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AT THE EDGE OF THE CIRCLE:
WILLA CATHER AND AMERICAN ARTS COMMUNITIES

by

Andrew W. Jewell

A DISSERTATION

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Under the Supervision of Professor Susan J. Rosowski

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At the Edge of the Circle: Willa Cather and
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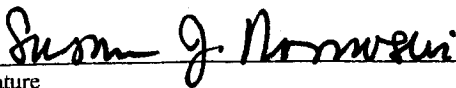
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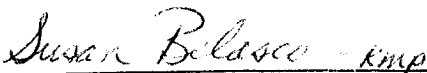

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AT THE EDGE OF THE CIRCLE:
WILLA CATHER AND AMERICAN ARTS COMMUNITIES

Andrew Wade Jewell, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2004

Adviser: Susan J. Rosowski

During the pivotal years of Willa Cather's artistic development, she regularly engaged a variety of American arts communities that encouraged, challenged, and influenced her work and professional growth. Her interactions with these communities were an effort to locate a sustainable, meaningful relationship to her fellow artists. This dissertation explores her efforts by analyzing the character of the communities, chronicling Cather's involvement within them, and interpreting the impact on Cather's life and work.

After the Introduction, the chapters are organized to follow Cather as she experimented with various communal forms and developed her own relationship to the literary scene. Chapter one explores Cather's relationship with Annie Adams Fields and the circle that gathered around Fields's Boston home. Fields, who was Cather's ideal of the literary hostess, demonstrated the power a community could have on an artist's work and engaged Cather's imagination as a representative of the American literary past. Chapter two investigates Cather's experience in Greenwich Village during the early twentieth century, a time when the neighborhood was popularly known as the home of

political and artistic radicals. Cather's comments about the Village, particularly in her story "Coming, Aphrodite!," demonstrate her efforts to counter the Village's popular identity and define her own role within the community. In chapter three, I look at Cather's involvement in three formal artists' colonies: the Bread Loaf School of English, Mabel Dodge Luhan's colony, and the MacDowell Colony. Her involvement with and eventual rejection of these colonies suggests Cather's growing awareness of her own creative needs and worth as a legitimate artist. The final chapter details the most profound artistic relationships of Cather's life, the intimate circle of her friends and fellow writers. Examination of her professional exchanges with Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, and Edith Lewis reveals that Cather frequently relied on the encouragement and suggestions of these women while creating her work.

Introduction: The Group Life

In her essay “Katherine Mansfield,” Willa Cather writes that in all families there exists a “double life”: “the group life, which is the one we can observe in our neighbour’s household, and, underneath, another—secret and passionate and intense—which is the real life that stamps the faces and gives character to the voices of our friends.” “One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life,” Cather continues, “that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them” (136). This dual impulse to both search for and escape human relationships echoes in Cather’s long and complicated experiences with American arts communities. In her years as a professional writer, Cather entered into several distinct American arts communities and found in them a “tragic necessity.” These communities, which Cather became a part of in various ways in the early twentieth century, offered her encouragement and support, assisted her as she molded her personal and professional identity, and influenced the development of her writing. She remained always at the edge of the circle, however, vacillating between “greedily seeking” the group and “pulling away” in order to define herself apart from them.

The critical tradition in Cather studies, perhaps taking a cue from Cather’s assertion that “underneath” the group life is “the *real* life,” generally regards her participation in arts communities as tangential to her authentic creative experiences. Instead, critics have been more interested in exploring the nebulous world of Cather’s

“secret and passionate and intense” private life. Though these explorations have taken many forms, from traditional biographies which understand Cather’s life as a series of personal gains and losses to critical readings that interpret Cather’s fiction as veiled expressions of her innermost feelings of sexual desire and frustration, critics have rarely understood Cather as *part* of anything. Instead, she has been investigated as a woman who, in her own words, was “escaping, running away, trying to break the net which circumstances and [her] own affections have woven about [her]” (Cather, “Katherine” 136).

Contributing to this view of Cather as highly-independent are her late years, when, financially and personally secure as a major author, she grew less socially engaged and preferred a quiet life with her partner, Edith Lewis, and a select group of intimate friends. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, a long-time friend of Cather’s, writes, in Willa Cather: A Memoir, that Cather withdrew “from vital participation into a mold of almost rigid quietness” (281). Edith Lewis, in her memoir Willa Cather Living, describes Cather’s withdrawal from active social life as “self-preservation,” arguing that Cather needed “solitude not only to work in, but to feel and think in” (136; 137). This withdrawal was also accompanied by enthusiastic efforts to protect her privacy and determine her legacy: she attempted to burn all of her private correspondence; she forbade the publication of surviving letters; she refused to allow her work to be adapted into other media, like theater or film; and she was reticent about certain issues that many critics have deep curiosities about, like her sexual orientation. These efforts have both tantalized critics searching for hidden private meanings and created considerable

roadblocks for Cather scholars who, used to these inconveniences, now joke that Cather herself would greatly disapprove of the entire Cather-scholarship phenomenon.¹

Though Cather's life has been scrutinized considerably over the past several decades, there has been virtually no attention paid to a remarkable aspect of her career: her working life as a novelist was one of repeated engagement with the arts communities in the United States. Cather did call the inner life "the real life"; however, she also acknowledges the power and pervasiveness of human connections, the "net" of relationships that fill and demand much of one's life. My dissertation looks at the other side of Cather's double life: her "group life." Examination of her memberships in multiple communities suggests that Cather, consciously or not, subtly utilized communities to propel her personal and professional development. Cather's experiences with arts communities helped her negotiate the move from novice writer to acclaimed professional.

Willa Cather was a part of the circle of Annie Adams Fields in Boston; the creative neighborhood of Greenwich Village, New York; Vermont's Bread Loaf School of English; the Mabel Dodge Luhan colony in Taos, New Mexico; and the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire. Additionally, Cather cultivated a small group of women writers who, through their friendship with Cather, provided her with a sustained intimate circle. Far from being radically independent, Cather made engagement with arts communities a fundamental part of her artistic and professional development. Nevertheless, Cather's engagement with these communities was complex and irregular;

¹ For example, before his lecture at the 2000 International Cather Seminar in Nebraska City, Nebraska. Joseph Urgo joked that the large poster of Cather smiling behind the podium made him uneasy as he was about to read his paper, as he was sure Cather was laughing at him.

characteristically, she responded to them on her own terms, embracing some, challenging others, and uniquely interpreting all.

“Community,” for my study, means localized, interdependent groups of people that formed around a unifying experience or interest and responded directly to one another. More specifically, I am investigating communities that are unified by their experience and interest in artistic creation. Raymond Williams, in his book Keywords, notes that “community” is a term distinct from “society,” which suggests a more impersonal collection of people within a “realm” or “state.” From the 19th century, Williams writes, “community” had “a sense of immediacy and locality [that] was strongly developed in the context of larger and more complex industrial societies” (65). Strikingly, community is “unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society, etc.*)” in that it “seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term” (66). “Community” is a positive term, reflecting not the nameless masses, but a name for a group of individuals, with *individual* identities, that come together for mutually-rewarding interchanges.

Of particular interest to me, however, is what happens when a community develops around art and artists’ lives. Cather’s work, her professional sense of herself, and her relationship to American letters arose, partially, in response to her interactions with arts communities. Cather’s engagement with communities of artists can be traced back to her childhood (she grew up in a family that read and sang, and she was influenced by several arts-oriented citizens of Red Cloud, Nebraska, like the Wieners and William Ducker), or to her years at the University of Nebraska (particularly her involvement with the Union Literary Society and the Hesperian, the student literary journal), or to her years

as a journalist in Lincoln, Pittsburgh, and New York (most profoundly, her days in the editorial offices of McClure's). Those early years of Cather's interaction with communities of artists are a prologue to my emphasis here on Cather's exploration of "professional" arts communities as a professional herself.

Arts communities helped Cather develop her professional identity and her relationship to the American literary landscape in two major ways. First, they brought her in proximity to, and sometimes in rapport with, other contemporary writers and artists. When living in Greenwich Village, for example, she invited poet Elinor Wylie to tea because they were neighbors (Cather, Calendar 42, #255). When in Taos, New Mexico, at Mabel Dodge Luhan's home, she had occasion to call on D. H. Lawrence. While a resident at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, she dined with E. A. Robinson. Most famously, when visiting Annie Fields in Boston, she met Sarah Orne Jewett, an important mentor and the dedicatee of her breakthrough work of fiction, O Pioneers! Though most of these meetings with important writers did not develop into meaningful relationships, through her encounters Cather familiarized herself with the literary scene. By knowing many writers of books, she had a surer sense of what it meant to be a writer in the United States.

Second, arts communities helped Cather ascertain her relationship to American letters by giving her a space to confront major artistic and philosophical movements of her day. Her time at 148 Charles Street between 1908 and 1915 gave her a glimpse of nineteenth-century literary heritage, from the transcendentalists to the realists. She was in Greenwich Village as it developed a highly-visible bohemian enclave, full of leftist theatrics, psychoanalysis, and experimental poetry. When she visited Los Gallos, Dodge

Luhan's home in New Mexico, she encountered many who had rushed to the desert to escape materialism and live an idyllic agrarian life as they created their art. Through these communities, Cather witnessed the efforts of fellow artists to define their own agendas and allegiances. In some cases, as in the small, interconnected world of Village bohemia, she saw the agendas morph into stereotype and proceeded to distance herself, telling reporters who asked about living in Bohemia, Inc., that the "village doesn't exist" (Bohlke 31).

The distance Cather put between herself and Greenwich Village bohemia is echoed in how Cather responded to many of the communities. She never adopted a group identity, but always remained willfully marginalized. Even the community that developed around Annie Fields in Boston, a group Cather plainly celebrates in her essay "148 Charles Street," was a crowd whose long history prevented Cather from completely joining. She apparently never participated in the Native American activism or Jungian psychology important to many at Los Gallos, she resisted identification with bohemianism, and she rebelled against the traditional work schedule of the MacDowell Colony. Even though Cather regularly interacted with arts communities in the early decades of her writing career, she never identified herself within them. Cather's artistic self-identification emerged, at least partly, through defining herself against dominant artistic groups. Her experiments with community helped teach her who she was by demonstrating who she was not; her communal experiences sharpened her independence.

At the same time, however, Cather learned that art, by its nature, emerges from relationships and cannot be sustained in isolation. In Annie Fields Cather saw the enormous power of encouragement and connectedness. Through her friendships and

deep commitment to literature, Fields created a haven of support for many writers, particularly women. She introduced artists to one another, established a network that helped make their work visible, and offered her home and her insights to dozens. Fields's creation of this community happened organically; she did not, like Mabel Dodge Luhan, strategically create environments for her own stimulation. Instead, she reached out to artists out of a sincere, even idealized, interest in their work. Cather responded to Fields's methods by adopting them in her own life: she began a tradition of Friday teas, where guests would gather at her Bank Street apartment, and she cultivated her own circle of fellow writers.

It is in Cather's consistent reliance on and support of a limited group of fellow writers that one can witness the lessons Cather took from arts communities. Though she demurred at group identification, she cherished life-long relationships with other literary professionals. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Elizabeth Sergeant, and Edith Lewis, whom I discuss in my final chapter, personify this larger pattern. Cather needed others to offer encouragement, to read books in manuscript and make suggestions, and to talk over ideas. She needed other people to share her writing life.

Cather's engagement with arts communities were an experiment in finding the literary relationships that would sustain her over the long haul. Early in her career, she responded to the esteemed halls of Charles Street; but the obsequious behavior Annie Fields inspired in her could not make her an artist. The energetic atmosphere of Greenwich Village witnessed the creation of Cather's first important books, but the quiet, affordable apartment on Bank Street, much more than the bohemian cafés, is where she felt at home. She was interested and compelled by the efforts to create an ideal creative

space at the Bread Loaf School of English, Los Gallos, and the MacDowell Colony, but she realized that she needed little of what they had to offer. Only in the personal—and professional—relationships with fellow writers did she locate a sustainable way of connecting with other artists.

After my Introduction, the chapters are arranged to follow Cather throughout her years as a professional writer as she encountered a variety of arts communities and discovered what kind of literary relationships she required. Chapter One argues that Cather began her negotiation of the American literary scene and formed a lasting ideal of an arts community through her relationship to the literary hostess, particularly Annie Adams Fields of Boston. Cather's essay on Fields, "148 Charles Street," reveals a very selective understanding of Fields's complex life as both a notable hostess *and* a philanthropist and writer. Fields engaged Cather's imagination as a representative figure, as someone who was valuable chiefly in her ability to be a connection between Cather and her literary ancestors. Cather's response to Fields's circle was more frankly positive than her response to any other arts community, and it provides a keen example of Cather's negotiation of group identity as she formulates her own relationship to American literary history. Additionally, in Annie Fields, Cather witnessed a hostess who knew how to create a productive, sustainable community, one that developed organically and without pretension. Fields was a model of artistic hospitality that Cather admired and drew from in her own life. I end Chapter Two with a close reading of The Song of the Lark (1915), arguing that Cather incorporates into it ideas of community as she observed it on Charles Street. Just as she was emerging as an artist, Cather observed the deep ties a creator has to her community.

Chapter Two details Cather's efforts to define a communal identity that is at odds with popular assumptions. In doing so, the chapter offers a specific case study of how Cather defines herself against certain aspects of an arts community while simultaneously reclaiming the community's authenticity as a home for artists. This study is accomplished by looking at Cather's relationship with Greenwich Village during the early twentieth century, a time when "Bohemia, Inc." became shorthand in the press for the antics of the arts community located there. Cather's experience of the community was considerably different from the dominant historical narrative of the Village; the "bohemians" were a "fictive community"² that was only a tiny part of a larger, diverse group of people. Cather settled in Greenwich Village and identified herself with a version of the neighborhood that predated "Bohemia, Inc." and she repeatedly refused to accept the popular characterization of her neighborhood. Instead, she wrote in her 1920 story "Coming, Aphrodite!" a version of Greenwich Village that sought to redefine it against the oversimplified version in the press. Cather's Greenwich Village was a humble place in which sincere, hardworking artists could hone their craft while having the privacy to intellectually and emotionally mature. Cather's redefinition demonstrates the way community identity, in this case an identity she rejected, helped her define her own atmosphere and role in a culture.

Chapter Three explores Cather's sampling of different formalized arts communities while she was working out her own long-term literary life. This chapter investigates a decade in which Cather joined in with a specific arts community

² The term is Christine Stansell's. See Christine Stansell, American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century (New York: Verso, 1996), 43.

movement. In the 1920s, Cather was an early participant in three major artists' colonies: the Bread Loaf School of English in Ripton, Vermont; the MacDowell colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire; and Mabel Dodge Luhan's colony in Taos, New Mexico. Cather had important interactions with these communities, but always engaged them on her own terms. Through her brief encounters with each, she worked out her own ideal creative environment and, in doing so, the confidence to claim it for herself. Cather's time with the colonies represent the move from a somewhat reticent teacher of other writers at Bread Loaf to a confident, self-assured voice in the literary landscape. The writing colonies, filled as they were with both struggling and successful artists, helped Cather understand her own worth and position as a legitimate artist. Written in the same years that Cather was experimenting with artists' colonies, this novel reflects Cather's efforts to locate a sustainable professional dynamic, something she apparently found in her last quiet years.

The final chapter looks at the personal relationships that formed an ongoing engagement with fellow artists throughout much of Cather's adult life, focusing on Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Elizabeth Sergeant, and Edith Lewis. These relationships suggest the pattern that fulfilled Cather's needs for artistic connection: individual, thoughtful exchanges with writers whose perspectives Cather trusted. Though all had extremely interesting and complex personal relationships with Cather, my focus is on their professional relationships. To that end, this chapter systematically examines their responses to one another's writing and career. Correspondence among them shows that they often swapped manuscripts and commented on them, that they encouraged and advised each other, and that they shared each other's interest in literary life. Key to my

section on Edith Lewis are the revised typescripts of several Cather novels that have Lewis's handwriting all over them. Manuscript evidence suggests that Lewis was essential to Cather's writing process, and that she provided important suggestions that helped Cather craft the final published versions of the texts. Though the level of involvement varied over the years, Cather's intimate group of fellow writers was among the most sustained and meaningful communal interactions of her career; in this small circle, Cather received frequent and essential support that concretely led to her development as an artist.

My methodology for each chapter has been to begin by recreating the specifics of Cather's involvement with communities. With the exception of biographical work, particularly on Cather's relationship to Annie Fields, and Mark Madigan's excellent discussions of Cather's friendship with Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Cather criticism has been largely silent on Cather's relationship to arts communities. Therefore, my major sources have been letters and manuscripts from archives; Cather's fiction, nonfiction, and interviews; published memoirs of Cather and her era; history and criticism of the selected communities; and Cather scholarship. Close readings of relevant Cather texts have provided the core of my interpretations in Chapters One and Two, for her writings often explicitly reflect her understanding of individual communities (for example, "148 Charles Street" and "Coming, Aphrodite!") and, implicitly, the broader role of communities in the creative process (for example, The Song of the Lark). The final chapter revolves largely around archival materials, memoirs, and histories. In each chapter, I have attempted to recreate the events of Cather's interactions with communities as fully as possible while

also offering analysis about how these engagements affected Cather's authorial identity and creations.

My theoretical approach has been influenced by social history and cultural studies, as well as by critical biography. I attempt to understand the communities broadly—the forces that created them, the character of the members, the political and sociological situations that inspired them. My interpretations, however, are meant to elucidate Cather's individual connections with the communities rather than the communities themselves. My dissertation is, in the end, an examination of an important and neglected aspect of one writer's life; however, the nature of my inquiry forces me to examine that writer in relationship to others. Like Cather, my dissertation lives a "double life," focusing on the characters of groups, communities, and movements while simultaneously considering the effect on the "secret and passionate and intense" inner life.

As this dissertation chronicles, Cather's participation in formalized arts communities ended in about 1926. But her participation within the human community lasted until the end. As Cather matured, the tensions between the group life and the interior life mellowed. She stayed close with many good friends and professional associates, but she did not feel required to perform for the public. The arts community that sustained her in her final years was intimate and personal: Edith Lewis, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Elizabeth Sergeant, and other associates from her long life. But to get to that point, Cather spent decades encountering, challenging, and celebrating several

different arts communities. As the following chapters demonstrate, this “group life” among the arts communities helped forge Willa Cather’s identity and creations.

-1-

Splendid Contacts: Willa Cather, Annie Adams Fields, and the Literary Hostess

On a late winter day in 1908, Willa Cather left the Parker House in Boston and went to Alice Goldmark Brandeis's house to make a social call. Alice Brandeis, the wife of future Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, was a friend Cather had met while working in Boston for McClure's, researching and writing an exposé on Mary Baker Eddy. When she got to Alice Brandeis's house in Otis Place, Alice told her that they would go to another home instead. "She thought I would enjoy meeting a very charming old lady who was a near neighbor of hers," Cather writes ("148 Charles Street" 53). That charming old lady was the 74-year-old Annie Adams Fields. Alice took Cather to 148 Charles Street to make the introduction:

When the door at 148 Charles Street was opened we waited a few moments in a small reception-room just off the hall, then went up a steep, thickly carpeted stairway and entered the "long drawing-room," where Mrs. Fields and Miss Jewett sat at tea. That room ran the depth of the house, its front windows, heavily curtained, on Charles Street, its back windows looking down on a deep garden. Directly above the garden wall lay the Charles River and, beyond, the Cambridge shore. At five o'clock in the afternoon the river was silvery from a half-hidden sun; over the great open space of water the western sky was dove-coloured with

little ripples of rose. The air was full of soft moisture and the hint of approaching spring. Against this screen of pale winter light were the two ladies: Mrs. Fields reclining on a green sofa, directly under the youthful portrait of Charles Dickens (now in the Boston Art Museum), Miss Jewett seated, the low tea-table between them. ("148" 53-54)

Alice asked Mrs. Fields if Willa might be shown some of the treasures of the house. "But I had no eyes for the treasures," Cather remembered, "I was too intent upon the ladies" ("148" 55).

Cather's encounter with Annie Adams Fields and Sarah Orne Jewett was a high point in her early career and led to fruitful friendships with both.¹ But Cather's forthright embrace of Fields and her milieu came only after years of distancing herself from people like Fields who were known as the confidantes of artists, but not artists themselves. This chapter chronicles Willa Cather's transition from a young writer arguing for the artist's autonomy to an aging novelist acknowledging that every artist requires something beyond herself: completion in a sustained community. This transition emerges from an evolution of need. As a young woman, Willa Cather had to find her independent identity; as an older woman, she had to find her connection to community. Cather distanced herself from non-artists through theoretical and fictional diatribes, but connected herself again through an extended consideration of a single woman, Annie Adams Fields. As Cather matured, she re-conceptualized the artist's relationship to her culture.

¹ Critics and biographers have long pointed to Sarah Orne Jewett as a key influence on Cather and her development as a writer. This chapter focuses on Annie Adams Fields and does not treat Cather's complex relationship with Sarah Orne Jewett, as other critics have done so ably. See, for example, O'Brien 334-352, Stout, *Willa* 98-104, and Romines.

What a Symphony Means to an Oyster

As a young woman, a college student, and a writer for the Nebraska State Journal, Cather began to define for her readers—and for herself—the calling of the artist. In dozens of reviews and commentaries of the 1890s, Cather established an ideal vision of the artist as a protector and creator of the splendid, sacred things. The real artist must not compromise the sanctity of the truth, must never be superficial or pandering, must never do anything cheaply. Bernice Slote writes, “To many the problem of art in society is the alienation of the artist. Willa Cather, however, was less concerned with the artist as an outsider than with society as second rate—with *anything* second rate” (171). This early ideal of the artist, as one who “must know the world a good deal as God knows it, in all the pitiable depravity of its evil, in all the measureless sublimity of its good” (Cather, “Utterly Irrelevant,” 28 October 1894), led Cather to draw harsh conclusions about those who surrounded artists but were not themselves artists. Cather thought these people—managers, social-climbers, salon-keepers—were infringing upon, in Bernice Slote’s words, the “rights of genius” (141).

In her “Utterly Irrelevant” column of October 21, 1894, Cather wrote a tirade against professional managers of actors that reveals a deep suspicion of all who make their career by attaching themselves to creative artists. After reporting that many managers are “loudly wailing” at the loss of clients, she argues that “the actors are not much to blame.” “Every actor has some instinct of what he is fitted for,” and a manager is a “man without an artistic temperament, without ideas of art . . . who in all kindness

sets about melting the actor down and casting him over.” Cather’s is a world of creative geniuses misunderstood by soft-headed businessmen who fail to perceive the gifts of their clients, who, for example, try to make Sarah Bernhardt a comedienne. She sees artist-management as artist-attack:

It is laughable, this passion the canaille have for running a genius. . . . Here is a man essentially commonplace, who has the common needs and the common desires and lives the common life, attempting to manage and control a man who is not of the common, whose every strength lies in the fact that his needs, desires and life are different from those of every other man on earth.

To the young Cather, those in management are common, “canaille,” riffraff; geniuses are exceptional, extraordinary.

Cather’s vision of the artist in 1894, when she was only twenty years old, is considerably less sophisticated than her later viewpoint. However, we can see in it a claim that would remain consistent throughout her life: the artist must have time to be alone, must not have her work compromised, and must not be at the mercy of the market. The strength of this claim in her early years is especially important, though, because in these years Cather was already imagining her life as the artist’s life. Claims she makes for the artist are, potentially, claims she makes for herself. “The fewer friends [the artist] has the better; every friend means one more manager,” she writes (“Utterly,” 21 Oct 1894).

Cather’s statements about artist-management, combined with her mockeries of mainstream American culture (“That is a characteristic American habit, to adore authors with whom we are acquainted only through the book reviews” [“The Passing Show”]),

demonstrate a suspicion of any infringement on the life of artists, particularly any infringement emerging from a self-serving motivation. This suspicion is present in her early fiction, too. In 1905, Willa Cather published her first book of fiction, The Troll Garden, a collection of seven stories about art, artists, and those who sought the company of artists. The lead story of the collection, “Flavia and Her Artists,” about a doomed gathering of prominent artists and intellectuals at the home of Flavia Hamilton, is Cather’s mockery of dilettantism, her contemptuous skewering of pretenders. Flavia Hamilton is the focus of Cather’s contempt, a woman who finds “interesting people” to be her “lawful prey” (Cather, “Flavia” 3). She is fiercely determined to surround herself with “the few, the select, ‘the best.’” Flavia and her husband, Arthur, have built a large house in the Hudson Valley, and it has become, Cather writes ironically, “a temple to the gods of Victory, a sort of triumphal arch” (6). At this temple Flavia has gathered an international troupe for the weekend: a painter, an Italian tenor, a German Assyriologist, a Russian chemist, a philologist, novelists, an editor, an actress, and the famous French author “M. Roux.” What Flavia ostensibly wanted to create was a retreat for artists and intellectuals, a place for creative people to come together. What she actually created—the “accomplished fact”—was an “asylum for talent,” a “sanatorium of the arts,” an “infirmary for the arts” (6; 9). In other words, Flavia has created a madhouse filled with artists. It was a place “habited by freaks who discharge [the] servants, borrow . . . money, and insult [the] neighbors” (19). According to the narrator, Imogene Willard, Arthur Hamilton is the only “pillar of sanity and law in this house of shams and swollen vanities, where people stalk about with a sort of mad-house dignity, each one fancying himself a kind of a pope” (27).

“Flavia and Her Artists” characterizes Flavia Hamilton’s salon as a foolish gathering of demented individuals, and what makes this salon so ridiculous, so insane, is the hostess’s vain stupidity. As the down-to-earth actress (and Cather mouthpiece) Jemima “Jimmy” Broadwood says, “all Flavia’s artists have done or ever will do means exactly as much to her as a symphony means to an oyster; . . . there is no bridge by which the significance of any work of art could be conveyed to her.” All Flavia Hamilton wants is the appearance of intelligence: “To Flavia it is more necessary to be called clever than to breathe” (20). Flavia tries to “appropriate your stories and opinions,” or, more subtly, “soak up the very thrash and drift of your day dreams, and take the very thrills off your back.” Speaking to Flavia makes one feel “energetically and futilely explored” (21). Flavia has no real self, but tries to cobble an identity together out of the bits and pieces she pulls from conversations, out of the stuff in others that she thinks worthy of admiration.

Cather’s story is a tirade against dilettantism and the false pretenses of those who attach themselves to talented people. It is a polemic against a certain type of artistic gathering: one whose reason for being is self-promotion, where art itself is only window-dressing for social climbing. Art, Cather suggests, is not something to be fooled around with, something to be misused in the pursuit of a personal agenda, and artists should not be celebrities assembled to fulfill social ambitions. In “Flavia and Her Artists” Cather makes her point perfectly clear: salons formed for the glory of the hostess are no better than symphonies performed for the ear of an oyster.

Cather’s 1905 story returns to themes she had explored in her criticism of the 1890s. In the November 18, 1894, column “As You Like It,” Cather wrote that “the

colossal egotism of the world is in Philistia, not Bohemia.” Philistia, where “the great standards of art avail nothing, for these people patronize art,” is certainly descriptive of Flavia Hamilton’s home: “In Philistia there are no standards and no gods. Each house has its own little new improved portable idol and could never be convinced that it was not just as good as any other idol.” Flavia Hamilton’s idolization of the artists—or, more appropriately, the fashionable artist of the moment—is the personification of Cather’s 1894 complaint. The Hamilton house is Philistia and an obstructor of art.

“Flavia and Her Artists,” published in 1905 and never reprinted in Cather’s lifetime, is the best example from Cather’s early fiction of her contempt for Philistia. Though much of her fiction bemoans the cheap and superficial in American culture, this story takes direct aim at artistic pretenders in the guise of a patroness. James Woodress speculates that Cather must have gotten her vision of Flavia when, as a music and drama critic, “she attended soirées given by Pennsylvania matrons, wives of steel and coal moguls, who devoted themselves to lion-hunting” (*Willa* 173). However, the roots are much deeper. Susan Rosowski argues that Flavia Hamilton has a prototype in Flavia Canfield, the mother of Dorothy Canfield Fisher and a devotee of art. Cather knew Flavia Canfield while in Lincoln in the early 1890s, and Rosowski considers Cather’s belittling portrayal of her to be behind the decade-long interruption in Cather and Fisher’s friendship (“Prototypes” 144-145). Perhaps Flavia Canfield was the inspiration behind Cather’s *Nebraska State Journal* attack on Philistia as well. Regardless, it is evident that, well before encountering the “lion-hunters” of Pittsburgh, Willa Cather had known a Flavia or two, and her story continues her long-standing effort to distance herself from the dilettantes.

