cather has portrayed. Physical sturdiness and the gay courage that goes with it stand out even more prominently, however, in all that she says and does.

Miss Cather uses the words "stalwart," "fine," "well set-up," "determined," "ambitious" to describe the group of peasant girls among whom Antonia stood out, as Jim Burden thought, "the fairest of them all." She was strong and hearty, a good cook and housekeeper, and could dance and play with the best of them. Antonia was at her prettiest during the time she spent in town, learning so much and "having her fling" socially, as she said. She was already a picture of gentle heroism. She had gone through experiences that would have daunted a character less sturdy, and before her "fling" was over she was to pass through further

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[14]This novel Cather once stated was "the most successfully done" of all she had written. "Carroll Interview," The Bookman, LIII (May, 1921), 216.

acid tests. But her inheritance of a wholesome, hearty, clear-eyed courage carried her past all adversity.

Her father, whom she loved and admired with a passion, was a musician and a dreamer. His mediocre, but ambitious wife, had insisted on coming to America where she thought they could get ahead. Here her son Ambrosch could "be rich, with many cattle." The privations of pioneer life that first winter on the prairie were too much for Mr. Shimerda, however. Rather than face the unequal struggle against adverse circumstances, he took his own life shortly after Christmas. The loss of her revered father was the first test of Antonia's courage and endurance. She met this test, however, and the others that followed with a hardiness that she evidently had inherited, but that her father had not. She shouldered her share of the burden of making a living from the farm. Strong and independent, she managed to keep pace in the fields with her ox-like brother, Ambrosch. She would have liked to go to school and become educated like her father. She had always been so proud of his book-learning, his skill in weaving, and his talent in music. "He play horn and violin," she would boast, "and he read so many books that the priests in Bohemia come to talk to him."[15] But Antonia thrust aside her longing for these things. Her responsibility to her family must come first. Other Shimerdas had to be fed and

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[15] My Antonia, p. 142.

clothed whether Antonia's latent talents lived or died.

For talent she did have. She learned very quickly and seemed to have a natural aptitude for all sorts of skills. The American language she learned to speak unbelievably fast. In Black Hawk she picked up all the household lore Mrs. Harling could teach her. She learned the dance steps quickly, too, and soon became the smoothest dancer and most graceful figure on the floor. When she began to sew for herself, she seemed to have a positive genius for imitating the styles of the most fashionable ladies in town. Though she never had a chance for any musical training, she enjoyed good music and carefully preserved her father's violin. Later her own children taught themselves and learned to play on it.

At twenty-four, after she had gallantly faced down the second great disaster of her life, there was a new kind of strength apparent in the gravity of her face. In spite of sorrow and disappointment in one she had loved and trusted, her expression was still one of deep-seated health and ardor. And at forty-four, when Jim Burden saw her next, this inner glow had not faded. In spite of the fact that she had borne ten children and had had a hard struggle to establish a homestead, she was still staunch and vital. "All the strong things in her heart came out in her body that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions."[16]

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[16]My Antonia, p. 398.

If Miss Cather meant, as she said, to paint a vignette of life, a sort of folk song, she has succeeded in doing so in My Antonia with its varied background of Bohemians and Scandinavians. And if she wanted to leave an unforgettable portrait of the Bohemian girl whom she remembered from her childhood, she has done that, too. Overton says, " It is a biographical triumph. Reminiscence here surpasses fiction."[17] Antonia is a figure that will live as Millet's peasant girl does in the picture from which Miss Cather took the title for another of her stories. She is example enough, if we had no other, to portray the inherent strength and beauty of the Bohemian people that attracted Miss Cather's attention and held her interest over such a wide period of time. In Antonia we find the happy combination of those striking attributes which we have said Miss Cather most evidently set forth in her Bohemians. Intelligence, talent, genial warmth, and color were hers. But above all she was endowed with sturdiness of character, with a peasant strength of body, mind, and spirit that made her stand out like "the founder of early races."

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[17]Grant Overton, op. cit., p. 265.

III. Scandinavians

Another racial group which has come to our country in large numbers since the mid-nineteenth century and settled largely in the north central section, including Nebraska and the Dakotas, is the Scandinavian group, including the Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes. Among the first foreign characters in whom Willa Cather became interested were the Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish neighbors near Red Cloud. Evidently she made very careful observations of their racial characteristics, especially the Swedes, for she has devoted herself in various cases to drawing minute pictures and personality sketches of Swedish characters in her novels. Notable among these are Thea Kronborg and her immediate family in The Song of the Lark, and Alexandra Bergson and her brothers in O Pioneers. She did not neglect the Norwegian people, either, though in no case has she made a Norwegian a leading character in her novels as she has Thea, Alexandra, and Bohemian Antonia. In My Antonia there are a number of charming girls from the Norwegian settlement near Black Hawk who figure quite prominently in the story as Antonia's friends. There were Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball, Anna Hansen, and the Harlings. And in O Pioneers, Norwegian Ivar is a striking character. Nowhere in Miss Cather's

works did I find a Danish character filling such a large role as any of the other Scandinavians I have named. In My Antonia, however, she describes the Danish family and home of Mr. Jensen and mentions several others.

Though Miss Cather does not devote so much attention to acquainting us with the Danish characters, she does make us see that they were attractive, kindly, and likeable people. The Jensens had their house behind the laundry, with a lovely big garden where the clothes were hung out to dry. The four Danish girls who worked in the laundry lived there with the laundryman and his wife as if they were at home. Mr. Jensen was a kind, wise old fellow who paid his girls well and looked out for their welfare in other ways besides. Contentment seemed to be the keynote of this little group. The girls were hard-working and happy, not so ambitious as some of the other immigrant girls, but simple, kind, and very neat and clean. When they went to the dances, their freshly ironed clothes always smelled of rosemary leaves.[1] Our picture of the Danes, therefore, though scanty, is of a type of people who make very satisfactory neighbors and citizens.

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[1]This use of rosemary leaves was mentioned in O Pioneers in connection with Marie Shabata, the Bohemian, and Alexandra. Miss Cather has been at pains in various instances to mention some similar token of refined tastes brought over from some "old country." In Shadows on the Rock it was the rose petals the French scattered between their linens. Too many times we Americans think of some such smell as garlic connected with all foreigners. Miss Cather manages to leave quite a different impression.

Miss Cather, as I have said, gives a somewhat fuller treatment of the Norwegians. These people are widely known for their honesty, industry, and kindliness. Sometimes, too, they exhibit great artistry in music. Scandinavians as a whole are a religious people, and Norway especially has the reputation of being a very Christian country.[2] Norwegian Ivar in O Pioneers, with his quiet, unobtrusive gentility, portrays almost all these qualities. Mostly, however, he is the best example Miss Cather has presented of the religious Norwegian. This simple character conscientiously practiced the religion he professed. He lived by himself in a dugout snugly placed in a clay bank on the prairie. There he read his Bible, cared for the sick or crippled livestock of the countryside, and welcomed to his pond the wild fowl that passed. The cleanliness of his person and the meticulous neatness of his home surroundings were another point in his favor. Though he lived almost completely isolated,

> He always put on a clean shirt when Sunday came around. . . . He disliked the litter of human dwellings; the broken food, the bits of broken china, the old wash-boilers and tea-kettles thrown into the sunflower patch. He preferred the cleanliness and tidiness of the wild sod.[3]

Quick as he was to resent any real or fancied injury to his feathered friends or to the four-footed beasts he

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[2]J. Viduls, "Norway--The People," The World Book Encyclopedia, VIII, 5081.

[3]O Pioneers!, p. 37.

championed, old Ivar could be kindness and gentleness itself in dealing with either injured animals or heart-broken people. When Alexandra was in great trouble, Ivar was her most understanding and helpful friend.

In My Antonia the Norwegian characters lengthily described were simple and kindly. Yet not all the Norwegian people in their settlement were fine or noble or lovable, by any means. Ole Benson was described as fat and lazy and discouraged. Bad luck had become a habit and he consoled himself for his deficiencies by sitting on the draw-side to help pretty Lena Lingard watch her cattle when he should have been plowing his own fields. Lena, too, though she was gifted as a seamstress and milliner and became quite successful in her business, was what Antonia termed 'soft' where masculine friends were concerned. Her warm, generous nature, coupled with rather careless attitudes, caused her to be talked about. All her life people compared Lena unfavorably with Antonia because her character was not so strong and true as was Antonia's.

