
Paul Comeau

British Columbia, Canada
The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanti-
cism. By Susan J. Rosowski. Lincoln: Uni-
versity of Nebraska Press, 1986. Table of
contents, preface, illustrations, notes, in-
dex. xvii +284 pp. $22.95.

The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanti-
cism is a valuable and compelling addition to
Cather criticism. Working from the late eigh-
teenth century definition of romanticism—the
process whereby the creative imagination
locates meaning in the material world—Susan
Rosowski demonstrates convincingly how the
central tenets of romanticism informed the
progress of Willa Cather's artistic vision as
exemplified both in individual works and in
the pattern of her canon. Accordingly, the
possibility of discovering value in external
objects is addressed in the optimistic early
novels, of which Alexander's Bridge constitutes
a romantic allegory of creativity, The Song of
the Lark, Cather's Prelude, and A Lost Lady a
Keatsian ode.

When Cather's youthful optimism gave
way to the disenchantment of middle age, the
romantic imagination turned inward in its
quest for truth, as in The Professor's House and
My Mortal Enemy, interpreted by Rosowski as a
romantic version of the fall and as an awaken-
ing to the dangers of romantic sentimentality
respectively. Redefining the process of know-
ing, Cather subsequently celebrated the har-
mony of correspondences in Death Comes for
the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock. And
finally, Rosowski concludes, Willa Cather
explored the dark underside of romanticism by
writing her last novels, Lucy Gayheart and
Sapphira and the Slave Girl, in the Gothic
mode.

The critical significance of Rosowski's
study inheres as much in the breadth of
scholarship it encompasses as in the depth of
insight it provides, most notably with regard to
the minor novels, which acquire greater pro-
minence as representative stages in the de-
velopment of Cather's romantic vision. For
example, when viewed as Cather's Prelude, as
her autobiographical preparation for a life of
art, The Song of the Lark relates more pro-
foundly to the novels that follow it; and in this
case the distinction noted between Thea's
intensely female imaginative growth and the
conventional male rhythms of the narrative is
especially poignant. Similarly, the much ma-
ligned Lucy Gayheart and the seemingly
anachronistic Sapphira and the Slave Girl are
infused with new vitality and meaning when placed in the Gothic tradition, the dark extension of romanticism. And even the acknowledged classics like My Antonia and Death Comes for the Archbishop are illuminated by Rosowski’s approach, the former representing the individual mind’s capacity to perceive the world symbolically and the latter identifying the sacramental quality of symbolization.

One of the obvious challenges of a book-length study of a writer’s canon through a single theme is to highlight the artistic development and achievement of the whole without diminishing the unique imaginative richness of the constituent parts. In The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather’s Romanticism, Susan Rosowski meets this challenge head on and succeeds masterfully in producing a highly readable and distinguished work of criticism.

PAUL COMEAU
British Columbia, Canada