Ironically, Cather's story lambasting the doyenne of a salon was written while she was a guest in the home of another benefactor of the arts, Isabelle McClung. Cather met McClung in 1899 when she was backstage with Lizzie Hudson Collier, an actress Cather had long admired and befriended. McClung, whom James Woodress calls Cather's "great love" (*Willa* 139), was the daughter of a prominent Pittsburgh family. Her father, Judge Samuel A. McClung, was a stern Scotch Presbyterian who disliked "any form of 'Bohemianism' or romanticism" and was "hostile toward all radicals" (Lewis 51-52).² Isabelle McClung, nevertheless, liked to be with artists, to surround herself with individuals not too culturally removed from the "radicals." Edith Lewis remembers that Isabelle "admired writers, painters, musicians, actors, foreigners, and the exotic element in life and art" (52). Elizabeth Sergeant writes that Isabelle "identified with the arts herself, rather than with the social round of the rich young lady," and, though "not herself an artist," she was "a patroness of the arts" (35).

Certainly among the most well-known acts of patronage of Isabelle McClung's life was her invitation to Cather to move into the McClung family home in the Squirrel Hill section of Pittsburgh, where Cather had comfort, contacts, and a quiet room in which to write. Cather's move, in the spring of 1901, had "many psychological and spiritual implications" (Sergeant 35); it gave Cather breathing room in her antic Pittsburgh life and helped enable her first two books, *April Twilights* (1903) and *The Troll Garden* (1905). For Cather, Isabelle McClung was the antidote to Flavia, a woman who sincerely loved

² Samuel McClung was the presiding judge at the trial of Alexander Berkman, who, with the support of Emma Goldman, tried to shoot capitalist Henry Clay Frick in 1892; Lewis says Judge McClung gave Berkman "the extreme penalty the law allowed" (52).

the arts, had personal feeling for Willa Cather, and actually helped in the production of meaningful art by enabling the artist. According to Elizabeth Moorhead, who was an acquaintance of Cather and McClung in Pittsburgh, McClung “became for Willa Cather what every writer needs most, the helping friend” (50).

Isabelle McClung’s helpfulness—her skill at being an effective supporter of the arts—certainly grew out of a sincerity and intelligence that Flavia Hamilton lacked, a sensitivity to the needs of the people she wished to support. For example, rather than try to “appropriate” Cather as Flavia would have, McClung converted a sewing room on the third floor of her house into a secluded study where Cather could write. Elizabeth Moorhead remembers that during Isabelle’s popular social teas, Cather would often “be at her desk in the attic, leagues away from us all in that rich world of imagination which Isabelle always understood and protected” (51).³

Cather’s relationship with Isabelle McClung was not simply a patroness/artist relationship; Cather profoundly loved McClung and remained close to her long after she needed a third-floor study. Through McClung’s generosity, Cather learned something about the writer’s need for community. During her early years in Lincoln, Cather had warned artists that “every friend means one more manager,” but McClung taught Cather that some friends can help the artist flourish. Cather’s dedication of The Song of the Lark (1915), a novel about an artist and the community who assists her, is to Isabelle

³ Helen Cather Southwick convincingly argues that Elizabeth Moorhead got a lot of facts wrong in her memoir of Cather and that she probably did not even know Cather much at all until 1914 or 1915. Nevertheless, Moorhead’s assertion that Cather often sequestered herself in her room to write is consistent with the wide variety of memoirists and critics that have commented on Cather’s vehement insistence on her privacy while working.

McClung, and the verse with which she dedicates the book signals her appreciation of McClung's support:

On uplands,
 At morning,
 The world was young, the winds were free
 A garden fair,
 In that blue desert air,
 Its guest invited me to be.

Cather, a "guest" at McClung's oasis in the "desert," realized her indebtedness to the patronage of Isabelle McClung.

McClung's hospitality propelled Cather to new places in her career, and to a new and different hostess. By invitation, Cather submitted stories that she composed in the third-floor study of McClung's house (probably "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "Paul's Case") to S. S. McClure, editor and publisher of McClure's Magazine, who responded with enthusiasm. In 1903, McClure summoned Cather to his office in New York, rhapsodized about the quality of her writing, promised to publish anything else she wrote, and began a working relationship that lasted another decade. In 1906, Cather left the McClung house in Pittsburgh (she returned for extended visits several times) and moved to New York City to join the staff of McClure's. One of her first major writing assignments, started in 1907, was to rework the biography of Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy begun by Georgine Milmine. To do that, she had to temporarily move to Boston to do research, where one late winter morning in 1908 she met Annie Adams Fields.

Safe From Everything Ugly

Willa Cather's description of her first meeting with Annie Adams Fields and Sarah Orne Jewett in her 1936 essay "148 Charles Street" (see pages 1-2) reads like the ascension into Boston Brahmin heaven. The climb of the lush, carpeted stairs; the delicate, rose-gray light of the late winter sky; the two women, backlit by the gorgeous view out the windows, quietly and calmly taking tea beneath relics of the literary past: it all works together to create Cather's memory of her encounter with a major locale of American literary history, the place where she came, in her words, "to inherit a Colonial past" ("148" 57).⁴

148 Charles Street, Boston, was the home of James T. Fields (1817-1881), publisher and editor, and his wife, Annie Adams Fields (1834-1915). James T. Fields was a publisher with Ticknor and Fields, the house that published many important authors of the mid-nineteenth century, including Emerson, Thoreau, Lowell, Stowe, Whittier, and American editions of Dickens, Browning and Tennyson. "The name of that firm meant something to me," Cather remembered, "In my father's bookcase there were little volumes of Longfellow and Hawthorne with that imprint" ("148" 53). James T. Fields's working relationship with major literary figures (he also edited The Atlantic Monthly from 1861-1871) spilled over, in many cases, to close friendships. James and Annie Fields invited countless authors, artists, actors, and eminent figures to dine with them, to talk with them, and to become their friends. According to Henry James, James

⁴ The most complete history of Cather's relationship with Annie Adams Fields appears in Rita K. Gollin's terrific biography Annie Adams Fields: Woman of Letters, 302-308.

and Annie Fields were “addicted to every hospitality and every benevolence, addicted to the cultivation of talk and wit and to the ingenious multiplication of such ties as could link the upper half of the title-page with the lower” (“Mr. and Mrs. Fields” 165). This linking happened primarily at 148 Charles Street.

The list of Charles Street guests “sounds like something in a school-book” (Cather, “148” 56), and it includes Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes (a close neighbor), James Russell Lowell, Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne, Francis Parkman, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Julia Ward Howe, Henry James, William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, Sarah Orne Jewett, Lydia Maria Child, Rebecca Harding Davis, Celia Thaxter, Rose Terry Cooke, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Matthew Arnold, and actors Helen Modjeska, Edwin Booth, Christine Nilsson, and Joseph Jefferson. As a gathering place for such a list of cultural luminaries, 148 Charles Street developed a distinct resonance in American literary history; it had, according to William Dean Howells, “an odor and an air of books” (41). James called it “the little ark of the modern deluge” with “its kept echo of the very accent of the past” (*The American Scene* 244; 245).

James T. Fields’s decision to open his home to the authors he met through his work as an editor and publisher was a fulfillment of the role of “gentleman publisher.”⁵ The “gentleman publisher” sought close relationships with the authors on his list and blurred the distinction between working life and personal life. “In all the annals of American commerce in books,” M. A. DeWolfe Howe writes, “there is no other such

⁵ Susan Coultrap-McQuin calls Fields a “gentleman publisher” in *Doing Literary Business* (32-40), and Rita Gollin affirms this label in her biography of Annie Adams Fields (20).

instance of a man who combined in his own person the offices of friendship and business” (*Atlantic* 39). Fields’s publishing and editorial efforts *were* personal, for the way he did his job emerged from a private conviction of public duty. By providing quality books and supporting quality authors, James T. Fields believed he advanced American cultural life. Rather than pursuing publishing merely for profit (though Fields did make good money that supported a rather lush lifestyle), Fields considered himself a friend to many of his writers, giving better-than-market deals to some authors, like Charles Dickens, whose work—in pirated forms—was widely available in America before the establishment of international copyright law. Of course, Fields’s deals made good business sense as well: he secured his firm’s relationship with major authors and created a reputation for quality with the reading public. As Cather’s comment demonstrates (“the name of that firm meant something to me”), James T. Fields successfully united his name—and his life—with the top rank of American and British writers.

Fields’s integration of his business and personal life meant that his wife had extraordinary access to his circle of business associates. Rita K. Gollin writes, “because cultured Bostonians considered good literature one of life’s essentials, [James T. Fields] enjoyed unusual access to social power. Once he married, his wife shared that power. Once they acquired their own house, his wife was in the center of that center” (20). Annie Fields, an educated, committed woman, was James T. Fields’s key collaborator. She knew and befriended the same figures Fields befriended, she presided over countless social gatherings that strengthened professional relationships, and, between 1861-1871, she participated in the day to day work of editing the *Atlantic Monthly*. Annie Fields’s

biographer calls her James's "editorial assistant" and notes many occasions when she was approached by authors to influence acceptance of their manuscripts or was asked for editorial advice, when she solicited contributions and judged submissions, or when she anonymously contributed verse or translations to the pages of the magazine (Gollin 35-38). Harriet Beecher Stowe relied upon Annie Fields to proof her wartime essay, "Reply to the Affectionate and Christian Address of the Women of England," and to help with research for her book Oldtown Folks (Gollin 138). Though Annie Fields is remembered today primarily for her social skills and her exceptional gift for hospitality, her friends knew her as a powerful partner to James T. Fields. James Russell Lowell, a major nineteenth-century poet and cultural figure and the first editor of the Atlantic Monthly, remarked, "It was to Mrs. Fields liking me . . . that I owed my place on the Atlantic" (qtd. in Gollin 259).

In addition to her social activity and her work as "editorial assistant" to James, Annie Fields was actively involved in charity work, social and political reform, and writing. Her philanthropic accomplishments are remarkable: in addition to volunteering at numerous Boston locales, Annie Fields started the first Holly Tree Coffee House, an establishment designed to give alcohol-free social space to the working poor; she opened and coordinated the Lincoln Street Home, a residence for working women; she helped organize the Cooperative Society of Visitors, which promoted direct contact between philanthropists and the unemployed in order to better assess needs and inspire sympathy; she invested money in a clothing factory after the Great Fire of 1872 devastated Boston and left many jobless; and she was a leading figure in the creation of the Associated Charities of Boston (Gollin 163-168). Annie Fields's work on behalf of the poor was a

driving force in her life, and in her journal entry on New Year's Day, 1874, she ranked her duties:

As a woman, and a wife my first duty lies at home; to make that beautiful; to stimulate the lives of others by exchange of ideas, and the repose of domestic life; to educate children and servants; 2d To be conversant with the poor; to visit their homes; to be keenly alive to their sufferings; never allowing the thought of their necessities to sleep in our hearts. (qtd. in Gollin 185)

In addition to her volunteer work, Annie Fields was a major force for reform. In numerous essays and in her book How to Help the Poor (1883), Fields argued for improved working and living conditions, educational reform, and better security for the poor.

In addition to advocating for the poor, Annie Fields was a committed suffragist and women's-rights advocate. She was a founding member of the New England Woman's Club and the Boston University Women's Education Association, and she was involved in the formation of the Harvard Annex, which later evolved into Radcliffe College. Though she overtly embraced nineteenth-century conventions of gender in some ways, Annie Fields challenged conventions by tirelessly advocating for the lives of nineteenth-century American women, promoting their enfranchisement, and enriching their education.

Another element of Annie Fields's life often ignored is her work as a poet, novelist, editor, and essayist. She made her first splash as a poet in 1863 with the long occasional verse, published by her husband and distributed to friends, Ode Recited by Miss Cushman, at the Inauguration of the Great Organ in Boston. In addition to many

periodical publications of her poetry, including several in the Atlantic Monthly. Fields published several collections of verse, including Under the Olive (1880) and The Singing Shepherd (1895). She also published one poorly-received novel, Asphodel (1866), and several admired works of nonfiction, including James T. Fields: Biographical Notes and Personal Sketches (1881), A Shelf of Old Books (1894), Authors and Friends (1895), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1899), and editions of the letters and poems of Celia Thaxter (1895 and 1896) and the letters of Sarah Orne Jewett (1911). Annie Fields was a productive writer and editor, especially after the death of her husband in 1881, but she never identified herself first as a writer. As Fields wrote in her journal,

I am too much a woman to be always a poet. Yet I know there is a heart of a singer hidden in me and I long sometimes to break loose—but on the whole I sincerely prefer to make others comfortable and happy as I can now do and say fie! to my genius if he does not sing to me from the sauce-pan all the same. (qtd. in Gollin 49)

* * *

Willa Cather's writings about Annie Adams Fields, especially "148 Charles Street," do not attempt to accurately represent Fields's biography, but instead explain the way Cather interpreted her value.⁶ In light of Annie Fields's lifetime of varied accomplishments, Cather valued Fields in a limited way, focusing on her famous friendships with nineteenth century literary giants. In her 1922 review of M. A. DeWolfe

⁶ Willa Cather writings about Annie Fields were published in three different forms. On November 4, 1922, she published "The House on Charles Street" in the New York Evening Post, pp. 173-174; a review of Howe's Memories of a Hostess was published in the December 1922 issue of Atlantic Bookshelf. The entire essay "The House on Charles Street" and sentences from the book review were later incorporated into "148 Charles Street," which was part of Cather's 1936 collection, Not Under Forty (Crane 309).

Howe's book drawn from Fields's diaries, Memories of a Hostess, Cather credits Howe for including "only the high spots" of Fields's life (338). The "high spots" were social gatherings with the literati, and Cather rejoices in the way Howe's book lets her participate vicariously:

One sits down at a dinner given for Dickens in the dining-room at 148 Charles Street; the guests are Agassiz, Emerson, Judge Hoar, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Greene, Charles Eliot Norton, Longfellow. They leave the table "in a tempest of laughter," and Dickens hurries off to give one of his readings. Such a dinner! And after it, no penance, no information, none! We simply go to another dinner-party that Dickens gives at the Parker House for his Boston friends. Or, we can go over through a snowstorm in the afternoon with Mrs. Fields, "at Mr. Dickens's kind request," to see that the flowers are properly arranged and that the management has neglected nothing about the appointments of the table. (339)

Cather relished the "golden hours" of Fields's life, and suggests these moments would be all that Fields herself would want remembered (338-339). Cather's praise of Howe's selectivity, and her own selectivity when writing about Annie Fields, propels Fields into the world of symbol: she becomes the great image of hospitality and of a literary age.

Cather's writings about Fields spotlight Fields's experience with the very-famous at the expense of her long devotion to charity work, to political reform, and to many, many lesser-known women writers and artists. Cather's circumscription of Fields emerges from a complicated web of experience and need. When Cather met Fields in 1908, she was a young, unproven writer of fiction still feeling her way through life at McClure's. Annie Fields was forty years older, an aging woman long established in the

privileged circles of American cultural life. Cather's whole personal knowledge of Fields was borne out of this disparity, and out of the sense of willful submissiveness she felt in Fields's presence.

Cather's characterization of her younger self in her 1936 essay, "148 Charles Street," emphasizes her naïveté. When she is being escorted to Charles Street by Alice Brandeis, Cather asks her how any widow of James T. Fields, a man long dead, could still be alive. At the beginning of the essay, Cather is unaware of Fields's very existence, unattached to even the legend of 148 Charles Street. When she meets Sarah Orne Jewett, she again emphasizes her initial distance from this atmosphere: Jewett, Cather writes, "looked very like the youthful picture of herself in the game of 'Authors' I had played as a child" (54). Cather does not claim to know Jewett through a common connection or even through an appreciation of her work (which Cather had by 1908⁷); rather, Cather says that as a child she had seen Jewett's face while playing a common parlor game. Cather also tells an anecdote that reveals her "Boeotian ignorance" of John Donne (65). The naïveté, though partially a rhetorical technique used to emphasize the sense of apprenticeship Cather had felt in Fields's presence, also has a ring of truth. Cather *was* a young woman unused to the world of Fields—for her, meeting Fields was an exceptional event.

Willa Cather so venerated Fields that her friend Elizabeth Sergeant calls her a "hero-worshipper" (51). Cather was eager to be a part of 148 Charles Street; in her first extant letter to Fields, Cather says she has long wanted to know her and apologizes for

⁷ George Seibel recalls that Cather gave him Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896) and also admired The Country Doctor (1884) while she lived in Pittsburgh in the very early 1900s (17); Phyllis Martin Hutchinson, Cather's former student at Pittsburgh's Central High School where she taught from 1901-1903, recalls that Cather "admired [Jewett] tremendously" (50).

telephoning so often (Calendar 23, #135). Elizabeth Sergeant, who went with Cather to visit Fields in 1911, was “struck” by “how the delicious, fragile, faded hostess, spare, slim, hollow-breasted as Whistler’s Mother, her hair framed in black lace, like George Eliot’s, received my friend as a sort of Midwest grandchild, a creature of zestful surprises who still needed a little toning down” (75). And, though Cather was clearly well-loved by Annie Fields and her companion, Sarah Orne Jewett, letters reveal some tactlessness borne of her inexperience with Fields’s world. For example, in a 1908 letter to Fields, Cather reports that early chapters of Mrs. Humphrey Ward’s novel Daphne, which was to be serialized in McClure’s, were tedious and commonplace. Cather was apparently unaware that Mrs. Ward was a longtime friend of Fields and had been a guest at 148 Charles Street that very spring (Gollin 304). Years later, when M. A. DeWolfe Howe, Fields’s literary executor, wrote Cather to ask her if he might retain her letters in the large collection of Fields’s correspondence, Cather remembered her inexperienced self and responded that she wanted her letters destroyed, claiming that they were “too artificial and unrepresentative” (Woodress, Willa 196). Sergeant suggests that when Cather “took up her pen” to write Fields a letter, “the image of a very special and fragile old lady, opening a letter at the breakfast-table, froze her words into careful formality” (76).

When Cather wrote to Fields, she was less able to be her plainspoken self. This reticence emerged, quite naturally, from Cather’s reverence of Fields and what Fields represented. Boston was the “symbolic center of American literary culture” for Cather and the “oasis of culture” in her early stories “A Wagner Matinee” (1904) and “The

Sculptor's Funeral" (1905) (O'Brien 316)⁸; Annie Fields was at the center of that culture, was the medium that made "the great shades . . . enter the room" (Cather, "148" 62).

Cather was so protective of Fields that she called Henry James's 1915 essay, "Mr. and Mrs. Fields," which celebrated the couple and their hospitality, "patronizing" (Calendar 51, #311). Cather's veneration of Fields was like a student's respect for her mentor.

Though Cather did "modify and modulate her voice and self" around Fields, as O'Brien points out, it would be a mistake to characterize the relationship negatively as a result. Like a student with a mentor, Cather deferred to Fields's expertise and authority. Also like a student, Cather gained tremendously by openness to what Fields's home offered her.

In a 1908 letter to Sarah Orne Jewett, only a few months after Cather met her and Annie Fields, Cather describes to Jewett the immense satisfaction she gained from visiting 148 Charles Street. Her satisfaction, Cather says, emerges from an excited feeling of acquisition. What that acquisition was is subtle, abstract, and personal, but Cather's letter suggests it was a sense of history. She writes Jewett that Fields is the only living person who can evoke a time that was nobler than the present, that seeing Fields in the parlor with the Charles River behind her made her feel that Americans had something fine of their very own. Cather was glad to play the student to Annie Fields's teacher, was glad to acquire something only Annie Fields could give.

⁸ Sharon O'Brien, who interprets Annie Fields as a maternal figure in Cather's life, argues that her response to Fields was that of "the dutiful and docile daughter seeking to please a matriarch whom she both loves and fears by modifying and modulating her voice and self" (314). Though I do not find O'Brien's mother-daughter paradigm useful to understand Cather's relationship to Fields, I do think her general point is accurate: Cather behaved differently around Fields than she did with her other friends.

Cather's respect for Fields and for the past that she evoked was anomalous among young writers in the early twentieth century. Elizabeth Sergeant's self-consciously "modern" reaction to Fields emphasizes Cather's uniqueness: "New Englanders in their twenties, like me, did not bow to the ancient and honorable idols. They preferred Amy Lowell to James Russell. I was about to say [to Cather], 'Come now, this is 1910!'" (51). Cather's novels demonstrate that she was constantly yearning to know the past, to make it a part of herself. This yearning is manifest in her evocation of the remembered past of Nebraska (*O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*) and her creative excursions into distant American and European cultures ("Tom Outland's Story," *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *Shadows on the Rock*, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*). Unlike Sergeant and other self-defined "moderns" who embraced the new, Cather prospered when she imaginatively engaged history. Annie Fields was a point of engagement. "Think, Miss Sergeant," Cather told her friend, "what it is to know someone who invited to her table Emerson, Holmes, Hawthorne, Howells, James Russell Lowell—and who remembers and quotes what they said there!" (Sergeant 51). Fields offered Cather a door into a half-real, half-imagined world of American literary history. What Cather acquired was not the only thing Annie Fields had to give, but the only thing Willa Cather wanted to take.

Cather's earliest description of Annie Fields in the 1908 letter is strikingly consistent with her 1936 description in "148 Charles Street." From the beginning, it seems, Cather appreciated Annie Fields because she felt richer in her presence. Though her letter to Jewett does mention several of Fields's poems, works that go unmentioned in the later writings, she still gives the focus to being in the presence of Fields. In fact, she even claims to like certain verses because they recall meeting Fields and Jewett for the

first time on Charles Street. The quality of Annie Fields's presence is celebrated in "148 Charles Street" as a gift for hospitality: "No woman could have been so great a hostess, could have made so many highly developed personalities happy under her roof, could have blended so many strongly specialized and keenly sensitive people in her drawing-room, without having a great power to control and organize." Cather cherished that power and felt a solace in it: "[i]t was a power so sufficient that one seldom felt it as one lived in the harmonious atmosphere it created—an atmosphere in which one seemed absolutely safe from everything ugly" (58). Annie Fields's hospitality gave Cather protection from life's ugliness and brought her into a new place of almost utopian peacefulness and richness. Cather claims that "there was never an hour in the day when the order and calm of the drawing-room were not such that one might have sat down to write a sonnet or a sonata" (60).

The atmosphere was "harmonious" for Cather not simply because so many famous writers had tea in the long drawing room, but because the house was brimming with artifacts. Annie Fields had manuscripts, rare books, portraits of authors, and even a lock of Keats's hair under a glass dome. "When one was staying at that house the past lay in wait for one in all the corners," Cather writes, "it exuded from the furniture, from the pictures, the rare editions, and the cabinets of manuscript" (61). In his 1915 essay, Henry James calls 148 Charles Street the "waterside museum" and says that it retained "fine vibrations and dying echoes" of past events ("Mr." 166). Cather, who, unlike James, never visited in the drawing room during the celebrated years of the nineteenth century, counters the "dying echoes" of James's characterization. For Cather, the "unique charm of Mrs. Fields' house was not that it was a place where one could hear

about the past, but that it was a place where the past lived on—where it was protected and cherished, had sanctuary from the noisy push of the present” (61). To be in the presence of a living past: this was Cather’s acquisition at 148 Charles Street.

Cather’s portrait of Fields also resulted from—and contributed to—a larger effort in the early twentieth century to define Fields through her relationships with an exclusive list of long-dead male authors. Mark Howe’s Memories of a Hostess is probably the greatest example of this defining drive, as it chronicles the “eminent friendships” of Fields’s life with significant mention of only one woman writer, Sarah Orne Jewett, and virtually no mention of charity work, reform activism, or Fields’s creative writing. Granted, Howe’s book, as his subtitle tells us, was “drawn chiefly from the diaries” of Annie Fields and relied on personal journals that were kept active primarily during the 1860s and 1870s, when James T. Fields was editor of the Atlantic and Annie Fields had a series of meaningful relationships with famous people. Nevertheless, Howe was a personal friend of Annie Fields late in her life, and his selections and introduction emphasize a circumscribed understanding of her as a “central animating presence . . . which seemed to make a single phenomenon out of a long series and wide variety of friendships and hospitalities” (Howe, Memories 3). In other words, she is a motif that unifies diverse parts, the structure that holds together the story; she is not, however, the story itself.

Howe’s book echoes—and judiciously quotes from—Henry James’s 1915 essay on Annie Fields. James, like Howe, praised Annie Fields for the qualities within her that made others gather around: “she was all the gentle referee and servant, the literary and

social executor . . . of a hundred ghosts” (“Mr.” 173). In her 1916 memoir, Harriet Prescott Spofford also focuses on Annie Fields as the “referee and servant” to the collected greats, commenting that entering 148 Charles Street made her feel that she “had stepped into a home in some enchanted wood and among a rarer race of beings” (17). Cather’s essay on Fields, published first as a response to Howe’s book, reinforces this interpretation of Fields. All of her writings about Fields, culminating in “148 Charles Street,” emphasize Fields’s nearness to respected and famous writers, her ability to be in the presence of others’ greatness. Consider this representative anecdote: “After dinner Mrs. Fields began to read a little—warmed to her work, and read all of Matthew Arnold’s Scholar Gypsy and Tristan and Iseult. Miss Jewett said she didn’t believe the latter poem had been read aloud in that house since Matthew Arnold himself read it there” (66). “[Fields] brought to her greeting of the new,” Cather writes, “all the richness of her rich past: a long, unbroken chain of splendid contacts, beautiful friendships” (“148” 71).

One reason Annie Adams Fields’s legacy has been so squarely defined in terms of those who gathered around her is her own insistence, near the end of her life, that her journals become public only “for some reason not altogether connected with myself” (Howe, Memories 3). As Gollin notes several times, Annie Fields embraced, at least at an overt level, certain dominant Victorian gender conventions, among them the subordination of a woman’s identity to her male counterparts (hence, several of her books were signed “Mrs. James T. Fields”). Furthermore, Fields valued humility and was uncomfortable considering herself a literary celebrity. In defining Annie Fields in the decades following her death, the memoirists and editors of the early twentieth century respected Fields’s humility and described her in terms of her friendships.

However, the impulse of Fields's friends to define her through the greatness of her associations is not only because she wanted it that way. Consciously or not, Howe, James, Spofford, Cather and all others who recalled the "rarer race of beings" that inhabited 148 Charles Street implicitly puffed themselves. Cather's essay recalls both the legendary past of Charles Street and her own experience there. In doing so, Cather places herself along the same continuum of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Dickens, and Sarah Orne Jewett. Her essay interweaves her own experience with Oliver Wendell Holmes's and William Thackeray's, using the character of Annie Fields as a connection to all. In "148 Charles Street," Willa Cather *becomes* one of the Charles Street ghosts.

By placing herself among the old guard of American and British writers, Cather was indulging a desire that grew in strength as she aged. By the 1930s, Cather was increasingly distressed by contemporary culture and longed for earlier days. She wrote in her "Prefatory Note" to Not Under Forty, the collection in which "148 Charles Street" appeared, that "the persons and prejudices recalled in these sketches slid back into yesterday's seven thousand years" that the essays were "for the backward, and by one of their number." James Woodress notes that in 1936 and after Cather often expressed that "the world used to be a great deal happier for everyone" (Willa 475). According to Elizabeth Sergeant, soon after World War I began, Cather began saying "a sad little refrain which her friends dreaded to hear her repeat: 'Our present is ruined—but we had a beautiful past'" (131).

Cather's writings about Annie Fields ache with a desire for the past as Fields presented it. "Where can one find such gathering of brilliant friends to-day," Cather writes in her review of Howe's book, "when the gifted are so singularly, so intentionally,

graceless? These people had time for amenities, for friendship; to taste the flavor of life, and to enjoy what was rare in each other" (339). Cather had a sentimental, even utopian understanding of the Charles Street past, and she clung to it fervently. At Fields's home, Cather writes, the "ugliness of the world, all possibility of wrenches and jars and wounding contacts, seemed securely shut out. It was indeed the peace of the past, where the tawdry and cheap have been eliminated and the enduring things have taken their proper, happy places" ("148" 63). At the end of "148 Charles Street," Cather laments the lost past: "the literary world which emerged from the war used a new coinage. In England and America the 'masters' of the last century diminished in stature and pertinence, became remote and shadowy" (74). Cather's final paragraph expresses relief that "Mrs. Fields never entered this strange twilight" (74-75).

As Cather aged, the symbolic value of Annie Fields grew. More than a complicated human being, Annie Fields in "148 Charles Street" is Cather's personal contact to a vanished world, a world Cather deeply admired. In 1908, the thrill of meeting Annie Fields was her gracefulness and hospitality. By 1936, Annie Fields meant more: she was, for Cather, the last gasp of a dying world, the strongest memory of a rare and beautiful community. In writing about Fields, Cather sought to reclaim something of that world, to live again in "that house of memories" (Cather, "148" 75).

