A Literary and Field Guide to the Trees in Willa Cather’s Nebraska Novels

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A LITERARY AND FIELD GUIDE TO THE TREES
IN WILLA CATHER’S NEBRASKA NOVELS

by

Linnea M. Fredrickson

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
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Willa Cather, one of America’s foremost novelists and short-story writers, was deeply interested in and profoundly affected by the places she lived and encountered. One small aspect of her knowledge of places was familiarity with the trees of the locale. A number of influences during her youth gave her the gift of tree awareness: a great-grandfather who was a forest conservationist, a home in the northern Virginia mixed-deciduous forest that was named for its prominent trees, perhaps the sound of her own first name, the wrenching contrast of a move to the nearly treeless mixed-grass prairie of Nebraska when she was still young, relatives and friends who loved botany, Arbor Day promotions, the visible results of a federal tree-planting act, her insatiable reading, which included some works with a strong and meaningful arboreal presence, and her college education.

With this background, Cather was attuned to a portion of an enormous, rich, living world beyond yet very near the human world. She was thereby able to use a variety of species of trees
in her novels and stories to subtly develop themes, characters, and scenes.

Descriptions of a number of the trees that Cather uses, such as cottonwood, willow, bur oak, osage orange, box-elder, eastern red cedar, linden, Lombardy poplar, and locust, along with their natural and cultural histories, help illuminate both Cather’s environmental knowledge and the manner in which she uses them in particular novels and stories. This thesis introduces Cather’s arboreal education and then examines her literary use of specific trees in five of her Nebraska novels: *O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, One of Ours, A Lost Lady*, and *Lucy Gayheart*. The uses confirm the depth of detail and subtlety in her writings and illuminate an artist at work in both the natural and human world.
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Although I did not have a thesis in mind then, it truly started at the seminar, specifically on the back terrace of the Lied Conference Center at Arbor Day Farm, overlooking the hazelnut grove, timbered creek, and J. Sterling Morton’s glowing white mansion on the far hill. I asked Marilyn Arnold what she thought someone interested in nature ought to write her conference paper on, and she suggested taking a look at the trees in Cather’s works. She didn’t think anyone had done much with that, and she recalled trees of significance in Cather’s books. Lynn Wake and Betty Jean Steinshouer, also out enjoying the beautiful evening,
vigorously supported the idea. I began my reading the next day, slapping Post-it Notes on every mention of tree, twig, and leaf.

I must also thank Margaret R. Bolick, curator of botany for the University of Nebraska State Museum, for several hours of her time one day as we dashed from herbaria to office to lab to archives, sleuthing Cather’s botanical education and exposures. Thanks too to John Swift for a couple enthusiastic conversations about Cather’s love of botany and a chance to view the Fem Bot cartoon that ran in the 1895 yearbook that she edited.

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Finally, I really thank family, friends, and coworkers who have all been encouraging and extremely tolerant of receiving only neglect, absent-mindedness, and unpleasant sidewashes of my stress in return. I will work my way back to civility, normal conversations, and doing my chores now.
“If it had not been for the few stunted cottonwoods and elms [ . . . ]

Canute would have shot himself years ago.”

—“On the Divide,” 1896
INTRODUCTION

Willa Cather knew her trees.

Willa Cather knew her trees so well that she could make great use of their qualities, characteristics, cultivation, and history in her Nebraska stories and novels. Readers will not find her fictional characters sitting under nameless leafy boughs or walking among an array of trunks as undefined as a field of telephone poles. Readers will also not come across trees simply because a situation calls for an outdoor setting or the variety provided by a little vegetation. Cather is as intentional, detailed, spare, and subtle with the trees in her works as she is with any other element. She nestles her characters’ homes in cottonwood and pine groves, lines their lane with exotic Lombardy poplars, blesses them with parklike orchards, surrenders their souls in cedars, endows their catalpa stands with the preciousness of children, turns rivers and creeks into oases with elms and willows, and renders a sunset unbearable with honey locusts—all to powerful effect.

But how did an author generally so taken by people, their actions and emotions, and particularly by music, literature, and art, and the artist’s striving, know anything about trees? Cather had quite a number of strong arboreal influences, including knowledge from family and friends, the contrasting places she lived as a child, a national push to plant and replant trees, her
reading, and her college education. She also had her own talent-
ed, curious eye. For all her touted urban living and many trips
to Europe, she was originally and always in part a rural person.
During minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years of her
life, her eye fell on natural designs, and what is there for an
eye not to be delighted with in trees? They became part of her
art in the same measure as everything human created, and she jux-
taposed them with humans, just as trees are in the nonfictional
world.

Cather’s first arboreal influence came from her own family.
It seems likely that, in the Virginia sheep-farm household of her
youth, family members, from the influence of the generations be-
fore them, simply lived and breathed a knowledge of trees, in the
way that some families pass down a love for stock-car racing or
birding from parent to children, and children on to their chil-
dren. Most rural families would have known some trees and taught
their names and useful characteristics to their offspring just
because wood was so necessary for living: for fuel, fences, wag-
ons, buildings, furniture, tools. The Cather family likely knew
even more. Mildred R. Bennett notes that Cather’s paternal great-
grandfather, James, was a forest conservationist (4). That some-
one might have been concerned about forest conservation in the
eastern United States in the early nineteenth century, when tam-
ing the vast American wilderness and constructing cities, towns,
and farms was still so important, seems almost impossible, but
even then a movement was underway, driven by a concern that the young United States was being terrifically wasteful with its resources and could someday run out of wood (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Trees 702-03).

Given the enormous acreage of eastern timber cut without restriction for building and clearing during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such an early nineteenth-century shift toward conservation really shouldn’t be too surprising. Colonists had begun shipping timber back to England in 1605. One anecdote is that the earliest arrivals to the American coast had had to cut trees to even get ashore. After a time, localized wood shortages near towns and cities on the eastern seaboard were not uncommon (702). The location and date of establishment of the very first sawmill is still debated, but a number of historians think it was in Virginia between 1608 and 1620 (687). So by the time civic-minded James Cather became active in conservation work in Virginia, the forests there had been coming down for nearly two centuries. It seems likely that the tree knowledge he had for working in forest conservation, on top of the knowledge required for successful rural living, brought much specific knowledge about trees into the Cather household for young ears to hear.

More concrete evidence of Cather’s possible gaining of tree knowledge through familial descent is in the names of two of the Virginia Cather homes. Jasper Cather (one more grandfather back, James’s father), who came to the colonies from Ireland, named his
Flint Ridge property Oakshade. Later, his grandson, William (Willa’s grandfather), named his nearby Back Creek property Willow Shade Farm (Bennett 5). A stream ran close to the house and supported water-loving weeping willows out in the yard. Such name choices seem to place trees at the center of home life for the Cathers.

Ask Virginians today how to pronounce the name of the tree that identified that place Willa Cather lived for the longest time in Virginia—the creekside tree with elegant, narrow leaves and in one species twigs longer than an arm and flexible as a whip—and they will tell you either “willer” or “willah.” That in her first name Willa Cather shared at least three phonemes with the name of a favored ornamental tree and the name of her home was certainly not lost on her. When she finally decided how to sign her name (not William Cather, M.D., and less often Willie, and not ever Willela—but Willa), euphony and reminiscences of her early home may have guided her.

Another knowledge-reinforcing exposure to trees was just a lift of the gaze beyond the family’s dooryard willows during the early years of Cather’s life. She played and hiked with Marjorie Anderson, their hired girl, and tagged along after her father and their sheep on the slopes of the Blue Ridge, where Willow Shade Farm is located—in the Shenandoah Valley of very northern Virginia. The native vegetation of this locale is characterized by foresters as mixed deciduous forest, and its soils and precipitation
levels support at least fifty types of towering or otherwise impressive trees: numerous species of oaks and hickories, white pine and shortleaf pine, tupelo, sycamore, poplars of several kinds, American and red elms, sweet gum, ashes, hard maples, yellow birch, catalpa, magnolias, and chestnut (chestnut blight did not begin to wipe out these trees until about 1904, so they would still have been large and plentiful in Cather’s childhood). Dozens more understory trees, such as mountain laurel, dogwood, redbud, and burningbush, are also present (Sutton 68, Peattie 189). Although family pictures show plenty of bare pasturage around the Willow Shade house, trees and the old mountain slopes they grew on were the world of young Willa Cather.