Yet Lena had that kindliness and big heartedness which we have said was often typical of her people. She worked for her family and looked out for the interests of her friends. She and Tiny and Anna, like the other foreign hired girls who worked in Black Hawk, were sending home the money they earned to help the family pay off the debt on the land and to see that the younger children got a better education than the older ones could. For these girls were

not only honest and industrious, but were ambitious as well--ambitious for their families more than for themselves.

Right here Miss Cather takes an opportunity to score a point for the foreigners when she has Jim Burden comment:

> One result of this family solidarity was that the foreign farmers in our country were the first to become prosperous. . . . The girls who once worked in Black Hawk kitchens are to-day managing big farms and fine families of their own.[4]

The town girls who once looked down on the hired girls and considered all foreigners ignorant found themselves outclassed.

The Harlings, for whom Antonia worked in Black Hawk, were a Norwegian family who had already succeeded in their ambition. They had a good business, a stable position in the community, and a comfortable home where they could enjoy one another, entertain friends, and practice the music which was quite a popular diversion with them. There was usually someone at the piano. Julia, the second daughter, was known as the musical one, and she was the only one who was held down to regular practicing hours; but they all played. Even little Nina, who was only six, played the "Swedish Wedding March." The oldest girl, Frances, would come in from work at noon, sit down and play until dinner was ready. And Sally, afternoons after school, would sit down in her hat and coat and drum out her favorite plantation melodies. Mrs. Harling had studied under a good

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[4]My Antonia, p. 328.

teacher and somehow managed to practice every day. Her facile fingers moved quickly and easily, and she played with intelligent concentration. Often, on Saturday nights, she played the old operas for the children--"Martha," "Norma," "Rigoletto"--and told them the story while she played.[5] This household was filled with warmth and light and color, even in the long, dreary winter when most houses in Black Hawk were dark and cold and forbidding. The American boy, Jim Burden, was drawn there as by a magnet.

Really there were two strong magnets--Mrs. Harling and Antonia, both foreign-born women. Mrs. Harling had lived in Christiania until she was ten years old, while Antonia was twelve or thirteen when she came from Bohemia. Though they came from different countries and different racial strains, there was a "basic harmony between them."[6] They both had that dual nature that Miss Cather has found many times in her foreign characters--an artistic sense combined with a "hearty joviality and relish of life, not over delicate, but very invigorating."[7] Certainly there was in Mrs. Harling none of that weak, insipid quality that the American mind often associates with an artistic person. Short and square and sturdy-looking, like her house, every inch of her was charged with an energy that made itself felt the

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[5]My Antonia, p. 200, also p. 180.

[6]Ibid., p. 205.

[7]Loc. cit.

moment she entered a room. Jolly and enthusiastic about everything that happened, she routed lassitude and indifference wherever she came. One could not hope to find a character anywhere who would more satisfactorily represent the more cultured, yet democratic, Norwegians.

But the first mentioned division of the Scandinavian race, the Swedish strain, is the one to which Miss Cather has given even more of her attention. The Swedes are an enlightened and educated people, and with the other Scandinavians are among the world's progressive peoples. They are generally more vivacious and light-hearted than their western kinsmen, the Norwegians, but they have the same reputation for frankness, honesty, and industry.[8] Talented and artistic, too, this people has produced some very great musicians and opera singers. Women of Swedish extraction are protagonists in The Song of the Lark and O Pioneers. Miss Cather portrays in one the development of a great musical artist after a struggle against great odds, and in the other the successful outcome of a great effort to master and hold the land that she loved. Each in her way was a creative artist and each exhibited a tenacious will to do, backed by the calm, patient industry that it takes to make one's dreams come true. This last quality is so typically Swedish that we find it in practically every Swede Miss

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[8]Wollmar F. Bostrom, "Sweden--The People," The World Book Encyclopedia, XI, 6949.

Cather mentions. Sometimes the tenacious will or patient industry amounts to mere stubbornness or stolidness, but in Thea Kronborg and Alexandra Bergson this disposition is elevated by an artistic desire that changes all.

Thea, in spite of a slight Norwegian strain on her father's side, was "a little Swede through and through," with soft, fine hair and a silky skin that her friend, Dr. Archie, thought "must have come from her mother."[9] As a child she was very sensitive about being thought a foreigner. Eleven years old at the beginning of her story, she was gentle and sensitive, with an innate fineness unlike the rest of her family. There was defiance, fierceness, hardness about her, but withal an interior softness which her "delicate, tender chin--the one soft touch in her hard little Scandinavian face" gave away. The music in her the rest of the family had not inherited, but her father was proud of saying that her grandfather had played an oboe in the old country.

In Mrs. Kronborg, almost as much as in Thea, Miss Cather expresses her admiration of certain qualities of the Swedish character. Both had strength of will and the determination to follow the rightness of a thing or to achieve the heart's desire, however difficult the means. Mrs. Kronborg, Cather says, would have made a good chess player; she had a head for moves and positions. Her children were

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[9]The Song of the Lark, p. 10.

all trained for their duties and everything about the house was planned and organized.[10] She was

> a short, stalwart woman, with a short neck and determined-looking head. Her skin was very fair, her face calm and unwrinkled. . . . She was a woman whom Dr. Archie respected: active, practical, unruffled, good-humored, but determined.[11]

Though naturally kind, she was capable of strong prejudices and she never forgave. In her discipline she was stern, but judicious. She thought problems out and tried to deal fairly with her children, realizing that their temperaments were different and judging accordingly. So matter of fact and practical was she, indeed, that her husband believed, and our author expressed his thought as her own, that "the sovereign State of Colorado was much indebted to Mrs. Kronborg and women like her."[12]

Peter Kronborg, born in an old Scandinavian colony in Minnesota, came of "a poorer stock than his wife; from a lowly, ignorant family that had lived in a poor part of Sweden."[13] There was a strain of Norwegian blood that

> came out in each generation of the Kronborgs. Both Peter Kronborg and his sister Tillie were more like the Norwegian root of the family than the Swedish,

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[10]This trait of orderliness is one that Miss Cather describes with admiration in numerous places. The ability to organize and classify was hers to a great degree, evidently because she had admired this orderliness in others and then developed it in herself.

[11]Song of the Lark, p. 11.

[12]Ibid., p. 12.

[13]Ibid., p. 19.

> and this same Norwegian strain was strong in Thea, though in her it took a very different character.

Miss Cather fails to say just what character this different streak did take in Thea, but just as any particular mark of distinction that made one member of the family different from the others in the past had been blamed on this Norwegian great-grandmother, so Thea's almost fanatic zeal for her art might be due to that one spark in her nature. She was typically Swedish, and had been endowed with abilities and aptitudes that many Swedes like her might have had, but she had above that a great desire that made of her a creature set apart.

Various critics have concurred in the belief that Thea typifies Miss Cather herself.[14] Like Thea Miss Cather is sincere, vigorous, self-controlled. There is no flippancy about her. She has always thought of her art with great earnestness. At one time she entertained the idea that she might devote herself to a musical career. She says in The Song of the Lark, "A voice has even a wider appeal than a fortune. It is the one gift that all creatures would possess if they could."[15] Just as Thea turned from an early obsession for the piano as the means of expressing herself to a realization that her voice was the proper tool, so Miss Cather soon decided that it was writing that she was

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[14] F. L. Pattee, A History of American Literature Since 1870, p. 264.

[15] Song of the Lark, p. 489.

fitted for rather than music. But she never lost interest in the world of music or the problem of the musical artist. So she uses this type of artist in her story to tell of "a young girl's awakening to something beautiful, . . . her floundering escape from a smug, domesticated, self-satisfied provincial world of utter ignorance."[16] This novel might well be an interpretation through Thea of some of the experiences that Miss Cather herself had to meet in coming into the fruition of her own art. She says further:

> What I cared about, and still care about, was the girl's escape; the play of blind chance, the way in which commonplace occurrences fell together to liberate her from commonness. She seemed wholly at the mercy of accident; but to persons of her vitality and honesty, fortunate accidents always happen.[17]

Whatever may be Miss Cather's own personal experiences behind this story, it seems significant that she has used a Swedish girl for this lengthy and psychological study and that she has spoken of honesty and vitality as the two dominant traits that made her the success she was. Thea had those attributes, certainly, along with that gentle stubbornness which she had inherited from her mother and that spark of fire that, we have said, set her apart and made her a genius.