Fridays, 5 Bank Street

In 1915, Annie Adams Fields died, and she bequeathed "to my dear Willa Sibert Cather the bust of Keats, the original marble of which is in the Hampstead church in

Hampstead, England, and the copy of Severn's full length portrait which hangs on the bookcase next the street" (qtd. in Gollin 308). These portraits were proudly displayed in Cather's New York apartment on Bank Street. It was a bequeathal that "conveyed a custodial obligation," for it "invited cultural communion with the cherished past" (Gollin 308). The bust by Anne Whitney, long a part of the Charles Street parlor, was a silent witness to the famous literary gatherings Cather cherished. Soon after its appearance at 5 Bank Street, it again bore witness to a literary hostess.

Around the middle of the 1910s, Willa Cather decided, with her partner Edith Lewis, to become a hostess in her own right.⁹ In their comfortable Greenwich Village apartment at 5 Bank Street, Cather and Lewis began to host open-houses on Fridays, late-afternoon events open to a variety of people for conversation and tea. Cather, who by the mid-1910s had published three novels, two of which earned considerable acclaim, was the prime attraction. As Lewis writes, in the parlance of polite tea-parties, "Willa Cather was at home to her friends every Friday afternoon" (134).

Cather and Lewis sent invitations for these Fridays (see Figure 1), and a variety of people attended: Alice and Henry Hoyt, Elinor Wylie, Marian and Henry Canby, George Arliss, Elizabeth Sergeant, Ida Tarbell, Viola Roseboro', Zoë Akins, Harry Dwight, Ferris Greenslet, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Irita and Carl Van Doren (Woodress, Willa

⁹ The precise year when the Friday open-houses began is hard to pin down. James Woodress suggests they began after Isabelle McClung's marriage in 1916, and he cites an April 4, 1916 letter from Cather to H. G. Dwight that includes a printed invitation (Willa 281; n539); Janis Stout does not include this letter in her Calendar of Letters, though she does include many to Dwight from the same collection at Amherst College. Stout places the first printed calling cards at around 1917 (60, #379), though the cards are undated and she does not provide an explanation for her placement. Elizabeth Sergeant remembers attending a "tea-party" at 5 Bank Street in the late winter of 1915, though, she notes, "Whether Willa and Miss Lewis had as yet begun their Friday tea-parties, their 'at homes,' I am not sure. This was a similar occasion" (139). Edith Lewis only says that the Friday open-houses happened "for a number of years" (134).

281). Others, like Mary Austin, H. L. Mencken, Cather's student at Bread Loaf in 1922, Lorna Birtwell, and Helen McAfee, a staffer at the Yale Review, were also invited. (Calendar #380, #381, #566, #640, #715). True to Elizabeth Sergeant's memory, the Fridays were "a mélange of various kinds of friends from various past or present lives" (139).

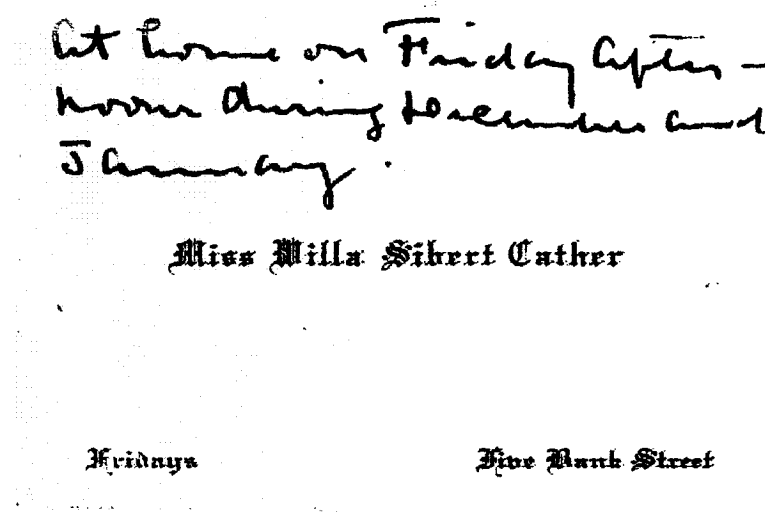


Figure 1. Cather's calling card from the New York Public Library, H. L. Mencken Papers

Edith Lewis remembers the Friday afternoons with words that echo Cather's nostalgic description of meeting Annie Fields for the first time "[a]t five o'clock in the afternoon" when "the river was silvery from a half-hidden sun" (Cather, "148" 54). Lewis writes, "those informal gatherings around the coal fire in the living-room at 5 Bank Street, with the late winter sunlight slowly changing into dusk, and the melodious sound of the tugboat whistles coming up from the river near by, were very pleasant while they lasted." Though the teas eventually drew too many people and became "too much of a responsibility," for a while, they were occasions where "[e]very one talked as if there were not nearly time enough for all they had to say." "Often," Lewis remembers, "a

small group of Willa Cather's more intimate friends would stay on after the others had drifted away, lingering until eight o'clock or later" (134). At these events, Cather was "[u]nquestioned in her primacy, eager as a countrywoman to feed and warm her guests, she had no gift for changing a collective conversational mood or amalgamating disparate human elements." Sergeant, probably imagining the "gifted" Victorian hostess who suppressed her own identity in order to subtly shine light on others, considers Cather's dominance a social failure. Though Edith Lewis "gracefully helped and seconded," Sergeant writes, "Willa just prevailed" (140).

Like Fields's gatherings, the teas were successful because the invitations were sincere rather than calculated. Unlike Flavia Hamilton and other false hostesses, Cather "never in the world sought to use her growing success and reputation to dip into the realm of 'Society' or 'Important People.'" Instead, she invited people she admired, "and that made her tea worth drinking and the talk at Number Five generous and human" (Sergeant 140). Cather's decisions as a hostess reflects what it was at Annie Fields's home that made it a meaningful community for her. The terms of the community were not prestige (though the Fields's did run in prestigious circles), not membership in any exclusive club, not national or regional identification, not vocation, not race, gender, or sexual identity; the community that gathered around Annie Fields in Boston was united only through individual, personal relationships with Annie Fields. And, as a hostess, Annie Fields sought opportunities to bring her friends into personal connection with each other. Cather's and others' writings about Annie Fields emphasize the esteemed crowds that gathered around her. However, to Annie Fields herself, these people were just friends,

people her husband worked with, neighbors, acquaintances from a life bound up with literature.

The community that gathered around Annie Fields was organic. No design or ambition was defined, no professional agenda was followed. Instead, over time Annie Fields met more friends, invited them over, introduced them to one another, encouraged them in their work, and slowly the House on Charles Street became a leading literary salon in American cultural history. But, unlike Mabel Dodge, who carefully strategized to make her Greenwich Village home culturally productive in the 1910s, Annie Fields hosted literary figures out of a personal desire to participate in that world, and out of a personal conviction that one ought to elevate oneself through active pursuit of culture. Though these drives might now be observed as phenomena of middle-class Victorian America, to Annie Fields they undoubtedly felt like individual ambitions emerging from her own relationship to the larger world.

Willa Cather witnessed and approved of the organic community that gathered around Fields. She saw in it something that affected her understanding of arts communities. “It was this sensitivity to the woman behind the performance that distinguished Cather’s treatment from that of others who had written about Mrs. Fields,” Susan Rosowski argues, “Cather knew that great effort is required to create an effect of effortlessness” (“Historical” 209). After knowing Annie Fields, Cather never again wrote dismissive stories like “Flavia and Her Artists,” for she saw that one could greatly influence authorship by *not* writing. She understood that artists benefit from sincere community and from personal relationships with those who encourage and support the arts. She saw in Annie Fields the power of the hostess to guide and enable writing.

Annie Fields paid attention to those around her. She felt she ought to know them and appreciate them, and in doing so she offered writers the assurances of an interested reader.

Years later, when Cather created her Friday teas, they were in the spirit of Annie Fields's gatherings on Charles Street. Like Fields, Cather created her crowd through personal interest or friendship, and did not make invitation lists based upon other prerequisites; H. L. Mencken, perhaps the foremost journalist of his day, and Lorna Birtwell, a student of Cather's at Bread Loaf, shared the same space. Cather's teas, however, never created a community the way Annie Fields's hospitality did, for they lacked two key elements. First, they did not last long enough for the gradual, organic formation of recognizable community. Annie Fields hosted friends at Charles Street for nearly fifty years; Cather hosted friends at Bank Street intermittently for no more than a decade, probably less. Second, Annie Fields created a community with her skill at drawing out the personality of others, at making others the focus of attention and creating interdependent relationships among her guests. Willa Cather lacked those skills, and her teas were places where she "prevailed." Cather's dominant personality, and, undoubtedly, her fame as an important American author, made her the center of the parties, and there is little indication that those who gathered ever felt her apartment to be anything more than Willa Cather's place. Unlike Fields's home, there were no "Bank Street ghosts."

Though Cather never equaled Fields as a hostess, her desire to open her home to her friends in the late 1910s suggests that she felt a need for a community around her not unlike the community that surrounded Fields. Between 1916-1926, Cather was writing as

productively as she ever would, publishing five novels and a book of short stories. At that same time, she was actively participating in willful community-formation, both in her home, and, as Chapter Four discusses, in established artist colonies. Cather was seeking something she could not achieve by writing quietly alone: a dynamic relationship with others who understood, valued, and supported her life and her work.

Representing Community: The Song of the Lark

In the early section of Willa Cather's 1915 novel, The Song of the Lark, Thea Kronborg, the protagonist, explains to her friend Ray Kennedy her personal vision of the nature of artistic success: "Everybody's up against it for himself, succeeds or fails—himself" (108). "In one way, yes," Ray responds, "But when you look at it another way, there are a lot of halfway people in this world who help the winners win, and the failers fail. If a man stumbles, there's plenty of people to push him down. But if he's like 'the youth who bore,' those same people are foreordained to help him along" (108). Ray, who soon after this passage dies and makes Thea the beneficiary of a \$600 life insurance policy that takes her to Chicago to study music, makes a point that Cather proves in the narrative of the novel: those who succeed do so in response to both a personal effort *and* a community effort. The artist, if she is to achieve all that it is possible to achieve, will do so because others have enabled it. Ray Kennedy wisely corrects Thea's naïve insistence on individual autonomy; the world, even when it feels lonely, is, in reality, a network of connections.

The Song of the Lark, Cather's semi-autobiographical *künstlerroman*, is a narrative about how an artist becomes an artist, how she transitions from a small-town

girl singing at the Methodist church to a leading soprano giving a thrilling, ethereal performance at the Metropolitan Opera House. The novel, published in 1915, is Cather's first work of highly autobiographical fiction; as Susan Rosowski argues, "Thea Kronborg is Willa Cather in essentials" (*Voyage* 62). The development of the artist in the novel corresponds to Cather's ideas of her own development as an artist. Significantly, highlighted in this tale of artistic achievement is the small community of supporters that, in both concrete and abstract ways, enable Thea's rise. The novel is Cather's manifesto about the community's role in creating artistic excellence. As such, it reflects her education at Charles Street and the realization that artists cannot go it alone.

Cather's composition of The Song of the Lark came quickly on the heels of her success with O Pioneers! in 1913. With that novel, much more than with her first published novel, Alexander's Bridge, Cather felt she came into her own as a writer. As she indicated in 1931, writing O Pioneers! was "like taking a ride through a familiar country on a horse that knew the way, on a fine morning when you felt like riding" ("My First" 92-3). In other words, with O Pioneers! Cather stopped being an aspiring writer and became an artist. The reviews of the novel, which Cather read avidly, suggested as much: "It is touched with genius. It is worthy of being recognized as the most vital, subtle and artistic piece of the year's fiction," Floyd Dell wrote in the Chicago Evening Post; "Few American novels of recent years have impressed us so strongly as this," the Nation reviewer wrote (O'Connor 47; 55). After such an accomplishment, an

accomplishment encouraged and enabled by her fellow writers,¹⁰ Cather turned to a meditation on the creation of the artist.

By the time she was composing The Song of the Lark, Cather knew full well the importance of the community in her own life. She had benefited greatly from the support of capable literary hostesses like Isabelle McClung and Annie Adams Fields, from the close friendships of other writers and editors like Elizabeth Sergeant, Edith Lewis, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher, and from the sage advice and comradeship of the luminous Sarah Orne Jewett. But she also understood the silence of the writing table, the lonely feeling of composition, and the sacrifices of ambition. The Song of the Lark is Cather's articulation of creative balance. Within the narrative, she offers a vision of a highly committed artist who, while understanding the costs of achievement, succeeds through the power of interchange with community.

It is easy to read The Song of the Lark as a withdrawal from conventional communities and partnerships; after all, Thea Kronborg, on her road to artistry, delays marriage, is alienated from most of her siblings, is intolerant of all the "stupid faces" that surround her in Chicago, refuses to return home to her mother's death bed, and generally chooses not to waste time in social niceties. But this behavior is not, Cather's novel tells us, a sign of the artist's isolation. Rather, it suggests that the artist refuses to participate in things that are distracting and not required. For Thea Kronborg, despite the evidence above, is a member and beneficiary of an arts community, a group of people who come together out of a like interest in music.

¹⁰ See my discussion of Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's role in the development of O Pioneers! in Chapter Four.

The members of Thea's community—Dr. Archie, Mrs. Kronborg, Herr Wunsch, Ray Kennedy, Andor Harsanyi, Fred Ottenburg, Spanish Johnny—are featured prominently in the novel and, therefore, emphasize the role of the community in the creation of the artist. The first section of the novel is even entitled "Friends of Childhood," and those friends offer the foundation upon which Thea's character and career are built. Even in passages that discuss Thea's search for solitude within her own house and her "double life" of daily chores and nighttime reading and thinking, Cather emphasizes the nearness of Thea's community. Her solitary late-night reading, when she rejoiced that there was "no one to nag her," is not as solitary as it seems. As Cather's narrative demonstrates, others are aware of her and caring for her: "Ray Kennedy, on his way from the depot to his boardinghouse, often looked up and saw Thea's light burning when the rest of the house was dark, and felt cheered as by a friendly greeting" (53). Ray's introduction to the scene is followed closely by reports of his conversation with Spanish Johnny, and the words of Dr. Archie and Wunsch. In other words, Cather's juxtaposition tells us, even the apparently solitary moments are in the midst of community.

Cather emphasizes the role of community most explicitly in the details of her story. Time and again, Thea's development happens because others—the "halfway people"—enable it. The examples are numerous and profound: Dr Archie overhears labored breathing and probably saves young Thea's life; Mrs. Kronborg, Thea's mother, uniquely understands that her child's talent did not mean that Thea "must have her hair curled every day and must play in public," but that she "must practice four hours a day" (25); Spanish Johnny offers an example of a singer whose songs emerge not from artifice

but from sincerity and vitality; Wunsch teaches Thea what he knows about music with a deep commitment to artistic excellence; Ray Kennedy funds Thea's first year of musical education in Chicago; Dr. Archie encourages Thea's parents to let her study in Chicago, accompanies her there, and helps her find lodging and a job; Andor Harsanyi, Thea's piano teacher in Chicago, discovers her potential as a singer and tells her "sometimes you will need to be understood; what you never show to any one will need companionship. And then you must come to me" (180); Fred Ottenburg finances a summer in the southwest, where she makes important personal discoveries about the role of art and her desire to be an artist; Dr. Archie loans her money when she must travel to Europe to study; and all members of her community offer encouragement, advice, respect, love, and support.

These are examples of community, rather than patronage, because there is *interdependence* in these actions: Thea's community gains significantly from her. As Dr. Archie tells her near the end of the novel, "As for me, life would have been a pretty bleak stretch, with you left out" (379). Cather further emphasizes the interdependence by shifting her narrative perspective in the last parts of the novel, "Dr. Archie's Venture," "Kronborg," and the "Epilogue." In the first four parts, "Friends of Childhood," "The Song of the Lark," "Stupid Faces," and "The Ancient People," the third-person narration overwhelmingly follows Thea as she develops her artistic vision and desire. In the last parts, Thea is still the major focus of attention, but Cather tells her story through the eyes of others, most often Dr. Archie. By doing so, she emphasizes that the experience is not just Thea's, but her community's. For example, instead of narrating Thea's perspective as she writes Dr. Archie for money to study in Germany, a perspective that potentially

contained many dramatic and romantic elements, Cather emphasizes Dr. Archie's thrill at receiving such a correspondence. It was "a feeling of elation rather than of anxiety" that compelled Dr. Archie to rush to New York City (293).

Even more prominent is the interdependence of Thea and her community that occurs when Thea is creating art. By writing of the interplay of performer and audience, Cather offers a metaphor for the role of the artist in community. The art is meaningless, perhaps nonexistent, if a community that intimately relates to the artist is not there to understand. The community, Cather suggests in The Song of the Lark, must be present as witnesses to creation or the artist's potential is unfulfilled.¹¹ This position is first implied at Thea's first public performance in the novel, a church entertainment on Christmas Eve. Here, Thea plays Reinecke's "Ballade" on the piano, and from the stage Thea "picked out many friendly faces." Dr. Archie, "who never went to church entertainments," was there, as was Ray Kennedy "with a party of freshly barbered railroad men he had brought along with him." In the back was "a little group of Mexicans, and among them Thea caught the gleam of Spanish Johnny's white teeth" (55). After she played the ten-minute piece that she knew would be unpopular to the general Moonstone crowd ("It makes no matter what they like," Wunsch told her, "It is time already that they learn something" [54]), she heard "the usual applause, but it was vigorous from the back of the house where the Mexicans sat, and from Ray Kennedy's *claqueurs*" (56). Only Thea's community, the

¹¹ This dynamic is also implied in Cather's most famous articulation of the artistic process in "The Novel Demeuble":

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, 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, as well as to poetry itself. (42)

Significantly, she grammatically places the crux of her argument on the intimate response of the reader; it is about what one "feels" or "divines." She acknowledges that art's full value requires a highly receptive audience.

“friendly faces,” understood what she was doing and could be receptive to the art she produced.

The fundamental importance of the community is emphasized much more in the final passages when Cather writes of Thea coming “into full possession of things she had been refining and perfecting for so long” during her performance of Richard Wagner’s *Die Walküre* as Sieglinde (395). Her performance provides a reunion of sorts for many of the characters that have constituted Thea’s community: Dr. Archie is there, as is Fred Ottenburg; Andor Harsanyi, whom Thea has not seen in years, returns from his European tour to offer the “companionship” of a like artistic mind; and, most surprising, Spanish Johnny, Thea’s Moonstone comrade, is also quietly present, a member of a traveling Barnum and Bailey Mexican band that happened to be in New York City. Cather’s novel orchestrates a reconstruction of key members of Thea’s community so they might make her artistic triumph complete. They must be there to hear it, to fully participate in the communal exchange. As Thea receives the energetic applause of the audience, she extends her hand toward Harsanyi. “She ought to be pleased that you are here,” Mrs. Harsanyi tells her husband, “I wonder if she knows how much she owes to you.” “She owes me nothing,” Harsanyi, who comprehends the reality of his and Thea’s interdependence, responds, “She paid her way. She always gave something back, even then” (394). “The complete integration of [Thea’s] artistic success with the rest of her life is underscored,” Kevin A. Synnott argues, by “Cather’s gathering of Thea’s various influential friends. . . the somewhat odd and eclectic community that recognized, nurtured, and developed Thea’s art” (297).

Thea's last scene in the novel articulates both her absorption in her art and her profound need for a community to support her creation. As she exits the theater after the performance, she passes a "little crowd of people" who were gathered at the door. She "bowed graciously to the group," but did not look at them. She did not see "the only man in the crowd who had removed his hat when she emerged" (396), the only member of her community that she had lost contact with, Spanish Johnny. She missed him and did not reconnect with him. Perhaps this detail indicates her isolation from Johnny and her Moonstone past; perhaps we are meant to remember the great personal sacrifice Thea has made for her art ("Your work becomes your personal life," Thea tells Dr. Archie, "You are not much good until it does" [378]). Yet the fact of her missing Spanish Johnny is not where the weight of the scene falls. Cather, instead of lamenting the cold sacrifices of an artistic career, reconfigures the terms of communal interdependence with her final scene. Thea does not see Johnny, but, Cather repeats twice, "she would have known him." Thea has not broken her bond to Johnny or Moonstone, but is simply exhausted from her performance, and Johnny understands:

She passed so near that he could have touched her, and he did not put on his hat until her taxi had snorted away. Then he walked down Broadway with his hands in his overcoat pockets, wearing a smile which embraced all the stream of life that passed him and the lighted towers that rose into the limpid blue of the evening sky. If the singer, going home exhausted in her cab, was wondering what was the good of it all, that smile, could she have seen it, would have answered her. It is the only commensurate answer. (396)

By making the smile of Spanish Johnny the “only commensurate answer” to Thea’s art, Cather emphasizes the novel’s vision of the artist’s community: the success of art is in the interchange between creation and response, and that interchange happens most profoundly between the artist and her intimate community.

-2-

Willa Cather's Greenwich Village

Early one day in June 1913, Willa Cather left her house at 5 Bank Street in Greenwich Village to do the day's marketing. She had just finished off a breakfast made from fresh raspberries, brioche, and strong Chinese tea, and she was in good spirits to haggle. She walked south toward the Jefferson Street market, chatting about France with her friend Elizabeth Sergeant, who had recently arrived in New York. As the two women walked, they passed near the home of John Sloan, a painter and illustrator who had been submitting regularly to The Masses since Max Eastman took over the editorship in 1912. But Willa Cather was probably not thinking about radical journalism; she was probably thinking about a good French Camembert (McFarland 156, 193; Sergeant 126).¹

The weather was agreeable and the two women decided not to walk directly to the market, but to stroll east to Fifth Avenue and south to Washington Square. They liked to admire the old houses, and Cather particularly wanted to show Sergeant the Church of the Ascension, where she often went to vespers and gazed at John La Farge's frescoes. Across the street from the church was a mansion whose upper floor was rented out to Mabel Dodge, a woman recently returned from Europe who was hosting regular

¹ My description of this walk is an imagined scene culled from a variety of sources, which I cite internally. Though the events I describe may be a conflation of several different days, they do offer a useful representation of Cather's daily life while living in Greenwich Village.

gatherings in her home, inviting people like Big Bill Heywood, Carl Van Vechten, Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, John Reed, and Lincoln Steffens to stir up the conversation. But Cather had not met Mabel Dodge yet, and so she passed by without comment; instead, she pointed out the Brevoort Hotel, where, only a few years earlier, she and Edith Lewis were taking their dinner as often as four times a week (Lewis 151-2; McFarland 80; 192-4; Cather, Calendar 24, #140).

They walked near the old house of Richard Watson Gilder off Fifth Avenue on Eighth Street. The Gilder house had been a distinguished salon at the end of the nineteenth century, drawing such artists as August Saint-Gaudens, John Burroughs, Helena Modjeska, and Stanford White, the architect who designed the Washington Memorial Arch in nearby Washington Square. As Cather and Sergeant walked under the Arch, Cather pointed directly south to 60 Washington Square South, the first building she lived in after moving to New York to work for S. S. McClure in 1906. Next door, at 61 Washington Square South, was the “House of Genius,” a building that had known Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, O. Henry, and a variety of other artists and journalists as tenants. After they walked through the park filled with local Villagers, mostly Italian immigrants, they turned west, walked past the studio of William Glackens and, crossing MacDougal Street, looked south toward Polly’s restaurant, home of Heterodoxy, a local radical women’s group. After O Pioneers! was published, Willa said, she got all sorts of invitations from local women’s groups, and she hated the very thought of belonging. “Perish all social clubs for women!” she exclaimed (Sergeant 127; McFarland 86, 156-7, 193; Beard et al., “Spiritual” 264).

They soon made it to the Jefferson Street Market, and Willa and Elsie bought a chicken from an Italian man with a ragged blue hat, an unshaven chin, and one fang-like tooth pushing against his lip and forcing his ready smile into an eccentric shape. Cather, nodding at a well-dressed young man in a black-banded straw hat who was walking near, said to Sergeant, "Surely that one sells bonds on Wall Street, and no doubt his mother had his teeth straightened! Mouths should be left as nature made them—mouths are as individual as ears or eyes, . . . but the dentists insist on deadly conformity" (Sergeant 126-127).

After getting back to Bank Street with armfuls of food for Josephine Bourda to cook, Cather excused herself and told Sergeant that she must be alone for two and a half hours, as it was time for her to write.

"Greenwich Village does not exist"

Two assumptions confront anyone exploring Willa Cather's relationship to Greenwich Village. First, that Willa Cather, who lived in the Village from 1906 until 1927, and made New York her permanent residence until her death in 1947, was at American modernism's geographic center: around her in these years was the highest concentration of artistic talent that twentieth century America ever knew.² According to

² Here's a list of some of the notable figures who lived in New York—many of them in Greenwich Village—between 1910 and 1930: Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, Elinor Wylie, Hart Crane, Sara Teasdale, Floyd Dell, Hutchins Hapgood, Neith Boyce, Katherine Anne Porter, Theodore Dreiser, Thomas Wolfe, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Marianne Moore, Margaret Anderson, Jane Heap, Max Eastman, Crystal Eastman, Ida Rauh, Louise Bogan, Edmund Wilson, Robert E. Sherwood, Edna Ferber, John Dos Passos, George S. Kaufman, Ludwig Lewisohn, Gilbert Seldes, Van Wyck Brooks, Katharine Cornell, Laurette Taylor, Charles Gilpin, Paul Robeson, Zora Neale Hurston, Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake, Langston

Ann Douglas, “Modern American culture . . . is unimaginable without New York City” (13). To Alfred Kazin, Greenwich Village “ushered in the first great literary society in America after Concord” (295). “Nowhere did the instinct for the new flourish more extravagantly,” Christine Stansell writes, “than in New York City, where a group of writers who collected in Greenwich Village between 1890 and 1920 transformed an unexceptional shabby neighborhood into a place glowing with a sense of the contemporary” (2). The second assumption is that, living in the heart of the American avant-garde, Willa Cather ignored it.

Most critics who have commented on Cather’s relationship to Greenwich Village have presumed she willfully distanced herself from Village bohemia due to her particular frame of mind, one that prefers quiet, elegant domesticity to raucous party-hopping. In her friend Elizabeth Sergeant’s words, Cather “had more natural affinity for *la vie de famille* than for *la vie de bohème*” (35). James Woodress reports that “Cather was an observer rather than a participant in the yeasty ferment in Greenwich Village” (Willa 236). Joan Acocella states that, despite her Greenwich Village address, “she had no contact with the partisans of Freud, Marx, and free verse who constituted Village bohemia in those days” (23). Deborah Lindsay Williams, however, considers Cather’s aloofness from the bohemian community a willful attempt to protect her “public persona” and “remain free of any obligations that might interfere with her writing” (212).

Hughes, Nella Larsen, Rudolph Fisher, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Ethel Waters, Bix Beiderbecke, Cole Porter, Arna Bontemps, Jean Toomer, Wallace Thurman, Damon Runyon, Gene Fowler, Robert Ripley, Robert Benchley, James Thurber, E. B. White, Al Jolson, Babe Ruth, Hubert Fauntleroy Julian, Harry Houdini, Raymond Hood, Jimmy Walker, Eugene O’Neill, Heywood Broun, George and Ira Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, Jerome Kern, Walter Winchell, Moss Hart, Walter Lippmann, Fats Waller, and Willa Cather (Douglas 15-16; various sources).

Williams paints a picture of Cather as a writer ruthlessly establishing imaginative “boundaries” for her literary career that will not allow her to acknowledge publicly any sort of identification with the literary community of Greenwich Village.

Whatever the analysis, virtually every critic who has written about Cather in the Village has begun with a presumption of Cather’s unwillingness or inability to enter into the vibrant arts community around her.³ They have assumed a split between Cather and the community as if it were a given and irrefutable fact. These interpretations fail, however, because they inaccurately circumscribe the experience of early-twentieth century Greenwich Village.