Clearly Cather was knowledgeable about many individual species from that time in her life because later, while she was a student at the University of Nebraska (at the end of her sophomore year, to be exact), she wrote one of her first short stories that was published in the school literary magazine, The Hesperian. It was “The Elopement of Allen Poole,” and in it she was able to name chestnut, sycamore, pines, cedar, locust, maples, and willow along with the smaller woody plants red sumach and laurel. Neither in this story nor in any of her stories does Willa Cather go on and on about the trees, but she selects the species with some consideration, even in this early Hesperian work.

In this story, Allen and Nell meet and promise to meet again under a “big chistnut” tree after dark to elope. The American
chestnut has been a highly prized tree throughout U.S. history. Before the blight, it grew to an enormous size with a broad crown, fitting for the imagined future of two sweethearts. Its wood is strong and true, like Allen and Nell’s supposed love, and it was used for furniture and coffins (Constantine 210-11), the latter a possible foreshadowing. Chemicals in the bark made that part of the tree important for the hide-tanning industry, a possible reference to punishment for law breaking (having one’s hide tanned). The nuts are rich and delicious, if painful to gather and extract from their bristly, needle-sharp husks, which may have been strewn in a broad circle on the ground beneath the branches—a definite check to the blessing aspect of the tree. The twigs and deeply toothed, sharp-pointed leaves could be made into medicine for treating wounds—yet another foreshadowing. The chestnut was also a beautiful tree that long ago captured the attention of poets, so Cather’s readers even outside its range would likely have known of it and its beauty (Martin 60).

A black cherry or butternut, for example, would simply never have made a comparable meeting place for such an important persuasive argument, decision, action, and denouement. In the story, Nell does come out to her true love’s whistled tune later that night, but on his way to the tree Allen has been shot by an anxious revenuer. He had managed to stagger on but dies of the bullet wound in Nell’s comforting arms at the base of the chestnut.
The pines in the story are most likely eastern white pine or shortleaf pine (also called southern yellow pine)—or both of them—and they screen Nell’s home, the presence of which is revealed by only a curl of blue smoke. These two trees are quite similar, and someone new to their appearance might have to look closely at the bark color, the cone shape and size, and the number of long, soft needles in each bundle to tell them apart. Donald Culross Peattie describes the shortleaf pine specifically as gentle and dignified and writes that a house in association with one “borrows some of the great tree’s dignity” (26). The structure hidden in these pines houses Nell’s parents, who have given her a beautiful white dress with silk ribbons and are strongly opposed to her making a lifelong commitment to a lazy bootlegger.

Allen’s reverie, after he first wins and makes arrangements with Nell, is under a mountain laurel, a small (in northern Virginia), exceedingly beautiful, fragrant tree that shares its name with the laurel of Greek mythology and Greek and Roman history (Jaynes 7–10, 20–21). It is that distant laurel that is the source of the victor’s leafy crown, which Cather undoubtedly knew of from her extensive reading of the classics. Apollo loved Daphne, but Cupid had made Daphne hate him; Apollo, however, continued to pursue her. Peneus, Daphne’s father, eventually turned her into a laurel, and it was after that that Apollo wreathes his head with laurel sprigs forever after (Martin 115, 130; Sutton 370–71).
Several more things about the mountain laurel are significant for Cather’s story. The first is that this little tree is also known as “spoonwood” because its wood was so often used for little tools, such as weaving shuttles, tool handles, and spoons; this common name’s similarity with “spooning” makes for an easy association between Allen’s resting place and his and Nell’s courtship. Second, the flower parts are spring-loaded and when the pollen is ripe, anything that touches them causes them to shoot—something every mountain child would have known and happily triggered. The action fertilizes and suggests consummation but also foreshadows the revenuer’s gun blast. Third, the mountain laurel, for all its beauty, is extremely toxic—fatally so—to both livestock and humans (Sosa 4).

These three, the chestnut, pines, and laurel, are the strongest symbolic connections between trees and tale in this work, but the other species mentioned carry accuracy and meaning as well. Of final note are the eastern red cedars in the graveyard, which form a tall, black backdrop for the white headstones, a place where Allen uncharacteristically pauses on his way to the chestnut. Cedars were very typically planted in country cemeteries: some say this was done because they are eternally green; others say they were chosen because their conical shape points toward heaven like the steeple of a church (Peattie 80, Welsch 4).
From this single short story, published during Cather’s busy and active college days (when contemplation of trees was likely not the first thing on her mind), it’s apparent that she knew trees fundamentally and well from her life in Virginia, and likely from her own explorations and the influence of her elders, passing such natural history and lore down from one generation to the next.

A shock to Willa Cather’s tree consciousness came at the impressionable age of nine—the year she was made excruciatingly aware of trees. In 1883, she and her family left Willow Shade Farm, the mountains, and the woods and moved to Webster County, Nebraska, dead center in the broad mixed-grass prairie of North America, an ecosystem whose chief characteristic is an almost complete lack of trees (Brown 45). From northern Virginia’s wealth of tree species, and the enclosed, shaded, and impressive environment they provided, Willa Cather came to the wide-open grassland, where the view was like mid-ocean: sky and waves as far as the eye could see. Although Raymond Pool asserts that Nebraska has sixty-some species and varieties of native trees (6), important to Willa Cather was that many of them were shrubs and most all of them, shrub or tree, were growing back on the Missouri River bluffs and banks, 150 miles away. Only cottonwood, several willows, green ash, river maple, honey locust, American and red elms, black walnut, bur oak, and eastern red cedars—about a dozen species—survived in Webster County, and in their native
state they were pretty much limited by fire and water to the
creek and river banks, sandbars, and draws.

Readers of Cather the world over know how she felt about
this change. In My Ántonia, she howls her lament through the
young character Jim Burden, who is newly arrived to the plains:

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks
or trees, no hills or fields. [. . .] I had the feeling
that the world was left behind, that we had got over
the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction. I
had never before looked up at the sky when there was
not a familiar mountain ridge against it. [. . .] Be-
tween that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted
out.

[. . .] Everywhere, as far as the eye could reach,
there was nothing but rough, shaggy, red grass [. . .]
.” (7-8, 14)

His obliterated feeling seems to soon lessen but is replaced with
another odd sensation that he notices while out in the garden
with his grandmother:

The light air about me told me that the world ended
here: only the ground and sun and sky were left, and if
one went a little farther there would be only sun and
sky, and one would float off into them, like the tawny
hawks which sailed over our heads making slow shadows
on the grass. While grandmother [. . .] dug potatoes,
while I picked them up [. . .], I kept looking up at the hawks that were doing what I might so easily do.

(16)

Willa Cather had lost her anchorage.

But then begins her affection for the prairie and the few precious trees that are present. Their lonesome upright growth, standing out on the vast landscape, even though made of unspeaking plant material, made them feel like kindred to the settlers. The trees lived in the draws, hanging on by their roots, like the immigrant families seeking shelter in their bank dugouts. In My Ántonia again, when Jim and his family go to visit their new neighbors living thus, the children run up and through the deep grass to the edge of a high bank to see the trees whose tops reach just above their ledge. It is fall, and “some of the cottonwoods had already turned, and the yellow leaves and shining white bark made them look like the gold and silver trees in fairy tales,” Jim notes (21). Ántonia, knowing little English, wants to learn Jim’s name first—“Name? What name?”—but second, immediately, she wants to know the name of these gold and glittering trees (25).