Love of the land is another trait common to the foreign

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[16]Preface to Song of the Lark, pp. v and vi.

[17]Ibid., p. vi.

immigrants whom Miss Cather has described. This trait she treats of most particularly in Alexandra Bergson. But Thea, too, though she left the country and gave herself over wholly to the pursuit of her artist's goal in the city, did not lose her love of the land, her Swedish affinity to the soil. Her native sand hills and the open plains had enriched her life as a child and had given her an outlet for the stirring emotions of adolescence. Later, when she grew tired and stale at her work in the city, she found a refuge and resting place in the rugged Colorado ranch country to which Fred Ottenburg sent her. All her wavering, earlier life and her emotional maturity were built on the strength she had drawn from the rural background of her birthplace.

This love of the land and the hunger for fulfillment that comes from close contact with planting and with reaping was not the only feeling that Alexandra had in common with Thea. Devoted as the former was to the soil, she too was an artist who just happened to find there on her father's farm her own particular medium of creative expression.[18] Like Thea, she was calm, unruffled, and tenacious. Sensitive, too, the opposition of her family wounded and depressed her, but her strong will and the strength of her great purpose led her to suffer in silence and move on toward her goal, even as Thea did, in spite of all. It was love of

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[18]Lucy Lockwood Hazard, The Frontier in American Literature, p. 271.

the soil and a response to its need of her that sustained her, just as Thea's obligation to the demands of her great voice held her within the grooves of hard endeavor. The land seemed beautiful to Alexandra, "rich and strong and glorious." When its call first came to her most urgently, she had been driving over the country trying to decide whether it was best to keep her claim or sell it. The realization came to her as she drove that this land had a great future and that it was hers to work with it and to bring about the fulfillment of its destiny. She sat in her buggy and "drank in the breadth of it until her tears blinded her."[19]

Alexandra was different from her brothers in this respect, just as Thea differed from her family. They had not her imagination, her spark of genius. Cather says that "a pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves."[20] Not all the Swedes were endowed with this quality, however. Some had to be patient plodders, to follow while others who could look ahead made the decisions. Alexandra's brothers were like that--one of them stolid and stubborn, the other petulant and flighty. They reluctantly let themselves be guided by Alexandra, who was more like her long-headed

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[19] O Pioneers!, p. 65.

[20] Ibid., p. 48.

father than they. Then, when they succeeded, they did not even realize how greatly their success was due to Alexandra's foresight.

Alexandra was typical of the more progressive Swedes. She looked back to the customs and traditions of Sweden with pride and veneration, indeed, and always honored the old people and their ways. Once every year, for example, she had old Mrs. Lee over for a week and let her do as she pleased and speak her own tongue if she wished. Yet Alexandra was anxious to adopt for herself all that she could of the best that the New World had to offer. She used all the most modern methods in her farming. Tall and resourceful, she walked as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next.

Perhaps even better than Thea Kronborg, Alexandra's strong peasant nature depicts what Miss Cather saw in the Swedes that one could best emulate. But the Swedish characteristics, as Miss Cather presents them in various places, are too complex to be completely revealed in any one or two characters. The qualities, however, which Miss Cather treats most sympathetically and emphasises most in these and the other Scandinavians are: energy, tenacity, ambition, generosity, love of music, and devotion to the land.

IV. The Germans

There was evidently something comfortable and congenial about the German-Americans as Miss Cather knew them. In three of her earlier novels she has given special attention to the family life and artistic temperament of various German characters. In The Song of the Lark she has written quite a detailed description of the peaceful and harmonious life of the Kohlers and their rather permanent house guest, Professor Wunsch. In One of Ours the Erlich family opens to young Claude Wheeler a vision of what the more cultured and sympathetic family circle can be like. In The Professor's House, again, there is old Augusta, a devout German seamstress. Staunch and loyal and understanding, she helps to make Professor St. Peters' house more homelike and endurable. Finally, in her latest novel, Lucy Gayheart (1935), there are several German characters to offer evidence of our author's deep and continued interest in this particular people.

The Germans belong to that great division of the human race called Germanic, which includes the Scandinavian, the English, the Dutch or Netherlanders, and their descendants in the United States and Canada. Consequently, they are not so alien to our culture as some of the other groups

discussed in this thesis. Certain distinct characteristics are, however, generally attributed to German people. Perhaps the chief of these is thoroughness. They have delved deeply and thoroughly into the fields of science, philosophy, and literature. No country has given the world a larger number of great musical composers.

Miss Cather has shown a decided appreciation of the characteristic of thoroughness. In various places she has praised the Germans for industry and perseverance. In addition she has carefully analyzed and depicted their ability to secure beauty and comfort in their home life and their willingness to give themselves up wholly to music or some other artistic endeavor in which the soul may slake its thirst. It is to be expected that these two phases of German culture would occupy Miss Cather's attention most. She was first of all an artist herself and was interested primarily in "the art which expands our measured interval with beauty or high passion."[1] Yet with all her zest for studio life, Miss Cather has retained an imaginative regard for four walls and a hearthstone, and the vital experience of mothering a family.[2] So we find her devoting a great deal of space to the German homes and the place of the mother in the home, as well as to the German's devotion to

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[1]Stuart P. Sherman, Critical Woodcuts, p. 42.

[2]Percy C. Boynton, Some Contemporary Americans, p. 170.

his art and the thoroughness with which he attacks whatever projects he may undertake. Though Miss Cather mentions many other German characteristics, yet she devotes most space and attention to these three which I shall discuss: maintenance of a cultured home life, devotion to art or music, and thoroughness.

A description of German home life ascribing to it quiet harmony, sympathetic community of interests, and the coziness and charm of comfortable and beautiful surroundings, may be more idealistic than absolute realism might demand. Yet this is the sort of picture Miss Cather gives of German-American homes in several cases. The first example we find is the Kohler home in The Song of the Lark.

Fritz Kohler, the town tailor, was one of the first settlers in Moonstone. He was a quiet sort of person and had few cronies in the village. The significant factor in his life was the home he had built just out of town and the garden he had made there. No one but a German, Miss Cather implies, could have made such a garden. Kindly Mrs. Kohler had her part in making it, too. She devoted her time to that and to her house, caring nothing for village ways, or for the gossip and dress on which the 'American' women spent a great deal of time. "She lived for her men and her garden," writes Miss Cather. "Beside that sand gulch, she had tried to reproduce a bit of her own village in the

Rhine Valley."[3]

Miss Cather evidently noticed when she was a girl that the German settlers always planted trees and vines to make a shady place, whether other pioneers did or not. Alexandra Bergson's comment might well be Miss Cather's own:

> That's one thing I like about Germans; they make an orchard grow if they can't make anything else.[4]

And through Jim Burden she says:

> Sometimes I went south to visit our German neighbors and to admire their catalpa grove, or to see the big elm tree. . . . Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them and visit them as if they were persons.[5]

Willa Cather's own life on the prairie was very similar to Jim Burden's experiences in this novel. No doubt she learned to appreciate trees and growing things in the same way he did. This is probably the reason for her lengthy treatment of German gardens and for her special mention of their care for certain trees. The linden tree she mentions quite frequently. Old Professor Wunsch tells Mrs. Kohler that he asks nothing better of God than to end his days with her and "to be buried in her garden, under her linden tree."[6]

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[3]Song of the Lark, p. 23.

[4]O Pioneers!, p. 133.

[5]My Antonia, p. 14.

[6]The Song of the Lark, p. 84.