The popular perception of Greenwich Village is that it is brimming with personality: artistic, feminist, sexually uninhibited, leftist, Freudian, and—above all—eccentric. This version of the Village gained prominence with a series of events that transpired between 1912 and 1918: the beginning of Mabel Dodge’s salon (1912); Max

³ Very few critics have written about Cather and Greenwich Village at all, and no critic has commented extensively on it. Other than James Woodress, whose position on Cather and the Village I quote above, Cather’s biographers, including Sharon O’Brien (*Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* [New York: Oxford UP, 1987]), Hermione Lee (*Willa Cather: Double Lives* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1989]), E. K. Brown (*Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, finished by Leon Edel [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953]), and Phyllis G. Robinson (*Willa: The Life of Willa Cather* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983]), virtually ignore Cather’s relationship to Greenwich Village. Robinson does briefly describe Cather’s early days in the Village much the way Edith Lewis (a “very sedate Bohemia”) describes them: “The informal neighborhood of little shops and restaurants, with its mixture of the tidy and the slightly tawdry, had retained an individuality and an air of *bonhomie* that she enjoyed. It reminded her of Europe. The presence of creative people made it stimulating, but it was the sense of civility and privacy that Willa found not only attractive but also absolutely essential to her temperament” (131). Janis P. Stout (*Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* [Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 2000]) notes that where “Cather and Lewis chose to live . . . alerts us to an aspect of Cather’s life that has not been adequately recognized.” “[T]here is surprisingly little evidence that Cather interacted with any of these people and groups [Village bohemians],” Stout continues, “but it is clear that the atmosphere of bohemia was all around and that she chose to be within it.” Stout concludes her very brief discussion by noting that the absence of references within Cather’s correspondence to hallmark events of Village bohemia—for example, the Armory Show of 1913—are a “puzzling” quality of her life (128). Another book, *Willa Cather’s New York*, ed. Merrill Maguire Skaggs (Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2000), contains multiple references to Cather’s life in Greenwich Village, but only Deborah Lindsay William’s article, which I discuss in the section entitled “I still insist that I am in that sort of village,” offers sustained attention.

Eastman's assumption of the editorship of The Masses (1912); the creation of the Liberal Club and the all-women's group Heterodoxy (1912); the Paterson Strike Pageant at Madison Square Garden (1913); the 1913 Armory Show and exhibitions of modern art at Alfred Stieglitz's Gallery 291; the publication of Margaret Anderson's Little Review; Margaret Sanger's fierce advocacy for women's reproductive rights and access to birth control; the formation of the Provincetown Players (1915); Randolph Bourne's cultural criticism; and Emma Goldman's fiery labor activism. Additionally, historians highlight the romances and sex lives of Goldman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Max Eastman and Ida Rauh, Neith Boyce and Hutchins Hapgood, Mabel Dodge and John Reed, Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, and many more.

As an embodiment of national political, artistic, and intellectual life in the early twentieth century, "Greenwich Village . . . did not refer to an actual neighborhood so much as to a fictive community" (Stansell 43). In the American imagination, the Village "has often served as kind of iconographic shorthand," for not one, but "two parallel mythologies," Ross Wetzsteon argues, "fun-loving, sexually uninhibited, and bizarrely attired bohemians" on the one hand, and "blasphemous, un-American, and unhygienic . . . nonconformists" on the other (x). By such accounts fiction and myth have achieved a seemingly irresistible momentum of their own, standing in for "Greenwich Village" in American culture broadly, and in Cather studies specifically. Even in 1921, when she gave an interview to the Omaha Daily News, Cather had to respond to the myth: "The village doesn't exist," Cather told the reporter, "How could it in these times when the last cellar is empty?" (Bohlke 31).

This chapter is about Willa Cather's Greenwich Village, a real place, though quite distinct from the fictive community, and about Cather's iconoclastic experience of it. She arrived in 1906, well before "the Village" became shorthand for the bohemian lifestyle. Between 1912 and 1918, she lived quietly with her partner, Edith Lewis, in an unassuming apartment at 5 Bank Street, and worked steadily on the books that would establish her reputation: O Pioneers! (1913), The Song of the Lark (1915), and My Ántonia (1918). Though the Village did produce novels, poetry, and memoirs that codified the bohemian myth, it also produced the broad western landscapes of Cather's first major works of fiction.

* * *

"Although the image of the Village as a republic of free spirits won wide popular acceptance during the mid-1910s," historian Robert McFarland observes, "it reflected only a tiny sliver of Village life" (210). Caroline Ware's 1935 study, Greenwich Village, 1920-1930, agrees, and she makes a clear distinction between two groups that she labels "Local People" and "Villagers." She describes her distinction this way:

Socially this community lived in two distinct social worlds. The first world was the world of the local people, mostly tenement dwellers who made up the basic population, to whom the community was home, and whose behavior patterns constituted the basic pattern of the community. The second was the world of those who came to reside in Greenwich Village without becoming a part of the locality, the backflow whose social patterns had been built up elsewhere, whose social contacts remained far-flung, to whom the locality was a mere place of

residence, and who did not mesh with the basic population. The distinction between these two worlds was . . . sharp. (105)

The “local people” lived in a different “social world” from the “Villagers” and, therefore, had a different experience of the place. Moreover, there are many possible dividing lines beyond the one drawn by Ware. McFarland notes that the “nonbohemian” residents “differed greatly among themselves,” which is the “key to understanding how the Village functioned as a social community for the diverse groups who lived in it in the early twentieth century” (210-211). Among the “nonbohemian” population were tens of thousands of Italian immigrants and their native-born children, thousands of Irish immigrants and their native-born children, thousands of old-stock native-born Protestants, and thousands more German, French, Russian, and other immigrants. Additionally, there was an African-American enclave with long roots in Greenwich Village (Ware 38; McFarland 211).

Cather’s residence in the Village between 1906 and 1927 was not—and *could not have been*—simply a life among the bohemians. Instead, it was life lived among a diverse group of people, including a few scattered bohemians. In one of the first detailed stories we have of Cather responding to her Greenwich Village environment, the story of her first encounter with Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant in 1910, the complexity of Cather’s Village community is apparent. Sergeant’s account, written and published in the early 1950s, is, of course, a reminiscence colored by knowledge of Cather’s full career and adult life, but it is still revealing of Cather’s place in the dynamics of 1910s Greenwich Village.

Sergeant and Cather met because Sergeant was trying to sell an article—a muckraking piece about the squalid conditions in the Italian tenements in New York—to McClure's, where Cather was managing editor. Sergeant, who would have a long career as a journalist, novelist, memoirist, and political activist, remarked upon seeing Cather that “[n]o trace of the reforming feminist” was on her face. The lack of this “trace,” combined with Cather’s “open, direct, honest” face, “rosy” cheeks, “freshness and brusqueness,” and “boyish” enthusiasm, compelled Sergeant to remark that Cather “rebelled against urban conformities” (43). Sergeant paints Cather against expectation; though she tells of nervously entering into the heart of an eastern city, what she encounters is the “resonance of [Cather’s] Western voice” (43). In other words, Cather, full of “homespun brilliance” (44), did not really fit into urbane New York.

Sergeant remembers in her 1953 memoir that Cather “exploded” at her after reading her 1910 piece on the tenement: “Tell me why you joined the reforming pamphleteers? This all has its place—it’s good—but aren’t short stories more in your line? I don’t mean tenement stories—you look like a Jamesian—am I right?” (45). Sergeant defended her article passionately, pointed out the dire conditions of so many Italian immigrants who toiled at “artificial flowers for the ten-cent stores,” and connected the immigrant population to the Italians Cather admired while visiting Naples, a trip Sergeant knew about from their mutual friend, Pauline Goldmark. Cather quietly responded, “I know those Italians.” After Sergeant carried on for a few more impassioned paragraphs, Cather “gruffly” explained: “she knew the Italian children, because they splashed in the fountain in Washington Square of a summer evening when she often sat on a bench with a book. She lived in Washington Place, right up against the

Italian Quarter I was talking about, and she loved the big brown eyes, dark smooth skins and Latin voices of the youngsters” (46-47). Cather accepted the article for McClure's and suggested to her boss that they find more assignments for Sergeant.

This incident might have been about Cather's refusal to accept the fashions of her Greenwich Village neighbors, for she lacked the “reforming” spirit that fed the political activism that dominates the histories of the Village. But it isn't about that; at least, the incident isn't only about that. Instead, it is about the unique way Cather, as an artist, *does* respond to her Greenwich Village community. Though Cather does not respond to “reforming pamphleteers” in theory—she is much more interested in the refined artistic sensibilities of “Jamesians”—she does respond when there is a personal connection, when she feels that an authentic community is being sincerely represented. She “knows those Italians” not because, as Sergeant supposes, she romantically remembered them as a tourist in Naples, but because she is their neighbor, and because she is a part of their community.

I doubt those Italians thought of Willa Cather as one of their own. My point is not that Cather actually *was* a part of the Italian immigrant community, but that she perceived her Greenwich Village world differently than many did.⁴ Caroline Ware sees a “sharp” distinction between “Villagers” and “local people.” Other prominent Village artists, like Djuna Barnes, mention the diversity of the area (“houses and hovels passing into rabbit-

⁴ In one of Cather's relatively few fictions set in New York City, the short story “Behind the Singer Tower” (first published in Collier's in May, 1912), Cather demonstrates her awareness of tragic Italian immigrant experiences through the inset story of Caesarino, a laborer who dies thanks to unsafe cost-cutting measures taken by a wealthy engineer. Though the tale is somewhat sentimentalized (Caesarino dies just before he is to go back home to his mother), it does provide an explicit example of Cather responding to urbanization and labor issues through her fiction.

warrens where Italians breed and swarm in the sun as in Naples” [3]) as a quality that “gives life, stimulates imagination, incites to love and hatred” and imparts to Washington Square “a meaning, a fragrance” unlike other parts of the city (3). Barnes, like Ware, characterizes the area in terms of duality, “[s]atin and motor cars on this side, squalor and push carts on that” (3). Cather, though financially closer to satin than squalor, resists easy dualities. Instead, Cather’s Greenwich Village is its own place, unique in its disassociation from popular characterizations of both Bohemia and tenement misery.

“I still insist that I am in that sort of village”

In 1925, Allene Sumner, a reporter from The Cleveland Press, had a conversation with Cather about Greenwich Village. When Sumner asked Cather about life in “Bohemia, Inc.,”⁵ she was told that when Cather moved there in 1906, “it was just a gentle spot of old Georgian red brick homes with brass knockers, filled with folks who like quiet and rest and mellow living.” “I still insist that I am in that sort of village,” Cather told her, “The rest just flows over my head” (Bohlke 87-88).

By telling the reporter that “Bohemia, Inc.” was just flowing over her head, Cather was declaring herself apart from the nonconformist lifestyle that dominated conventional understandings of the Village. But she was not suggesting an ignorance of bohemianism. Cather had long experience with bohemianism by 1925. In April 1896, Cather published a thoughtful article on Henri Murger’s Scènes de la vie de Bohème and

⁵ The term “Bohemia, Inc.” must have been shorthand for describing the Village in the 1920s. In another article on Cather in 1925, this one by Walter Tittle in Century Magazine, there is a description of Greenwich Village as “the haunt of Bohemianism, Incorporated” (Bohlke 81).

the nature of Bohemia itself in the Nebraska State Journal, revealing that during her early twenties she was already deeply engaged with the issues.

The Bohemia Cather writes about is, initially, that found in the Latin Quarter of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century, the world sentimentalized and made famous by Murger's 1848 novel and its subsequent dramatizations by Murger and Théodore Barrière (1851), Dion Boucicault (Mimi, 1873), and Giacomo Puccini (La Bohème, 1896). As her article progresses, though, Cather moves to a fuller discussion of bohemianism within the artist's life, concluding that, as inviting as the anti-bourgeois, artistic life sounds in fiction, it is ultimately quite "tragic." "For despite all sentimental notions to the contrary," Cather writes, "Bohemia was the result of an absence of money rather than an absence of morals, and not one of its many celebrated inhabitants dwelt there a day longer than his income compelled him to" ("Murger's Bohemia" 293). Cather was concerned with serious creative activity and found Bohemia to be merely "a land of youth where [a young man] tarries but a moment and from which the serious business of life will call him away." More darkly, though, Cather calls Bohemia "pre-eminently the kingdom of failure" (294). The reason for this, Cather tells us, is the self-destruction that results from the "essence" of Bohemia, the "rebellion against all organized powers." This rebellion is "in itself a defeat, for victory is with the organized powers of the universe." She traces a man's hypothetical rebellion against "standards of art," "social government," "ethical standards," and, finally, "nature," and she concludes that the only completion to "the cycle of Bohemianism" is "annihilation" (295).

To be a successful, productive artist, Cather says, one must get out of Bohemia, must leave behind a life of absolute rebellion. The proper choice is not to embrace a conventional life, though, but to stop worrying about whether one is conventional or not:

Artists have never been close observers of conventionalities of life because it requires too much time and that way lies an artificial regularity. But to openly defy the accepted conventionalities of any generation requires an even greater expenditure of time and that way lies anarchy. For the business of an artist's life is not Bohemianism for or against, but ceaseless and unremitting labor. (295)

Systematic nonconformity, poverty, lifestyle-obsession: these things don't get the work done, and one must, if she is to be any sort of artist at all, get the work done.

Cather published this article on April 5, 1896, only months after her graduation from the University of Nebraska and a short time before she left Lincoln for Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the editorship of the Home Monthly. In leaving Nebraska and her student days behind her, Cather was also leaving her bohemian self behind. She would, instead, give herself over to "ceaseless and unremitting labor" as a professional journalist and budding creative writer. Throughout the spring and summer of 1896, Cather exchanged letters with Mariel Gere, a Lincoln friend and daughter of Charles Gere, editor of the Nebraska State Journal, and Bohemia was a topic of their correspondence.

On May 2, 1896, Cather wrote to Mariel Gere from Red Cloud, Nebraska, and confessed that her college years had been full of different personas, that she had tried being scholarly and had, even, affected the bohemian. This affectation, Cather implies, is behind her; she was tired of everyone watching her, waiting for her to be outrageous.

By July, Cather was in Pittsburgh, trying to get out the first issue of Home Monthly. Her letters back to Nebraska that summer are full of implicit and explicit denials of bohemianism. Among the implicit denials is the July 13, 1896, letter to Mrs. Gere, Mariel's mother, which, in great detail, explains that Cather has chosen "ceaseless and unremitting labor" over bohemianism. Before asking Mrs. Gere for some information about Mrs. William Jennings Bryan, Cather tells of writing half the copy of the first issue by herself, sweating over forms in the composing room until one o'clock in the morning, and trudging through piles of manuscripts and correspondence. The responsibility is overwhelming, Cather explains, and she even dreams about the magazine at night. This letter is not from someone indulging in the devil-may-care life of the bohemian, but from an industrious, practical young woman.

Nevertheless, Mariel Gere must have continued to tease Cather that she was living a bohemian life as a Pittsburgh journalist, for Cather's August 4, 1896, letter to Mariel is a lengthy denial of bohemianism. After expressing surprise that Mariel would suggest that she was a bohemian, Cather claimed that she never seriously contemplated living that sort of lifestyle. Mariel must have kidded Cather (quite prophetically) that she was on her way to the New York literary world, for Cather responded that, though she may go to New York sometime, she certainly would not go for the express purpose of entering Bohemia. Rather, she hoped to surprise her friends and disappoint her enemies by living very conventionally. She did not want to be a *poseur*, but instead wanted to sincerely give herself to Art, which she can get as much out of as most people do their religions. Cather goes on to describe her hard work, as she did in the earlier letter to Mrs. Gere, and

ends by listing off a few of the distractions in her life: picnics, boat rides, and a local woman's club. All that, Cather writes slyly, is not very bohemian, is it?

In the next letter to Mariel Gere, dated August 10, 1896, Cather follows-up her previous epistle by joking about Mariel's description of her as bohemian. Cather compares it to one calling a nun "bohemian." She insists that she really likes the working life, and suggests that the temperament that allows her to enjoy her work would drive her to suicide in Bohemia.

The article on Henri Murger and the letters to Mariel and Mrs. Gere demonstrate that as she left her undergraduate years and began her working life, Cather defined her professional identity explicitly against bohemianism. She embraced her work with industry and was not ashamed of reveling in conventionalities (though, as her letters to Mariel Gere make clear, she did not take many of those conventionalities, like women's clubs, very seriously). Though Cather had affected bohemianism for a bit as a student at the University of Nebraska, by the spring 1896, when she was only twenty-two years old, she decided to put Bohemia aside and try out "ceaseless and unremitting labor."

Her move to Greenwich Village in 1906, then, really had little to do with bohemianism. Her description of the Village as "a gentle spot of old Georgian red brick homes with brass knockers, filled with folks who like quiet and rest and mellow living" was not facetious. Rather, it was an argument made in 1925 (the year the interview to Allene Sumner was given) for a different perspective on Greenwich Village. Cather's comment "I still insist that I am in that sort of village" is, like her letters in the spring and summer of 1896, both a denial of a bohemian life and a claim for a different professional identity.

This “sort of village” is reminiscent of the one Edith Lewis describes in her memoir of life with Cather. Lewis describes Cather’s first Greenwich Village residence, at 60 Washington Square, as in

one of the most charming places in New York. On the north side the long row of houses of rose-red brick, residences of aristocratic old New York families, gave it an aura of gentility and dignity. On the south side, writers and artists lived. But it was a very sedate Bohemia; most of the artists were poor and hard-working.

(xxxi)

Deborah Lindsay Williams complains about “Lewis’s silence about their neighborhood” which, she suggests, would be teeming with revolutionaries from The Masses and Steiglitz’s gallery, and claims that Lewis is “disingenuous” and “aimed more at perpetuating Cather’s image as a writer uninterested in public life than at accurately characterizing life in the Village in the teens and twenties” (214). However, Lewis was not describing the Village “in the teens and twenties”; she was describing the Village in 1906. The Masses was nowhere to be seen. The timeline is important. Historians of Greenwich Village bohemianism have pointed to “around 1910” as the year when “New York’s avant-garde emerged as a coherent community” (Stansell 40). Others have noted that Greenwich Village did not get a wide media reputation as a bohemian community until around 1915 (Beard et al., “Greenwich Thrillage” 333). Cather’s understanding of the community would pre-date the bohemianization of Greenwich Village. Rather than being (as Williams suggests) disingenuous, Cather’s public description of the Village as a “gentle spot of old Georgian red brick homes with brass knockers,” like Lewis’s

description of the “sedate Bohemia,” reflects perspectives outside the avant-garde community.⁶

Cather *did* have an artistic community surrounding her in Greenwich Village, though it was not the one that has been popularized by the canon of American literature. Cather’s acquaintance, the popular novelist Fannie Hurst, notes that Cather’s Bank Street apartment “was no more a part of Fitzgerald’s twenties than Mars” (259), but it was a part of the artistic world of the 1910s and 1920s, even if it wasn’t Fitzgerald’s.

Cather’s artistic associates are innumerable, and some of them, like Elizabeth Sergeant, Zoë Akins, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher, became close friends as well as writers. Elizabeth Sergeant’s memoir offers a glimpse of one occasion in 1914, when Cather invited over several people that were a part of her artistic community. Cather’s dear friend Isabelle McClung was there, as was Ida Tarbell, whom she met through her work at McClure’s. Ferris Greenslet, Cather’s editor at Houghton Mifflin, and Alice and Henry Hoyt, the latter a painter, were also there. And, of course, Cather’s partner Edith Lewis, a professional editor, and Elizabeth Sergeant, a successful writer, were at the same function (Sergeant 139). Other times, Cather welcomed Elinor Wylie, Marian and Henry Canby, George Arliss, Viola Roseboro’, Harry Dwight, Blanche and Alfred Knopf, and Irita and Carl Van Doren (Woodress, Willa 281). Yet, Sergeant says, Cather “seemed to

⁶ It is interesting to note Cather’s prominent use of the word “bohemian” in her fiction of the 1910s as an ethnic marker. She published “The Bohemian Girl” in 1912, wrote of Marie Shabata, a “Bohemian,” in O Pioneers! (1913), and of the Bohemian Shimerda family in My Antonia (1918). Though the word “bohemian” would have described immigrants from the eastern European region of Bohemia in the agricultural communities of Nebraska, Cather wrote these fictions from Greenwich Village and knew full well that community’s use of the word. Her frequent use of the word as an ethnic descriptor, combined with her willful distancing from the Village Bohemia, suggests that she, consciously or not, sought to reclaim the original meaning of the word.

have no ‘circle’ of intimates” and “never in the world sought to use her growing success and reputation to dip into the realm of ‘Society’ or ‘Important People.’” Instead, Cather “cared about musicians, actors, singers, and sometimes painters and writers—if *she admired them individually*” (140; emphasis Sergeant’s). Sergeant argues what other evidence bears out: Willa Cather led a productive artistic life in Greenwich Village that had little to do with the artists we tend to call “Villagers.”

Manifesto for Greenwich Village

Cather’s fullest description of her Greenwich Village is contained in her 1920 story, “Coming, Aphrodite!”⁷ This story, which follows the love affair between painter Don Hedger and singer Eden Bower, has been called “Cather’s Manifesto for Art” (Rosowski); it also, I think, can be called Cather’s Manifesto for Greenwich Village, for it offers Cather’s alternative vision of Village life when most reports identified the neighborhood as “Bohemia, Inc.”

The first sentence of Cather’s story, “Coming, Aphrodite!,” places us in the heart of Greenwich Village: “Don Hedger had lived for four years on the top floor of an old house on the south side of Washington Square, and nobody had ever disturbed him” (63).

⁷ This story was published first in *The Smart Set* (August 1920), in a different form, as “Coming, Eden Bower!” It was collected with seven other stories under the title “Coming, Aphrodite!” that same year in Cather’s collection *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920). I have chosen to use the text of “Coming, Aphrodite!” rather than “Coming, Eden Bower!” since many textual variants result from Cather’s decision to alter the tale for magazine publication in order to avoid run-ins with censors (see Woodress, *Willa*, 315-316). Therefore, the story published as “Coming, Aphrodite!” is more authoritative. As Woodress notes, Cather “never regarded the magazine publication as very important; it was the book version of her works that counted, and she needed money” (316).

The construction of her initial sentence emphasizes Hedger's Villager status by referring to the most well-known part of Greenwich Village: Washington Square.

Simultaneously, Cather tells us that this is not going to be another bohemian rhapsody like Floyd Dell's Love in Greenwich Village, but an alternative look at this neighborhood. With the final phrase of her first sentence, she establishes that Don Hedger lives quietly. Moreover, her language, "nobody had ever disturbed him," indicates that he wants it that way: more contact with people would be "disturbing" to his preferred way of living. This story of a quiet artist in Washington Square defied the public's understanding of Greenwich Village life. In the post-World War I years, tourists were flocking to the Village to see "bohemian frolics" (Fishbein 225); Floyd Dell, a proud member of the Village artistic set, said that the community had "become a side-show for tourists, a peep-show for vulgarians, a commercial exhibit of tawdry Bohemianism" (296). Rick Beard and Jan Seidler Ramirez suggest that "the modern discovery of the Village as a tourist destination" can be dated to around 1915, "when the neighborhood and its natives burst into bloom as a favorite subject for Sunday magazine spreads" ("Greenwich Thrillage" 333).

Hedger's reserved life directly refutes such popular notions of Greenwich Village. For example,

He forgot there was anything of importance going on in the world outside of his third floor studio. Nobody had ever taught him that he ought to be interested in other people; in the Pittsburgh steel strike, in the Fresh Air Fund, in the scandal about the Babies' Hospital. A grey wolf, living in a Wyoming canyon, would hardly have been less concerned about these things than was Don Hedger. (69)

Cather's Villager is distinctly *not* the sort that would have participated in the Paterson Strike Pageant of 1913 or the free speech debates at the Liberal Club. Don Hedger would not, like John Sloan, create biting political cartoons for the leftist periodical, The Masses. Instead, Don Hedger dedicated himself to "painting eight hours a day" and "only went out to hunt for food" like the grey wolf of Wyoming. He is, according to this description, one of the "poor and hard-working" artists Edith Lewis describes.

This pointed de-politicizing of the artist is something familiar in Cather's writing. In her 1936 letter to The Commonweal, known as "Escapism," she lays out her argument that "[e]conomics and art are strangers" (27). She articulates the clear distinction she sees between the imaginative writer and the reformer, the accomplished artist and the useful political thinker. She believes that different intelligences must be allowed their different vocations: "I can't believe that if Tolstoi and Goethe and Viollet-le-Duc and Descartes and Sir Isaac Newton were brought together and induced to work with a will," she writes, "their opinions, voiced in their various special languages and formulae, would materially help Mayor La Guardia to better living conditions in New York City" (21). Unlike many artists in Greenwich Village who sought to conflate their art and their politics, Cather thought both art and politics were best served when artists left political activism alone and political activists left art alone.⁸

Cather's description of Don Hedger's apolitical attitude and her subsequent declaration that he is, as a painter, "one of the first men among the moderns" (100),

⁸ To say Cather was apolitical, though, is an overstatement, at least according to our current understanding of "politics." I would argue that, like every other artist, political statements are implicit in Cather's fiction. So, though Cather never actively supported the political enfranchisement of American women, her pre-Nineteenth Amendment novels, O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, and My Ántonia, certainly have something to say about women's empowerment.

implies what “Escapism” and many other works spell out: Cather thought that to be an authentic artist, one had to cut oneself off from public life and dedicate oneself wholly to art. At the same time, though, “Coming, Aphrodite!” makes a declaration about Greenwich Village. By establishing Hedger on the south side of Washington Square, the precise location of Cather’s first New York address (60 Washington Square South), Cather’s story claims that there is more to Greenwich Village than the popular notions suggest, that there are different kinds of artists and different kinds of commitments that do not belong to “tawdry Bohemianism.” She implicitly claims that an artist who fits her conception, an artist like Willa Cather, belongs in the Village, too.

It is important to note, however, that many details of Don Hedger’s life in “Coming, Aphrodite!” do square with popular notions of Greenwich Village. Though he is never given to “side-show” antics of the sort tourists were coming to see, Hedger still has many qualities reminiscent of bohemianism. Unsurprisingly, given Cather’s Francophilia, Hedger’s bohemianism combines nineteenth-century European notions of Murger’s *la vie de Bohème* with modernist New York notions. For example, Hedger’s appearance recalls the antibourgeois attitude and destitute condition of the French bohemians: “Hedger . . . was hunched up in an old striped blanket coat, with a shapeless felt hat pulled over his bushy hair, wearing black shoes that had become grey, or brown ones that had become black, and he never put on gloves unless the day was biting cold” (63). Yet this vision of a raggedly-attired man is countered by his companion, Caesar III, a bull terrier that “had taken prizes at very exclusive dog shows” (63). The show dog speaks to Hedger’s refined tastes and his relative financial security (if Hedger ever “ran short of money,” Cather tells us, “he could always get any amount of commercial work”

[67]). It also echoes Leslie Fishbein's analysis of Village bohemians who "embrac[ed] picturesque poverty" in order to win "temporary reprieve from adult economic responsibilities that might confine their creativity" (214). The celebration of "childlike pleasures"—like playing with a dog?—were "fruits of privilege"; most bohemians could choose "respectability and economic stability" any time they wanted it (Fishbein 214). Don Hedger is no different: though "he did without a great many things other people think necessary," he could afford to pay advance rent and leave New York for months at a time (67).

"Coming, Aphrodite!" also suggests that Cather was aware of the effect the bohemian population had on other aspects of the neighborhood, such as the cost of housing. Cather writes that the "trained nurse" who leased the room adjacent to Hedger's "sub-let her rooms . . . to young people who came to New York to 'write' or 'paint'—who proposed to live by the sweat of the brow rather than of the hand, and who desired artistic surroundings" (64). The nurse was doing what so many property-managers did in early twentieth-century Greenwich Village: taking advantage of "artistic surroundings" and making some money. The Village drew many young artists because the majority of its population, immigrant laborers, kept the rents low. Once bohemians, whose education and background ensured that they were able to pay higher rates, began to look for lodging in the Village, rates went up. As Mary Simkhovitch, the activist and founder of the Greenwich House social settlement, wrote, "It was certainly amusing and astounding to us who had fought against cellar lodgings as unhealthful, damp and unfit for human habitation, as they were, to see them revived as 'one room studios' and let often at six

times the price of former rentals” (110-111). Caroline Ware describes the situation with a bit less humor:

To the local people, \$35 a month for an apartment for a whole family was high.

To the Villagers, \$50 for one or two people was low. The fact that the very houses where the Villagers were paying \$50 to \$75 were nothing but made-over tenements where the former occupants had been paying \$20 to \$25 helped to make the payment of such rents seem to reflect a warped sense of values. (108)

Cather’s nurse appears to be following this practice of raising rates to match what the market can bear: she tosses out a playwright for unpaid rent and quickly lets the room to Eden Bower, a singer subsidized by a Chicago millionaire.

