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Willa Cather [from *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century American Fiction*]

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Cather, Willa

Melissa J. Homestead

Willa Cather is known primarily for her novels representing the experiences of women immigrants on the Nebraska prairies in the late nineteenth century, but Cather's 10 novels and scores of short stories' produced over a career spanning 50 years actually range widely over space and time, from seventeenth-century Quebec to twentieth-century New York. A social conservative who proudly identified herself as one of the backward looking, her experiments with fictional form and her approach to culture nevertheless ally her with modernism. It is, perhaps, the depth and diversity of Cather's body of work and the impossibility of reducing her achievement to a single descriptive formula that have secured her reputation as a major American novelist.

Born Wilella Cather in Back Creek, Virginia in 1873, Cather moved with her family to Webster County in south-central Nebraska in 1883. After a year living on a farm, the family moved to the county seat of Red Cloud, where Cather attended high school. She then attended the University of Nebraska, in the state capital of Lincoln, majoring in English and working both on student publications and professionally as a journalist (primarily writing theater and book reviews). After her graduation in 1895, she spent a year doing journalistic writing and looking for work before moving to Pittsburgh in 1896 to take an editorial position at a regional women's magazine. The magazine was short-lived, but Cather stayed on in Pittsburgh, returning to journalism and then turning to high school teaching to give herself more time to write fiction. She finally left Pittsburgh in 1906 to accept an editorial position at *McClure's Magazine* in New York City, which became her primary residence until her death. She did not make her final break from *McClure's* until 1912, becoming a full-time creative artist for the first time when she was

nearly 40 years old. She died in New York City in 1947.

Willa Cather's life and works represent a number of seemingly irresolvable contradictions. She is best known for two Nebraska novels, *My Ántonia* (1918) and *O Pioneers!* (1913), but she lived in Nebraska barely more than a decade, and the majority of her fiction is set outside of Nebraska. Feminist critics have found the strong female heroines of her Nebraska pioneer novel, and of *The Song of the Lark* (1915) compelling, but Cather never embraced feminism, and two of her novels most admired by critics in her own day and today, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *The Professor's House* (1925), focus on the lives of women. Her primary affective ties throughout her life were with other women, and late twentieth and early twenty-first-century critics have interpreted her fiction through the theoretical lenses of lesbian and gay studies and queer theory. Critics and biographers remain strongly divided, however, on the question of Cather's sexual identity, and her fiction includes no overt representations of same-sex intimacy.

Later in her career, Cather sometimes downplayed, or even denied the existence of, much of her early short fiction. However, she was still in college when her first short story appeared in a national magazine, and she had been publishing short fiction for two decades by the time her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), appeared. Much of *Alexander's Bridge* takes place in drawing rooms in Boston and London, as Bartley Alexander, an engineer, becomes entangled in an extramarital affair while building an innovative bridge in Canada. The novel ends with the collapsing bridge taking the life of its designer. Cather later dismissed *Alexander's Bridge* as a shallow "studio picture" produced under the influence of Henry James and Edith Wharton. Her first short story collection, *A Troll Garden* (1905), likewise features a number of "artist tales" in the manner of James; however, the line between her Nebraskan and Jamesian fiction is not wholly distinct. For instance, "A Wagner Matinee" takes place in Boston and is narrated by a Boston lawyer, but he spent much of his childhood in Nebraska. His aunt, who comes to Boston to settle family business, is a former Boston conservatory piano teacher who left her career to follow her husband to Nebraska,

where she has spent decades as a poor farm wife. "The Sculptor's Funeral" reverses the geographical trajectory of "A Wagner Matinee," but again crosses the artist tale and prairie fiction as the student of a world-famous sculptor accompanies his mentor's body from Boston home to his bleak Kansas home town for burial.

O Pioneers!, the novel Cather claimed as her real "first novel" in opposition to *Alexander's Bridge*, continues to define her in the public imagination as a prairie novelist who focuses on strong immigrant heroines (thus in 2002, Cather was paired with Laura Ingalls Wilder and Edna Ferber in a White House symposium on "Women and the American West"). However, *O Pioneers!* also marks the beginning of Cather's experiments with novelistic form. Although heroine Alexandra Bergson successfully masters the prairie that defeated her father's agricultural enterprise, Cather does not write a social-realist novel representing the work of farming. Instead, Cather represents Alexandra as a visionary artist of the land, with the years of labor converting unplowed farmland into a large and prosperous farm absent in the novel. Cather also created what she called a "two part pastoral," complexly intertwining Alexandra's story with that of the doomed love affair between Alexandra's brother Emil and a married neighbor, Marie Shabata.

