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Historical Essay and Explanatory Notes by Mark J.  
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**Willa Cather's Many-Colored Medusa of Art**

*Youth and the Bright Medusa*. Willa Cather. Historical Essay and Explanatory Notes by Mark J. Madigan. Textual Essay and Editing by Frederick M. Link, Charles W. Mignon, Judith Boss, and Kari A. Ronning. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. Willa Cather Scholarly Edition Series. 2009. 646 pp. 25 illustrations. ISBN 978-0-8032-1754-6. \$80.00.

## Nancee Reeves

Willa Cather was notoriously picky not only about the excellence of her writing, but also about how those words would be presented to the public. She involved herself in every step of the publishing process: paper stock, font, margins, illustrations, ink color, cover, and wrapper design. To Cather, reading was an immersive activity, one that should be tactile and aesthetically pleasing, as well as emotionally and intellectually stimulating. She believed that “a book’s physical form influenced its relationship with a reader” (ix). She would hate today’s practice of cramming her most well-known works together in one unwieldy volume printed on thin paper with nonexistent margins.

The latest edition to the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition series, *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, is a monument to Cather’s own standards of excellence. The thick paper stock is warm and creamy—the kind of paper that feels smooth and comforting to fingers well used to thumbing the cheap texts that are so common today. The type is large and dark, and the wide margins showcase the text while filling the consummate note-taker’s heart with joy. As the series general editors, Susan J. Rosowski and Guy J. Reynolds, point out in the preface, “[g]iven Cather’s explicitly stated intentions for her works, printing and publishing decisions that disregard her wishes represent their own form of corruption, and an authoritative edition of Cather must go beyond the sequence of the words and punctuation to include other matters” (ix–x). The book itself is lovely, warm, and inviting—all that Cather herself could have wished.

The attention to detail that we see in the physical presentation of the book is a good indication of what is to come. Cather was an accomplished and well-practiced editor, and she used her skills on her own writing, making a thoroughly researched textual apparatus indispensable if a reader wishes to understand her creative process and her true intentions. She also wrote untiringly about her own life, as well as the trials and tribulations of those few dear people close to her, making historical essays, research, and explanatory notes critical to a literary scholar. Combining all these elements, The Willa Cather Scholarly Editions are a study in both literary scholarship and textual scholarship—two fields that are usually studied separately, but which greatly profit from a graceful commingling.

Perhaps more than most of Cather’s works, *Youth and the Bright Medusa* benefits significantly from both a textual and literary treatment. All eight stories

in the collection deal with artistic longing, the management of a creative gift, and the high cost of artistic success—themes explored and brooded over by Cather throughout her long career. They are also unique in that four of the stories were originally published in *The Troll Garden* (1905), and the other four came from contemporaneous magazine publications. None of Cather's other short story collections were comprised of stories previously published in other books, making *Youth and the Bright Medusa* one of Cather's most heavily edited collections. All of the stories were reedited by Cather before being republished, undergoing many substantive changes. For the first time, these stories are presented with complete historical backgrounds and a textual apparatus that show how the stories changed through many drafts and subsequent publications. By studying the stories first historically and then textually, the reader is able to understand not only how and why the works were originally conceived, but also how Cather changed as both an artist and a person.

The eight stories in this scholarly edition are presented as they originally appeared in the first U.S. edition of *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, published in 1920 by Alfred A. Knopf. The pages are clean and unmarred by any sort of textual apparatus—even the endnotes are listed by page, so no unnecessary numbering distracts readers from the stories. This conforms to the series' aim to produce a “critical text faithful to [Cather's] intentions as she prepared it for the first edition” (vii). The historical essays, explanatory notes, and extensive textual apparatus appear after all the stories have been presented. This certainly allows the reader to enjoy the stories on a visceral level that is not always possible in scholarly editions. However, most readers of this edition will be using it for scholarly purposes rather than for entertainment purposes. And for this, the edition may be inconvenient. While the editors should be applauded for their efforts to present an authentic and historically accurate base text, readers may find that they spend a good deal of time flipping back and forth between the story and the explanatory notes, as well as reading the part of the historical essay that deals with the story they had just finished (while it is fresh in their mind), rather than wait until all eight stories have been consumed.

However, despite the cumbersome nature of the book's setup, the editors are justified in their assertion that this edition “is distinctive in the comprehensiveness of its apparatus, especially in its inclusion of extensive explanatory information that illuminates the fiction of a writer who drew so extensively upon actual experiences, as well as the full textual information we have come to expect in a modern critical edition” (vii). As shown by the historical essay and explanatory notes, written by Mark J. Madigan, Cather was a writer who drew strongly on her own life and the lives that surrounded her for inspiration and insight. Madigan has broken down the historical essay into sections, so the reader can, after a general introduction, read about the historical

construction of each story. Cather was notoriously private, destroying personal letters and even including a stipulation in her will that forbade the publication of her private papers. However, through publisher's records and letters, interviews with friends, memoirs of contemporaries, and detective work, a strong historical background is available for each story in the collection.