Cather further suggests the disparity between the Villagers and the “local people” in her story by offering bleak glimpses of the lives of the urban poor. For example, Hedger hires “old Lizzie,” an impoverished and drunken woman from the neighborhood, to clean his little apartment. Lizzie has to “toil” up the stairs, wear “a great leather strap” on her wrist to “prevent dislocation of tendons,” and is directed “roughly” by Hedger as she scoured the place (73). Old Lizzie’s presence in Hedger’s apartment and Hedger’s bullying of her articulates the social divide that beset Greenwich Village. Though he seems to be content with few material possessions (“it didn’t occur to him to wish to be richer than this,” Cather tells us [67]), he also is unwilling to clean his own apartment. Instead, he “stood over” Lizzie and “watched her in nervous despair” (73). Hedger’s decision to employ an ill-suited local woman to do the dirty work of cleaning his place rather than just doing it himself suggests that he perceives a social distinction between himself and the laboring class akin to Ware’s separation of “local people” from

“Villagers.” But Hedger himself seems unaware of his own demarcation. Immediately after he shut the door behind Lizzie, Cather tells us, “he hurried off with his dog to lose himself among the stevedores and dock labourers on West Street” (73). Whether it is from ignorance or guilt, Don Hedger’s immediate reaction after authoritatively directing a working-class woman is to “lose himself” among laboring men, something Cather’s narrative suggests is impossible.

Other moments in Cather’s narrative present a much more coherent Greenwich Village, one where the divisions between the “Villagers” and “local people” are not so apparent. For example, in a scene early in the story, when Hedger first overhears Eden Bower singing, Cather describes a cityscape full of music and a neighborhood unified underneath such sounds. While looking at the stars, Hedger and his dog are “suddenly diverted by a sound.” Following Hedger’s attempt to locate the source, the narrative catalogs the many musical sounds that rise from the Village: “It was not the Prologue to *Pagliacci*, which rose ever and anon on hot evenings from an Italian tenement on Thompson Street, . . . nor was it the hurdy-gurdy man, who often played at the corner in the balmy twilight. No, this was a woman’s voice, singing the tempestuous, over-lapping phrases of Signor Puccini” (68). Though Eden’s voice, “a big, beautiful voice” that “sounded rather like a professional’s” (69), is privileged in this scene, the story suggests that there is a community-wide interest in artistic expression, that the Italian tenement is a source of operatic singing just like the artists’ studios. In another scene, Hedger and Eden Bower visit Coney Island to watch Molly Welch, one of Hedger’s models, perform a balloon act. One way Hedger convinces Eden to join his trip to Coney Island is to argue it is a place where a diverse crowd of New Yorkers can share a common

experience: "It's nice to see all the people," he tells her, "tailors and bar-tenders and prize-fighters with their best girls, and all sorts of folks taking a holiday" (82). To go to Coney Island is to be one of the crowd, to fit into the broader community.

Importantly, Cather creates this characterization of Greenwich Village in 1920; however, the Greenwich Village of most of the story is not the Village of 1920,⁹ but an earlier, pre-bohemian Village. The most specific time reference Cather offers is that the summer of the story's plot was "the very last summer of the old horse stages on Fifth Avenue" (65). Essentially, the story takes place at the turn of the twentieth century, around the years of Cather's first residence in the city. This temporal setting allows Cather to be free of much of the "Bohemia, Inc." atmosphere that her audience might expect, and it lets her make a claim about the heritage of the Village and add a refinement and depth to the public discussions of her neighborhood. It allows her to wax about the beauty and peace of the place, a peace threatened by the advent of modern life:

The fountain had lately begun operations for the season and was throwing up a mist of rainbow water which now and then blew south and sprayed a bunch of Italian babies that were being supported on the outer rim by older, very little older, brothers and sisters. Plump robins were hopping about on the soil; the grass was newly cut and blindingly green. Looking up the Avenue through the Arch, one could see the young poplars with their bright, sticky leaves, and the Brevoort glistening in its spring coat of paint, and shining horses and carriages,--

⁹ The end of the story, an epilogue of sorts, is set twenty years after the rest of the action, suggesting that the last few pages are set in New York circa 1920.

occasionally an automobile, mis-shapen and sullen, like an ugly threat in a stream of things that were bright and beautiful and alive. (65)

This description, full of spring and rebirth images —wet babies, hungry robins, newly cut grass, sticky-leaved poplars—recalls the Village in an idyllic past, a “bright and beautiful and alive” instant before the “mis-shapen and sullen” cars turn the neighborhood into another piece of urban machinery. Her insertion of the “ugly threat” at the end of a lovely descriptive passage gives a tone of regret to the story, as if the authentic Greenwich Village where artists like Don Hedger and Eden Bower could come together was gone. It is a nostalgic voice similar to the one she used when offering her friend Yehudi Menuhin “historical perspectives” about New York. She “resurrect[ed] a Manhattan where whole houses belonged to single families, the breadwinners of which walked or rode to Wall Street, tipping their hats to acquaintances met en route” (Menuhin 184). Her sense of regret is not unlike Henry James’s in The American Scene. As he returns to Washington Place, the site of his birth and childhood, he is saddened by the loss of his remembered home: he realized the hope that “nearly nothing was changed” was a “pretence” and he felt “amputated of half [his] history” (91). James mourns the loss of the Greenwich Village of his young memory, a Village captured in his 1881 novel Washington Square. Although Cather never knew the patrician world of James with intimacy, she admired something of the old-world elegance that accompanied nineteenth-century Greenwich Village.¹⁰ Before it became lionized in the press as a den of “tawdry

¹⁰ In the late nineteenth century, Greenwich Village, especially around Washington Square and on streets adjacent to lower Fifth Avenue, was home to upper-class New Yorkers, some living in mansions that predated the Civil War. By the twentieth century, this group felt threatened by the growing immigrant population and the encroachment of commercial buildings, and most abandoned the neighborhood. It was a

Bohemianism,” the Village could claim a quiet detachment from the urban cacophony of New York City. “Coming, Aphrodite!” is set on the margin between the Old Village and the New; it is, after all, the “very last summer” of horse stages clopping up Fifth Avenue.

But it would be simplistic to claim Cather is, like Henry James, lamenting the loss of wealthy, old-stock Villagers. I do think she was attracted to the quiet refinement that money can provide; however, her story is not about that world. Her Greenwich Village borders Henry James’s Greenwich Village, but they are not the same place. Instead, Cather suggests, not unlike Edith Lewis, that the Village was, for her, a “sedate Bohemia,” a place where artists could do serious work without undue interruptions. Don Hedger can be a withdrawn artist, yet still be economically stable, partly because he lives in Greenwich Village, where no one is taken aback by his behavior. Likewise, Eden Bower, who grew up in the Midwest but wanted a little urban training and excitement before leaving for Europe, could get what she needed in Greenwich Village. She is able to socialize with whomever she pleases, to be a part of a Coney Island show for one afternoon, and to have a passionate relationship with an eccentric artist—even unbolt the doors that separated their rooms—without any pressure for marriage. Ross Wetzsteon perceptively argues that Willa Cather herself got “order, comfort, security, and especially privacy” from the Village, that she “sought the isolation that only a tolerant community could provide” (297; 298). She gave her characters the same kind of isolation, and they had a sexual and emotional relationship unhindered by prying neighbors. Willa Cather used the Village in “Coming, Aphrodite!” to create a space where her characters could be

group from this patrician population, however, that in the 1890s commissioned and funded the Washington Memorial Arch in an attempt to unite the Village to its “old republican virtues” (McFarland 77-81).

alone as they tromped through the city, where they could make decisions for themselves and accept, for themselves, the consequences.

-3-

Cather at the Colonies

One afternoon in August of 1926, Willa Cather went for a walk in the woods of southern New Hampshire. She had worked on her new novel about an Archbishop all morning in the studio that the MacDowell Colony provided her, and she and Mary Colum, an Irish writer, stole away to the Inn in Peterborough for a hearty lunch. In the afternoons, though, she liked to put her pen down and walk among the trees. She brought her new pages with her and, after reaching the stone amphitheatre surrounded by tall pines, she read her words aloud. Standing against the sheer cliffs of the Pageant Theatre, her voice echoed off the rock and came back to her. Perhaps, surrounded by the green of New Hampshire, she needed to hear her story of nineteenth-century New Mexico to rebound against dry rock, against a surface that reminded her of the pale desert. Or perhaps she just liked the acoustics. In any case, she finished her reading, noted what worked and what did not work, and tramped off again through the woods (Sergeant 235).

This image of Cather reading pages of one of her most acclaimed novels, Death Comes for the Archbishop, in the middle of a forest, written just moments before in the picturesque seclusion of a private studio, is, perhaps, a romanticized description of her MacDowell experience, a month that was, overall, disappointing. But such visions of the productive artist alone in a natural environment are just what artist colony founders had in mind. Artist colonies were created to be a haven from the modern world. “The artist,”

Herbert Gorman wrote in his 1922 New York Times article about the MacDowell Colony, “must get away from the roar of the ‘L’s,’ the crashing of automobiles and the multitudinous discords of great cities, with their futile obligations and interruptions” (16). What the artist needs, Gorman argues, is silence:

Quietude must surround him if he is to succeed in realizing in marble, music, paint, or words the subtle divagations of the human soul. He must find that high and still place where the hurrying footfalls of the busy days beat afar off, where in the peace and serenity so invaluable to his unobstructed self-expression he may conceive, mold, labor over and finish as they should be finished those intellectual things that are to be the heritage of tomorrow. (16)

Where else can one find “peace and serenity,” the thinking went, than in the beauty and comfort of trees and footpaths and rustic studios and twittering songbirds?

E. A. Robinson, who spent many summers at the MacDowell Colony, expresses a similar need: in the spring of 1911, he writes, “I found myself in possession of a thing I was pleased to call an Idea for a Work of Art, and one that required, for its most advantageous working out, a combination of conditions that was not promised by the sights, smells, temperatures, and noises of New York City” (35). What Robinson “required, or at least wished for” was a “place in the country, not too far from the civilizing conveniences of life” with a “secluded and substantial building in the woods” to work in, complete with “a free view from the door of the best kind of New England scenery” (35). Robert Frost, writing to the director of the new Bread Loaf School of English, Wilfred Davison, in 1920, said he yearned for a rural location in which to write, surrounded by other writers, “in a sort of summer literary camp” (qtd. in Bain 13). He

thought the wooded atmosphere of Middlebury's rural campus would be more conducive to such an atmosphere than any formal college (Bain 13).

Mabel Dodge Luhan, whose home in Taos, New Mexico, was a gathering place for artists and intellectuals, claimed that "acquiring a piece of this land here was a symbolic move, a picture of what was happening inside me." Like Robinson, Luhan understood her personal struggle to be directly linked to the space she occupied:

I had to have a place of my own to live on where I could take root and make a life in a home. This earth and Tony [Luhan] were identical in my imagination and his, and I wanted to become a part of them, and the day the place became mine, it was as though I had been accepted by the universe. In that day I became centered and ceased the lonesome pilgrimage forever. (Luhan 232-233)

Luhan understood Taos—and the native Pueblo population, particularly her husband Antonio (Tony) Luhan—as a powerful counter to her previous experiences in Florence, Italy, and New York City.¹ In the sparsely-populated land surrounding Taos, Mabel Dodge Luhan drew hundreds of artists and writers who, like her, responded to "the strikingly diverse landscape of mesa, mountain, and desert; the high altitude and dry climate . . .; [and] the native American and Hispanic peoples who had maintained their cultural integrity for centuries" and offered "rich sources" for artists yearning for "an aesthetic which would break the European cultural dominance over American art and

¹ For example, Luhan writes:

In the years gone by, yearning and unsatisfied in Italy, I had had preoccupations that had absorbed all my thoughts and I called them love. Then in New York I had learned to use the name of sex for the strong autonomous serpent in the blood that once unleashed took full possession of all my other activities, and rode me unmercifully.

Here in Taos I was awake to a new experience of sex and love, more mature and more civilized than any I had known before. (234)

literature” (Rudnick, Mabel 144). Like Robinson, Frost, and Gorman, the artists who surrounded Luhan in Taos felt their art needed a new environment. They were grateful that Luhan, inheritor of an extensive fortune, was there to provide a comfortable place to create.

Artists’ colonies, like those in Peterborough and Taos, sought to create a protected space in American culture, a place where creative work was valued and inspired. This space was rural, natural. Artists who sojourned at colonies “rejected . . . the possibility that the urban landscape could provide the conditions and means necessary to their personal, aesthetic, and social visions” (Rudnick, Utopian 24). The forests, mountains, and deserts offered artists a serene atmosphere that distanced them from chaotic urban centers. Cities, particularly New York City, were a double-edged sword for early twentieth-century artists. On the one hand, they were important locales for success in the marketplace: artists were able to network with other artists, publishers, gallery owners, and a large and culturally diverse population.² On the other hand, cities were, for many, an enormous distraction from creative work. In her search for quiet place to write, for example, Willa Cather rented the apartment above hers in order to keep it unoccupied; she could not tolerate the noise of the footsteps (Sergeant 236).

Formalized artists’ colonies arose for the first time in America in the early twentieth century.³ Though different colonies had different ambitions and structures,

² See note 2 in Chapter Two, “Willa Cather’s Greenwich Village,” for a list of the many artists and cultural figures that lived in New York City between 1910 and 1930.

³ In the nineteenth century, several American locales were central gathering places for artists, including Old Lyme, Connecticut, and Appledore, Dublin, and Cornish, New Hampshire. These communities “developed casually around a charismatic figure” (McDermott 11), and were not formally established as ongoing colonies. It was not until 1907, when the MacDowell Colony formed, complete with rules and a specific, articulated mission, that the modern American artist colony emerged.

they had a few key elements in common: a rural setting that offered natural beauty and seclusion, the presence of a select group of dedicated and accomplished artists, and a belief that artists required circumstances and an atmosphere that most could not attain easily. In the 1920s, Willa Cather spent time at three widely-recognized colonies for artists, and this chapter explores her experience at each. Her first experience, at the Bread Loaf campus of Middlebury College in 1922, is distinct in that Bread Loaf had not yet become the site of the now-famous Writers' Conference. Cather was invited to deliver lectures to students at the Bread Loaf School of English, and her role was largely as a paid teacher and writer-in-residence. In 1925, Cather spent time at another major colony: Mabel Dodge Luhan's home, Los Gallos, in Taos, New Mexico. In August of 1926, Cather had her final colony experience at the highly-formalized and influential MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire.

Cather's experience at these colonies suggests that the 1920s were a time of major transition in Cather's understanding of herself as an author. She began the decade moderately well-known, the author of four novels, three of which garnered significant critical attention. By the time the decade ended, however, Cather was a major American novelist, the winner of the Pulitzer Prize, and the author of five more novels, all of which aroused considerable critical and popular interest. In this move from respected professional author to renowned literary artist, Cather's relationship with arts communities shifted. Now, instead of the young writer responding to the friendship of eminent people, like Annie Adams Fields, Willa Cather *was* the eminent person. When arts communities gathered, she was in demand as a celebrity and writer and was a curiosity for the new generation of would-be authors.

This ascending status naturally affected her experience at artists' colonies. At Bread Loaf, in 1922, she apparently had a fine time, was well-liked by students, and was invited to return as a lecturer in following years. Though she declined those invitations, she did not do so out of displeasure for the program; instead, her career took off and Bread Loaf, which did not formally begin its Writer's Conference until 1926, did not manage to reclaim her attention. In 1925, when she visited the Luhans in Taos, she could enjoy the quiet of the Pink House (a guest cottage) and was free to disassociate herself from the gathered artists as much as she wished. Mabel Dodge and Tony Luhan were Cather's friends, and though a retrospective account of her sojourn may place Cather in one of American modernism's premier colonies, she herself may have simply felt she was staying at a friend's house for awhile. In August, 1926, however, Cather officially registered at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, a nineteen-year-old, structured artists' colony.⁴ Though she wrote part of Death Comes for the Archbishop while there, she could not tolerate the routine of the colony and its imposition on her personal work habits. She met and befriended a few people while there, but, mostly, she found the MacDowell Colony dissatisfying, and after 1926, she never went to another artists' colony again.

Willa Cather's experiences at these three distinct arts colonies in the 1920s suggest that she was searching for the right environment in which to work. These

⁴ My claim that Cather registered is inferred from the fact that the MacDowell Colony records indicate that Cather's residency began on August 1, 1926, and ended on August 30, 1926 (However, the "Colony's earliest record keeping was not always precise when it came to the exact dates artists were in residence, so some of these dates may not be exactly right" [Aldridge]). Her presence, then, was official, for others who were apparently there when Cather was there, like the Irish writer Mary Colum, are not in the official records. This suggests, as do memoirs of the MacDowell Colony, that some artists who were friends with Marion MacDowell just stopped by and were not actual "colonists."

environments offered an alternative to her New York apartment and provided fresh vistas that her work was particularly responsive to (especially the composition of Death Comes for the Archbishop in Taos). They also provided her with opportunities to explore what many felt were ideal creative environments.

Most importantly, the arts colonies provided Cather atmospheres for self-discovery. Through a series of participations in their communities, coupled with a consistent output of remarkable work, Cather became an eminent American novelist, and she knew it. The communities were a source of affirmation for her, partly in her realization that she did not really need them. In the early 1920s, her fiction suggests a preoccupation with alienation and the writer's exile from community. At the same time, she began her experimentation with arts colonies. Perhaps the experimentation grew out of the alienation, perhaps Cather hoped the arts colonies, where creative, intellectual figures gathered, would offer camaraderie to her sense of exile. However, by 1926, Cather forsook the arts colonies, finding not strength in camaraderie, but distraction. She probably realized that she had all she needed, for, that same year, she and Edith Lewis, her life-long comrade, built their own cabin on Grand Manan, an island in the Bay of Fundy, effectively creating a miniature arts colony of their own.

**Willa Cather Summer:
Bread Loaf, 1922**

Willa Cather's few weeks in Vermont in July of 1922 in the School of English at the Bread Loaf campus of Middlebury College were her first in a secluded, organized retreat for artists and aspiring artists, and it was a thoroughly positive experience for her.

She was invited to give a series of lectures to the students enrolled in the school, and she was offered a stipend and room and board while she was there. She had been a teacher previously in Pittsburgh, and though she left her position to work for S. S. McClure in New York, she had been a successful instructor. Teaching, then, was a familiar experience, but the Bread Loaf School of English offered her an improvement on that experience.

The Bread Loaf summer school of English was started in 1920 on the model of Middlebury College's already active summer schools in foreign languages. It offered master's-level graduate courses in English and American literature, pedagogy, public speaking and debate, modern drama, and composition. The School of English at the Bread Loaf campus of Middlebury College combines the structure of a school with the objective of creating a community to support and inspire writing. It offers classrooms, tuition-paying attendees, and academically-trained staff in a program tailored to serious, advanced students. By 1922, the school was drawing high-profile lecturers, including Cather, writer Katherine Lee Bates, poet Edwin Markham, and poet and anthologist Louis Untermeyer (Bain 12-13). By 1926, the School of English was expanded to include a special conference on creative writing. The Bread Loaf Writers' Conference became a prominent locale in twentieth-century American writing, a place for writers to meet one another, brush shoulders with literary celebrities, and share their work. Robert Frost, called the "spiritual godfather" of the Writers' Conference, is only one of dozens of well-known writers that have attended—and still attend—the summer conference at Bread Loaf.

But when Willa Cather was there in 1922, it had none of that luster. In a January 26, 1922, letter to her long-time friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Cather admits that she's never heard of the Bread Loaf school before. Still, it was an honor to be asked to lecture, as the invitation was "an indication of her recognition as a writer of repute, someone qualified to dispense words of wisdom to aspiring writers" (Stout, "1922" 2-3), for Cather's authority as their teacher came not from her university degree, but from her success as a novelist. It was also a job that earned her \$200, plus expenses, and a few weeks in the picturesque Green Mountains of Vermont.⁵

Cather agreed to give five lectures at Bread Loaf, and she suggested in a February 15, 1922, letter to the director, Wilfred Davison, that three of them be on writing, another, drawing on her years at McClure's, on the writer's relationship to the magazine editor, and the final a question-and-answer session with students. These lectures were a hit. Her presence so dominated the session in the summer of 1922 that, in subsequent years, 1922 at Bread Loaf was referred to as "Willa Cather Summer" (Anderson 41). An anonymous student, quoted in Anderson's history, offers the only available report of Cather's lectures. As such, it deserves extended quotation:

During the course of her three weeks' stay at Bread Loaf, we learned something of the strength and depth of her personality. She drew for us a distinction between books that "were born" and books that "were made" or manufactured. The process by which books, the great books, "were born" she described as "an emotional explosion," the sudden flash of an idea gathering to itself the related

⁵ In a July 2, 1922, letter to Wilfred Davison, Cather says she is eagerly looking forward to a stay in the mountains, suggesting that the natural surroundings were important to her understanding of Bread Loaf and the experience she anticipated.

experiences of the past and forming the nucleus of a story. Written expressions, she believed, enriched and deepened the artist's appreciation and enjoyment of life. The artist, to do his best work, should use what lies within his own experience, and he will discover this to be an inexhaustible resource. She warned young writers against a flower[y] style, plain, simple language being preferable.

(41)

As this anonymous student reports it, Cather's lectures were full of advice and observations about the creation of meaningful works of art. Typical of Cather's pronouncements about art, she aimed high, concerning herself only with writing of the highest standard, and she located the source of that art in an ethereal realm—an "emotional explosion"—that defies precise definition. Her quasi-mystical language about books that "are born" rather than "manufactured" echoed her position in "The Novel D  meubl  ," an essay published in April of that same year: "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" (41-42).

The advice Cather gave in her lectures to the students at the Bread Loaf School of English was, in a way, a re-articulation of advice she had received years earlier, advice she had tested and accepted as valid. Cather's insistence at Bread Loaf that one should "use what lies within his own experience" reiterates Sarah Orne Jewett's wisdom from a 1908 letter to Cather. "I want you to be surer of your backgrounds," Jewett wrote to her, "these are uncommon equipment" (248). Cather's insistence on literature that emerges from honest inspiration—is "born," not "made"—also reflects Jewett's advice: "your

vivid, exciting companionship in the office must not be your audience, you must find your own quiet centre of life, and write from that to the world . . . you must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up” (Jewett 249). Cather, who would, in 1925, collect and introduce The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett, understood Bread Loaf as a forum for influencing future literary output, and she drew upon a writer who influenced her as she influenced others, effectively linking the American literary past with its potential future.⁶

Cather’s influence on the Bread Loaf students was not confined to her four o’clock lectures, which had to be held late to enable all the students to attend (Birtwell 129). She also volunteered her advice as part of Professor George Whicher’s creative writing course. Cather, Whicher, and the students would gather in the living room of Whicher’s cottage, and Whicher would read student fiction aloud. Cather, her back turned to the group in order to avoid embarrassment to herself or the student writer, listened and, when Whicher finished, commented. Her comments were direct and consistent with the attitudes expressed in her lectures: a student’s use of “scene of ancient household rites” to describe a kitchen provoked “Miss Cather’s kindly, chuckling criticism of this amateurishness.” When another student wrote about a musical virtuoso, Cather warned them “how very dangerous it was for a young writer to get a violin into the story” (Birtwell 128). She followed this with a story from her own experience, noting her first published story, “Peter” (1892), used the tale of an immigrant’s suicide, a tale

⁶ As others have argued, Cather’s editing of Jewett can be read as an act of “revisionism and of canon-formation” to “depict and lay claim to an enabling model of female creativity, and to establish a context, a precedent, a history, and a favorable climate of reception for the nondramatic—in many ways ‘queer’—narratives she was working on at the time” (Lindemann 90-91).

she would return to in My Ántonia (1918). Her different handling of that tale, she noted, revealed “a lifetime of artistic evolution” (Birtwell 129).

This interaction in George Whicher’s creative writing class in 1922 is the only time Cather, after she became a professional author, formally discussed student writing with student writers. By 1925, she told an interviewer that fiction writing classes were a waste of time: “they can only teach those patterns which have proved successful. If one is going to do new business the patterns cannot help” (Bohlke 76-77). Her experience at Bread Loaf, then, was a rare one. She never again gave a series of lectures, and she never again gave anything but bad press to creative writing courses.

In 1922, however, Cather created “Willa Cather Summer” at Bread Loaf. The students appreciated Cather so much that they wrote a song in her honor:

O Miss Cather, when we gather

For your talks so wise and clear

Now you’re going we’re all hoping

You’ll come back another year. (qtd. in Woodress, Willa 322)

After Cather and the other visitors left, the students put on a review that lampooned their teachers. The students had no problem mocking the “drolleries” of Louis Untermeyer or the dog, Tansy, which followed Katherine Lee Bates wherever she went. But “no one could be found who could, or would, take off” Willa Cather. Lorna Birtwell, a student and later friend of Cather, deemed the lack of Cather parody a sign of respect (“To be inimitable! It is the hallmark of the great artist” [132]). Indeed, Cather’s weeks at Bread Loaf were very satisfying, both for her, the students, and the administration. However, when she was asked to return in 1924 and in 1925; she declined both offers and told

Wilfred Davison that she probably would not ever have time to attend Bread Loaf again (Cather, Calendar 121, #812).

Why did Cather, who said in the months following her stay that she had a terrific time (Stout, “1922” 12), never return to Bread Loaf? Davison provided her a secluded cabin—Maple Cottage—in which she could stay with Edith Lewis; she was able to work on A Lost Lady in the mornings, her preferred writing time; she had a terrific response from students; she made sustained friendships with the Whicher family and others; and she earned a modest income. Why didn’t Cather come back to Bread Loaf?

Janis Stout argues that, with the publication of One of Ours in the fall of 1922, which sold well despite a mixed critical reception, Cather’s income stabilized, and side jobs, like lecturing at Bread Loaf, were no longer necessary (“1922” 13). James Woodress speculates that Cather “found her three weeks at Bread Loaf exhausting and never again was tempted” (Willa 322). I think a combination of factors led to Cather’s refusal to return: as her books brought her more money, she could afford to make decisions independent of financial concerns. She traveled often, and the trajectory of her life pushed her toward other experiences. Though she enjoyed Bread Loaf, by the time Davison’s first follow-up offer reached her in 1924, she was focused elsewhere.

The Conditions that Contribute to an Artist’s Work: Taos, 1925

Mabel Dodge left Greenwich Village in 1917 because she sought to change her life. She needed a new atmosphere, so she traveled to New Mexico. Her arrival in Taos was momentous: “For the first time in my life I heard the world singing in the same key in which my own life inside me had sometimes lifted and poured itself out. But that had

always been a solitary thrill before this. Now the world and I were met together in the happiest conjunction. Never had I felt so befriended” (Luhan 194). Mabel Dodge Luhan was part of a larger movement in American arts to find a “refuge where [artists’] aesthetic energies would be safe, and where they could express them freely.” Many artists—painters, writers, musicians, and others—“felt endangered by what they identified as America’s corrosive materialism and civic hypocrisy. They believed that their increasingly industrial society stultified creativeness, and they developed a familiar secessionist intent” (Gibson 180).

Many of these artists came to a large estate outside Taos called Los Gallos. This estate, complete with a three-story, twenty-two room Big House, five guest houses, a twelve-hundred-foot gatehouse, twelve acres of land next to Taos Pueblo, and remarkable views of the Sacred Mountain, belonged to Dodge Luhan (Rudnick, *Utopian* 7). Dodge Luhan purchased the property in 1918, and Tony Luhan (a tribal leader of the Taos Pueblos and, after 1923, Dodge Luhan’s husband) supervised the construction. Part of Dodge Luhan’s life-long quest for a “home”—she moved from Buffalo, New York, to Florence, Italy, to Greenwich Village, New York, and then, finally, to Taos, New Mexico—Los Gallos “was created with the utopian intention of altering human consciousness and human relationships through the built environment.” Though ironically lavish given Dodge Luhan’s declared intentions to counter American materialism, the place sincerely and profoundly helped enable a great deal of creativity over a period of many years. The artists and intellectuals who visited Los Gallos “typically left Taos with their social ideals, their art, and themselves, revitalized”

(Rudnick, Utopian 57-58).⁷ Artists often stayed in one of Dodge Luhan's guest cottages, painted or wrote about the environment surrounding Los Gallos, and made personal and professional connections with others who gathered.

It is unclear when Willa Cather met Mabel Dodge Luhan. They lived near each other in New York City between 1913 and 1917, when then Dodge held forth in her Greenwich Village salon. "Cather must have met [Dodge Luhan] in New York," according to James Woodress (Willa 363); however, no documentary evidence confirms such a meeting or provides details about it, if it occurred. The earliest existing letter from Cather to Dodge Luhan is dated May 23, 1925, only a few months before Cather's first visit to Los Gallos that July. The letter is informal, familiar, and it clearly was not the first letter of their correspondence, as Cather refers to friends-in-common (like Elizabeth Sergeant) and responds to Dodge Luhan's invitation to Taos (Cather, Calendar 117, #783).