There is definite evidence of respect for the Old World influence in Miss Cather's reference here and elsewhere to the lindens. She says further:

> They were not American basswood, but the European linden, which has honey-colored blooms in summer, with a fragrance that surpasses all trees and flowers and drives young people wild with joy.[7]

She speaks also of the grapevine in the garden as "the knotty, fibrous shrub, full of homesickness and sentiment, which the Germans have carried around the world with them."[8] Certainly Miss Cather credits the Germans with a deep feeling for the plants that add attractiveness and comfort to the home. She mentions the tamarisk hedge in Mrs. Kohler's garden, the cherry trees, peach trees, and golden plums. Then the climax of her description deals with the oleanders, which were a special pride to Mrs. Kohler. We read this significant statement:

> There is hardly a German family in the most arid parts of Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, but has its oleander trees. However loutish the American-born sons of the family may be, there was never one who refused to give his muscles to the back-breaking task of getting those tubbed trees down into the cellar in the fall and up into the sunlight in the spring. They may strive to avert the day, but they grapple with the task at last.[9]

The Kohler family is not the only example Miss Cather gives of the German fondness for making the Old World live

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[7]Loc. cit.

[8]Song of the Lark, p. 25.

[9]Ibid., p. 26.

again in some beautiful, well-tended garden spot. Another interesting example is found in The Professor's House. Professor St. Peters' old landlord, Appelhoff, was a retired German farmer,

> good-natured and lenient about everything but spending money. . . . When it was a question of the garden, however, the old man stretched a point. He helped his tenant with seeds and slips and sound advice, and with his twisted old back.[10]

This garden they made after the French fashion--without a blade of grass. It was a tidy half-acre of glistening gravel and shrubs and bright flowers. There were trees, too, of course--a spreading horse-chestnut, a row of slender Lombardy poplars, and two "symmetrical, round-topped linden trees."

Though I have discussed at great length Miss Cather's preoccupation with the German love of gardening, this is not the only phase she has noted of their ability to create homes of comfort and of charm. Inside the Erlichs' house in One of Ours we are shown a picture of harmonious, sympathetic family life. This home is quite in contrast with the typical American home of that day as represented by that of Claude Wheeler's family or any of his American neighbors. When Claude visited the Erlichs he found that they had easy, agreeable manners. They all took an interest in the same things, and the talk "went racing from one

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[10]The Professor's House, p. 14.

thing to another." Claude had never heard a family talk so much or with anything like the enthusiasm they had. Here was none of the poisonous reticence he had always associated with family gatherings. Claude found that he wanted to think things out before he went to the Erlichs' so that when he arrived, he could express himself. At home it had been considered unnecessary to do that. It wasn't 'American' to explain yourself.

Nor was conversation the only thing that made this house an attractive place to Claude. The Erlichs had beautiful things about them, too, not especially rich, but good. There was a rare engraving of Napoleon, a small bust of Byron, and some comfortable, well-used furniture--nothing luxurious. But the number of books astonished him. The

> wainscoting all around the room was built up in open bookcases, stuffed with volumes fat and thin, and they all looked interesting and hard-used.[11]

These people, Claude decided, knew how to live. They had learned to spend their money on themselves instead of on machines. Often he contrasted the materialism of people he knew with the quiet content of the Erlichs.

The center and guiding force of this household was Augusta Erlich, the mother of six grown sons. Claude liked all the boys and admired them very much, but he liked best to have Mrs. Erlich to himself for a half hour. When she

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[11] *One of Ours*, p. 40.

talked to him she taught him so much about life. And

> every time he went away from her he felt happy and full of kindness, and thought about beech-woods and walled towns, or about Carl Schurz and the Romantic revolution.[12]

In her home he had a sense of being in a warm and gracious atmosphere that was charged with generous enthusiasms. Life took on a richer meaning for Claude because of his friendship for the Erlichs.

Another German house that offered comfort and peace to a student away from home was the one to which Thea Kronborg was taken on her arrival in Chicago. The two German women who lived there were sympathetic and understanding. And though their house was not modern nor beautifully appointed and furnished, Thea found peace and quiet there. Fat, jolly Mrs. Lorch was a good cook and very gentle and kind. Her daughter, Mrs. Anderson, was musical and sang in the Mozart Society. The latter introduced Thea to the Art Institute and thus made possible the satisfying experience Thea had with the great pictures and casts exhibited there. Both these women were faithful friends, and the peace that Thea found in their home helped her to support the great and difficult experiences of that first winter.

Still another tribute to the German home is found in Lucy Gayheart. Lucy's teacher in Chicago, Professor Auerbach, and his wife were very genial, sound, and understand-

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[12] Ibid., p. 45.

ing people. Mrs. Auerbach knew just the sort of place Lucy needed for a homey feeling and took her to the Schneff bakery, an old German landmark in the city. There Lucy found rooms where she was allowed all the privacy and solitude she needed for her work and still was watched over by people who were kindly and congenial.

The willingness of the German to give himself over whole-heartedly to his art is the second characteristic which Miss Cather has portrayed very strongly. And the art to which the German is seemingly most devoted is his music. In several instances in Miss Cather's novels we are told that the German race makes one of the most receptive audiences for various sorts of musical entertainment. Sebastian, for example, in Lucy Gayheart, was willing, as many singers were not, to make engagements with ordinary little singing societies. He gave as his reason that most of these societies were made up largely of Germans and Swedes who could really sing and who really got something out of music. And in The Song of the Lark Fred Ottenburg says, "We may have a musical public in this country some day, but as yet there are only the Germans and the Jews."[13]

Not only does Miss Cather present the Germans as being very appreciative listeners when there is good music, but she describes many of her German characters as skilled per-

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[13] Song of the Lark, p. 274; also see Lucy Gayheart, pp. 37 and 68.

formers. Lucy Gayheart's father, Jacob Gayheart, though he was a watchmaker by trade, played the clarinet and flute very well. He gave instrumental lessons and trained the town band. So artistic and music-loving was he that he took more pains in making the band members practice than he did in making his business pay. When Lucy told Sebastian some of these things about her father, he said, "German, of course? That's good. A German watchmaker who plays the flute seems to me a comfortable sort of father to have."[14]

Another talented German, whose musical instrument was her rich contralto voice, was Mrs. Erlich's cousin, Madame Schroeder-Schatz, who sang with the Chicago Opera Company. Her voice "was a really superb organ and gave people a pleasure as substantial as food and drink."[15]

Fred Ottenburg in The Song of the Lark was another character who knew good music and could listen with an expert ear to great concerts and operas. He played the piano quite well and had a splendid baritone voice. He took lessons occasionally just to keep his talents in trim for his own pleasure. The Kohlers, too, in this same novel were very sympathetic toward art. Although neither Mr. nor Mrs. Kohler played an instrument, they furnished an appreciative audience for Thea and Professor Wunsch. Often they

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[14]Lucy Gayheart, p. 43.

[15]One of Ours, p. 59.

sat and listened to the Mexicans singing across the gulch. And when Thea began to sing at church, Mrs. Kohler changed her custom and began to attend services so that she might hear Thea's voice.

The Kohler family, besides exhibiting a deep appreciation for art and the ability to maintain a home of comfort and charm, also present an interesting study of the German attribute of thoroughness. Mr. Kohler, for example, was a well-trained and conscientious tailor. The man under whom he had studied his trade in Germany had required each of his pupils, before finishing the course, to create a picture stitched with small pieces of silk or woolen cloth on a linen background. Fritz Kohler's picture was a copy of a popular painting of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. It was a very intricate piece of work and remarkably well-done. Fritz had worked out every detail with the minutest fidelity. This piece of work was a great source of pride to Mrs. Kohler and she took special care of it.

Professor Wunsch is an interesting example of the influence that the German characteristic of thoroughness can have on other people as well as on the Germans themselves. The Professor was a decided failure in life and a traitor to his talents. But when he discovered the remarkable ability Thea Kronborg had for music, and had helped her to feel the urge of a great aspiration and desire, he went further and impressed upon her the necessity of hard work

and faithful endeavor. It was his pupil's power of application and her rugged will that interested him. He had lived so long among people whose sole ambition was to get something for nothing that he had learned not to look for seriousness in anything. Now that he had discovered it, it recalled standards, ambitions, a society long forgot. So he kept Thea at her practice for long hours, told her she should be at it even earlier in the mornings, and insisted on knowing that she understood completely the meanings of the songs he taught her.[16]

Miss Cather does not present a completely idealistic picture of the German race. Professor Wunsch was weak and addicted to drink. Jacob Gayheart in Lucy Gayheart, though genial and refined, had not the practical sense necessary to succeed. And in One of Ours Miss Cather has described individual German soldiers who were crude and deserved the epithet of "Boches" that the French and their allies attached to them. But such unrefined characters can be found in any army and any nation, and it is with the more refined German element that Miss Cather has been concerned in her novels. She quotes from their poems, alludes to their great operas and speaks feelingly of the fine qualities of their language.