By the next summer, Jim can navigate an expanse of the prairie on his own, as Willa Cather evidently did by horseback, from the stories she told interviewers (Bohlke 5, 122). Again via Jim, she tells us that
sometimes I went south to visit our German neighbors and to admire their catalpa grove, or to see the big elm tree that grew up out of a deep crack in the earth and had a hawk’s nest in its branches. Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons (28).

Visiting a catalpa grove out on the prairie was possible because of a tree-planting movement that would surely have been another part of young Willa Cather’s tree education. She was by far not the first or sole person to be deeply troubled by the tree-less prairie environment. Everett Dick tells the story about early tree planting in his chapter titled simply “Trees” in Conquering the Great American Desert (116-40). About two decades before Cather was born, people were just beginning to settle in the Nebraska Territory rather than pass right through to the west. They built their homesteads mostly along the bank of the Missouri River. Although their fellow settlers laughed heartily at them, a few tried to plant trees—to ameliorate the immediate environment; for lumber, fuel, food, and cash; and because of a notion that trees would bring more rain. Amazingly enough, the trees grew. These first settlers became fairly successful foresters and orchardists, and it wasn’t too many years before men such as J. Sterling Morton and R. W. Furnas were planting timber groves, hundreds of fruit trees, and starting nursery operations. (Morton
eventually became U.S. secretary of agriculture, and Furnas served as Nebraska’s governor; both were newspaper publishers as well, of the Nebraska City News and the Brownville Nebraska Advertiser, respectively [Williams 80-81].

By the time the Nebraska Territory had become a state in 1867, the Nebraska State Horticultural Society had been formed, with the promotion of tree planting an important part of its mission. On 4 January 1872, Morton gave a lecture on fruit trees to this organization, and then joined the State Board of Agriculture at its meeting later the same day, where he proposed that a day dedicated to tree planting, an Arbor Day, be set aside and promoted. Furnas, the nurseryman, happened to be presiding over the board meeting at the time, and Morton’s motion was entertained and passed. In 1872, just a year before Cather was born, the first Arbor Day was celebrated in Nebraska—with newspaper publicity, a proclamation from the governor, a contest with a cash prize for the most trees planted—and the planting of more than a million trees (Olson, “Arbor Day” 10).

The popularity of Arbor Day spread rapidly. Iowa, Minnesota, and Ohio picked up the holiday right away. Several western states followed, as mining was consuming whole mountainsides of timber (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Arbor Day 12). While the attention to planting and retaining trees was an important aspect of making Nebraska’s shocking plains environment livable in the eyes of its new immigrants, Arbor Day also resonated with the wooded states
that had lost so much timber. Younger conservationists in like
mind with Cather’s great-grandfather had been seeking ways to
scientifically and quickly reforest their states. The Honorable
Cassius Clay of Kentucky spoke for many when he complained that
the springs and creeks (and fish) he had known as a boy were gone
with the forests, that spring arrived later and delayed planting,
that droughts more often threatened harvests, and that rainwater
ran off in floods rather than sinking into the soil. It was not
long before nearly all the states and many other nations had
adopted Arbor Day.

The special tree-planting day went out from Nebraska and
likely came back with a new level of energy applied to the
schools after the 1882 National Forestry Convention in Cincin-
nati. On the 26th and 27th of April that year, Cincinnati schools
were let out for the Arbor Day holiday. The celebration brought
out somewhere between seventeen thousand and fifty thousand peo-
ple, depending on whose account is read. Five thousand school
children dedicated trees planted along a ridge as an “Authors
Grove” while adults did the same, planting groves throughout the
city’s Eden Park dedicated to presidents, pioneers, soldiers, and
famous citizens. A parade began the pageant, and speeches by dig-
nitaries closed it, with the final result that “the Cincinnati
plan” went national as a model for Arbor Day celebrations. New
York’s recommended program was published, with a reminder that it
be kept under two hours for the children (Schauffler 354–60). It
began with a devotional of scripture, prayer, and song and con-
tinued with a reading of the law that established Arbor Day. The
reading of prominent persons’ letters on trees and Arbor Day and
then songs and student recitations (of Holmes, Whittier, Irving,
Shakespeare, and Lowell, to name a few) followed. The celebration
continued with more songs, the reading of student compositions, a
vote on the favorite state tree, more readings and songs, the or-
ganization of local shade-tree organizations, and finally, the
planting of trees. The planting itself was accompanied by songs,
dedicatory speeches, and a ceremonial spading of earth around the
trees. That Willa Cather and her two fellow high-school class-
mates planted a honey locust on the school lawn for their gradu-
tion in 1890 is most likely a direct result of this sort of Arbor
Day promotion (Bohlke 176; Olson, J. Sterling Morton 423–24).

The men in the two Nebraska organizations who had come up
with and developed the idea for Arbor Day next joined forces—in a
small joint committee—and sent representatives to Washington to
ask for federal support for tree planting on the prairie. Alt-
hough similar ideas reached congressional representatives from
more than one source, historians at least partially credit the
work of these men in capturing the interest of politicians. The
result was that U.S. Senator Phineas W. Hitchcock (R-Nebraska)
introduced legislation that quickly became the Timber Culture
Act, passed on 3 March 1873. The law granted a quarter section of
land—160 acres—to a settler for planting 40 of those acres to
trees, to be spaced not more than twelve feet apart. (A twelve-foot by twelve-foot planting, by the way, requires 12,080 trees, according to James T. Allan’s tree-planting guide, which might take an “active man” a little more than a week to put in the ground [27, 24]). The young trees had to be kept alive and healthy for five years for the person to receive a patent, or title. Although amendments and other tax-credit laws ensued, it was with the passage of this law that tree planting gained special significance for homesteading families. These quarter sections became known as “timber claims.” Newspapers of the time reported the unloading of fifty thousand and seventy thousand seedlings at the respective steamboat stops of Brownville and Nebraska City. Nursery ads in agricultural publications offered seedlings and tree-planting services. Settlers themselves could make money by subcontracting with these businesses to plant trees or by pulling up cottonwood seedlings from river sandbars for resale. They could earn fifty cents to a dollar for every thousand seedlings gathered.

Most of this planting went on before the Charles Cathers arrived in Nebraska in 1883, and that is reflected in Willa Cather’s stories. She recalls how hard the pioneers had worked to keep their trees alive—hauling water, cutting grass and weeds, cultivating, and worrying. She had already well-developed groves, orchards, and timber claims in which her fictional action could take place. Many of the Timber Act plantations would have been
ten years old when she first saw them, and given that cottonwoods can shoot up five feet in one summer and maintain that pace if conditions are good, they would have been well out of the sapling stage—perhaps even fifty feet high.

James T. Allan’s little handbook, *Forests and Orchards in Nebraska*, printed in 1884 in Omaha, or some such publication like it, could probably have been found on the Cathers’ kitchen table or in the hands of one of their neighbors preparing to set out more trees. In it is the why and wherefore of every planted tree that appears in Willa Cather’s Nebraska fiction. It also communicates the fervor behind the tree-planting movement:

> Why to plant? To those who have chosen homes on these plains it is a binding duty that we owe to ourselves, to our children and to the State. Timber culture is no longer an experiment with us, but with care a certain and complete success. The protection afforded by shelter belts is worth far more than the rent of the ground on which the timber stands, saying nothing about the returns in fuel, etc. It renders a farm so much more beautiful and attractive as a home, and much more valuable for sale. No man is too poor to plant trees and none so rich that he has any right to neglect such a duty. (2)

It exhorts farmers to plant native trees (“It is always safe to follow nature’s teachings”) and presents the list of species
“certified [to be] adapted to the soil and climate of Nebraska” (2). Allan advises getting started with cottonwood and willow and then moving on to “more permanent and valuable” species later. Planters are reminded to cultivate the trees and mulch midsummer to prevent moisture loss. Orchard trees should be pruned when the limbs requiring removal are small enough to be cut with a knife. All farmers should understand the propagation of trees from nuts, seeds, and cuttings; a first planting might need to be purchased but thenceforward everything ought to be grown from stock available on the farm. Prairie dwellers should also remember to beautify school grounds with trees and teach children to care for and protect trees, he advises.