Willa Cather and her partner, Edith Lewis, traveled to Taos, New Mexico, in the summer of 1925 and stayed with Tony and Mabel Dodge Luhan at Los Gallos in a guest house called simply the Pink House. "With one or two exceptions, Willa Cather never visited anyone," Edith Lewis recalls in her 1953 memoir of Cather, "but Mabel Luhan was very persistent, in a quiet, persuasive way . . . [she] promised that [Cather] should never be bothered by anyone, need never see anyone, except when she came over for

⁷ A partial list of the cultural figures whose "lives and works were affected by their visits to the Luhan house and its environs" in the early and mid twentieth century includes: Mary Austin, Myron Brinig, Witter Bynner, Willa Cather, Harvey Fergusson, Aldous Huxley, Spud Johnson, D. H. Lawrence, Oliver La Farge, Jean Toomer, Frank Waters, Ansel Adams, Dorothy Brett, Andrew Dasburg, Miriam DeWitt, Maynard Dixon, Nicolai Fechin, Laura Gilpin, Marsden Hartley, Ernest Knee, Ward Lockwood, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Ida Rauh, Arnold Rönnebeck, Maurice Sterne, Paul Strand, Rebecca Strand, Cady Wells, Edward Weston, Carlos Chavez, Dane Rudhyar, Leopold Stokowski, Robert Edmund Jones, Martha Graham, John Collier, Carl Jung, Jaime de Angulo, Elsie Clews Parsons, Ella Young, Elizabeth Sergeant, and Carl Jung (Rudnick, Utopian 7-8; Sergeant 216).

meals” (141). So, Cather accepted. Dodge Luhan’s promises to allow Cather ample privacy to work must have been alluring in this remarkably productive time: in the spring of 1925, Cather wrote her short novel My Mortal Enemy; that summer, Cather read proof of The Professor’s House and conceived of her next novel, Death Comes for the Archbishop, while reading William Howlett’s The Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf late one night in a Santa Fe hotel room.

Cather was also likely drawn, perhaps in a more subtle way, to the attitudes that led Dodge Luhan to create Los Gallos. During this period, Cather, too, was concerned about the “corrosive materialism” of postwar America. Her fiction of this time, particularly A Lost Lady and The Professor’s House, prominently feature characters, like Ivy Peters and Louis Marsellus, whose ability to exploit opportunities for wealth give them a dangerous amount of social power, and whose exploitation wreaks havoc on things of value (Ivy Peters drains a beloved marsh in order to plant more wheat; Louis Marsellus, good intentioned but wrong-headed, glories in the material wealth enabled by the late Tom Outland’s patent). Cather, like Dodge Luhan, was attracted to a world that did not revel in capitalist acquisition. Instead, both women were concerned with creating an atmosphere that supported creativity in a landscape and culture that was amenable to art. Ironically, Cather, like Dodge Luhan, also enjoyed the comfort and service that came from having a great deal of money while in such a landscape.

Though attracted to Dodge Luhan’s home and her sensitivity towards artists, it is unlikely that Cather understood herself as part of a thriving art colony. As mentioned previously, Dodge Luhan was Cather’s friend, and she could have very well understood her sojourn in Taos as simply staying at a friend’s house. Yet, the same could be true for

dozens of the notable artists who stayed for a time at Los Gallos. Unlike Bread Loaf and the MacDowell Colony, the artist colony that formed at Los Gallos arose organically out of Mabel Dodge Luhan's personal relationships and her desire to cultivate those relationships by providing space and opportunity for artists to work. Most of the time, she personally invited her guests. And though she was invested in surrounding herself with prominent people,⁸ she did not have an application procedure or a faculty list to fill. Therefore, the colony that surrounded Los Gallos can be seen most clearly in retrospect, and Willa Cather was part of that colony. She not only used Dodge Luhan's home as a place to write, but also engaged the other "colonists" in meaningful exchanges that directly impacted her art.

The individual who influenced Cather the most during her stay at Los Gallos was Tony Luhan, Mabel Dodge Luhan's husband. Lewis remembers: "Willa Cather was very much impressed by Tony Luhan, and felt an instant liking and admiration for him. He was a splendid figure, over six feet tall, with a noble head and dignified carriage; there was great simplicity and kindness in his voice and manner" (142). Elizabeth Sergeant remarks that "Tony is a man of force, dignity and charm as well as wisdom and intuition" and that he particularly struck Cather (216). Lewis, who claims Cather's character Eusabio from Death Comes for the Archbishop is likely based on Tony Luhan, describes her and Cather's interactions with him. Dodge Luhan "rarely appeared" but "sent us off on long drives about the country with Tony." "Tony would sit in the driver's seat," Lewis continues,

⁸ In the volume of her memoir entitled Movers and Shakers, Dodge Luhan describes her personal ambition while creating her Greenwich Village salon in 1913: she desired "to know the Heads of things, Heads of Movements, Heads of Newspapers, Heads of all kind of groups of people. I became a Species of Head Hunter, in fact" (qtd. in Rudnick, Mabel 74).

In his silver bracelets and purple blanket, often singing softly to himself; while we sat behind. He took us to some of the almost inaccessible Mexican villages hidden in the Cimmaron mountains, where the Penitentes still followed their old fierce customs; and from Tony, Willa Cather learned many things about the country and the people that she could not have learned otherwise. He talked very little, but what he said was always illuminating and curiously poetic. (142)

Luhan, who appears in Lewis's description to be a mysterious, exotic presence, was a complicated figure in Taos, both "vain and proud, but also generous, earthy, and good-humored" (Rudnick, Utopian 47). His relationship to the Native community was complex: he married a rich white woman and, in doing so, alienated members of his community; at the same time, he was recognized as a key figure who helped the Pueblos organize and protect their lands and cultures (Rudnick, Mabel 155; Rudnick, Utopian 46). His relationship with the white artist population was also complicated. Sergeant remembers him "detached and hieratical, sitting apart, playing solitaire amidst Mabel's Florentine relics . . . as the white artists and intellectuals tossed the ball of the higher conversation back and forth (216). However, his "illiteracy and lack of formal education did not prevent his having a powerful spiritual influence" on visitors, and he "negotiate[d] two entirely different worlds and cultures with aplomb": when white people came in search of "the age-old wisdom of the Indians, they were more than like to get an earful about the automobiles he loved to drive" (Rudnick, Utopian 46-47). According to Christopher Schedler, Tony Luhan offered Cather "an intercultural model of the dialogic social transactions that characterize the cultural borderlands" and impacted her vision of Death Comes for the Archbishop (119).

Tony Luhan seems to have influenced Cather more explicitly than Dodge Luhan herself did, particularly if Tony Luhan is, as Lewis suggests, the model for Eusabio. Dodge Luhan, however, did have resonance in Cather's life, though her work was done silently, implicitly. Dodge Luhan understood what many others did not: one could affect Willa Cather's writing most positively by being absent. Edith Lewis writes that Cather's visits to Dodge Luhan were "very rewarding": "Mabel Luhan—essentially an artist herself—knew the conditions that contribute to an artist's work, and was able to create them. . . . one felt that she enjoyed helping them toward their aim and seeing them realize their desires" (143). Dodge Luhan provided the seclusion of the Pink House, a space for Cather to write that had all she required: privacy, comfort, and the rich atmosphere of Taos.

Cather and Edith Lewis did, however, travel twenty-five miles into the mountains to see their acquaintances, D. H. Lawrence and his wife, Frieda. They had met in 1924 when the Lawrences and Dorothy Brett attended tea at 5 Bank Street in New York. Dorothy Brett remembers kind and hospitable hostesses, excellent tea, and D. H. Lawrence's constant teasing of Willa Cather. "I hate literature and literary people," Lawrence "mischievously" claimed, "People shouldn't fuss so much about art. I hate books and art and the whole business." The more "indignant" Cather became, the more Lawrence "stormed" (Brett 84). Still, Cather was interested in his company enough to look him up in the summer of 1925. They found the Lawrences immersed in rustic living: baking their own bread, milking their own cow. This visit, Lawrence's talk was "full of charm and vivacity" and "without any of the polemics" of their previous

encounter: “nothing could have been friendlier or more hospitable than their welcome” (Lewis 143).

Cather’s relationship to the people of Taos was, as her desire for secluded space suggests, tepid. She loved the southwestern environment, and her fiction suggests a complicated engagement with its cultures, but unlike many of the Taos artists who became active in the political, social, and cultural issues of the region, Cather was not an explicit activist for such issues.⁹ Sergeant, herself an activist for Native issues, recalls that Dodge Luhan, who “push[ed] all her New York friends to join the Indian ‘movement’ . . . made no headway with Willa Cather” (217). Joseph Foster’s memoir of D. H. Lawrence in Taos, however, reveals that Cather at least took enough interest in the people of Taos to attend a “Round Dance,” where whites danced “shoulder to shoulder with the Indians.” After describing the rising and falling voices of the Indian chorus, Foster writes that his friend “pointed out a middle-aged woman in starched white, spinsterish, wide-eyed, disdainful, at the edge of the circle. ‘That’s Willa Cather. She’s a botanist enthusiast. She’s writing a novel about Santa Fe—the Archbishop or something—’” (180). Foster’s comment highlights qualities that determined Cather’s relationship to the Taos community: Cather was “middle-aged,” older than many of the participants in the arts communities; she was in “starched white” and “spinsterish,” unwilling to be extravagant for extravagance’s sake; she was “wide-eyed,” excited,

⁹ There is one suggestion that Cather did get involved in the preservation of certain historical structures in New Mexico. Gibson claims Cather “took a special interest in the cloister at Acoma. As a member of the Society of Colonial Arts she helped to raise the sum of \$5,000 required for its preservation. She wrote articles about the cloister and the need for prompt conservation attention and spoke on its behalf” (171). Gibson’s source is the 2 February 1933 edition of the Santa Fe New Mexican. Cather’s bibliographer, Joan Crane, does not list any such articles.

perceptive, and a bit tense; and she was “disdainful” and “at the edge of the circle,” there, but not wholeheartedly investing herself in the drama of the community.

Cather’s experience at Los Gallos suggests that she made distinctions among different aspects of the colony experience, greatly valuing some and disregarding others. She wrote productively while there, remained friends with Dodge Luhan, was significantly affected by Tony Luhan, and wrote poignantly of the northern New Mexico region many times in her fiction. But she was not interested, as many were, in Jungian psychology, nor in the Taos group’s particular style of political activism. She did not lobby legislators or write letters to the editor or march in the streets. She did, however, deeply engage the issues. Central to Death Comes for the Archbishop is a meditation on the conflicts between Natives and foreign intruders, for example. Her engagement with the Taos artist colony was selective: she greatly responded to Dodge Luhan’s sensitive provisions for her creativity, but did not suppress her individual identity to become a full-fledged member of the Taos arts circle.

**Evading Pursuit:
The MacDowell Colony, 1926**

The MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, was the only regulated, systematic, consciously-designed artist colony that Willa Cather ever attended. Bread Loaf and Taos, though they have emerged as notable colonies, were not created with the specific purpose of establishing an enduring and productive atmosphere for talented artists. The MacDowell Colony was created with that purpose.

After the death of her husband, composer Edward MacDowell, Marian MacDowell sought to transform their rural New Hampshire home, Hillcrest, into a haven for a few artists in the summer months. The MacDowells, both musicians, had benefited enormously from the solitude and wooded environment at Hillcrest, and they wanted to give others that experience. Even before Edward's death, Marian had gathered support to create the Edward MacDowell Association, which became the administrative body that governed the MacDowell Colony.

The Edward MacDowell Association was incorporated in 1907 and that summer the first colonists, writer Mary Mears and sculptor Helen Mears, arrived. Admission policies were designed to encourage a wide variety of artists of all media and background. To offer artists the opportunity to attend the MacDowell Colony if they wished, "regardless of social status or income," Mrs. MacDowell and the MacDowell Association "considered talent and seriousness of purpose as criteria for admission" (McDermott 12). Marian MacDowell was concerned that the colony not become a "charitable institution," and so in her deed of gift to the Association, she determined that "those who avail themselves of its privileges should be required to pay such moderate sums as might be possible, in return for the benefits received" (qtd. in McDermott 11).

The fee-paying colonist encountered a regulated daily schedule, one which was designed to appeal to the needs of the artist. The colonists all had breakfast together in a common eating room, after which each artist walked through the woods to their own studio. Helen Cheyney Bailey, a colonist in 1922 and 1925, described the experience this way:

With a sudden change of mood each of the fortunate colonists sets out quietly and alone along a path through the deep woods to his own studio. There, out of sight or hearing of anyone, he builds his fire and settles down to seven hours of uninterrupted work. He may be a writer, a composer, a painter or a sculptor. He knows that no phone bell will ring, no caller will arrive, no committee will swoop down to ask support or contribution. There will be but one break in the silence. At twelve the rattle and toot of a little truck will sound through the woods, a lunch basket will be dropped on the wide porch, and all will be still again—except for the squirrels and the bluejays who know the basket and arrive to hint for a share in the feast. (qtd. in McDermott 17)

The colonists were alone in their rustic cabins all day long, and special effort was taken not to disturb them. Visual artists were given studios with ample natural light; writers were offered studios with writing desks and wastebaskets. But far more than the material comforts of the studios, artists remark on the precious, quiet hours. E. A. Robinson writes, “it is practically impossible for me to say, even to myself, just what there is about [the MacDowell Colony] that compels a man to work out the best that is in him, and to be discontented if he fails to do so. The abrupt and somewhat humiliating sense of isolation, liberty, and opportunity which overtakes one each morning has something to do with it” (37). Robinson, like most of the artists who have written about the MacDowell Colony, are moved by the rare opportunity to be alone with one’s creation, to absolutely devote oneself to one’s art, to experience “that mental exhaustion that meant something thought out thoroughly” (Gorman 19). The writer, Esther Willard Bates says, “exults over . . . the prospects of quiet, peace and timelessness” (qtd. in McDermott 17). After the workday

was spent, the colonists headed back to the dining room to eat together, talk to one another, and, sometimes, participate in impromptu concerts and recitations.

Willa Cather entered into this much-heralded artists' utopia in 1926, when she was writing Death Comes for the Archbishop. At the MacDowell Colony, Cather "went her own way, as she always did, instead of fitting into the usual pattern" (Sergeant 234). In 1926, Cather was in the midst of her most productive period and had firmly established her own daily pattern, so she did not acquiesce to the MacDowell schedule. She did not want the entire day to write, but wrote only in the mornings. Cather did not like a boxed lunch, but liked "a hot, hearty lunch" and so slipped down to the inn on the Lower Road at noontime, saving her boxed lunch for her afternoon tea (Sergeant 234). The evenings, "full of sociability, poetry, music, or just croquet," were often held without Cather: "Willa, as Mrs. MacDowell, in her nineties, says with her gay, ringing laugh, was always evading pursuit" (Sergeant 234).

Cather's nonparticipation in the MacDowell routine was indicative not of her crotchety nature, but of her frustration at the imposition of an ideal which did not fit that which she had already worked out for herself. Robinson and the other artists exalt at the rare time and quiet the MacDowell Colony provides; Cather had realized the importance of time and quiet long ago and preserved it for herself. What the MacDowell Colony offered was something Willa Cather already had. Furthermore, what came with the promise of quiet and time—the evening emphasis on sociability—was not something Cather desired. Though Cather spent her life enjoying the company of her friends, she did not like to party for parties' sake. She simply wanted to have the schedule that she,

over years of writing, had worked out as her personal ideal. Basically, that meant a quiet morning to work and the freedom to spend the afternoon and evening as she pleased.

Nevertheless, Cather's deeply desired quiet morning, even in a colony renowned for its gift of undisturbed silence, was interrupted. According to Grant Reynard, Cather demanded to Marian MacDowell that she be assigned to a new studio, for the one she was in was too near "voices declaiming in the woods beyond the stone wall near her studio" and it "disturbed her" (174). Marian MacDowell, acknowledging that the theater camp, Mariarden, rehearsed outside, quickly fulfilled Cather's request and moved her to a new studio. The studio Cather occupied, according to MacDowell Colony records, was the Myra McKeown Studio, later called the Youngstown Studio and now rechristened the Irving Fine Studio (MacDowell Colony). The studio, a combination of stone, exposed timbers, and stucco, faces westward toward Mount Monadnock, the same mountain seen from her gravesite in Jaffrey, New Hampshire (MacDowell 33).

For all of Cather's evasions and apparent frustrations with the regimented schedule of the colony, the most detailed reminiscence of her MacDowell experience reflects on her kind, subtle mentoring of a young artist. Grant Reynard, a native Nebraskan and, in 1926, a young painter and illustrator for the Saturday Evening Post, joined the MacDowell Colony and had a remarkable encounter with Cather. When sitting at breakfast with E. A. Robinson and Dorothy and Dubose Heyward, Reynard asked Robinson to point out Cather, the woman he had overheard complaining to Marian MacDowell. His description of seeing Cather at the colony challenges the grumpy Cather of Elizabeth Sergeant's memoir. Reynard remembers a powerful sense of *connection*

with Cather, and his evocative explanation of her demeanor and appearance is worth lengthy quotation:

I had heard her lusty laughter and thought her a woman who expressed herself with vigor and freedom. There was a youthful animation about her, outgoing in conversation. Her hair reminded me of a favorite aunt of mine in Nebraska. It was parted in the middle and drawn plainly above her well-shaped ears to a terminal knot at the back. My grandmother Bacon had also kept her hair that way, and at once I was taken back to the pioneer women of the West. The New Hampshire morning being cool she wore, over a white shirtwaist, a mannish short coat with a design on the cuffs and pockets, the sort cowboys might wear. It reminded me of Annie Oakley in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Her eyebrows dark and straight, she had an ample nose and a firm, full mouth, the valley between the nose and mouth deeply indented and her chin a good one. All in all a forthright, gay, laughing person. Something about her facial structure recalled Russian women to me, the wives of workers on the Union Pacific railroad back home. I wondered what she would say to me when she found that I was born out in her country. (177)

Far from Sergeant's brief portrait of Cather fussing with the schedule of the colony and generally avoiding all human contact, Reynard sees Cather as home-like, a forthright and approachable western woman, a formidable, powerful Annie Oakley. Though I do not dispute the facts of Sergeant's memoir—Cather's insistence on her own schedule is consistently remarked upon by her friends and associates—Reynard's impression of

Cather suggests that her experience at the MacDowell Colony was far more complex than previously acknowledged.¹⁰

Reynard remembers that he had several talks with Cather in the dining hall, and they discussed their Nebraska connection, line drawing and the W. T. Benda illustrations in *My Ántonia*, and Cather's need for a quiet place away from noise, the "great enemy" (178). Their friendship led to Cather's request for a visit at Reynard's studio to see his paintings. She came by at five one evening near the end of her stay to look at his current effort: canvases covered with horribly overwrought images of goats and naked women. She said nothing about the paintings, commented favorably on Reynard's small drawings of the woods and Mount Monadnock, sat down to tea and store-bought cookies, and began to talk about herself. Reynard remembers, "I thought, 'Well, I suppose writers are like this, wrapped up in themselves.' I listened, however, to every word in spite of my disappointment at her failure to praise my work. It wasn't until she left my studio that I realized that the talk about herself was directed straight at me" (178).

Cather's talk echoed her remarks at Bread Loaf four years before, and they again echoed Sarah Orne Jewett's advice that Cather be "surer of [her] backgrounds." Cather told Reynard the story of her own career, how she wrote derivative work until she reached a turning point: "it wasn't until I suddenly thought of my youth in a great wave of nostalgia for the early Nebraska days that my work took on a new dimension." She, in effect, told Reynard to consider other sources for his art, to not contrive fantasias of goats and nymphs. She told him how she felt meaningful art was created: "The crux of this

¹⁰ James Woodress, for example, relies almost entirely on Sergeant's account for his remarks on Cather at the MacDowell Colony, claiming, "she had a low opinion of communal living and writers' colonies" (Willa, 395). Cather's other biographers say nothing or only offer a passing reference to her residence at MacDowell.

whole art experience is in that word *desire*—an urgent need to *recreate* a vital life experience which wells up within and must find release in the writing. My Ántonia came that way, born of feeling and memory” (Reynard 179). “After she left,” Reynard writes, “I sat in a state of shock, there in the hollow shadows of the studio amid the ruins of my goats and phoney [sic.] women. . . . In half an hour a distinguished writer had left me and my summer’s work in utter shambles” (179). After meeting with Cather, Reynard made his way back to Nebraska subjects, and his work currently fills the Museum of Nebraska Art in Kearney and the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer in Grand Island, Nebraska, as well as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

But Grant Reynard was not the only artist Cather met and impressed at MacDowell. Thornton Wilder saw her often at dinner and “valued the occasions when he was able to sit beside her” (Woodress, Willa 396). Mary Colum, the Irish writer that Sergeant said accompanied Cather to the inn at lunch time, called Cather “one of the most interesting people I met in America, and I later read every book she wrote; I . . . always kept my great admiration and even veneration for her” (Colum 203). Marian MacDowell also became a friend of Cather’s, and according to Elizabeth Sergeant, Cather and MacDowell had “one good visit every summer” when Cather came to the Shattuck Inn in nearby Jaffrey, New Hampshire (235).¹¹ Cather’s half-decade of self-discovery through

¹¹ According to the MacDowell Colony records, which archivists acknowledge are spotty, the other colonists present during Cather’s stay were the composers Amy Marcy Beach, Mary Howe, and F. Marion Ralston; the writers John Black, Kenneth Brown, Frederic Day, and Demetra Vaka; and the poets Louise Driscoll and E. A. Robinson. Demetra Vaka, also known as Mrs. Kenneth Brown, is likely the person Cather referred to in her letter to Ferris Greenslet in November of 1926, when she wrote that she enjoyed meeting the calculating Mrs. Brown at Peterborough (Cather, Calendar 128, #858).

colonies was over. She had realized her own qualities more fully and understood that rather than attempting to work within the utopias of others, she could most effectively create her own personal artist colony.

A Quiet Place Near the Best Companions

Cather turned away from the artists' colonies because, by 1927, she did not need what they offered. Reading her writing of the 1920s as a connected narrative, particularly The Lost Lady (1923), The Professor's House (1925), My Mortal Enemy (1926), and Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927), one can observe a shift from disillusionment and alienation to connection and purpose. Marian Forrester, Godfrey St. Peter, and Myra Henshawe must relinquish something of themselves—their self-respect, their sense of joy, their very hold on life—in order to survive in a world, as Godfrey St. Peter of The Professor's House does, “without delight” (282). They struggle with disconnection and are fixated on escape: from Sweet Water, Nebraska, from family, from the passage of time, from the confines of living. Death Comes for the Archbishop, however, presents a different paradigm. Its focus is the community of the American Southwest, and particularly the brotherhood of two priests and friends, Father Latour and Father Joseph Vaillant. In this novel, Cather again affirms community and its sustaining power. Though her work continually acknowledges the complexities of human relationships, Death Comes for the Archbishop, particularly when read against the dark visions of her previous novels, acknowledges commitment, purpose, and community as a way out of despair.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that only after the composition of Death Comes for the Archbishop did Cather distance herself from formal communities of artists. Her attendance at Bread Loaf, Taos, and MacDowell, while certainly motivated by a number of forces, coincided with years of philosophical questioning and deep suspicions of the human capability for a meaningful, desirable life. Was she searching for a community that would stay the despair? Was she looking for a way out of alienation and into rapport? Does the simultaneous publication of Death Comes for the Archbishop and the rejection of colonies suggest a resolution to her despair? Though I do not attribute Cather's response to colonies only, or even primarily, to her sense of alienation, the arc of her fiction does offer the possibility that, by 1927, Cather had reconciled herself to personal, philosophical dilemmas, and with that reconciliation no longer had the need to participate in the constructed, formalized communities of the artists' colonies.

In addition to not needing the community of the artists' colonies anymore, Cather no longer needed their atmosphere. She had sampled the promise of seclusion and sensitivity to creation, and she realized that she could now afford to provide it for herself. In her remarkable December 13, 1909, letter to Cather, Sarah Orne Jewett had told her to "find a quiet place near the best companions (not those who admire and wonder at everything one does, but those who know the good things with delight!)" (Jewett 249). Cather's response to Jewett included exploring artists' colonies, experimenting with them, and, finally, rejecting the compromises they forced upon her. In the end, she found a "quiet place near the best companions" and more forcefully controlled her creative environment.

In 1926, Willa Cather and Edith Lewis bought land on the island of Grand Manan in the Bay of Fundy. In 1927, they arrived to occupy a little Cape Cod cottage. It had no electricity, no running water, and only received supplies from the mainland (St. John, New Brunswick) twice a week. Nevertheless, it had what Cather most desired: quiet, seclusion, space. She walked along the cliffs in the afternoons, completely alone. She could afford shipments of garlic, olive oil, wild strawberry jam, caviar, wild rice, and French wine to supplement the food of the Whale Cove inn. This property was the only property Cather ever owned, and it is where she did significant writing in the last years of her life. Fully in control of her creative skills, well-established as a formidable writer, and financially stable, she and Edith Lewis created a quiet place on a small green island.

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“Someone Who Knew What it Was All About”: Willa Cather’s Intimate Circle of Writers

Though Willa Cather’s life repeatedly intersected with the most notable arts communities in America, her most sustained, powerful, and important arts group was an intimate circle of fellow literary professionals. Unlike the other communities I’ve discussed, this group was not gathered together in one neighborhood or colony; instead, this circle was created by a lifetime of correspondence, conversation, and deep engagement in one another’s work. This group of friends challenged and encouraged Cather throughout her writing life, met Cather through a shared artistic interest, and developed a significant professional relationship with her. As a group, these women provided Cather with important artistic interchanges that were vitally important to her professional development. Examination of these interchanges offers insight into the broader dynamics of Cather’s reliance on relationships during her professional development.

Though several of Cather’s friends might fit the description above,¹ this chapter focuses on three women who had remarkable influence on Cather’s development as a writer: Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, and Edith Lewis. In her

¹ For example, Zoë Akins, Isabelle McClung, and Alfred and Blanche Knopf.

long-term relationships with each of these women, Cather created her own close circle, a “community” in the sense that all four were unified through their shared interest in literature and communicated significantly about that interest. Through interaction with these women, Cather witnessed the importance of artistic interchange; she found trusted, honest voices of support and located minds that provided her opportunity to define and clarify her literary ambitions. These friends do not constitute an independent community the way, for example, the Greenwich Village or MacDowell Colony residents do, but they are the most important and representative figures of an ongoing phenomenon in Cather’s life: she relied on others as she developed her writings, people whose literary judgment she greatly valued. No single person fulfilled this role for Cather; instead, a series of people with different strengths and characteristics became for Cather a fundamental communal sounding board. Through analysis of Cather’s patterns of professional exchanges with just these three women, a communal experience emerges, one that articulates the subtlety with which Cather regularly related to the wider group of fellow writers. Any discussion of Cather’s interactions with arts communities, then, has to take account of the fellow artists who most deeply affected her work as an intimate circle of Cather’s own construction.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, and Edith Lewis have often been written about in Cather scholarship for their intriguing personal relationships with Cather: Fisher and Cather did not speak for years after a bitter argument; Sergeant, the recipient of some of the most revealing Cather letters, published an insightful and complex memoir of her friendship with Cather a few years after Cather’s death; Lewis was Cather’s longtime domestic partner and an important figure in studies that consider

Cather's sexuality. Rather than focus on the personal issues between these women, this chapter is concerned with the professional interdependence of Cather and this small group. Repeatedly, Cather shared her work and sought literary advice from Fisher, Sergeant, and Lewis, and all three responded in a way that greatly influenced Cather's career. Their interactions with Cather demonstrate that her career developed through interrelationships with other professional writers, that she was deeply engaged in a literary "sisterhood" with fellow artists.²

Through analysis of these professional exchanges, this chapter argues that Cather valued and maintained relationships that explicitly impacted her writing. Cather, in fact, cultivated such relationships and thrilled at finding someone whose perspectives, she felt, complemented her own. In nurturing such fellowship with other writers, Cather was articulating the value of communal exchange in her own creative life. Cather's professional engagement with these three women varied, but in each case she relied on them for fundamental support and insight. Fisher, a friend of Cather's from her university days, provided Cather with important responses and confidence, and she publicly supported her friend's work at crucial moments in Cather's career. Sergeant, whose friendship with Cather was most intense during Cather's early successes with O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, and My Ántonia, was vitally important to Cather's development of her literary voice and the focus of her ambitions. Edith Lewis's role in Cather's career has been more obscured. For years, she has been shrugged off as a

² Deborah Lindsay Williams, in Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship, argues that Cather was deeply protective of her role as novelist and actively sought to distance herself from other female writers. Williams drew this conclusion largely through Cather's letters to Zona Gale (only six have survived), and her thesis fails to account for Cather's much more involved relationships with Fisher, Sergeant, and Lewis.

glorified personal secretary, the woman who made the hotel arrangements and ordered dinner. Through newly discovered corrected typescripts of several Cather works, however, we now know that Lewis's involvement in Cather's career was much more profound. Lewis, a professional editor at McClure's and the advertising firm J. Walter Thompson, was deeply involved in Cather's writing process. The manuscripts reveal Lewis's hand making corrections that were later incorporated into the published novels. Lewis, I argue, worked very closely with Cather as she polished her fiction for publication. More than just a demure helpmate, Edith Lewis was Cather's trusted partner in valuable stages of her writing.