It is fascinating to see how deftly Cather blended fact and fiction, plucking characters wholesale from her personal life and making use of their talents and foibles for her own ends. It is especially interesting to see how Cather interwove the careers, personal lives, and personalities of the opera singers of her time to produce fully realized characters such as Eden Bower from "Coming, Aphrodite!" and Kitty Ayrshire from "A Golden Slipper" and "Scandal." However, by far the most original and fascinating contribution to Madigan's historical essay is the story behind "Paul's Case."

It has long been established that Cather drew on students from her teaching days to construct Paul, a young man willing to sacrifice his life for a few weeks' escape from the "colorless mass of every-day existence" (209). However, by examining newspaper articles and wading through factual errors introduced by earlier Cather biographers and critics, Madigan is able to show for the first time how Cather drew extensively from a case that mirrors that of the fictional Paul. A photograph that ran along with the news stories also strongly suggests that Cather modeled her character's personal appearance after that of his doppelganger. It is rare and fine to see this level of historical research done for a scholarly edition.

The historical essay also gives valuable insight into the motives that often pushed Cather to produce her work. The most stinging example is the background of "The Sculptor's Funeral," a story that closely mirrors the funeral of Pittsburgh-born artist Charles Stanley Reinhart. While mourned by the artistic community, in his hometown he was counted a man who "never amounted to much," which led Cather to conclude, "I never knew the emptiness of fame until I went to the great man's funeral. I never knew how entirely one must live and die alone until that day when they brought Stanley Reinhart home" (330). If it is possible to have an overarching theme or moral to all the stories contained in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, Cather's comment on Reinhart's funeral is it.

Madigan's historical essay is followed by pictures that elaborate on his analysis. Many are of interest, such as a facsimile of a page from the first draft of "Coming, Aphrodite!" and the newspaper photo of James J. Wilson, the prototype for Paul, while others are less so, such as generic pictures of opera halls and hotels that are briefly mentioned in various stories. The explanatory notes that follow suffer from the same unevenness. A history and explanation of the title "Coming, Aphrodite!" is valuable to a full understanding of the story,

but most readers do not need to be told what a Boston bull terrier or a lilac is. However, as this is common practice for scholarly and critical editions, it is easy to forgive.

As mentioned before, many of the stories in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* have a long and tattered history. After outlining their methods (which follow the guiding practices of the Modern Language Association's Committee for Scholarly Editions), the editors give a complete but succinct publication history for each of the eight stories. This is followed by a printing history, which details the significant changes made to three American editions and the first British edition, as well as the part Cather played in the book's entire publishing and printing history. The essay then takes up each story in turn, following it from manuscript (when available), to magazine, to *The Troll Garden*, to the copy-text. All together, there are twenty-seven source documents for the texts of the eight stories.

As with the historical essay, the textual essay's convention of breaking down the stories into parts makes it easier for a reader to concentrate on a story that is of particular interest. While many of the textual changes are accidentals or typographical (interesting in themselves for the level of perfection and control Cather asserted over her writing), some of the stories have interesting and telling substantive changes. For example, Cather's story based on the life of her music-loving Aunt Georgiana, "A Wagner Matinée," has 130 substantive changes. The majority of these changes were made to appease family and friends who "felt insulted by her thinly veiled characterization of the 'pathetic and grotesque' Aunt Georgiana and the hard depiction of pioneer life" (328).

Even more interesting, "Coming, Aphrodite!" has over three hundred variations between the magazine text and the text that appeared in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. Short on money at the time of its initial publication, Cather bowed to pressure from the Society for the Suppression of Vice and allowed her story to be bowdlerized as the only means of getting it published in a magazine—she was even required to change the title to "Coming, Eden Bower!" In this version Eden does not dance "wholly unclad," but instead cavorts in a "pink chiffon cloud." This was perhaps not the hardship it appears, as Cather knew the story would be published, in *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, in its original form later that same year.

The detailed textual essay is followed by a list of emendations and a table of rejected substantive variants that show the changes between the copy-text and every other text available for each story. A reader would be hard-pressed to wish for a more thorough textual examination of this tenth volume of the Cather Scholarly Edition and Cather's seventh book and her second volume of short stories. However, the genius of this series is not in its thoroughness (no matter

how much that is appreciated), but in the skillful and dedicated way the editors have crafted a successful work of textual and literary scholarship. Not only does it make for a more interesting read, it is also an invaluable asset to scholars looking for a well-rounded, complete study of Willa Cather's writing. Nothing is left out, nothing is wanting.