The qualities of German character and culture that I

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[16]Song of the Lark, pp. 75-78.

have found most strikingly portrayed in her novels, however, are: the ability and desire to make homes of comfort and charm, willingness to devote themselves unreservedly to the production or enjoyment of great art, and the thoroughness that enables them to do either great or small things to their complete satisfaction. Certainly Miss Cather shows a great respect for the Germans as a race of people.

V. The French

Since the very beginning of our national history the French people have had a distinct contact with our American race. They bordered the early English colonies on the north in Canada and on the south in the Louisiana territory. Numerous French settlements were scattered all along the Mississippi basin. There was a whole settlement of French Canadians not far from Miss Cather's early home near Red Cloud, Nebraska.[1] Consequently she took an early interest in this race as well as in other immigrant groups. This interest is reflected in at least four of her outstanding novels. In Shadows on the Rock she deals quite thoroughly with the French colonization in Canada during the seventeenth century. In Death Comes for the Archbishop she tells how the French culture was brought directly to our American Southwest by the French missionaries who came about the mid-nineteenth century. In One of Ours she tells of the French culture in their own land as observed by our American soldiers during the World War. In O Pioneers, an earlier novel than these others, she describes a French settlement

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[1]Anon., "A Biographical Sketch" found in the Knopf Pamphlet, p. 1.

very similar to the one she used to visit near Red Cloud. She also describes Professor St. Peters in The Professor's House as a French Canadian on his father's side. He had studied in France during his youth and had adopted numerous French ideas and customs. Altogether we could say that Miss Cather has shown a decided interest in the French and their cultural background. We should remember, too, that she herself traveled in their country and tried for a while to live there. Thus she had a first-hand knowledge of French people both at home and in this country.

The French have received heritages from various stocks. Their national character combines the vivacity, brilliance, and quickness of the Celtic races with the practical sense, industry, and talent for organization of the Northmen or Teutonic people. The French are a race peculiarly fond of peace and order.[2]

Miss Cather's French characters run true to such type description. Some dominant personal qualities I have observed in her Frenchmen are fondness for peace and order, talent for organization, and a decided sense of practicality. She tells how these people brought with them to America the graces and traditions attendant on their religion, and shows how attuned they were to what Rapin calls "the mellow art of living." Needless to say, she does not overlook the

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[2]Count de Sargiges, "France--The People," The World Book Encyclopedia, IV, 2568.

Celtic inheritance of vivacity and brilliance.

Not every one of Miss Cather's French characters possesses all of the admirable qualities listed above, but we find many of these characteristics frequently repeated. The French love of peace and order in the home can be traced in several instances and seems particularly typical. Perhaps Miss Cather's best portrayal of this characteristic is found in Shadows on the Rock. In fact in this story Miss Cather seems most concerned, not with manipulating any certain complication of plot nor with the portrayal of any one character, but with presenting a picture of a way of living that was gracious and ordered. She reveals a refinement brought by the French that stood out in sharp contrast to the stark barrenness of the wilderness and the savagery of the Canadian Indians.

The main characters in the story were Euclide Auclair, an apothecary, and his little daughter Cecile. The mother had died soon after they came to America, but these two had carried out her purpose to make their home both comfortable and enjoyable. Such an undertaking had required careful planning and execution for this was about the year 1700, and Quebec was a hard, bare rock and a bleak place on which to make a home. But though the outside world was rough and crude, they made the interior of their little shop and dwelling as cozy as it could be with the furnishings and ornaments they had. Their establishment was an example of neatness, orderliness, and beauty. It seemed "like home to

the French-born" and the colonists liked to drop in on the slightest pretext.

His dinner Auclair regarded as the ritual that kept him a civilized man and a Frenchman. Not careless like some of his neighbors, he believed that if one took trouble he could live well, even in Quebec. One evening scene in his home Miss Cather describes thus:

> In the living room behind, which was partly shut off from the apothecary's shop . . . , a fire burned in the fireplace, and the round dining table was already set with a white cloth, silver candlesticks, glasses, and two clear decanters, one of red wine and one of white.[3]

All these things were a part of the peaceful setting and orderly routine that Auclair's wife was determined he should not lose.

Madame Auclair had brought from France her household goods, without which she could not imagine life at all, and the salon behind the shop was very much like their old salon in Paris. As long as she lived she tried to make the new life as much as possible like the old. After she began to feel sure that she would never be well enough to return to France, her chief care was to train her little daughter so that she would be able to carry on this orderly manner of living. She told little Cecile:

> Without order our lives would be disgusting, like those of the poor savages. At home, in France, we have learned to do all these things in the best

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[3]Shadows on the Rock, p. 9.

> way, and we are conscientious, and that is why we are called the most civilized people in Europe.[4]

Loyal to her trust, Cecile carried on the tradition of her mother's people. She was meticulously neat about all her personal and household affairs. She carried out the orderly routine her mother had laid down for various seasonal activities. She was both conventional and fervent in her adherence to the regular religious observances.

Some of the same characteristic orderliness we see in certain of the French families whom Claude Wheeler visited in One of Ours. Peace and order in the home is a matter in which Miss Cather herself evidently has taken great interest. Not only does she praise this virtue in the French, but she presents admirable characters of other nationalities who are marked by this distinctive trait. She speaks of the orderly management of Mrs. Kronborg's large household in The Song of the Lark. She writes respectfully in O Pioneers of Mrs. Bergson's eleven years' struggle "to maintain some semblance of order amid conditions that made order very difficult."[5] And in One of Ours she describes Claude Wheeler as having been "born with a love of order, just as he was born with red hair. It was a personal tribute,"[6] she says. Perhaps that is why Claude became so attached to

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[4]Ibid., p. 24.

[5]O Pioneers, p. 28.

[6]One of Ours, p. 33.

the French way of living that he though of making his home there. The French mode of existence had so much of peace about it and a permanence that he felt Americans were still too unstable to realize. "Life," he felt,

> was so short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together.[7]

Closely associated with the characteristic peace and order of the French homes is the natural ability of the French to organize. For without some system of organization there could be no orderliness about even household affairs. Splendid examples of the French talent for organizing were the two French missionaries of Death Comes for the Archbishop. They were Father Latour, the Bishop of the newly established New Mexican diocese, and his vicar, Father Joseph Valliant. French love of order and the talent for organization were both strongly exemplified in these two.

In the year 1848, a group of cardinals had met near Rome to select the priest who should be put in charge of the new diocese. Jean Marie Latour, then 35 years of age, was a Frenchman of good family, intelligent, well-trained, and endowed with exquisite taste. He was full of zeal for his work, too, and had the strong constitution which the arduous task he was to be assigned would require. When

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[7]One of Ours, p. 406.

Father Ferrand recommended young Latour for the new post, the Spanish cardinal agreed with him that the French were the best missionaries. "Our Spanish fathers," he said, "made good martyrs, but the French Jesuits accomplished more. They are the great organizers."[8] When the Venetian cardinal challenged him with the question, "Better than the Germans?," the Spaniard made this graphic statement:

> Oh, the Germans classify, but the French arrange! The French missionaries have a sense of proportion and rational adjustment. They are always trying to discover the logical relation of things. It is a passion with them.[9]

And when Father Latour, as Vicar Apostolic of New Mexico, arrived with his assistant, Father Valliant, and succeeded in establishing himself at the new post in Santa Fe, the task which confronted him called forth all of the Frenchman's talents for arrangement. All his powers were exerted to bring order out of chaos. His logical mind told him that the task could not be done in a short while nor without the use of great tact and diplomacy. But gradually, and with good business sense, he brought the recalcitrant priests into line, established churches, and strengthened the system already set up. Before his life's work was done he had built a cathedral in the French Gothic style which was to be a lasting monument to his zeal, his ability, and his consecration. It was built not so much for his own

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[8]Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 7.