**Challenge and Confirmation:
Dorothy Canfield Fisher**

Cather only shared credit on one work of fiction in her life. In 1894, when she was a student at the University of Nebraska, she published "The Fear that Walks by Noonday," by Willa Cather and Dorothy Canfield, in the Sombrero, the university's yearbook. Dorothy Canfield Fisher called the dual credit mostly just "generosity" on Cather's part:

At a football game where we happened to be on the same grandstand, I gave her the idea of a football story—of all things! . . . She wrote the story, and very generously, I thought, put my name with hers as if I had helped write her story although I would have been perfectly incapable of that at that age. The story got a prize, \$10.00—all of that! She gave me half of it. I thought it was generosity itself and still do. (Washington 21)

The story, a minor piece about ghosts and football, is significant not so much for its content, but because it represents explicitly a pattern that would be repeated more subtly throughout Cather's life: in the composition of her fiction, she would rely on the input of a few trusted friends, women whose advice emerged from their own professional accomplishments. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, one of the first to assist Cather in her writing, is also the most well-known literary companion. Cather's and Canfield Fisher's friendship spanned over fifty years, from their meeting in the early 1890s to Cather's death in 1947.

Cather met Dorothy Canfield in Lincoln, where Cather was a student at the University of Nebraska and Canfield's father, James Hulme Canfield, was the chancellor. Though Cather was six years older than Canfield Fisher, Canfield Fisher's parents had provided her with an academically-enriched, cosmopolitan upbringing, and the two young women shared an enthusiasm for art and culture. The age difference, nevertheless, significantly colored their early relationship; as Canfield Fisher writes, "a brilliant freshman in college had the prestige of a grown-up, compared to a little girl still in grade school" ("Novelist" 88). Their initial literary interactions were influenced by Cather's "prestige" in the eyes of young Dorothy Canfield. Cather's commanding presence as "a successful member of the older generation" "tinctured" Canfield Fisher's "admiring affection" (Fisher, "Novelist" 88). In the 1890s, Dorothy Canfield was Willa Cather's protégé, a young woman who thought co-author credit on a juvenile story was "generosity itself," and who, when visiting Cather in Pittsburgh at Christmas, was "thrilled" at the publication of Cather's translation of a Heine Christmas poem (Fisher,

“Novelist” 90). That early relationship soon evolved as Canfield Fisher matured and gained considerable confidence in her dealings with Cather.

In the early 1900s, Cather and Canfield Fisher often corresponded about their writing lives, and their correspondence suggests a mutual respect.³ For example, in a letter of March, 1904, Cather writes Canfield Fisher that she feels an almost family connection to her and that she has gone twice to the library to find a copy of the current Outlook magazine in order to read Canfield Fisher’s new story, but that she had to order a copy from the publishers at last because it was always in use. The next surviving letter that Cather wrote to Canfield Fisher is a detailed analysis of that story, a combination of encouragement and pointed criticism. For example, Cather feels that the beginning of the story strikes a true and clear note and creates a convincing atmosphere. The ending, Cather thinks, is too forced and manufactured, but she claims that concern is incidental to the success of the tale. Overall, Cather encourages Canfield Fisher to write more stories like it and to avoid the hardness of style and tone that has characterized much of her other fiction (March 1904, #2). Cather’s sensibility, as expressed in this letter, is consistent with many of her comments on literary style throughout her career: an author should aim for a truthful or natural rendering of her material, one that avoids all pretense and heavy-handed artfulness. Cather must have felt that Canfield Fisher shared her aesthetic principles, for in a letter from May of that same year, Cather requests Canfield Fisher’s response to her own work, as she informs Canfield Fisher that she is unsure if her novel is worth rewriting, and that she would like to go over it with Canfield Fisher after she

³ According to A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather, edited by Janis P. Stout, the first surviving letter Cather wrote to Canfield Fisher is dated October 10, 1899. The next surviving letter is from the spring of 1901. Though Canfield Fisher and Cather may have begun their correspondence in the 1890s, a record of it is not available.

arrives in Pittsburgh for a visit.⁴ As young writers just beginning to make their careers, Cather and Canfield Fisher critiqued each other's work and offered suggestions for more fully realizing their artistic ambitions.

Soon, the pleasant exchanges about their work deteriorated into a bitter disagreement.⁵ In January, 1905, Dorothy Canfield wrote a pleading letter to Willa Cather: "I have read the story and just as you thought I do ask that you do not publish it—not for my own sake but so that you will not have done a cruel thing" (Fisher, Keeping 26). The story she wrote about is Cather's "The Profile," a tale about a doomed relationship between Dunlap, an artist, and Virginia, a woman with a scarred, distorted face. Canfield Fisher was upset because she realized Cather had based her story upon Evelyn Osborne, a friend of Canfield Fisher's from the Bibliothèque Nationale that Cather had met in 1902 while traveling in Europe. Canfield Fisher thought Evelyn Osborne would be deeply hurt if Cather published the story in The Troll Garden (1905), as she planned to do: "I am quite sure you don't realize how exact and faithful a portrait you have drawn of her—her beautiful hair, her pretty hands, her fondness of dress and pathetic lapses of taste in wearing what other girls may, her unconsciousness—oh Willa don't do this thing" (Fisher, Keeping 26). Upon receiving this letter, Cather writes back that she cannot remove the story, for the collection is already in proof and a removal of this one story would mean the withdrawal of the entire volume. She also attempts to defend her decision by appealing to Canfield Fisher's sympathies as a fellow writer. In

⁴ The novel mentioned is Cather's unpublished Pittsburgh novel, about which very little is known; the manuscript was apparently destroyed. For the date attributions on the letters in this paragraph, see Cather, Calendar 16-17, #94, #96, #98.

⁵ This correspondence was unearthed by Mark Madigan, who discovered a trove of letters that answered long-held questions about tensions between Cather and Canfield Fisher. His scholarship about Canfield Fisher, Cather, and their relationship is foundational to this portion of the chapter.

using this technique, she calls upon the mutual respect the two women demonstrated in previous correspondence, the sense that their friendship was united in its valuation of literary success. The book was borne of sacrifice, Cather writes, both her own and those of her friends. Furthermore, the fight with Canfield Fisher has given the publication of The Troll Garden a bitterness which she did not expect. She claims Canfield Fisher's demand for the withdrawal of "The Profile" is very inconsiderate, as she ought to know how much the stories meant to Cather and how long Cather has been working on them (January 1905). Cather feels particularly upset by Canfield Fisher's request, the letter suggests, because Canfield Fisher, of all people, ought to know the emotional connection a writer has to her work. This response clearly troubled Canfield Fisher, and she sought the advice of her parents and "a member of the Columbia faculty connected with one of the big publishing houses in New York" (Fisher, Keeping 28). She told Cather that if the story would not be voluntarily pulled, she would petition the publishers directly to get the story removed from the collection.

Apparently, Canfield Fisher's efforts to stop the publication worked, for "The Profile" was not published as part of The Troll Garden.⁶ However, two years later the story appeared in the June, 1907, issue of McClure's.⁷ As a result of this dispute,

⁶ One story in the collection, "Flavia and Her Artists," features a shallow central character likely based upon Canfield Fisher's mother, Flavia Canfield (see Chapter Two). Mark J. Madigan, noting that Cather initially referred to the story as "Fulvia," asks, "could Cather have changed the classical name to 'Flavia' in retaliation for the Canfields' intervention?" (Madigan, "Willa" 122).

⁷ Witter Bynner, a staff member of McClure's during Cather's time with the magazine, remembers: Miss Cather's cold harshness in refusing to let us withdraw from publication, in McClure's magazine, "The Birthmark" [sic.], which friends of hers assured us at a tense session with her in Mr. McClure's office might ruin the life, even by suicide as in the story, of another friend of hers and theirs upon whose disfigurement and dilemma it was based. I can hear her now, saying briskly: "My art is more important than my friend." The story was published; and friend, as well as art, survived. (62)

The "friends of hers" that debated Cather in McClure's office certainly included Dorothy Canfield Fisher.

Cather's friendship with Canfield Fisher suffered. Aside from a few polite letters, the relationship cooled for fifteen years. Canfield Fisher's challenge of Cather had great power, for she demonstrated to Cather that she was no longer the impressed protégé, but was now prepared to think independently. Her challenge forced Cather to consider the ethics of basing an unflattering character on a recognizable prototype. Whether or not Cather's perspective changed based on this challenge is debatable: Cather used characters based on real people consistently throughout her writing career, but never again did she have to face such a stern confrontation from a respected colleague. Perhaps Canfield Fisher's challenge made Cather reconsider the sort of characteristics she would take from a model and use in her fiction. Instead of basing a short story on the disfiguring scars of an acquaintance, in the future Cather developed entire novels and complex portraits from people she knew reasonably well.⁸ In other words, she no longer allowed the superficial qualities of friends to be a source of character. Canfield Fisher's challenge, despite Cather's clear anger at the time, impacted Cather's career and the development of her writing.

The long break in Cather and Canfield Fisher's friendship resulted in a literary and professional relationship that had two very distinct periods. The first one, which I've briefly discussed above, emerged from their personal friendship and their time spent together. The authorial collaboration was concocted in their seats at a football game; the joy over the Heine translation was had at a Christmas party; the dispute over "The Profile" centered on the effect on a mutual friend. For most of these early years, Cather

⁸ For example, *Antonia Shimerda Cuzak* is based on Annie Pavelka; Mrs. Forrester of *A Lost Lady* is based on Lyra Garber.

was the ambitious writer that young Dorothy Canfield looked up to, and Dorothy was the cultured, well-traveled daughter of a prominent academic family who was just emerging as a literary talent. Created on these terms, the professional engagement of the two young women was limited; when Canfield Fisher spoke confidently against Cather's actions, their friendship could not survive it. However, by the time Cather and Canfield Fisher reestablished their friendship with gusto in 1921, both had matured and were well-known, well-regarded professional writers. Canfield Fisher had published twelve books, including five novels, four collections of short fiction, and three nonfiction works; Cather, in addition to her two early volumes of poetry and short stories, had published three very highly regarded novels and one collection of short fiction. Both were firmly established writing professionals. Therefore, when contact was re-made, the terms of their engagement had greatly shifted. No longer were the two women struggling writers trying to locate their literary voices; they built their mature friendship on a mutual understanding for each other's literary accomplishments.

During the 1910s, Cather and Canfield Fisher exchanged a few letters congratulating one another on their publications. Specifically, Canfield Fisher wrote to praise O Pioneers! (1913) and The Song of the Lark (1915), and Cather wrote to praise Canfield Fisher's The Bent Twig (1915).⁹ In Cather's March 15, 1916, response to Canfield Fisher's letter praising The Song of the Lark, she emphasizes that the book is written from the Moonstone perspective and, later in the letter, connects that perspective

⁹ Though it is possible more letters were written, only a few letters from Cather to Canfield Fisher written during the 1910s have survived. From references in those letters, we know that Canfield Fisher wrote Cather a particularly encouraging letter about O Pioneers! and another about The Song of the Lark. From the tone—and sheer number—of the letters written in the early 1920s that have survived, it is probable that the two women exchanged only a few letters during the 1910s.

to Red Cloud, Nebraska (Madigan, Abstracts 5-6). Cather's stress of the provincial perspective suggests that she is reaching out to Canfield Fisher as a friend of her youth, someone who knew her Nebraska background. At the same time, her inclusion of Randolph Bourne's New Republic review with the same letter pronounces her national credibility. Even though the review is somewhat negative, it demonstrates that the most important critical minds in the country are responding to her work. In the next letter, written on September 2, 1916, from Red Cloud, Cather praises The Bent Twig and again references their shared Nebraska experience by offering a humorous overview of the debate Canfield Fisher's readers are having with Cather's in Nebraska. She also, as in the previous letter, references her cultural status by casually remarking on her visit to opera star Olive Fremstad and comparing Canfield Fisher's character to a woman she met while with Fremstad (Madigan, Abstracts 7-8). The point is not that Cather was trying to be casually midwestern while simultaneously attempting to show off; rather, the pattern of these letters suggests the depth of Cather and Canfield Fisher's connections. They both understood Nebraska culture *and* the rarefied artistic circles of New York. They shared both a past in Nebraska and ambition that was much broader.

In their correspondence during the 1910s (only Cather's have survived), it appears that the two women wrote friendly, congratulatory letters that, at least in Cather's case, also made gestures toward making a more substantial reconnection. The letters remained few, however, and the gestures more implicit than explicit. Though they shared the past and ambition, they did not actively share the present until the early 1920s. Reconnection of their earlier bond was made after Canfield Fisher favorably reviewed Cather's

collection Youth and the Bright Medusa (1920) in the April 1921 edition of The Yale Review.

Canfield Fisher's review, interpreted from the context of her relationship with Cather, reads like a peace offering. In it, she acknowledges Cather's maturity and, through praise of the collection, her readiness to remake their broken relationship. Canfield Fisher achieves this by focusing her review on Cather's profound growth and the generous feelings it inspires:

There is no writer living in whose excellence Americans feel a warmer, prouder pleasure than we all feel in the success of Willa Cather. I do not by "success" mean the wide recognition given to her, although that is delightful to see. I mean what must give much more satisfaction to Miss Cather herself, her real inner success, her real excellence, her firm, steady, upward growth and expansion into tranquil and assured power. ("Among" 110)

Throughout the review, she makes multiple references which lightly reconsider the tensions that brought about her dispute with Cather. For example, in 1902, when she and Cather were in Europe together and paid a visit to A. E. Housman, Canfield Fisher was able to communicate with Housman much better than Cather, resulting in tears of frustration from Cather at the end of the visit (Fisher, Keeping 260-262). As has been convincingly argued elsewhere,¹⁰ Cather envied Canfield Fisher's cosmopolitan grace and worldliness, and she felt particularly resentful after her experiences with Canfield Fisher abroad in 1902. In her 1921 review, Canfield Fisher seems to acknowledge Cather's insecurity in this area by praising both her European sophistication and her

¹⁰ See Madigan, "Willa," especially 118.

ability to rise above it: "Here is an American writer to whom European culture (and she has always had plenty of that) is but a food to be absorbed and transformed into a new product, quite different, unique, inimitable, and with a harmonious perfection of its own" (110). Another example is Canfield Fisher's explicit comparison of Cather's mature work with her Troll Garden fiction. One should compare the 1920 version of the final story in Youth and the Bright Medusa ("A Death in the Desert") with the 1903 original published in Scribners, Canfield Fisher argues, for the "whole story of Miss Cather's development is there, and an unformed writer would learn more by pondering on the changes made by Miss Cather in her own story after eighteen years of growth and work, than by listening to many lectures from a professor of literature." According to Canfield Fisher, Cather, unlike most writers, knew "just where to lay her finger on the false passages and how to lift them out without disturbing the life of the story" (110).

In praising Youth and the Bright Medusa this way, Canfield Fisher appears to retain her old opposition to "The Profile" while simultaneously declaring the rift as part of the past. Her praise, after all, is focused on Cather's movement from "false passages" to "real excellence" and "assured power." The woman she so strongly opposed is now a part of the past; Canfield Fisher is ready to embrace the grown-up Cather. Did she write her review hoping Cather would see in it a peace offering? She knew that Cather closely followed the reviews of her work; even during the years of coolness in their friendship, Cather sent Canfield Fisher a clipping of Randolph Bourne's critical review of The Song of the Lark. Did Canfield Fisher write hoping that it would lead to a connection? Whether she did or not, Cather's grateful response to her review in a letter dated March

21, 1921, begins a rapid succession of letters that acknowledge Cather's own willingness to put the past behind them.

Significantly, their friendship was reformed through their professional relationship. After thanking Canfield Fisher for her review and sharing some news and a few personal feelings, Cather acknowledges her need for Canfield Fisher's help with her new book, One of Ours. On March 24, 1921, Cather tells Canfield Fisher that she is the only person who can help her in her struggles with the book's end, and that her most valuable help would be her sympathy. In April, Cather writes about her sorrow over their past disagreement and claims she behaved foolishly about "The Profile." She ends the letter by acknowledging her wish for a renewed friendship with Canfield Fisher. In February, 1922, Cather suggested the profundity of her respect for Canfield Fisher by asking her to read the page proofs of the novel before it went to press (Madigan, Abstracts 9-15). According to Mark J. Madigan, this request was the "real breakthrough" in their efforts to reclaim the friendship ("Willa" 124).

Canfield Fisher's contribution to One of Ours was profound. Cather asked her to read the proofs of the book and to pay particular attention to the last section, which chronicles Claude Wheeler's wartime experience in France. Cather wrote Canfield Fisher that she was worried about getting the details in that section correct, and moreover that she was concerned the last section of the novel did not rise to the quality of the first sections (Madigan, Abstracts 15; 18). She was turning to Canfield Fisher for both her expertise in France, where she had attended school and participated in war relief work, and for her literary expertise. Cather wanted Canfield Fisher to check the facts *and* the artistry of One of Ours, and Canfield Fisher obliged.

Canfield Fisher's role in the final stages of One of Ours has been well documented.¹¹ She read the proofs and commented on them, offered encouragement, provided a sounding board for Cather's description of the artistic goals of the novel and her experiences writing it, and gave her respected public literary voice to a positive, well-placed review of the novel. Cather knew that Canfield Fisher planned to review the novel and approved, feeling that Canfield Fisher knew "the book and its author better than anyone else" (Madigan, Abstracts 19). Canfield Fisher understood Cather's history and motivations exceptionally well. They shared a past in Nebraska, an ambitious youth, and a cultured, respected maturity. Canfield Fisher knew where Cather came from, and she knew where Cather wanted to go. With that knowledge, she could offer Cather more sympathy than most; Canfield Fisher was, in a sense, Cather's ideal reader for One of Ours. Communication about that novel was deepened by a shared understanding of the past frailties that informed the creation of Claude Wheeler. Also, Canfield Fisher knew the book so well because Cather wrote her at length about her artistic intentions. These descriptions, combined with Cather's orchestration of a meeting between Canfield Fisher and Knopf, meant that Cather "shape[d] Canfield's response" to her book: "The result—whether this was Cather's half-conscious intention when all this began or not—was, of course, that Canfield wrote a well-informed and sympathetic review" (Stout, "1922" 14).

Canfield Fisher's review, published in the September 10, 1922, edition of the New York Times Book Review, is exceptionally generous in its claims for Cather's greatness. "To read Miss Cather's novel," Canfield Fisher writes, "is to see an eagle soar up through all this pettiness, on broad sure wings, carrying us in spirit with her to the

¹¹ See Madigan, "Willa," and Stout, "The Making."

heights. . . . It is an amazingly rich book, rich as no other living American could write, many-peopled, complicated as life itself is complicated, but composed with a harmony and unity which only art can have” (119). Not all of the reviews of the book were as positive as Canfield Fisher’s; in fact, though most critics offered favorable notices, a few of the most influential reviewers, namely H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, felt the book was a disappointment compared to Cather’s earlier work. Mencken, a great champion of Cather’s in the 1910s, writes that the last half of the novel, the section set during the war in France, “drops precipitately to the level of a serial in the Ladies Home Journal” (141). Canfield Fisher seems to anticipate this reaction—a reaction Cather clearly worried about—in her review: “Unlike nearly every one else nowadays who has occasion to mention the war, she has no fear of the bitter tongues of the disillusioned, makes no attempt, as nearly all knowing writers do, to disarm them by giving occasional knowing hints that she is quite as smartly modern and skeptic as they” (119). Canfield Fisher told the public what effect Cather intended: “to make us see and feel and understand Claude” and the “truth” that “the war tore Claude away, as nothing else in the world could have done” (119-120). In short, Canfield Fisher offered professional assistance to Cather by writing a review—among the very first published—that was informed by Cather’s stated ambitions and attempted to establish positive critical momentum for the novel.

Despite the well-known detractors of One of Ours, the novel did succeed both critically and commercially. It earned Cather the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 and gave her a new degree of financial stability. After publishing One of Ours, Cather made the 1920s her most successful decade, publishing four more well-received novels and securing her

place on the American literary scene. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, who helped make the success of the 1920s possible, continued to be a key member of Cather's circle. The two women saw each other and regularly exchanged letters for the rest of Cather's life, often discussing each other's books and literary ambitions. As each of them published new works, they sent the other a copy. At least three times, Cather responded to Canfield Fisher's new novels with a detailed critical analysis, offering both encouraging words and constructive criticism.¹² Canfield Fisher also continued her public support of Cather through reviews and memoirs which praised Cather and offered analysis of her literary ambitions and achievements. In her 1933 essay on Cather, entitled "Willa Cather, Daughter of the Frontier," for example, Canfield Fisher seeks to propel Cather to the top of the American literary canon by claiming that Cather's work has "one real subject" which "is the effect a new country—our new country—has on people transplanted to it from the old traditions of a stable, complex civilization." This focus, Canfield Fisher continues, makes Cather "the only American author who has concentrated on the only unique quality of our national life" (90-91).

Though Cather's professional relationship with Dorothy Canfield Fisher was perhaps at its apex when Canfield Fisher assisted with One of Ours, that assistance and support was a quality consistent throughout much of their relationship. These writers, rooted in an old friendship, repeatedly made exchanges of great value, centering Dorothy Canfield Fisher in Cather's intimate circle. Their artistic interchange, whether rooted in

¹² In October, 1922, Cather responded to Canfield Fisher's Rough Hewn; in October, 1926, she responded to Her Son's Wife; in a December 1, 1930, letter, Cather commented on The Deepening Storm; in a letter dated November 8, probably 1939, Cather offers a reading of Canfield Fisher's Seasoned Timber (Cather, Calendar 96, #635; 126, #849; 152, #1027; 220, #1459). For more about Cather's readings of Canfield Fisher's works, see Mark J. Madigan, "Willa Cather's Commentary on Three Novels by Dorothy Canfield Fisher," ANQ 3.1 (January 1990), 13-16.

conflict over a short story or profound sympathy with a risky new novel, was built upon their shared past and mutual respect. Canfield Fisher, through her sensitive responses to Cather's fiction, helped Cather work through important ethical matters in the creation of her art. Cather's rather blunt use of Evelyn Osborne in "The Profile" was mitigated by her nuanced and perceptive use of her cousin, G. P. Cather, in the creation of Claude Wheeler. In her receptivity to Cather's art, Canfield Fisher helped to create that growth.

**Response and Encouragement:
Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant**

Willa Cather first met Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant as a professional colleague. While managing editor at McClure's in 1910, Cather guided Sergeant's piece on Italian tenements in New York through publication. "Miss Sergeant has brought in something up our alley on the sweated workers in the tenements—maybe a 'First,' Cather told the editor, S. S. McClure, "We must find her some more assignments" (Sergeant 49).¹³ Following that acceptance, Cather led Sergeant to the elevator, and their relationship continued to grow, for they began talking about literature. "There are only three or four people in the whole world with whom I can talk about books," Cather told Sergeant. Sergeant, thrilled to be quickly into a conversation about Flaubert, Balzac, Tolstoy, James, Wharton, and Jewett, asked herself, "did this potentate really care what a shy Boston girl thought about books?" (Sergeant 50).

Apparently, she did, for over the next several decades Elizabeth Sergeant and Willa Cather would have a friendship centered on literature and writing. Cather relied on

¹³ See Chapter Two for a discussion of this encounter.

Sergeant's opinion and support, particularly in the 1910s when her first novels were published. Sergeant, a valuable member of Cather's circle, was a confidante to Cather's dramatic emergence as a novelist. From the first meeting in the McClure's office to the last years of Cather's life, Sergeant was a fellow writer who interacted meaningfully with Cather and her work. But it was during the composition of Cather's first novel, Alexander's Bridge (1912), and her Nebraska fiction, especially "The Bohemian Girl" (1912), O Pioneers! (1913), The Song of the Lark (1915), and My Ántonia (1918), that Sergeant's role in Cather's development was particularly pronounced. In those transforming years, Elizabeth Sergeant offered Cather reactions, encouragements, and suggestions that helped propel and sustain her as she came to the forefront of American letters.

In early 1913, Willa Cather wrote Elizabeth Sergeant a letter about her progress on her new novel, which she would title O Pioneers!, and confided that Sergeant was one of the three people above ground whose opinion meant something to her. Though she had known Sergeant only a few years, Cather trusted Sergeant's literary judgment, and her confidence to push ahead with the publication of O Pioneers!—a book, she told Sergeant in the same letter, that would only have about six readers—emerged largely from Sergeant's encouragement. Perhaps her trust of Sergeant's opinion resulted from an exchange about Alexander's Bridge the two women had had a year earlier. As a young writer hoping to gain the approval of the "potentate" Willa Cather, Sergeant followed the serial publication of Cather's first novel, Alexander's Bridge,¹⁴ "with avidity." Cather,

¹⁴ Alexander's Bridge was published first as Alexander's Masquerade in McClure's 4-6 (February-April, 1912).

discovering that her friend was reading the serialized version of the novel, asked her to read the book proofs, as many revisions had been made. Sergeant agreed, and “brooded over” the proofs before returning them “with timid suggestions” that, to her surprise, Cather honored. Sergeant, though, was disappointed in her friend’s work: “I could not find in the story the author of strength and latent power I valued in life.” Cather, Sergeant remembers, “pulled my uncomfortable disappointment out of me—and more or less agreed with it. . . . In [Alexander’s Bridge] she had for the first time in her life tried to be literary and she feared that she had come a cropper” (Sergeant 85-86). Cather, who years later called Alexander’s Bridge “unnecessary and superficial” (“My First” 92), found in Sergeant not just someone whose perspective was akin to her own, but someone who would honestly respond to her writing.

Soon after this exchange, Sergeant became one of the few people who read Cather’s newest work while it was still in manuscript. Cather sent Sergeant a copy of her new story, “The Bohemian Girl,” and Sergeant responded so strongly that she took a train from Boston to New York in order to see Cather. “She remained incredulous at my certainty that *this was it*. We spent the better part of two days arguing about it at the Brevoort, on the bus, and in the Park,” Sergeant remembers, “As I took my Boston train I hoped she had ceased her self-queries, and was offering the piece” to McClure’s (Sergeant 86). Indeed, the story was published in the August edition of that periodical. According to Sergeant’s account, Cather could not recognize the merits of her new work and needed to be convinced to even submit it to a publisher.

As Cather grew more confident in the success of “The Bohemian Girl” as a work of fiction, she thanked Sergeant for helping her find that confidence. In April, 1912,

Cather wrote to Sergeant from Winslow, Arizona, and described for her the experience of being in Nebraska again (she had visited Red Cloud on her way west). Cather concludes that “The Bohemian Girl” is in the right key, and her visit to Bohemian country affirmed for her that the story is an honest reflection of a place and people she knows well. Cather thanks Sergeant for backing her on that story, for it really understands the place it is about. “The Bohemian Girl,” which is one of Cather’s most successful early fictions and the work that suggested Cather “was discovering with affection Nebraska as her flood subject” (Woodress, Willa 227), made it to publication thanks in large part to Elizabeth Sergeant’s energetic admiration. Without that support, it is unclear if Cather would even have had the courage to submit it. Like all writers, Cather required a trusted reader to offer an honest response; Sergeant was that reader. Cather, a bit self-conscious after the publication of the rather derivative Alexander’s Bridge, needed encouragement to try a new way, and Sergeant gave it to her. This encouragement—and Sergeant’s engagement with her work—led directly to the publication of her breakthrough novel, O Pioneers!, the following year.