The Song of the Lark (1915) is also set largely in the American west, but Cather again connects West and East in the life of an artist. Heroine Thea Kronborg, the child of Swedish immigrants, grows up in Moonstone, Colorado, but on her journey to a career as a major opera singer, she moves to Chicago, then New York, and even Europe, before returning to New York as a performer. In between, she makes a significant trip to the American southwest, where she discovers her true vocation as a singer, having trained primarily as a pianist. Cather later regretted the "full-blooded" method she employed in this conventionally and chronologically plotted novel, and when she prepared a collected edition of her works in the 1930s, she heavily revised and shortened *The Song of the Lark*, her longest novel. While her next novel, *My Ántonia*, is set entirely in a thinly fictionalized version of Webster County, Nebraska, a key portion of the novel, its introduction, takes place on a train between New York and Nebraska. The

introduction's narrator (implicitly Cather herself) discusses Nebraska childhood memories with Jim Burden, who also grew up in Nebraska, but who lives and works in New York. The introduction thus frames the main body of the novel as a printed version of Jim's manuscript reminiscences about his childhood and his friendship with Bohemian immigrant Ántonia Shimerda. This was not the first time that Cather had written in a man's voice. After she left *McClure's Magazine*, she ghostwrote the memoir of S. S. McClure, who had lost control of the magazine bearing his name. Despite the novel's title, *My Ántonia* is as much about Jim Burden as it is about Ántonia, and like *O Pioneers!*, the book violates novelistic convention; The novel combines fragments Jim's and Ántonia's intertwined, yet very different, life stories. Furthermore, oral storytelling occasions repeatedly disrupt the novel's forward movement.

Positive responses to *My Ántonia* from cultural arbiters such as H. L. Mencken seemingly cemented Cather's reputation as a major American novelist. However, her World War I novel *One of Ours* (1922) incurred the wrath of highbrow critics, while also gaining her a much larger readership than she had previously enjoyed. Based loosely on the experiences of her cousin G. P. Cather, more than half of the novel is set in Nebraska, where protagonist Claude Wheeler feels stifled and frustrated. For Claude, the battlefields of France are a convenient escape from a disastrous marriage, and in the comradeship of his fellow soldiers, and especially violinist David Gerhardt, he finds the meaning and purpose he could not find in rural Nebraska. Like Cather's cousin, Claude, dies relatively early in the American engagement on the ground in France, and Cather's protagonist is thus spared the postwar disillusionment that colors the fiction John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, and others. Mencken unfavorably compared the French section of *One of Ours* to Dos Passos's unambiguously ironic and anti-war novel *Three Soldiers* (1921), and modern critics of *One of Ours* remain divided on the question of whether Cather treats Claude's perspective ironically.

One of Ours was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, but Cather's subsequent novels of the 1920s continue to receive more critical attention and approbation than *One of Ours*. In the brief and elegiac *A Lost Lady* (1923), Cather returned to

nineteenth-century Nebraska, shifting her focus from European immigrant farmers to the entrepreneurial "American" class of railroad builders. Title character Marian Forrester is married to Captain Daniel Forrester, a moving force behind the Burlington and Northern railroad that crossed Nebraska and enabled its development. As in *My Ántonia*, readers see the main female character through the eyes of a male character.

Orphaned Neil Herbert is studying the law in the office of his uncle in the small town of Sweet Water, and he idolizes and idealizes Marian as a representation of the community's pioneer era. As her husband loses his physical vitality to repeated strokes and his assets in a bank failure, Neil expects Marian to devote herself entirely to her husband and to the past, but Marian finds sexual fulfillment outside of marriage and accommodates herself to the new economic order. Our last glimpse of the widowed Marian Forrester living happily in Argentina with her second husband suggests that she is far from "lost," even if Neil insists on framing her that way.

The Professor's House and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* are Cather's most formally experimental novels and her most insistently focused on relationships between men. Godfrey St. Peter is a university history professor contemplating a move from one house to another, and he is similarly caught between his vague dissatisfaction with his marriage and haunting memories of his student Tom Outland, who died while serving in the Foreign Legion in World War I. The first and the third sections of the novel take place in the fictional present after Tom's death; the second and central section, however, presents Tom speaking in the first person as he tells St. Peter the story of how he and a male friend discovered the ruins of a Native American community of cliff dwellers while working as cowboys.