[9]Loc. cit.

gratification as for the future, but he took pains to see that it embodied the best points of architectural beauty in design and structure that his native France had been able to accumulate in long generations of experience. He even arranged to have a French architect and artisans come from Toulouse, saying as he planned:

> I wish to leave nothing to chance, or to the mercy of American builders. I had rather keep the old adobe church we have now than help to build one of those horrible structures they are putting up in the Ohio cities. I want a plain church, but I want a good one. I shall certainly never lift my hand to build a clumsy affair of red brick, like an English coach-house. Our own Midi Romanesque is the right style.[10]

This good vicar, who as his diocese grew and his powers increased, became first a bishop and then an archbishop, spent forty years of service in his work as an organizer and leader in this great task of establishing a church that would best serve the young and rapidly changing territory which had been newly added to the United States. But he could never have succeeded as he did without the help of Father Valliant, who best represents the practical sense with which the French are often so richly endowed.

It was Father Joseph who managed the home and secured the comforts that made life endurable for himself and Father Latour. Almost miraculously he managed to secure the things they needed. Fresh food was almost unobtainable in that pioneer country, but Father Joseph somehow was able

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[10] Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 243.

to gather up the necessary viands to prepare a palatable meal. He made the rare French soup with which they celebrated the first Christmas Day, and he cooked the meal with his own hands. Later he trained an Indian woman to do these things. The soup--a dark onion soup with croutons--was one they both agreed that no one in all the western country could match unless he were a Frenchman. The Bishop stated,

> When one thinks of it, a soup like this is not the work of one man. It is the result of a constantly refined tradition. There are nearly a thousand years of history in this soup.[11]

Father Valliant was not only practical in his management of the house and servants but also a wonderful help in securing funds for the new cathedral. He felt no hesitancy in asking for donations so long as the money went to the church or to the carrying on of Father Latour's work. He secured the two fine white mules, Contento and Angelica, who were real treasures to the two priests when they traveled. He discovered a fine old Spanish bell, too, in the basement of the old church and soon had it established in the new structure. Father Valliant was certainly practical and had great success in the accomplishment of necessary things.

A fourth characteristic of the French with which Miss Cather has shown considerable preoccupation was their reli-

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[11] Ibid., p. 38.

gious zeal. Or perhaps she was more interested in "those graces, traditions and riches of the mind and spirit" that a religious people bring with them, as she says, into "a remote and savage country." Her preoccupation with the contribution of the Catholic religion pervades her novel about the French Catholics in Canada as it did the earlier novel, Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927). In the former, Shadows on the Rock (1931), she expresses her ideas about the matter in complete detail:

> When an adventurer carries his goods with him into a remote and savage country, the colony he founds will, from the beginning, have graces, traditions, riches of the mind and spirit. Its history will shine with bright incidents, slight, perhaps, but precious, as in life itself, where the great matters are often as worthless as astronomical distances, and the trifles dear as the heart's blood.[12]

She illustrates this thought with numerous incidents that had to do with the religious observances of Cecile Auclair and her friends. The traditions concerning the appearances of saints and the working of miracles are told with particular sympathy. She describes the cheerful attitude of the Sisters at the Ursuline convent toward the privations and hardships they had to endure. They accepted good and ill fortune with high spirit and even with humor and brought a rich blessing to that savage wilderness.

While Shadows on the Rock is especially rich in evidence of the cultural graces that were attendant on the

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[12]Shadows on the Rock, p. 98.

religious people with which it deals, Death Comes for the Archbishop is almost equally so. While Father Latour was trying to convert the Indians and Mexicans, he also used every means at his command to teach them what he thought were the necessary riches of life. Miss Cather shows that when his time had been served among these people, the territory that he had tended was considerably more cultured and civilized, largely due to his efforts. Schools had been fostered, remote villages visited and exhorted to more regular ways of living, and great cleanliness and beauty had been brought to many homes.

For one of the traits that long generations of settled living have built up in the French people is a complete mastery of what, for want of a better term, I have called "the mellow art of living." To many people this is a more commonly known trait than any of the others I have discussed. And Miss Cather has dealt richly with this characteristic not only in connection with the religion, but in other ways as well. Father Latour is still perhaps her best example. He worked as an organizer and builder and led his flock into brighter, higher planes of religious living. He also continued to cherish the culture of old France and helped to disseminate it in this new country. His home was made as comfortable and attractive as possible. The furniture, though heavy and roughly-hewn, was beautifully carved and covered with decorated leather. And the living room was lighted with the rosy soft glow of fire light and of candles,

set in the silver candlesticks he had brought from France.

He wrote back to one of his brother priests saying that all day he was an American and dressed and acted like a business man, but when he returned within his own walls, he put on his cassock and was once again more of a priest and a Frenchman. Everything that he had about him reflected the delicate taste and refinement that had been bred in him and that, as he said about the soup, represented "nearly a thousand years of history."

The Auclairs in Shadows on the Rock, as I have partially shown in my discussion of peace and order, knew the importance of keeping alive this "mellow art." The culture they had brought with them was not a surface ornament which one takes on by brief special training, but an inborn and infused way of living and feeling. Cecile knew this, not so much because she had been taught, but because she had grown into the knowledge, had drunk it in from her surroundings, her quiet, serene, and decent home life. She knew, too, that decent surroundings were important in keeping alive the precious heritage of cultured feelings. At the time, for instance, when she came home from a visit to the Harnois household where she was made unhappy and altogether uncomfortable because of their careless, disorderly way of living, she admitted to her father that they had kind ways, but she thought to herself that that was not enough. One had to have "kind things" about one too. And as she went about her work, taking joy even in her kitchen because of

its cleanliness and neatness, she thought:

> These coppers, big and little, these brooms and clouts and brushes, were tools; and with them one made, not shoes or cabinet work, but life itself. One made a climate within a climate; one made the days,--the complexion, the special flavour, the special happiness of each day as it passed; one made life.[13]

Everything, then, that contributed to making their life rich, mellow, and satisfying was Cecile's concern as well as her father's.

Miss Cather, who grew up in such a raw, new pioneer setting, was intrigued with the mellow flavour of older civilizations. She speaks frequently of the French taste for rare old wines. Often she describes their particular insistence upon fine cooking and tasteful table settings. There will be a snowy white cloth upon the table and an appropriate background of soft candlelight or fire light, or perhaps a gracious outdoor arrangement. And the food will be served one dish at a time so that one may relish its full flavour. These more aesthetic elements of everyday living, which have had such a decided appeal to Miss Cather's temperament, are part of the heritage of European people. Through long years they have learned to satisfy their souls with the more natural pleasures rather than the somewhat artificial ones to which Americans resort.

Vivacity is another quality of the French which Miss Cather has not overlooked. That Celtic strain, which I

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[13] Shadows on the Rock, p. 198.

have referred to is noticeable in several of her French characters. They are not always serious and methodical. Mixed with their practical ability is an element of brilliance and gayety. Pierre Charron, Cecile Auclair's very good friend, was a proud, handsome, and aggressive young man whom Miss Cather describes as having "the good manners of the old world, the dash and daring of the new."[14] Whenever he came to see the Auclairs he seemed to bring with him fresh courage, vigor, and gallant daring. Cecile loved to plan new exploits with him and to hear him tell of daring adventures. For she too was vivacious and gay. Her brightness livened up the bleak winters for her father and his friends, and when spring came she seemed to be all new again as soon as the first swallow was back.

In O Pioneers Miss Cather dwells again on the vivacity of the French. Emil Bergson's French friends were always having gay parties and festivals. Emil loved to take part in their good times. He told his sister that at school the Swedes were dull and stolid, but the French and Bohemians were different. They were always quick and alert.

Miss Cather's decided interest in the French people has led her to use them in many of her novels. She has given careful attention to their home life and has observed many phases of the rare old culture that they have built up through long generations. The characters that she has drawn

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[14] Ibid., p. 172.

fitly illustrate the dominant French traits of orderliness, organization, practical ability, adherence to religion and its traditions, cultivated artistic home life, and personal vivacity. These are the qualities that attracted her to the French and that she has attempted to make her readers see and appreciate.