Cottonwood, the tree Willa Cather called “the most beautiful tree on the plains” and that which brushed against her bedroom window in Red Cloud (Bohlke 47, 129), heads the list of trees when Allan begins to discuss each viable species. “A wise providence seems to have placed this tree within the reach of every poor settler on the bleak prairie, as the first tree he can plant for protection and fuel, and its universal success has entitled it to be called the ‘pioneer tree’” (5). He recommends growing the trees from overwintered fall cuttings eight to ten inches long, set in a furrow at a forty-five-degree angle and stamped in. Expect a growth of six to eight feet the first year, he says.

The fictional trees and the way they are arranged in Cather’s Nebraska novels have their nonfictional precedent in Al-
lan’s handbook. His willow, mulberry, and osage-orange growing recommendations describe the protective hedges of My Ántonia and O Pioneers! Likewise, the timber claims, or timber lots, and groves of O Pioneers!, One of Ours, and A Lost Lady can be recalled in his explanations of the protective and lumber values of ash, ash-leaved maple (box-elder), catalpa, hackberry, and walnut. Finally, Allan collects and reports the advice of farmers from all over Nebraska regarding the establishment and care of groves and orchards. In his quotation of Col. J. H. Roe’s communication to him from Buffalo County (which is two counties north of Webster County and just a little west, on the north side of the Platte River), it is no challenge to picture the Wheeler farm, the Shabata place, Captain Forrester’s claim, or Alexandra Bergson’s operation:

I filed on a claim of 160 acres in March, 1874, and had forty acres broken in June of the same year. In 1875 I prepared ten acres of it for trees and tree seeds by plowing and harrowing. It would have been of advantage to have cropped the land once or twice. I planted 1,000 seedling cottonwoods, which are now thirty to thirty-five feet high, with a circumference of twenty to thirty inches. Also one-half bushel of box elder seed, from which there are in places dense masses of trees fifteen to twenty feet high. They have borne seed for three years, and I expect forty bushels can be gathered this
year. I have been planting trees and tree seed on the
claim every year from 1875 to 1880. The kinds have been
soft maple, white ash, box elder, cottonwood, a few
gray willows, some locust, and forty bushels of black
walnuts. I have probably 45,000 trees of all kinds
growing, of all sizes up to thirty feet, and thirty
inches in circumference. (17-18)

Such a practical little booklet as Allan’s was not the only
book with tree references that might have crossed Cather’s path;
literature is yet another of her tree-knowledge influences. Among
the books in the Cather home as well as those borrowed from
neighbors and friends and those assigned in school and college
would have been works that reinforced her already-existing aware-
ness of trees. The Bible, which Bernice Slote shows was numbered
with a “1” in the private library of “Wm. Cather Jr.” (26), fairly
begins with trees: “And out of the ground made the Lord God to
grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food;
the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of
knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:9, King James version).

Among the cottonwoods and willows and their windblown seeds
on Indian and Crooked Creeks and in a stand of bur oaks with
their fringe-capped acorns on the Republican River, Cather would
have completely understood Jeremiah 17:7-8:

Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose
hope the Lord is. For he shall be as a tree planted by
the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit.

In every joy-filled, tree-referencing verse she read or heard—“all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” (Isaiah 55:12) and “then shall the trees of the wood sing out at the presence of the Lord” (1 Chronicles 16:33)—she must have at least sometimes pictured her favorite breeze-noisy cottonwoods.

The Georgics—a long poem celebrating country life, written by Virgil, an educated farmer’s son who became Rome’s greatest poet—was a favorite of Cather and of her younger brother Roscoe; they read Virgil together (in Latin, no doubt) during her university summers (Bennett 119). In The Georgics the references to trees are many: elm, cypress, lime (linden), beech, walnut, pines, willow, oak, bay (laurel), olive, myrtle, poplar, chestnut, hazel, ash, palm, fir, plane, mountain ash and rowan, yew, box, cedar, alder, ilex (holly), juniper, gum, and the orchard trees of cherry, pear, plum, apple, and blackthorn. Virgil even mentions those of distant lands: India’s ebony and other jungle trees, of which “no arrow can reach [their] tree-tops,” Chinese mulberries, balsam fir from the far north, and Arabia’s “tree of frankincense.” The poem is filled with arboricultural techniques and descriptions of the uses of various woods and fruits (Lewis).
A poet contemporary to Cather, Englishman A. E. Housman, made such an impression on her that she tracked him down when she visited England for the first time in 1902 (Cather Willa 23–24). “Loveliest of trees, the cherry [. . .],” he wrote in A Shropshire Lad (1896), and went on to calculate how many more springs he would likely enjoy them in profuse blossom:

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room.
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow. (9–12, qtd. in Fairchild 93)

Since recitations were such an important part of Arbor Day celebrations, Cather may have read or heard Sir Walter Scott:

Tis merry in greenwood, thus runs the old lay,
In the gladsome month of lively May,
When the wild bird’s song on stem and spray
Invites to forest bower;
Then rears the ash his airy crest
Then shines the birch in silver vest,
And the beech in glistening leaves is drest,
And dark between shows the oak’s proud breast,
Like a chieftain’s frowning tower. (qtd. in Schauffler 204)

Washington Irving was often read, along with William Cullen Bryant and John Greenleaf Whittier. With her youthful interest in
science and appreciation for trees, one hopes she early encoun-
tered James Russell Lowell:

I care not how men trace their ancestry,
To ape or Adam; let them please their whim;
But I, in June, am midway to believe
A tree among my far progenitors—
Such sympathy is mine with all the race. (qtd. in Dept.
of the Interior 61)

Cather had two more strong botanical encounters: one in Web-
ster County among friends and family and one when she was in col-
lege. Less focused on trees and more on forbs (which are the
broad-leaved, soft-stemmed plants, such as wildflowers, as dif-
ferentiated from both the woody-stemmed shrubs and trees and the
grasses), these twin influences would still have affected her
general understanding of plant forms, communities, and nomencla-
ture.

The first influence, at home, is that she knew botanists in
Webster County. Bennett includes “botanists” in her list of tal-
ented or professional adult friends that young Cather had in Red
Cloud (xiii); unfortunately, she doesn’t name the people. Perhaps
Cather’s own aunt, Frances A. Smith Cather (Aunt Franc), who
lived north of Red Cloud, where the Cathers had stayed the first
year they arrived, was one of them. She had been a teacher in
Winchester, Virginia, before heading west. In love letters dated
1873 sent to and received from sheep drover George P. Cather,
Franc’s fiancé, it is clear she has him interested in collecting flowers while out with the flocks: “I wish you to tell me the names of some of them,” he writes, “since you have won me over to the love of flowers” (George Cather Ray Collection, 17 April). On 18 May, she reports back that “yesterday the Botany class were in my room all day working on their Herbariums.” She adds that “the flower you sent last was Plex subulatum.” So the same aunt who organized literaries and clearly inspired young Willa Cather to some degree (Bennett 14) knew and loved wildflowers; perhaps her uncle had remained sympathetic as well.