In a letter to Sergeant written in early 1913, Cather claims that she has finally written something that she wanted to without being afraid of anybody and without cutting out what she typically cut out. Though it is all about crops and cows, she writes Sergeant, it does seem interesting. The book, of course, was O Pioneers!, and her ability to write without being afraid of anybody emerged, at least partly, from Elizabeth Sergeant’s response to her work. Sergeant, whose opinion she trusted, thought she ought to be more artistically ambitious, and by February or March, 1913, Cather wrote another letter to Sergeant to tell her that the typescript of her new novel was sent over to Paris,

where Sergeant was living. In that letter, Cather implores Sergeant to tell her the truth about the book, claiming that she is unsentimental about what she has made. Cather worries that there may be writing in it that is excessively emotional, and she is fully prepared to revise based on Sergeant's reaction. She closes the letter with the half-joking claim that she awaits Sergeant's verdict with terror.

In the next two letters, dated April 14 and April 22, 1913, Cather further articulates the power of her interchanges with Sergeant. On April 14, Cather writes Sergeant that she is very glad she sent the typescript over, and that, for whatever reason, she has lost some of her initial thrill with it. She is thankful that Sergeant responded positively and did not demand the sort of explanations that publishers did. On April 22, Cather writes Sergeant that she would be grateful if she would correct the French that appears in O Pioneers!, and that she feels such a relief that Sergeant likes the book. Cather again expresses gratefulness for Sergeant's positive response; more pointedly, Cather thanks Sergeant for agreeing to read and for liking it and, perhaps most importantly, for *wanting* to like it. Cather takes great pleasure that Sergeant has an investment in literature and in supporting its creation, claiming that Sergeant is one of six people who know or care about writing.

Additionally, Cather's April 22 letter to Sergeant demonstrates that Sergeant's response challenged Cather to articulate her literary ambitions. In reply to Sergeant's critique that the skeleton of O Pioneers! does not stand out enough, Cather writes that such a form is consistent with the subject matter, that the country itself has no skeleton but fluidly runs through the fingers. The softness of the land, Cather continues, influences how one writes about it. In articulating her form, a natural, unforced structure

for which Cather is continually lauded, Cather begins to clarify her developing aesthetic. Sergeant's response, therefore, brought about a clarification of style that would define much of Cather's literary output.

These letters to Elizabeth Sergeant plainly demonstrate Cather's professional reliance on Sergeant. As she prepared to submit her novel for publication, Cather needed the encouragement and assistance of another writer, and Elizabeth Sergeant filled that role. Though the two women were across the ocean from one another in the spring of 1913, they communicated with power and conviction. In addition to providing Cather important psychological support, Sergeant helped her prepare parts of her text and even sought a Paris agent who might get it translated and published there. Additionally, Sergeant showed Cather's typescript to others in France, like the family of Madame Gaston Paris and Helen Quincy Muirhead. These readers were "thrilled by the emergence of an indigenous American novelist" and "prophesied that this American friend of mine, with her acute poetic sensibility, would be known to the cultivated French reader in the end" (Sergeant 103). Sergeant, who passed these praises along to Cather to strengthen her encouragement, worked to spread Cather's name among influential people, again supporting Cather's professional development.

Sergeant, as a member of Cather's circle, not only supported the development of Cather's fiction, but received support from Cather as well. During these years, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, like Cather, was working to establish herself as a professional writer. Though more interested in nonfiction and journalism than fiction, Sergeant was on a career path not so different from Cather's. Cather knew this and was reading Sergeant's work at the same time Sergeant was reading hers. Specifically, Cather was responding to

Sergeant's sketches of French life, which were published in periodicals and collected in the volume French Perspectives in 1916. In a March 1912 letter, Cather suggests that Sergeant make a separate piece out of the Burgundy part of her essay, apparently referring to a typescript Sergeant sent Cather.¹⁵ In August of that same year, Cather informs Sergeant that she and Isabelle McClung have read Sergeant's Scribner's essay aloud with much enjoyment, and that the revisions to the Burgundian section were especially successful. On April 22, 1913, Cather wrote Sergeant about Outlook and its evident mishandling of Sergeant's work. Cather offers very specific professional advice about how to communicate with the editors and what tone to take, reflecting her experience as managing editor at McClure's. She told Sergeant to write firmly and refer to previous correspondence, as the Outlook editors have behaved badly and ought to explain their conduct. Cather claims that she tried to communicate with them by telephone from the McClure's office, for publishers often respect and tell the truth to other publishers, but it did not work.

In another letter from 1913, Cather responds with pointed criticism to a manuscript that Sergeant has sent her, claiming to delight in the material and writing, but to be quite disappointed in the artificiality of the epistolary form. In letters, she complains, all the elements of the narrative turn into discussions. The characters, then, are compromised, for they always are required to artificially point out the scenery and customs of her culture. By approaching the characters through letters, she says, the reader can only get at them second hand. Cather's criticism of this piece is lengthy and

¹⁵ In a note written in the bottom margin of a typewritten transcription of this letter, made probably while Sergeant was studying Cather's letters in preparation for her 1953 memoir of Cather, Sergeant writes that Cather urged her to base a novel on a sketch in French Perspectives.

reflects her serious engagement with Sergeant's work. She holds Sergeant to the high standard that she set for her own work: she wanted the writing to feel natural, the characters to be authentic and worthy of interest, and the narrative to develop without artifice. In many ways, she wanted Sergeant to understand what Sergeant had helped her understand: that one must approach one's subject with an openness to the form that most satisfactorily expresses it. If the subject is Nebraska, the author must let the fluid undulations of the landscape determine the structure; hard structural skeletons are inappropriate for loose soil. In the case of Sergeant's work, Cather observes that the distance imposed by the epistolary form impedes engagement with the people "writing" the letters. Sergeant valued this mutual engagement as much as Cather did; as Sergeant notes, she was eager "to consult" Cather as she developed her French sketches for publication (129).

The rich exchanges in the early 1910s were the peak of Cather and Sergeant's professional relationship. The two women remained friends until Cather died in 1947, but it was in these early years, when both were establishing their writing careers, that they particularly leaned on one another. Nevertheless, they continued to talk about their work in meaningful and productive ways. For example, in 1916, when Cather was working on My Ántonia, she visited Sergeant at her New York apartment, and was moved to discuss her literary ambitions. Cather, who "was the initiator of any communication about an unborn or unfinished work," told Sergeant that she was aiming to "banish the reporter" from her fiction. Then, she leaned over, put a vase filled with flowers in the middle of the table, and moved a lamp around the vase to create different shadows and effect. "I want my new heroine to be like this—like a rare object in the

middle of a table, which one may examine from all sides,” she told Sergeant (Sergeant 148-149). Soon after that, when Cather read Sergeant’s book French Perspectives, Cather praised Sergeant’s work for its presentation of “a moral revelation of the French spirit.” “These French people have values, aims, a point of view, and have acquired wisdom from the enduring verities,” Cather reportedly told Sergeant, “One did not find anything of the sort in the Middle West.” Cather, Sergeant admitted, should have been the dedicatee of the book, as she “had done much to project the sketches in this form” (155).

With the coming of World War I, Cather and Sergeant began to grow apart. Their very different experiences of the war—Cather was living and working in the United States and reading the newspapers; Sergeant covered the war in France for the New Republic, received a serious leg injury when a grenade exploded as she toured an abandoned battle field, and spent several months in a French hospital—resulted in their disconnection from one another. Sergeant tells this story about seeing Cather for the first time after the end of the war:

[I]t was soon evident that [Cather] was greatly involved in her soldier book, so greatly that one cup of tea had scarce been drunk before her questions started. She “wanted to know,” with that eye-in-every-pore quality that took possession of her, when she was bent on her own ends.

I “wanted to tell,” of course, but like all returned soldiers—and I felt like one—I did not know how to bridge the gap between her idealized war vision that was to be apparent in One of Ours—and my own stark impressions of war as *lived*. (165; emphasis in original).

Though, this story suggests, Cather went to Sergeant anxious for material to fill her novel, Sergeant no longer wished to engage Cather's work in the same way. Sergeant, who felt like a wounded veteran, felt a distance from Cather that would remain, to some degree, for the rest of their lives. Cather, as discussed above, recognized this divide, and turned to Dorothy Canfield Fisher for help with One of Ours, perhaps realizing that Canfield Fisher, more than Sergeant, would understand the perspective from which her novel was written.

In the last decades of Cather and Sergeant's friendship, the two women wrote and spoke less frequently, but never severed their relationship. As Sergeant remembers, "Willa's letters . . . preserved a continuity in our friendship. Casual, frank, gay, affectionate, often more confidential than meetings, they were a treasure-trove" (172). When they did get together, Sergeant writes with some bitterness, "we usually ended by talking of writing—her writing" (213). Nevertheless, when Sergeant published her only novel, Short As Any Dream, in 1929, Cather wrote her "a rare letter" which praised the book and offered Sergeant congratulations for understanding how to portray the genealogical inheritance present in families (Sergeant 250).

Sergeant, too, continued to publicly support Cather as an important American writer. In 1925, she published an insightful and affirming profile of Cather in the New Republic, a piece she revised and included in her collection of profiles, Fire Under the Andes: A Group of North American Portraits, in 1927. In 1940, at the publication of Cather's last novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl, Sergeant brought her insight into Cather's life onto the pages of the Book-of-the-Month Club News, a brief profile that contextualizes Sapphira in Cather's fictional oeuvre. In 1953, Sergeant made her longest-

lasting impact on Willa Cather's legacy with the publication of Willa Cather: A Memoir. The book, which was published the same year as Edith Lewis's Willa Cather Living and E. K. Brown's Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, presents a vibrant, multi-dimensional portrait of Cather. As Witter Bynner wrote, after reading all three books, only Sergeant gave texture to "the life I wanted to know about." "Here was 'Willa Cather living,' he continued, "here was the person present behind the young woman I had met at the turn of the century. . . . The fact that Miss Sergeant is not afraid to criticize her friend adversely now and then, to see weaknesses as well as strength, rather draws the reader to Miss Cather than estranges him from her" (61-2).

Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant was a fellow writer who, particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century, was an essential member of Cather's intimate circle. Sergeant offered Cather the encouragement and professional support she needed during a crucial time for her creativity and was a "valuable reader during her friend's time of uncertainty" (O'Brien 358). As Cather's correspondence repeatedly claims, Sergeant was a rare person whose literary opinion Cather trusted. Her praise for Cather's early Nebraska fiction, work that would propel Cather to the forefront of American letters, gave Cather the needed support for creative risk. Like Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Sergeant was a friend and writer who offered Cather's work the attention and response it needed.

Help and Trust: Edith Lewis

In order to write, Willa Cather "needed to be alone, as in a hotel room in the country; or to work in a corner protected by someone who knew what it was all about—

like Edith Lewis, her companion in New York” (Sergeant 71). Edith Lewis certainly did know what it was all about, and her nearly forty-year partnership with Willa Cather was the most fruitful, most meaningful, and most sustained intimacy of Cather’s professional life. Their relationship, largely discussed in criticism for what it reveals—or does not reveal—about Cather’s personal and sexual life, has a professional dimension that has been virtually ignored by Cather scholars. Edith Lewis, a professional copy editor and published author, worked very closely with Cather during the last stages of revision of her fiction. As manuscript evidence reveals, Edith Lewis was key in giving the final polish to Cather’s published work.

The few critical writings that have discussed Edith Lewis’s role in Willa Cather’s professional life have focused primarily on her role as Cather’s literary executor after Cather’s death in 1947. In Lewis’s dealings with Mildred R. Bennett, Elizabeth Sergeant, E. K. Brown, Leon Edel, and Alfred A. Knopf, all whom were involved in writing or publishing works about Cather in the early 1950s, she made her attitude clear: Lewis, in Edel’s words, “believed it was her duty to guard the approaches to Miss Cather’s privacy” (189). Patricia L. Yongue saw, in Lewis’s handling of Cather’s work, “the desire—the utter need—to possess and control [Cather]” (13). Bennett, who briefly met with Lewis in 1948, noted that “Lewis’s response gave indication of the protective attitude she assumed toward Willa Cather’s literary effects” (20). As John J. Murphy notes in his introduction to the most recent edition of Lewis’s memoir, Willa Cather Living, many scholars “resent” Lewis for her destruction of letters, manuscripts, and other Cather documents (she was carrying out Cather’s wishes), and for the “rough time” she gave biographers (v). All of this resentment has resulted in a rather ungenerous

portrait of Lewis. She is considered the “first officer” to Cather’s “captain” (Sergeant 212), the “subordinate who always deferred to her more illustrious companion” (Woodress, “Cather” 89), a woman who “submerged her own talents to help Willa Cather’s work” (Bennett 20).

This view of Lewis is not completely inaccurate, though it is overstated. After Edith Lewis met Cather, she indeed stopped publishing her own work (she published at least two poems, in Scribner’s and Harper’s, in 1905). Yet, after the two women began living together in 1908, Edith Lewis maintained an active career, first as an editorial proofreader at McClure’s—a job Cather helped her get—and later as a writer at the advertising company J. Walter Thompson. But all of those who have commented on Lewis (all of whom, significantly, knew Lewis through their relationship with Cather) have understood her identity as Cather’s helpmate, a woman who “companied a genius through many books and years” (Sergeant 98), a “devoted and selfless” caretaker (Knopf 222), someone who was the “buffer between Cather and the outside world” (O’Brien 355), a glorified assistant who made hotel arrangements, picked out Cather’s clothes, read her fiction aloud for her ear, and generally attended to all the distractions of daily life.

Though this role is not professionally insignificant—“without Miss Lewis,” Bennett writes, “Willa Cather could not have achieved so great a literary stature” (19)—Lewis played a much more complex role in the creation of Cather’s fiction. It has long been known that Lewis read proof with Cather. One of her earliest assignments with McClure’s was to go to Boston, where Cather was preparing a McClure’s piece on Mary Baker Eddy, to read proofs of the series with Cather. The two women continued this

practice throughout Cather's novel-writing career. Lewis writes of reading proof of My Ántonia with Cather in the summer of 1918 on the rocks near the Shattuck Inn in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. "It was very interesting to read proofs with Willa Cather," Lewis remembered,

After a thing was written, she had an extremely impersonal attitude toward it. If there was "too much" of anything, she was not only ready, she was eager to cut it. She did not cherish her word and phrases. Sometimes she would have a sudden illumination and would make some radical change—always, I think, for the better. She had to pay nearly \$150 for extra proof corrections on My Ántonia. Afterwards she was more provident, and made most of her changes in the typewritten copies of her manuscripts. (106)

Only once in Lewis's narrative does she acknowledge any sort of involvement with Cather's novels beyond reading proof. In 1930, Lewis reports, Cather asked her to "look over the foundry proofs" of Shadows on the Rock since Cather had to leave for California to visit her mother and receive an honorary degree from the University of California. Cather had "read carefully the copy of Shadows and then the galley and page proofs" and she trusted the reading of the foundry proofs, which Cather requested, to Lewis (Lewis 161). At the last minute, Lewis writes, Cather telegraphed her to tell her that all references to Archbishop Laval and Archbishop de Saint-Vallier had to be altered to Bishop Laval and Bishop de Saint-Vallier, thereby enabling Lewis to fix a mistake that would have been "endlessly annoying and humiliating" (Lewis 162).

Lewis's attention to Cather's personal needs and her reading of proof with Cather, along with her management of Cather's work and legacy after her death, has long been

thought to be the extent of Lewis and Cather's professional association. Recently, however, manuscripts have been unearthed that demonstrate Lewis's deep involvement at an earlier, and more meaningful, stage in Cather's writing process. Several revised typescripts of Cather's fiction and nonfiction have been donated by Cather's niece, Helen Cather Southwick, to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Archives and Special Collections since 2001. For the first time, scholars have access to revised typescripts of The Professor's House, Shadows on the Rock, Obscure Destinies, and Lucy Gayheart,; "Katherine Mansfield," "Sarah Orne Jewett," and "148 Charles Street" from Not Under Forty; and the stories "Before Breakfast," "The Best Years," and "The Old Beauty."¹⁶ On virtually all of these manuscripts are handwritten revisions that move the typescript closer to the final form; that is, the revisions alter words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs in the typescript in a way that is identical, or very close, to the accepted, published form. Many, if not most, of the handwritten revisions are in the hand of Edith Lewis.

John J. Murphy suggests that this writing on the typescripts "suggest not coauthorship but the closeness of their working relationship. Lewis obviously did more than proof for errors; she most likely indicated where passages might be improved or made clearer" (vii). In the textual essay accompanying the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of The Professor's House, the first volume of the Scholarly Edition to study the newly-available manuscripts, the editors note that "Cather and Lewis are known to have corrected proofs together, and the presence of Lewis's hand on this and other typescripts

¹⁶ All of these manuscripts are held in the Philip L. and Helen Cather Southwick Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.

shows that she was involved at earlier stages of production as well.” But the editors are hesitant to make too much of this involvement:

We accept revisions in Lewis’s hand as having Cather’s approval; Lewis would not have made significant changes on her own and Cather would in any case have reviewed the proposed changes as she prepared the next draft. The typescript of “Two Friends,” in fact, shows a few revisions in Lewis’s hand that were struck out and replaced by other readings in Cather’s hand. (Link et al. 398-99).

Though I do not challenge the general assertions of Murphy or the Scholarly Edition—Cather deserves full authorial credit for the novels and most certainly approved all changes Lewis made—I do think both unnecessarily downplay the significance of Lewis’s role. Though Cather was the author of her work, Lewis played an important role as Cather made final revisions to her fiction and prepared it for publication. Though there is no reason to believe Cather did not thoroughly review Lewis’s revisions, very few of the revisions are challenged on the page. This suggests that Cather trusted Lewis’s judgment and that Lewis, at least during the final stages of Cather’s writing, brought her editorial experience to bear on the creation of Cather’s work.

The editors of the Willa Cather Scholarly Editions describe Cather’s compositional practices, practices explained by Cather in interviews, correspondence, and by Lewis in her memoir: “Cather’s usual practice was to write her novels in longhand, then prepare or have prepared one or more typescripts, with carbons, always revising in the process. Final typescripts were prepared by a professional typist” (Link et al. 391). Manuscript evidence suggests that during this process Lewis was involved in reading and revising the typescripts. Cather apparently accepted the vast majority of these revisions,

for “it is obvious that the uncorrected typescript was revised in the direction of the KI text [the first edition printed by Alfred A. Knopf]” (Link et al. 399).

The nature of Lewis’s holograph revisions to the typescripts is consistent across the typescripts. She does not alter characterization or plot, nor does she make suggestions for the revision of form or narrative structure. Instead, the revisions are “focused on clarifying and improving diction and syntax at the sentence level and on eliminating ambiguity of reference, wordiness, and irrelevant detail” (Link et al. 400). In other words, Lewis was making editing decisions analogous to the ones she made on the job at J. Walter Thompson; Cather was utilizing the professional skills of a woman who intimately understood her artistic ambitions and philosophy.

Since many of the manuscripts contain both Lewis’s and Cather’s hand on them, it is likely that both women read the typescripts and corrected them. However, the level of revision, and the hand making the revisions, is inconsistent across the manuscripts in the Southwick Collection. This inconsistency can possibly be attributed to the varied stage of development each manuscript represents; the earlier manuscripts have more revisions on them. The manuscript of The Professor’s House is probably the most heavily-revised typescript in the collection, and is “one of the earliest substantially complete texts of any Cather novel” (Link et al. 400). The Professor’s House manuscript is also noteworthy because the revising hand appears to be predominantly Edith Lewis’s. This is not true in other, later manuscripts in the collection, such as Lucy Gayheart, Obscure Destinies, and “Before Breakfast.” Though Lewis’s hand appears on almost all manuscripts—“The Old Beauty” is a possible exception—only in The Professor’s House manuscript does her hand so absolutely dominate.

Precisely how Lewis worked with Cather when responding to these typescripts is unknown. There are a few possible scenarios. One possibility, given Lewis's assertion to have read proof *with* Cather, is that the two women read the typescript aloud, and the presence of Lewis's hand suggests that she was the scribe for the combined response. This is perhaps more likely to be true for typescripts that were revised after 1934, when Cather developed painful tendonitis that confined her hand to a brace and prevented her from writing, though the manuscript with the most revisions in Lewis's hand, The Professor's House, was likely checked in 1924, a full ten years before Cather's hand was unusable. It could be that, at least at certain points in her career, Cather read proof with Lewis in order to hear her prose aloud; that is, reading proof together strengthened Cather's aesthetic judgment of her own work. However, Cather's hand *does* appear on many manuscripts, which conflicts with any conclusion that presupposes her resistance to personally reading and correcting the proof in her own hand. In all likelihood, a combination of revising strategies were employed, sometimes listening as Lewis read and made revisions, sometimes reading and revising alone.

Another potential scenario is that Lewis read the typescript independently, made corrections and suggestions, and returned the manuscript to Cather for approval. This possibility, though feasible when confronting the manuscript evidence alone, defies much of what we know about Lewis and Cather's relationship. It suggests that Lewis may have independently and thoroughly revised Cather's fiction and that Cather accepted it with few changes. Such a scenario is unlikely, however, given the personalities of the two women, the record Lewis left about their working relationship, and Cather's clearly articulated desire to control her fiction. The evidence is still incomplete, but we do know

that Lewis's role in the development of Cather's fiction was more significant than historically assumed. The manuscripts suggest the possibility that Edith Lewis, at least at certain moments in Cather's career, was trusted to apply her independent editorial eye to Cather's manuscripts.

Though this manuscript evidence is not conclusive, it demonstrates that Lewis's involvement certainly was pronounced well before proof stage, although Lewis's discussion of reading proof with Cather on My Ántonia ("Afterwards she was more provident, and made most of her changes in the typewritten copies of her manuscripts [106]") does suggest the possibility that she understood reading the typescripts as checking "proof." The presence of Cather's hand overruling Lewis's (see Figure 3) demonstrates that Cather read Lewis's revisions closely; however, only one example of such overruling exists. This acceptance, and the trust it suggests, makes Lewis a much more important contributor to Cather's work than has previously been acknowledged. Far from the helpmate always "at the feet" of Cather (Bennett), Edith Lewis was an influential and dependable colleague who helped polish and refine Cather's published work.

younger sister daughter, looked even younger than
 Kathleen, the ~~St. Peters' friends~~ *considered much less prop-*
~~er than her sister, - though she had the slender, undeveloped~~ *she was - had the slender, undeveloped figure than very much*
~~figure then very much in vogue.~~ *in vogue.* She was pale, with light hazel
 eyes, and her hair was hazel-colored with distinctly green lights
 in it, soft, curly, not abundant. To her father there was some-
 thing very charming about the curious shadows her wide cheek-
~~bones threw~~ *cast* over her cheeks, and the spirited tilt of her head.
 Her figure in profile, he used to tell her, looked just like
 an interrogation point, because of the tense way she threw her
 shoulders forward.

~~Seated between her daughters Mrs. St. Peter listened in-~~
~~tently in the conversation between Sir Edgar and Marsellus.~~ *she*
 Scott, *she* ~~saw~~, was going to be sulky because *Sir Edgar and Marsellus were talk-*
~~things outside~~ beyond his little circle of interests. She made
 no effort to draw him into the conversation, but let him growl
 like a restless leopard among the books. The Professor was ~~am-~~
 amiable, but quiet. Mrs. St. Peter frankly liked having a son-
 in-law who could tot up acquaintances with Sir Edgar from the
 Soudan to Alaska, ~~and she was pleased with the turn the talk~~
~~had taken.~~ When the second maid came to the door and signalled
 that dinner was ready-- dinner was signalled, not announced--
~~she~~ *Mrs. St. Peter* ~~took~~ *seated* Sir Edgar and guided him to his ~~place~~ *seat* at her right,
 while the others ~~took~~ *found* their usual places. When they had finished
 the soup she had some difficulty in summoning the little maid
 to take away the plates, and explained to her guest that the
 electric bell, under the table, wasn't connected as yet,-- they
 had been in the new house less than a week, and the trials of
 building were not ~~yet~~ over.

Figure 2: A sample page from the corrected typescript of *The Professor's House*. The handwriting is Edith Lewis's. Courtesy Philip L. and Helen Cather Southwick Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.

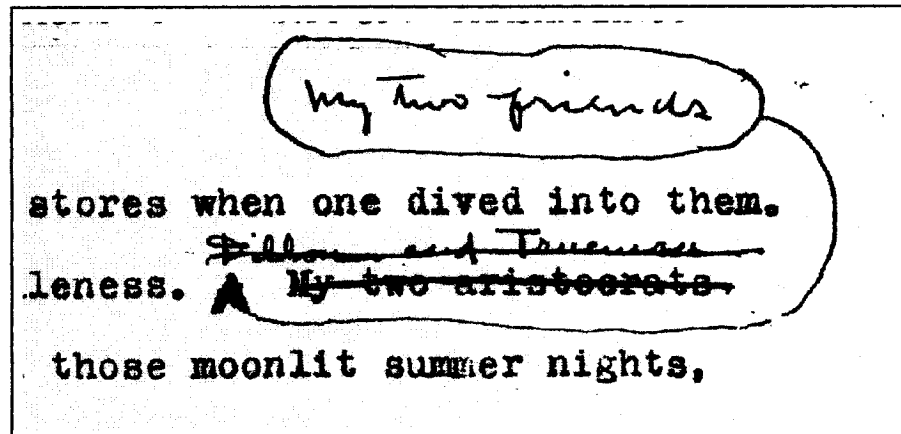


Figure 3: Cather's hand altering Lewis's revision to the typescript of "Two Friends." Courtesy Philip L. and Helen Cather Southwick Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.

The corrected typescripts offer some insight into Cather and Lewis's long relationship, but Lewis remains an enigmatic figure in Cather studies. Only one letter between them is available. Written by Cather from Jaffrey, New Hampshire, in 1936, it is a quiet accounting of Cather's time—her appetite, her sleep, her astronomical observations of Venus and Jupiter, her wrinkle-free clothes. Its tone, like many letters between longtime partners, suggests a deep personal intimacy, the sort of intimacy that makes one interested in the other's sleeping and eating habits. This personal, domestic familiarity clearly expanded into a professional closeness. Edith Lewis was a part of Cather's personal community of writers for a longer, and more meaningful, period than either Dorothy Canfield Fisher or Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant. Yet, because Lewis, unlike Canfield Fisher and Sergeant, suppressed knowledge of her full involvement, she has been generally given short shrift in Cather criticism. Lewis's memoir of Cather is

remarkable for what it says so very little about: Lewis and Cather's relationship. That silence, combined with its sometimes hagiographic tone (Lewis on Cather: "They were dark blue eyes with dark lashes; and I know of no way of describing them, except to say that they were the eyes of genius" [xxvii]), have led to a rather dismissive attitude about Lewis among critics. Only recently, in fact, have scholars made attempts to discover more about Lewis's role in Cather's life.¹⁷ As more and more discoveries are made, it is likely that Edith Lewis's stature will continue to grow. Far more than just a "first officer" to Cather's "captain," Lewis exerted considerable influence on the development of Cather's fiction, and her active role further proves that Cather, hardly working in isolation, depended on the circle of writers around her.

In an April 8, 1921, letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Cather emphasized the need she had for an intimate literary circle. Cather told Fisher that she wrote for herself, Fisher, and no more than a half-dozen other friends (Madigan, "Willa" 118). Though Cather's claim is obviously an overstatement (she treasured many of the letters she received from her readers), it speaks to her recognition of the importance of her closest literary contacts. Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, and Edith Lewis were certainly among those half-dozen friends, for they formed the nucleus of the personal writing community Cather gathered around her. She sought out the advice and

¹⁷ At the 2003 International Cather Seminar in Bread Loaf, Vermont, Anne Kaufman and Melissa Homestead presented a "work in progress" which suggests that some of Cather's connections—including D. H. Lawrence—potentially can be traced back to Lewis and her friends at Smith College. In tracing Lewis's role in Cather's career, they argue, one begins to understand that Lewis was much more influential and powerful than most have acknowledged.

support of her friends and fellow writers, and she returned it in kind. She cultivated communal exchanges with these three women, leaning on them at important moments in her career, and supporting them at important moments in theirs. From the beginning of her writing life, when she co-wrote a football story with young Dorothy Canfield, to the very end of her life, when she was reading over a typescript of "The Old Beauty" that Edith Lewis had made suggestions on, Cather wrote in the midst of community. Unlike the arts communities that surrounded Cather in Greenwich Village, Boston, Taos, Vermont, or New Hampshire, this community existed only for Willa Cather; it was a community that arose from the patterns of her own experience. When Cather's relationships to Canfield Fisher, Sergeant, and Lewis are understood collectively, we understand that the most profound communal interchanges of Cather's artistic career were with a small group of fellow professionals, women who were invested in Cather's career as she was invested in theirs. This was a circle that Cather did not stay at the edge of; this was a circle that had Willa Cather at its center.

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