VI. The Spanish-Mexican People

Travel in Spain might account for some of Miss Cather's interest in Spanish life, but no doubt most of her interest in Spanish Americans was aroused by her frequent visits to New Mexico and Arizona. Rather early in her writing career she made her first trip into the Southwest and spent a considerable period of time there. She became intrigued with the history of the Catholic Church in that country and the work of the Spanish missionaries, and for twelve years she went back as often as she could.[1] Then when her knowledge of the place was complete and her feeling for its culture was mature, she wrote Death Comes for the Archbishop. This book, which some critics consider her masterpiece,[2] reflects the long period of time Miss Cather had devoted to her study of the locality and its people. Though this work is primarily the story of two French missionaries, it also contains considerable treatment of the earlier Spanish missionaries, of the lives and customs of their Mexican charges, and of the more primitive Indian culture. The

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[1] Willa Cather, "Letter to the Commonweal," Knopf Pamphlet, pp. 18 and 19.

[2] René Rapin, Willa Cather, p. 81, also p. 83.

culture which the Spaniards had brought with them was still an important factor in the lives of the Mexicans and Indians, and Father Latour, as far as it was possible, wisely built upon the foundation already laid.

Miss Cather's appreciative regard for the Spanish culture is interestingly revealed in her treatment of the bell incident. Father Latour, on his return from one of his long pastoral trips, found that Father Valliant had secured a splendid old bell for their new cathedral. In response to his pleased inquiry about its source, Father Valliant related that it was Spanish in origin, was inscribed to St. Joseph with the date 1356, and had probably been brought from Mexico by ox cart. Though no one knew where it was cast, the story was told that it was pledged to St. Joseph in the wars with the Moors and that the people of some besieged city brought all their plate and silver and gold ornaments and threw them in with the baser metals. "There is certainly a good deal of silver in the bell," concluded Father Valliant. "Nothing else would account for its tone."

Father Latour's comment on this legend is an interesting revelation of Miss Cather's ability to trace our cultural heritage to its source.

> And the silver of the Spaniards was really Moorish, was it not? If not actually of Moorish make, copied from their design. The Spaniards knew nothing about working silver except as they learned it from the Moors. . . .
>
> I am glad to think there is Moorish silver in

> your bell. When we first came here, the one good workman we found in Santa Fe was a silversmith. The Spaniards handed on their skill to the Mexicans, and the Mexicans have taught the Navajos to work silver; but it all came from the Moors.[3]

Many other interesting examples of Miss Cather's respect for tradition can be cited from her novels. But I know of no instance where she goes so deeply into detail to reveal the debt we owe in America to other peoples and other epochs as she has done in the above passage.

The Professor's House furnishes another instance of Miss Cather's interest in Spanish civilization. Professor St. Peters, she said, looked like a Spaniard. "That was probably because he had been in Spain a great deal and was an authority on certain phases of Spanish history."[4] For fifteen years he had worked on his Spanish Adventurers in North America, an eight-volume history of the civilizing influence of the Spanish conquerors. He had spent two Sabbatical years in Spain, two summers in the Southwest, and another in Old Mexico.[5]

But in spite of his being steeped in Spanish history St. Peters was not a Spaniard, but an American of part French-Canadian extraction. Miss Cather has no wholly Spanish characters; therefore it is necessary for us to study her Mexican characters to find the Spanish traits

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[3]Death Comes for the Archbishop, pp. 44 and 45.

[4]The Professor's House, pp. 12-13.

[5]Ibid., p. 25.

which they have inherited and brought with them to the United States.

Mexicans, of course, have a mixed heritage of Spanish and Indian culture, but the Spanish influence often is dominant. At least this is true in the characters Miss Cather has chosen to portray. Beauty and charm are two closely allied traits of Spanish women that we find depicted in Miss Cather's Mexicans. The skill these Mexican women possessed in art and needlework, on the other hand, was probably handed down from their Indian forebears as well as the Spanish. The carefree gayety of the typical Mexican like Spanish Johnny is a quality usually attributed to Spanish ancestors. Strange as it may seem, the quiet strength and dignity of characters like Johnny's wife can also be traced to a proud, independent line of noble Spaniards.[6] The ability to enjoy the simple pleasures of life is perhaps the most striking characteristic of Miss Cather's Mexicans: a little music, a little dancing, and a mere sufficiency of food and clothing made their lives complete. The simplicity of their living and the spontaneity of their emotions make Miss Cather's Mexicans a warm and colorful part of the kaleidoscope of American life.

Two Mexican women who illustrate the quiet charm and

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[6]Marion Wilcox and J. B. McDonnel, "Spain--Ethnology," The Americana, XXV, 331. " The Spaniards are reserved, taciturn and stand much upon their dignity. . . . With their natural indolence there is a strange mixture of enthusiasm."

beauty mentioned above are presented in Death Comes for the Archbishop. They are Señora Carson, the wife of the historic character Kit Carson, and Magdalena, the wife of an American rascal named Scales. Señora Carson was a good woman, gentle but wise, and very devout. When the Bishop called on her she received him with "that quiet but unabashed hospitality which is a common grace in Mexican households." Intelligent and handsome, her countenance showed "that discipline of life which he admired."[7] Magdalena, too, when she was given refuge by the Sisters of Loretto, soon blossomed out into her native serenity and recovered her inherent beauty. The Bishop used to enter the school by the kitchen garden where she served, just to look upon her serene and handsome face.

In this same novel Miss Cather speaks of the skill of the Mexican women in needlework and lace-making and hemstitching. They freely supplied the Bishop with fine linen for his person, his bed, and his table. The men, too, were skilled in weaving, in pottery, and in metal work. Miss Cather is thoroughly conscious of Mexican artistry. She has described Tom Outland's Mexican blanket in The Professor's House and has told elsewhere in Death Comes for the Archbishop of their skill as silversmiths.

In The Song of the Lark, more than in any other of her books, Miss Cather has portrayed the carefree quality of

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[7]Death Comes for the Archbishop, p. 155.

the Mexicans. Across the tracks from the main part of the Colorado town of Moonstone, where Thea Kronborg lived, was a settlement designated as Mexican Town. There Johnny Tellamantez and his wife and a dozen or more other Mexican families lived, apparently happy and content with very little, certainly troubling no one as they went along in their own way of living--a quaint and rather pretty way to live, indeed.

Around all their adobe houses were "neat little yards, with tamarisk hedges and flowers, and walks bordered with shells or white-washed stones."[8] The spirit of Mexican Town could be partly seen in this neatness and prettiness. It was revealed also in the satisfying love of life exhibited by its citizens, and in the nightly sounds of music from fiddle and guitar that drifted over to listeners in the other parts of town on summer evenings.

"Spanish Johnny," as Señor Tellamantez was called, most strongly represents the gayer type of Mexican. He was the sort of carefree and warm-hearted person who is attractive to everyone. In spite of his weakness, his irresponsibility, everyone loved him and forgave him. And he in turn gave everyone else, as well as himself, great pleasure with his music. There was some unsatisfied longing in Johnny's heart, however, which he tried to satisfy with drink and with excessive devotion, at times, to his guitar-playing.

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[8]Song of the Lark, p. 41.

When one of these temperamental spells came over him, he ran away and played from town to town till he was below the Border. When he had finally worn himself out, he would come home, spent and tired, sick of body as of mind. Then it was that Mrs. Tellamantez could fulfill her part in his life.

In Johnny's wife Miss Cather presents an example of the stronger Mexican character. In strength and dignity very similar to Señora Carson and Magdalena, Mrs. Tellamantez represents the staunch self-sufficient quality of the proud line of old Spanish aristocrats. The following description bears out this point:

> Mrs. Tellamantez was always considered a very homely woman. Her face was of a strongly marked type not sympathetic to Americans. Such long, oval faces, with a full chin, a large mobile mouth, a high nose, are not uncommon in Spain. Mrs. Tellamantez could not write and could read but little. Her strong nature lived upon itself.[9]

This strong, but womanly, character did not concern herself with her neighbors' business. She did not waste time in idle gossip or fruitless criticism of others. When she was not engaged in looking after Johnny during his bad times or entering into his amusements when he was well and gay, she busied herself with her drawn work or sat at home in her doorway, communing with herself.