A second botanical person was Roscoe, the same brother who enjoyed reading Virgil. Bennett indicates that “when Roscoe was home, he and Willa collected botanical specimens and mounted them” (36), so Cather had sibling camaraderie in her outdoor interests as well. The Reverend Mr. Bates, rector of the Episcopal Church that Cather and her parents eventually joined, was also “an expert on botany” (Bennett 141). Cather sent him plants from the Southwest when she eventually traveled there and came to a stalemate with him over the existence of butterfly milkweed in Webster County, until she (and Carrie and Mary Miner) proved, years later, that it did grow there. “Botanizing” was a hobby for many people in the late nineteenth century, so it could well be there were others in Red Cloud with the same interests in green, growing things.
The second botanical influence came during her time in college. Probably less so formally but no doubt informally, she was able to learn more about the plant world during her campus years. She arrived in Lincoln in the fall of 1890 to start her first year’s work preparing to enter the University of Nebraska. Lincoln then had a population of about thirty thousand, and the university enrolled about five hundred students on its campus of just four buildings (Knoll 24). Literary critics and biographers concentrate on Cather’s language and literary interests, for her writing career began during her university time, but she came to Lincoln still thinking that she was going to become a surgeon. Science was her focus. She had studied medicine firsthand with Red Cloud’s doctors, worked in the town drugstore, conducted laboratory experiments with William Ducker (with whom she also read Latin and Greek), without a doubt dissected small vertebrates under her own volition, and defended such investigation in her high-school graduation oration. While she apparently took only freshman chemistry and something that looks on her transcript like “preparatory sciences” while an undergraduate, Woodress reports that it’s unknown what she studied during that first 1890–91 school term. He indicates though that “her interest in science continued at least into the summer after her prep year, for she wrote Mrs. Goudy then that she was chiefly interested in astronomy, botany, and chemistry” (71).
That she was exposed to a botany class at some point is hinted at in *One of Ours* where the narrator is explaining the friendship of Claude and Gladys while they are in high school. Claude appreciates Gladys’s dress and manners, and she appreciates the honor of his attention. Cather writes that “it was not all on her own account that she wore such beautifully ironed muslin dresses when they went on botanical expeditions” (98). Additional hints that she was around the formal study of botany that first year can be found in the biography of the man who would have taught the class. He was very interested in botany and nature conservation curricula for high school students, he wrote a botany text for high school and college students, and he is praised for “fusing together a scholarly community that included pre-college students in ‘prep bot’ and a famous succession of doctoral students” (Tobey 9). Botany was hugely popular on the University of Nebraska campus at that time, mainly because of this instructor, Charles E. Bessey. Although Margaret R. Bolick, curator of botany at the University of Nebraska State Museum, finds from her research that it’s unlikely Cather studied with Bessey, Cather could hardly have avoided the activities of so many of his students, and indeed she did not (Bolick interview).

But first, who is Charles Bessey?—because all else revolved around his botanical interests on campus in what Bolick describes as the “Bessey phenomenon.” He was a botanist at the University of Nebraska from 1884 until 1907, who is credited with laying the
foundation of the science of ecology in the United States (Tobey 2). He was beloved by his students for his outstanding teaching capabilities and was famous for the caliber of his botany department, his “painstaking survey of the structure and evolution of all of the main groups of the plant world” (Pool 509–10), his applied work in agriculture, his textbook Botany for High Schools and Colleges (first published in 1880), his botany editorship for the journals American Naturalist and then Science, and his serving in leadership roles for numerous agricultural, botanical, horticultural, and academic organizations. He also played an important part in establishing two forests in the Nebraska Sandhills and, when Willa Cather arrived on campus, was acting as chancellor of the university, serving in that capacity for six-odd years at several different times. As Susan J. Rosowski indicates, “being at the University of Nebraska in the early 1890s meant that one ‘could not have avoided the Bessey influence.’ [. . .] Everybody looked to Bessey as their ‘model of excellence,’ the one ‘who set the pace.’ His ‘influence was everywhere, in all the departments [. . .]’” (38).

Interestingly, a large portion of Bessey’s attention during Cather’s time on campus was given over to trees. His 1892 report for the Nebraska Horticultural Society focused on trees, and he had just begun his forestry experiments in the Sandhills, with the intent of foresting them completely (Overfield 19, Walsh 38). Also, the Seminarium Botanicum, or Sem Bot, the men’s botany or-
ganization, which he led, was very busy documenting the whole flora of the state (Bolick interview, Walsh 37). Even if Cather never attended a lecture by Bessey—and Bolick has found that likely to be so because Cather’s name does not appear on lists of students that he kept (Bolick “Women” 5)—Professor Bessey and his work would still have been very well known to her.

His work would have been familiar because Cather had friendships with some of the Bessey students, a few of whom went on to distinguished botanical careers. Roscoe Pound was the brilliant brother of her friend Louise. He eventually chose law for his career, but while Cather was at the university he was studying for his Ph.D. in botany (Knoll 31). Louise herself was so involved in botany that she had printed, personalized herbarium labels, which can be viewed today on her mountings in the Nebraska State Museum herbaria collection. Frederic Clements was also studying for his doctoral degree in botany, right along with Roscoe Pound. By the time Clements arrived at the university he “had already collected hundreds of plants, named many new species of fungi, and floored his classmates and teacher by identifying plants on sight wherever he traveled” (Croker 66). He was also a student of languages and literature, both classic and modern, so his and Cather’s campus paths would surely have crossed in those areas as well. Cather was quoted by Eleanor Hinman in 1921 as saying “there is one book that I would rather have produced than all my novels. That is the Clemen[t]s botany dealing with the wild flowers of the
west” (Bohlke 47). Frederic’s wife-to-be, Edith Schwartz, also studied botany at Nebraska but was in a younger class. Last, Bessey’s own son, Ernst, who followed in his father’s botanical footsteps, was younger than Cather but on campus at the same time and knew her (Shively 141-42).

Cather, with her high intelligence and expectations for full freedom in her intellectual pursuits, may have been a bit rankled by botany at the University of Nebraska. Another “organization” on campus during Cather’s years was the Fem Bot. Since women were not allowed in the Seminarium Botanicum, even though they could study botany, they established the false group to give their male classmates and Professor Bessey a hard time for not letting them participate (they were allowed only to assist in collecting). Although Cather apparently did not “belong” to the group, when she was editor of The Sombrero, her 1895 class annual, she did run a cartoon of “The Fem Bot Sem,” showing a student with her collecting case out in a cow pasture, drawn by one of the members. Her good friend Mariel Gere’s name is in the list of members.

Gere and Cather together pulled a fast one on the Seminarium Botanicum, and who knows but that this event made Professor Bessey “forget” Cather on his lists of students. The Sem Bot members had bought a bust of Charles Darwin to present to Bessey at one of their meetings, but Gere and Cather found it ahead of time and hid it. Although the hiding spot evidently wasn’t terribly diffi-
cult to spot, and they had informed the building janitor of their prank, the statue was not recovered in time for the meeting. As Hesperian editor, Cather allowed only a warning notice to run about the prank, and when Gere wrote a confessional story for the 1895 class annual, Cather, then editor of that edition, would not include it (Bennett 189-90).

On one other occasion, Cather attacked a Sem Bot member, this time her friend Louise’s brother, Roscoe. She had obviously wearied of his botanical energies, so she let him have it in print, writing that he “calls everything by its longest and most Latin name” and that he would “browbeat them [people], argue them down, Latin them into a corner, and botany them into a shapeless mass” (Woodress 86). The Pounds were not happy, and friendships were ruined for many years.

Notwithstanding these possible negative aspects of her botanical experiences at Nebraska, what she would have learned from these botanists, ecologists, and friends would have included plants’ names and characteristics, the many ways in which they have adapted to their environment, how they affect their environment in turn, how they not only survive but how they flourish, and how they compete and cooperate with one another. Knowing all these arboreal influences in her history, from her family and home in Virginia, the shock of the prairie, the tree-planting push of the Timber Culture Act and Arbor Day, and her personal
reading and formal education, it becomes clear how she could use trees in her novels and stories to carry much meaning.

