

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications -- Department of English

English, Department of

Spring 2007

Review of *Willa Cather and Material Culture: Real-World Writing, Writing the Real World*, edited by Janis P. Stout

Melissa Homestead

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, mhomestead2@Unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Homestead, Melissa, "Review of *Willa Cather and Material Culture: Real-World Writing, Writing the Real World*, edited by Janis P. Stout" (2007). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 76.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs/76>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications -- Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Published in THE JOURNAL OF THE MIDWEST MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION,
Volume 40, Number 1 (Spring 2007), pp. 148-151.
Copyright 2007 Melissa Homestead.

Willa Cather and Material Culture: Real-World Writing, Writing the Real World.
Edited by Janis P. Stout. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2005. viii + 240 pp.

In her essay “The Novel D meubl ,” American novelist Willa Cather famously protested against the “over-furnished” modern novel, in which “material objects and their vivid presentation” have overtaken artistic vision and skill (43). In response, she advocates “throw[ing] all of the furniture out of the [novel’s] window,” leaving behind “the room bare as the stage of a Greek theatre” (51). In the introduction to this collection of essays and in many of the essays themselves, editor Janis Stout and the essays’ authors refer to and rebut Cather’s famous artistic manifesto through analyses of material objects in her fiction. Stout’s introduction frames the collection as a whole as part of an ongoing reclamation of Cather’s modernism and as “consider[ing] her less in exceptionalist terms and more in terms of her involvement in, or even investment in, her culture” (2). Stout and several contributors cite Bill Brown’s *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003) and Douglas Mao’s *Solid*

Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production (1998), works that testify to the increasing attention that material objects are receiving in modernist literary studies. *Willa Cather and Material Culture* thus seeks to bring Cather's engagements with the material world into this critical conversation. More biographically, Stout frames some of the essays as recovering Cather's pursuit of "writing as a career, as distinct from a disinterested engagement in creating art for the ages" (3).

As is often the case with such collections, however, the essays are of uneven quality and thematic as well as methodological coherence is weak. The essays also cover Cather's career unevenly; scores of magazine stories from the 1900s and 1910s in addition to her great prairie novels *My Antonia* and *O, Pioneers!* receive virtually no attention. Structurally, the collection breaks roughly into two halves, the first half biographical and the second half textual. The collection begins with Ann Romines's essay "Willa Cather: A Life with Quilts," in which Romines moves between Cather's autobiographical reminiscences about quilt-making in her Virginia childhood community, rich "readings" of surviving nineteenth-century quilts produced by branches of Cather's family in Virginia, and a meditation on female creativity and community in Cather's Virginia novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Next, in "To Entertain, To Educate, To Elevate: Cather and the Commodification of Manners at the *Home Monthly*," Jennifer L. Bradley closely analyzes the advertising, articles, and fiction published in the magazine during Cather's year as an editor. She argues that although Cather worked within the intertwined editorial program and business objective of the enterprise, she ultimately undermined the magazine's construction of woman's domestic role. In "'That Kitchen with the Shining Windows': Willa Cather's 'Neighbour Rosicky' and the *Woman's Home Companion*," Park Bucker focuses on a single Cather magazine publication, belaboring the obvious point that Cather's short story fit well with the domestic values espoused by the magazine. He does not explain, however, how the thirty-five-page "Selective Thematic Concordance" of a random assortment of words from "acres" to "worldly"—compiled from the *revised* book appearance of the story rather than the periodical appearance—adds to the analysis easily conveyed in the 10 pages of his essay. In "Taking Liberties: Willa Cather and the 1934 Film Adaptation of *A Lost Lady*," Michael Schueth takes a biographical approach, using archival materials to recreate the marketing of the Warner Brothers film adaptation of Cather's novel (marketing that played heavily on the value of Cather's name) and to examine Cather's negative reaction.

Anne Raine's essay "Object Lessons: Nature Education, Museum Science, and Ethnographic Tourism in *The Professor's House*" marks the shift in the volume to a textual approach focusing on analysis of objects in Cather's fiction. Raine's essay, the most richly layered of the collection,

reads the Tom Outland section of Cather's Southwestern novel in relation to the emergence of both the natural history museum and the national parks movement. Although Raine is not the only critic to put the novel in these contexts, she finds far greater ambiguity and complexity in Cather's approach and brilliantly integrates the formal structure of the novel into her analysis. In "'An Orgy of Acquisition': The Female Consumer, Infidelity, and Commodity Culture in *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House*," Honor McKittrick Wallace reads telephones in the former novel and shopping in the latter in relation to "1920s advertising culture's representations of women" (145). She concludes that Cather is critical of the "postmodern femininity" of late capitalism, preferring a "premodern feminine fidelity" (154). In "'Fragments of Their Desire': Willa Cather and the Alternative Aesthetic Tradition of Native American Women," Deborah Lindsay Williams analyzes *The Song of the Lark* against *The Professor's House*, valuing the former over the latter for heroine Thea Kronberg's "cosmopolitan" approach to Southwestern cliff-dweller ruins "that allows her to gather insight from the ghosts of the pueblo women, instead of seeing merely artifacts to be collected and given as gifts, as Tom [Outland] does" (167). In "Material Objects as Sites of Cultural Mediation in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*," Sarah Wilson argues that "Cather's novel proposes the material object as a revolutionary site, wherein the cultural narratives of colonizer and colonized can engage in mutual reinterpretation and subversion, and multiple cultures can begin to accommodate each other's differences" (172). In "Gloves Full of Gold: Violations of the Gift Cycle in *My Mortal Enemy*," Robert K. Miller applies anthropologist Marcel Mauss's analysis of gift-giving in Native American and Melanesian traditional societies to the life and actions of Myra Henshawe, the protagonist of Cather's novella.

Mary Ann O'Farrell's final essay reflects on this collection's project and toys with one of the central questions of the volume's introduction, a question that other essays avoid: what does it mean to analyze "material culture" as *represented* in the immaterial verbal medium of words? It is possible, as O'Farrell notes, to make lists of things, and the act of listing seems to turn the words themselves into material objects. Ultimately, however, writing cannot quite solve the conundrum of "how, materially, to include the materiality with which it is enamored" (212). I would add to O'Farrell's provocative methodological critique another: despite Stout's proclaimed purpose, the volume reinscribes Cather's critical distance from the "real world" of her time if the real is understood to include consumerism, mass culture, and the market. The essays by Bradley, Schueth, and Wallace, for instance, all describe Cather as turning away from or taking a critical stance towards modern market culture. Indeed, by defining Cather's "engagement with her culture" as part of a recuperation of Cather's modernism, Stout makes such a result almost inevitable.

Modernist studies may recognize the engagements of modernist writers with things, but modernism defined itself against an ostensibly debased, feminized mass market. What about, for instance, Cather's peer cohort of writers (and their readers) dismissed by modernists as "middle brow"? Bucker's essay on "Neighbor Rosicky" in the *Woman's Home Companion*, a high-circulation, high-paying, middle-brow women's magazine, represents a missed opportunity to take up such an inquiry by presenting a more complex picture of Cather's engagements with the mass market.

Melissa J. Homestead
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Work Cited

Cather, Willa. "The Novel D meubl ." *Not Under Forty*. New York: Knopf, 1936. 43-51.