Her American neighbors, on the other hand, could not appreciate this "strong nature." They knew just enough

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[9]Ibid., pp. 42-43.

about her to presume to judge and condemn. People said she was too lenient with her husband and ought to discipline him. But Miss Cather reveals the inner woman of quiet refinement and gentle grace. Her strength, her patience, and her deep understanding of the childlike vagaries of her husband are exhibited in the following statement:

> "He is always fooled"-- The Mexican woman spoke rapidly and tremulously, her long lower lip trembling. "He is good at heart, but he has no head. He fools himself. You do not understand in this country; you are progressive. But he has no judgment, and he is fooled." She stopped quickly, took up one of the white conch-shells that bordered the walk, and, with an apologetic inclination of her head, held it to Dr. Archie's ear. "Listen, doctor. You hear something in there? You hear the sea, and yet the sea is very far from here. You have judgment and you know that, but he is fooled. To him it is the sea itself. A little thing is big to him."[10]

This passage shows what a close distinction Miss Cather wishes to draw between the spirit of her Mexican characters and the Americans. For her there was something to admire and respect about even a low-born foreign character. Her sympathetic portrayal implies a criticism of the American contempt for the simplicity and spontaneity of the Mexicans.

Spontaneity is perhaps the most typical Mexican trait which Miss Cather portrays in The Song of the Lark. Here she depicts the easy ability of these people to drink deeply of life's joys. The citizens of Mexican Town were

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[10] Ibid., p. 43.

able to receive great happiness and emotional satisfaction from little pleasures. In Mrs. Tellamantez' phraseology, "a little thing was big to them." Miss Cather tells about the Mexican dance Thea attended one Saturday evening when she had grown to a young lady and was home from Chicago for the summer. Thea had never been allowed to attend any dances before but the ones the railroad men sometimes gave in Firemen's Hall. Those dances were

> very different from this. The boys played rough jokes and thought it smart to be clumsy and to run into each other on the floor. For the square dances there was always the bawling voice of the caller, who was also the county auctioneer.[11]

The Mexican dance, on the contrary, was soft and quiet. There was no calling; the conversation was very low; the rhythm of the music was smooth and engaging; the men were graceful and courteous. Girls danced with their brothers, fathers with their daughters, and it was a wholesome family affair. There was an atmosphere of ease and friendly pleasure in the low, dimly-lit room. Thea could not help wondering whether the Mexicans had no jealousies or neighborly grudges as the people in Moonstone had. She observed no restraint of any sort. There was only "a kind of natural harmony about their movements, their greetings, their low conversations, their smiles."[12]

Not only were these people spontaneous and free in

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[11] Ibid., p. 229.

[12] Ibid., p. 230.

their participation in such social activities, but they also showed unbounded appreciation for the beautiful and artistic. After the dancing was ended, they all went over to Johnny Tellamantez' house for ice cream and "some lil' musica." At first the talk was low and indolent and was accompanied by a low strumming on guitar and mandolin. But when Thea began to sing for them, they all listened in rapt silence, their faces open, eager, unprotected. She felt as if all these warm-hearted people debouched into her. She had never before sung for a really musical people, and this was the first time she had felt the response that such people could give. Johnny told her:

> Señorita, if you sing like that once in the City of Mexico, they just-a go crazy. In the City of Mexico they ain't-a sit like stumps when they hear that, not-a much! When they like, they just-a give you the town.[13]

Through this striking episode and throughout the book, Miss Cather has made it very clear that the Mexican appreciation for music was infinitely greater than that of typical Americans as represented in the community of Moonstone.

Her whole treatment of the Mexicans, in fact, has exhibited a warm sympathy for them. Her every description of their sensitiveness to music, the natural harmony and grace of "their movements, their greetings, their low conversations, their smiles" has carried with it a criticism of American life with its fear of expression and its superior

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[13] Ibid., p. 233.

attitude of contempt for the simplicity and spontaneity of the Mexicans.

In my study of the novels mentioned in this chapter, I have found that Miss Cather has dealt with the Mexican people as representatives of Spanish culture and that she has concerned herself largely with the following characteristics: grace and beauty of personal appearance; skill in needlecraft and other manual arts; an easy-going, carefree attitude toward life; quiet strength and dignity in facing life's deeper problems; spontaneity in participating in life's simpler pleasures; and an ardent appreciation for music.

This portrayal may be a somewhat idealistic one, obviously overlooking many of the more sordid aspects of Mexican immigrant life. It may leave the impression that Miss Cather has too much sympathy for other races and too little appreciation for her own. Yet her apparent partisanship does not necessarily mean that. It seems obvious to me that she holds up the warm and colorful aspects of such foreign people as these in contrast to the more restrained, conventional and bigoted American attitude in order that we may see and adopt the characteristics and skills that will make our American life richer, fuller, and more meaningful.

VII. Conclusion: The Purpose and Significance of Miss Cather's Preoccupation

No one who has read Miss Cather's novels would dispute the statement that she has exhibited a decided preoccupation with foreign peoples in America. No detailed proof, of course, is necessary to establish this obvious fact. It has been necessary here only to cite the subject matter of her novels and short stories since about 1912 to show how definite and prolonged this preoccupation has been.

The object of my study has been to learn with which races Miss Cather has most concerned herself, to study the characteristics of these various peoples as she has presented them, to determine in what light--favorable or unfavorable--she has set forth their racial characteristics, and to decide what purpose she has had in thus presenting these qualities.

I find that Miss Cather has looked at foreign peoples--whether Slavic, Scandinavian, Germanic, or Latin--with warm sympathy, yet with an interest not overcolored by partiality. That is, although her extreme interest in her subject has often made her portrayal quite romantic and idealistic, she still is too much of a realist to overstep very far the bounds of probability. Her foreign characters, as a rule,

are true to type, and while she strives to emphasize or high-light their more desirable traits, she does not fail to mention weaknesses and limitations. In making the better elements of their cultural or racial qualities stand out strongly, or even heroically, she has not meant us to think the immigrant American a perfect creature, but she has wanted to help us see him as he is.

At first her idea was that she might explain the "underrated" foreigner to his neighbor. Her initial interest was in the peasant class of immigrant farmers. She was concerned with showing the pioneer sturdiness of these people, combined with the sensitivity that was born of long generations of careful, frugal living in the same country. She presented as desirable such qualities as their full-bodied joy in art and the artistic, their freedom from restraint, their simplicity and naturalness, and their love of the land and all its fruitfulness.

As her interest increased in her art and in the musical world, she became more and more intrigued with the sensitive and artistic tastes of foreign people. She began to portray middle-class Europeans who had brought their musical talents to America and who were endowed with even greater sensitivity than her earlier characters. In her later novels, namely in Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock, she has tended to stress refinement more than ever before, often emphasizing the observance of order and good taste in homes of higher-class, even aristocratic,

foreigners.

The significance of Miss Cather's interest in the foreigner lies in the uniqueness of her attitude and treatment. She is not the only American author who has dealt with the place of the immigrant in American society, yet she stands pre-eminent as the champion of lower-class people of foreign birth as well as of those who come from the upper strata of European society.

Other artists, like Henry James, Hamlin Garland, and Edvart RÖlvaag, also hold high rank in American literature for their skilful portrayals of foreign-born people. But each of these had a different thesis and treatment from Willa Cather's. Henry James dealt almost entirely with foreign people of aristocratic birth, and his stories were usually laid in the European homeland of these people rather than in America. Hamlin Garland, on the other hand, wrote about poorer immigrants on American soil, but he often pictured a misplaced immigrant and sometimes gave a very unsympathetic portrayal. RÖlvaag was more sympathetic than Garland, but his foreign-born characters lived bleak, tragic lives, whereas Miss Cather's have a more hopeful outlook. Miss Cather has exceeded all three of these other artists in the number of books she has produced that deal with foreigners in both a realistic and constructive manner.

Willa Cather stands pre-eminent among American authors as one who has dealt with the foreigner in America with sincere candor, with warm sympathy, and with loyal optimism.

Every contrasting picture she has made of the foreign versus the American concept of life shows that she would be pleased if such national characteristics as false pretense, intolerance, vulgarity, prodigal waste, shoddiness, conventionalism, materialism, and dullness should be replaced by something brighter and more enduring. She feels that when the transplanted European culture has been properly fused with our own, life in America will take on a color and richness heretofore lacking.

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Typist

Earl Oliver