The following chapters look at the trees in five of Cather’s works, all set in Nebraska: *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, *One of Ours*, *A Lost Lady*, and *Lucy Gayheart*. Some of the books contain locales distant from Nebraska: Bohemia in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* and France in *One of Ours*. Collectively they contain Nebraska’s most majestic tree—the cottonwood—and orchards, hedges and windbreaks, groves, thickets, riverine woods, lone trees, and house and urban plantings. The following chapters examine how Cather, an extraordinary artist, uses these trees in her works and also describe and explain what is known about the some of the particular species for a fuller appreciation of her skill.
In _O Pioneers!,_ Cather’s 1913 novel in which “she hit the home pasture” and wrote from her own experience, the references to trees are numerous. To begin, however, she establishes their importance conversely with a complete absence of trees. When the little town of Hanover is “trying not to be blown away,” the kitten is up the pole, and Emil is crying, not a twig is mentioned. When Alexandra, Emil, and Carl are bumping down the frozen road for home, not one tree is pointed out as they so often are in later wagon trips in this story and in other novels. All is barren, and nothing in the landscape is allowed to be forgiving as the story takes shape. Later on, opening the part called Winter Memories, Cather makes it plain that what trees there are in this place vanish in winter. Their leafless skeletons take on the same “slaty hue” of the “iron country” and leave the human spirit oppressed (169).

On that first bitterly cold day, Lou and Oscar, Alexandra’s brothers, have gone miles to the Little Blue River to cut wood. Alexandra regrets that they’ve gone but acknowledges that their mother worries when the wood gets low. In this one brief exchange of conversation with Carl about her brothers, the poverty of the settlers is revealed. To be midwinter without a supply of dry wood that will last until spring (and beyond, for cooking) is to live at the very edge of safety. To have to go miles for wood no
matter the weather adds to the understanding of what a resource-limited place this shaggy-grassed country was for the new settlers. That every homesteader pouring into the country also depended on the same limited supply of waterway trees for so many things helps partly explain their rarity and why the planting of trees became so important.

The watershed of the Little Blue River is opposite the Divide from the Republican River drainage. The river’s sister just to the east, the Blue River, was described by John C. Fremont in 1842 as a “clear and handsome stream [. . . ] running through a well-timbered valley” (Bouc 83). J. E. Weaver explains in the Native Vegetation of Nebraska that these slender riverine forest communities would contain a mingling of broad-leafed upland and floodplain trees: green ash, American elm, hackberry, boxelder, cottonwood, and willow. Along wide floodplains with protective banks, black walnut and bur oak might be present too (33–36). Although Cather doesn’t mention these species when establishing the desperateness of the Bergson’s situation, some combination of these tree types would have made up the walls of Mrs. Bergson’s log cabin—no sod for her—and fueled her busy cookstove. Even the clean plank floor of Ivar’s one-room dugout would likely have been one of these species.

Cather is specific about some of the trees that line Norway Creek, which the Bergson home overlooks. The creek itself is little and deep in a ravine “with steep, shelving sides overgrown
with brush and cottonwoods and dwarf ash” (25). Cottonwoods, although Cather’s favorite pioneer tree and a species she uses often in subsequent novels, are merely mentioned this one time. Dwarf ash might be prickly ash, a little tree with ash-like compound leaves and fin-shaped thorns like a hybrid rose (not really an ash at all), as suggested in the Scholarly Edition (330), or it may be green ash—which is very common in Nebraska—in a dwarfish form because it simply can’t make it to a respectable size in the Hanover vicinity.

Cather often uses “scrub” (more often than “dwarf”) to describe diminutive trees that don’t carry “scrub” in their names even in common nomenclature (for example, the “scrub willows” around Alexandra’s pasture ponds and the “scrub oaks” among which the hired girls and Jim play in My Ántonia). Weaver points out that tree species that can still manage to exist on the banks of ravines, creeks, and rivers west of the Missouri grow increasingly smaller the farther west they are encountered. Just as evergreens on high mountains tower above a human on lower slopes but lie no taller than a bush near the peak, so do the prairie trees hunker down as their growing conditions become more and more extreme across the range from tall-grass to mixed-grass to short-grass prairie environments. Weaver explains that a tree just west of the Missouri in perfect growing conditions might reach 75 feet but most westward broadleafs would have a more spreading crown and reach only 40 or 50 feet in central Nebraska, with 20 to 35
feet being more common. Compared to the trees Cather first knew in Virginia, the smallest of the latter are the size of understory species, like the mountain laurel and dogwood that she would have missed, and therefore they would be “scrub” or “dwarf” to her.

“Brush,” the first overgrowth mentioned in the description of Norway Creek, might be composed of sandbar willow, chokecherry, smooth sumac, or wild plum, according to the Scholarly Edition (330). Plums are certain, as later on the narrator tells us that “stout as she was, she [Mrs. Bergson] roamed the scrubby banks of Norway Creek looking for fox grapes and goose plums, like a wild creature in search of prey” (33-34). Alexandra lists making plum wine every year with Carl something that she will remember as one of their good times, just after he announces that his family is leaving forever.

Wild plums are a treasure on the plains. One individual plum tree could probably be grown into something that looks like a small fruit tree, but left to their own devices plums form thickets, with the tallest individuals in the center and progressively smaller stems reaching out to the border of the mass, where each “tree” might be just knee high. The thickets harbor wildlife wonderfully—cottontail rabbits, songbirds, and game birds—as the growth is dense, and every twig of any size bears stout little spines that are just shy of being full-fledged thorns. The thickets produce masses of long-lasting, powerfully fragrant white
blossoms in early spring that smell exactly of farm country—
heavily sweet and like a barnyard at the same time. Peattie calls it “an odor faintly fetid yet not wholly unpleasing” (374). It’s unmistakable and proof that winter is over. If the flowers miss the last hard frost then all spring and summer the drupes form, first appearing as tiny oval green earrings and progressively enlarging until by late summer they are the size of a good slingshot stone and sunset colored, ranging from yellow-orange to deep pink, with the familiar plum-family white haze on their skin.

Cather knew wild plums. She would have known them from draws and fencerows in the country, but they were also in her yard at home in Red Cloud. According to Mildred R. Bennett, when Charles Cather was a town alderman, young Willa became mayor of Sandy Point, a packing-box town along the south fence of her yard. The make-believe village was shaded by cottonwood and wild plum (172). Bennett also relates the story of one of Cather’s summer visits out to the Lambrechts, the family’s German neighbors when they first arrived in Webster County. The story goes that the daughters put wild plum jam on the lunch table, and their mother scolded them in German that their homemade jam wasn’t good enough for such a special guest. Cather understood her German, insisted that the preserves not be taken away, compared them to “the Damson plum-jam ‘cheese’ she had enjoyed in England,” and took several helpings, which completely pleased the daughters (56).
Peattie explains where the "goose" comes from in the wild plum’s common name. A Captain Means, of Nashville, Tennessee, sometime in the 1830s, Peattie guesses, once shot a wild goose and discovered a pit in its craw while dressing it out. He planted the seed, and it grew, the little tree producing fruit in its third year. Means so liked its plums that he gave some to local nurserymen, who bred the "Wild Goose" into many new varieties for commercial production (380). A half dozen domestic plum varieties were available for planting by the settlers, according to Allan (35–36), but Cather does not include plums in the O Pioneers! orchards, only the wild goose plum.

A few other trees get slight mention by Cather in this novel. Alexandra’s other fond memory that she will keep of the Linstrums is hunting Christmas trees with Carl. The pioneer Christmas tree is most likely an eastern red cedar, the only native conifer on this part of the prairie, and it would have been found down in a draw or just creeping out into shorter prairie grass. Although they take on a golden-brown patina in winter, as if they too had wanted to turn an autumn color, the selected tree would have greened up again in water and spread its juniper fragrance throughout the house. Another evergreen, a fir, appears imagi- natively twice. The first instance is in Ivar’s Bible reading that is interrupted when Alexandra and her brothers arrive so that she can ask him about their hogs. The passage he has open when they pull up speaks of the bounty and providence of nature for the
wild animals: along with mention of the majestic cedars of Lebanon there are fir trees for the stork and her nest. The firs are the stork’s house, and the passage, besides placing Ivar deeply in nature, serves as an Old World connection. So is the apron that Mrs. Lee has decorated with cross-stitch and taken to wear at Marie’s an Old World symbol. Its huntsmen, dog, and stag out in the fir trees are a small reminder of how the Old World remains both near and very far away to the original settlers and how much it occupies the minds of the overseas immigrants.