Both *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House* helped to recover Cather's reputation with critics. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* both solidified Cather's reputation for innovation and technical mastery and marked a turn to the past and history that would fuel attacks on her from the Left in the 1930s. Set during the early days of New Mexico's territorial annexation to the United States, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* traces the careers of two French priests sent to establish a new apostolic

vicarate. As contemporary reviews recognized, the novel's organization is more visual and spatial than narrative and plotted, and Cather subsequently identified the murals of French painter Puvis de Chavannes as an important influence on her technique.

The deep love between Bishop Jean Latour and Father Joseph Vaillant, their love of God and the Catholic Church, and Cather's engaged and respectful representation of Catholicism led many readers to believe that Cather herself was a Catholic. Cather was not a Catholic, but her next novel, *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), only intensified such assumptions, as Cather turned even further back into North American history to the intensely Catholic community of seventeenth-century Quebec, a frontier community built on both literal rock and the rock of religious faith. The relationship between apothecary Eudide Audaire and his patron Count Frontenac is important to the novel, but the domestic world of his young daughter, Cécile, takes center stage. Indeed, the novel's celebration of Cécile's kitchen as central to the preservation of French culture on foreign soil led male critics on the Left to dismiss the novel and to lament Cather's retreat into the past and bourgeois domesticity. Despite such critical attacks, and despite the fact that the novel is visually organized and largely plotless, digressing through oral storytelling occasions like *My Ántonia*, tens of thousands of ordinary readers embraced the novel. As a result, *Shadows* was Cather's first novel to reach the bestseller list, coming in at number two for the year behind Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*.

Throughout her career, Cather's fiction appeared in magazines. For instance, all of her novels of the 1920s were serialized in magazines before appearing as books, and the fiction she did not collect for book publication sometimes presents an instructive contrast to her novels and collected fictions of the same period. In the teens, for instance, while she was writing her prairie novels, many of her short stories were set in New York City, including a series of stories she anticipated publishing together under the title *Office Wives*. In *Obscure Destinies* (1932), a collection of three long short stories first published in the *Woman's Home Companion* and the *Ladies' Home Journal*, Cather returned to Nebraska as subject matter, writing stories deeply grounded in her childhood experiences and the

lives of her family and friends. Her slender novel *Lucy Gayheart* (1935) (serialized in the *Woman's Home Companion*) represents another layer of return Cather's late career. Not only is the novel set in central Nebraska, but also it repeats, in both a lighter and more melancholic vein, the story of a young woman's artistic development, which Cather first explored in *The Song of the Lark*.

Cather's last finished novel continued her turn to family history, but the southern family history that is only tangentially visible in earlier fiction. Jim Burden in *My Ántonia* is from the South, but his story begins when he is on his way to Nebraska, his southern childhood quickly receding into memory. "Old Mrs. Harris" (collected in *Obscure Destinies*) represents Grandmother Harris and her daughter Victoria Templeton as displaced southern "ladies" struggling to understand the social mores of the "snappy little Western democracy" of a Nebraska small town, but, again, the South is only a memory. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) turns back the clock before Cather's birth to a fictionalized version of her family's 'pre-Civil War history in Virginia. The troubled relationship between Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert and her slave (and probable niece) Nancy Till is at the center of the novel. Sapphira's husband Martin, her adult daughters, and her nephew all become implicated in a struggle over control of Nancy's budding sexuality. Cather anatomizes Sapphira's psyche in unflinching detail, stripping the relation between mistress and slave of any supposed patina of romance, a fictional psychological journey praised by Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* (1992). The novel's firstperson epilogue, however, in which Cather wrote herself into the story, has troubled modern critics. Recalling Nancy's postwar return from Canada to visit her aging mother from her perspective as a child, Cather turns Nancy's story into a white southern girl's most prized possession.

At the time of her death in 1947, Cather was working on yet another historical novel about French Catholics, *Hard Punishments*, set in medieval Avignon. Cather named as her executor Edith Levriss, a magazine editor and advertising copywriter with whom she shared a home in New York City for 38 years. In accord with Cather's wishes, Lewis destroyed all but a few pages of the manuscript of *Hard Punishments*. Lewis arranged for publication of a few short stories that

remained in manuscript at the time of Cather's death as *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948).

SEE ALSO: Dos Passos, John (AF); Gender and the Novel (AF); James, Henry (AF); Modernist Fiction (AF); Queer Modernism (AF); Wharton, Edith (AF)

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