Another curious brief mention of trees is in the description of John Bergson’s property. He apparently owned two timber claims, his own and his brother Otto’s, the man who went back to Chicago to work in a bakery and join a Swedish athletic club (27). Two claims are likely because Otto also owned a half section rather than quarter section of land. Had they both filed under the original 1873 Timber Culture Act, they would have been maintaining two 40-acre parcels of young trees. Had they filed after 1878, they would have been cultivating and watering perhaps only two 10-acre lots. Unlike the timber claim that Claude Wheeler so enjoys in One of Ours, in which the trees are fully described (“ash and box-elder and cottonwoods, with a thick mulberry hedge on the south side” [150]), Cather doesn’t mention the Bergson claims again, even when detailing Alexandra’s beautiful farm later on. It could be that the long osage-orange hedge, other windbreaks, the pond willows, orchard trees, and some walnuts
(where the bee hives are placed) total up to the required claim acreage and therefore need no more separate mention.

Cather’s sentence about the walnuts in that first description of Alexandra’s farm, made when Emil and Marie are approaching in Marie’s cart, both affirms Alexandra’s natural-born business sense and leaves a little confusion. Cather writes that “there is even a white row of beehives in the orchard, under the walnut trees” (81). If nut trees are considered orchard trees, then the confusion is cleared, as they would be in their own “orchard,” but James T. Allan lists walnuts with the forest trees in his *Forests and Orchards in Nebraska* handbook, so what is more likely is that the walnuts are proximate to the fruit trees. Black walnut is meant by Cather’s and Allan’s short-hand “walnut,” and it releases a toxin from its leaves, bark, roots, and husks called juglone that poisons many other plants, giving it a competitive growth advantage (Burns 393). Apples are one of the species adversely affected, which are likely the largest percentage of trees in Alexandra’s orchard. Confusion remains; perhaps juglone had not been identified in the late 1800s so that planters could be warned.

The affirmation of Alexandra’s business sense is certain, however. Walnut is an extremely valuable wood and was even in 1884 when Allan published his little handbook:

> This valuable tree for forest planting on the prairie takes the lead of all the hard woods. The rich high
bottom lands of Nebraska is the home of the walnut and where a great extent of unoccupied lands might be made to yield a rich profit. The growth is very satisfactory on the high prairie but not so fast as on the lower ground where the tap root can reach moisture. A forest planter should not hesitate because the trees will not mature in his life time, for he cannot leave a richer legacy to his children. At the rate of present demand the native walnut will be entirely gone before new crops can be grown. Single trees have been sold in Michigan for $1,200, and the old stumps are being dug up and cut into veneers. These facts are given to show the importance of planting.” (7)

Peattie, back in 1948, confirmed Allan’s conjecture about the “present rate of demand.” He wrote that there is so little Black Walnut in the forest now (except in the southern Appalachians) that it is sought by lumbermen in a door-to-door hunt throughout the countryside, where owners are sometimes tempted by a small price to sacrifice a magnificent shade tree worth, in some cases, if they but knew it, more than their houses. (123)

Alexandra could see the future as well as Allan and planted some of the best tree for Emil, Lou and Oscar’s children, and for the value of her property.
Ken Bouc interviewed a John Zwonechek of DeWitt (three counties east of Webster, on the Big Blue River) in 1983. Zwonechek had just fifteen acres in walnuts then, and “a forester estimated that, if walnut prices increase at the same rate between 1975 and 2000 as they did between 1950 and 1975, John’s trees will be worth $1 million per acre at maturity.” They had twenty-five years to go then, but like Alexandra, no doubt, he “planted the trees as a legacy for his family” (86).

To raise walnuts, Allan goes on to recommend that the nuts be planted in the fall eight feet apart and the ground still be used for corn growing as long as possible. When the sprouts are two or three years old—researchers report that black walnut can reach a yard in height its first year and grow even more than that in its second year (Burns 394)—Allan advises planting a “nurse tree, such as Lombardy poplar, cottonwood, or catalpa between the rows. A fast-growing, competing tree will force the walnuts to grow straight and tall, which would make good, knot-free veneer logs. The nurses are cut down after a few seasons, he writes, and can be used for stakes and poles. Keep the bluegrass out, he advises (researchers found that toxic juglone might actually promote bluegrass growth [Burns 393]), and look forward to about a peck of nuts from each tree at just eight years of age. (It is still worth the trouble to collect, dehusk, and crack the rock-hard walnuts to put their kernels in homemade ice cream and black walnut cake.)
All the other trees that Cather uses in *O Pioneers!* are farm trees. As horticulture and agriculture form the context of this novel, highly important to the characters and their new enterprises are the windbreaks and hedges—the farms’ protection against the elements. Their use was nothing new. Virgil knew their value and wrote of them in *The Georgics* before the Common Era:

[. . .] Willow and humble broom

Give plenty of leaf to cattle and shade enough for a shepherd,

Hedges they make for crops and feed for the honey-bee.

(Lewis 37)

The trees were planted in windbreaks and hedges for fencing, shade, and to break the eternal wind. As close-planted breaks were thinned over the years, the trees that were cut also provided fuel, lumber, poles, posts, and stakes to the farmer. In part 2, “Neighboring Fields,” Cather brings us up the lane in Marie’s cart along a mile of “glossy green” osage orange trees.

The osage orange was originally native to the Red River valley in Texas and Arkansas, but their hardiness and usefulness let them be planted throughout the contiguous United States. In Nebraska, these trees are usually short, round, and bristling with small branches. They were so commonly planted for field hedges that most people know them as that today: ask what kind of little tree with peculiar big green fruit is growing in a neglected
acreage corner or in a fencerow, and a native is likely to answer
“hedge.” The twigs bear short sharp thorns, and before barbed
wire was invented, close plantings served as livestock fences.
After barbed wire became available, the hedge trees were cut for
posts. The wood is nearly indestructible and hard as rock after
drying; “after seasoning one year, [it] will last fifty,” Samuel
Barnard quipped in Allan’s handbook (19). Alexandra’s roadside
hedge is “tall,” but many settlers trained the trees into fences
(80). She may have as well, since the farm has cattle, hogs, and
horses. Barnard, who lived near Table Rock, much closer to the
Missouri, describes what one of Lou and Oscar’s chores would have
been, if so:

Cultivate three years without trimming and then trim
the plants, which should be eight feet high, to bare
poles, cutting off one every four feet, three and a-
half feet from ground, for standards. Then commence to
cut the other half through with a sharp hatchet, bend-
ing down to an angle of forty degrees, and weaving them
in with the standards. The year after laying down shear
twice, the last of June and first of September; you can
now let the hedge grow higher if you wish. This will
make a perfect barrier against cattle and hogs in five
years. (Allan 26)
A Millard farmer (near Omaha) advises trimming every year to keep the hedge at four feet and claims that “a man will trim a mile a day” (27).

Willows are another sheltering tree in this story. Wild willows shelter the preening duck in “flickering light and shade” during Alexandra and Emil’s lunch on the way back home from viewing the river farms, the shared memory of which binds Alexandra and Emil together as alert, appreciative, and visionary, and separates them further from Lou and Oscar. Willows were also planted for shade for the cattle; these, since the willow must have plentiful water to survive, are always at the pasture ponds. Allan, in his handbook, refers to “white willow” and advises that it is “one of the first trees [. . . ] to plant for protection and fuel” for the new settler (5). The reasons:

The first year it will stop much drifting snow; the second, its influence will be felt in restraining the force of the wind; the third, it will be ten to twelve feet high; the fourth, with one wire there will be a stock barrier and windbreak combined. (5–6)

Closely related to cottonwoods, willow species are nearly impossible to tell one from the other for anyone except a botanist; in Nebraska the commonest species are black willow, peach-leafed willow, and sandbar willow. They can all be shrubby and brushy in form, like the “green willow bushes” on Ivar’s dam (39). The trees branch just above the ground, like a bush, and are shallow-
rooted, so most grown trees, even with sizeable trunks, look as if they’re lying down, as if the soil had given way beneath them. From a distance in a green hay meadow, their sinuous dark trunks look like the Loch Ness monster surfacing in the waves.

All these shelters provided by trees were a serious part of farm business, measurable in dollars. Alexandra Bergson, from Cather’s characterization of her, might have loved reading some of the research reports regarding windbreaks and shelter belts in the 1949 Yearbook of Agriculture. She already understood what was in them. Stoeckeler and Williams, working from the experiment station in Holdrege (about sixty miles northwest of Red Cloud), measured the fuel needs of two identical houses, one protected from the wind by trees and one “exposed to the full sweep of the wind.” The fuel requirement for the protected house was 22.9 percent less than that of the exposed home. Other researchers studied cattle in Havre, Montana. In this study two herds of cattle were fed in exactly the same way, but one herd was protected from the weather by trees and shrubs and the others were kept in an open lot with only a small shed. The protected cattle gained 34.9 more pounds during a mild winter and lost 10.6 fewer pounds during a hard winter than the unprotected herd. During one three-day blizzard in South Dakota, cattle that had found shelter in trees lost an average of 30 fewer pounds than animals that survived the storm in an exposed pasture (191).
A thick mulberry hedge shelters the most important location in *O Pioneers!*, the orchard planted by the Linstrums, owned by the Bergsons, and finally possessed by the Shabatas, Marie in particular. Here there are apples, apricots, cherries, and a white mulberry tree, where scene after scene builds to the final tragedy. As necessary food for the owners and perhaps cash crop value as well (Nebraska fruit could be sold in Chicago and Denver), this collection of trees especially required shelter. The Yearbook lists the reasons all crops need protection on the prairie:

From the time that crops are well established until they are ready for harvest, they are constantly subjected to damage or to destruction by soil drifting, blow-down, firing by hot winds, loss of soil moisture, or damage from frost and sleet. Orchards are subjected to the same damages, but the greatest benefits are realized from protecting the trees during the pollination stage and preventing wind damage to the ripening fruit. (193)

Fruit, the report goes on, “will not set on the windward side of trees when windy conditions prevail, because bees will not work in the wind” (194). The mulberry hedge then helped provide the cherries that Lou and Oscar picked early on (when Cather added to their already negative characterizations that they hadn’t the pa-
tience to grow their own orchards) and those that Marie picked after the rain while Emil mowed.

Cather, who so many reviewers and friends described as an assured outdoors person, is quite comfortable using the Shabatas’ orchard as a place of beauty, comfort, and delight—a kind of outdoor room. There are no mentions of slippery, rotten fruit or bees and wasps, only descriptions of green, light and shadow, and breezes to make the heart sing. The place is both common and exotic, well-rooted and soul-freeing—exactly the way Cather would have the whole human race if she could manage it.

It is Emil and Marie whose lives will pass through the orchard, and the first occurrence where the narrator views it with them is on that ride home from the graveyard. Emil has been cutting the grass around the headstones, and Marie comes by when he’s nearly finished and gives him a lift. They take in the Bergson farm that has been so beautifully and thoughtfully developed, and readers are shown the layout: the house on the hill, the village-like arrangement of the outbuildings, and the well-kept fields. Then

on either side of the road, for a mile before you reached the foot of the hill, stood tall osage orange hedges, their glossy green marking off the yellow fields. South of the hill, in a low, sheltered swale, surrounded by a mulberry hedge, was the orchard, its fruit trees knee-deep in timothy grass. (79)
James T. Allan and the farmers he interviewed would no doubt have approved of the swale location (for frost-damage prevention) but would recommend that the orchard be mowed, and sure enough it is, but first Marie is visited there by Alexandra and her guest, Carl Linstrum. They talk about Carl’s having watered the trees when his family owned the place, keeping them alive, and his happiness that someone now “takes comfort in them” (123).

They sit under a white mulberry tree, Marie’s favorite place in the orchard, where an old wagon seat has been placed. It seems that she can more often be found there sewing, reading, or napping than in her house. The mulberry hedge that shelters the orchard is of regular native stock—the hardy and widespread red mulberry with deep purple fruit—but Marie’s tree is an Asian exotic, the plant so important in the production of silk, brought to the United States via Europe in hopes of starting a silk industry here. Its fruit truly is white (tipped with just a little pink), which allows Cather to seat Alexandra under it in her summer white dress and build the “pretty picture in the strong sunlight”: Carl seated in the grass and “the leafy pattern surrounding them like a net; the Swedish woman so white and gold, kindly and amused, but armored in calm, and the alert brown one, her full lips parted, points of yellow light dancing in her eyes as she laughed and chattered” (124). They share apricots from the beautifully described “circus trees”—“pale-yellow, pink-cheeked fruit” from trees with “blue-green leaves, porous like blotting-
paper and shaped like birch leaves, hung on waxen red stems” (125–26). It is a nostalgic scene of plenty and joy.

The beauty of the orchard is irresistible on the day Emil finally comes to cut the grass. It is “sparkling and rippling in the sun” under puffy white clouds after a night’s rain. Marie hears his scythe on the sharpening stone, changes clothes, and runs down to pick cherries instead of churning butter on the back porch. Everything flows downhill though, in a barely noticeable, electric but menacing way. The two move toward each other and danger, one swinging the tool of the Reaper and one harvesting a pail of sweet desire (in Etruria, during pagan times, it was Venus who was goddess of fruit trees), shivering under the branches as they unload raindrops down her neck.

Marie and Emil’s argument begins with Marie’s question about the Swedes’ religion and her assertion that the Bohemians were tree worshipers, believers that trees bring good or bad luck. Emil wants to know the lucky ones, but Marie remains serious, sitting on the old wagon seat beneath the white mulberry. Lindens, she recalls, were planted to purify the forest. No lindens are mentioned as being planted on the local farms in this story, even though North America also has beautiful, sweet-blooming _Tilia_ species, and Allan lists basswood (the tree’s other common name) as a good lawn tree and “superior bee food” (6). Cather thereby brings purity—lawful purity and natural purity, Christian church and paganism, and right and wrong into tight conflict un-
der the ivory-berried tree. By law and church, Marie and Emil’s love is wrong, a sin, because of her marriage to Frank, but by nature their love is the purest of all. It belongs among the trees and in the rich “neglected wilderness” of larkspur, hoarhound, wild cotton, foxtail, and wild wheat (138), and in the roses she wishes Emil would not have to cut. She is a good Catholic, she asserts, but the church has her life trapped in a mistake of a marriage, a wrong that is sinking three people. What can a priest tell her that will save her soul but also preserve her spirit for living? The white mulberry, like a sacred tree of pagan times, becomes her confessor, confidant, and model and the whole orchard a sort of sacred grove. “I feel as if this tree knows everything I ever think of when I sit here. When I come back to it I never have to remind it of anything; I begin just where I left off,” she tells Emil. She says she likes trees, wishing to emulate them, “because they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do,” also quietly sharing her unhappy state and view of a limited future in the human world.

Marie’s monologue sails past Emil, but it is he who picks the sweet, sweet fruit from the tree (white mulberries are even sweeter than red mulberries [Welsch 128, Forsell 86]), usually neglected, and drops a handful in her lap, a twist on the chain of events in the Biblical fall from the garden. He is equally spirited as Marie but frustrated and despairing, and he reacts
with anger to her and to his situation, wanting to pull up the whole Divide like a tablecloth, insisting that they can go no longer as they have been, and flying in the face of his own religious upbringing by retorting that “I can’t pray to have the things I want,” but “won’t pray not to have them, not if I’m damned for it” (143). He picks up his scythe, and Marie runs to the house in tears, the beautiful day spoiled.

With the white mulberry Cather is also writing a new version of Ovid’s ancient “Story of Pyramus and Thisbe.” In this tale that Willa Cather knew, set in Babylon, two forbidden young lovers plan to meet in a graveyard near a white mulberry tree. Thisbe arrives first but is frightened away by a bloody lioness that rushes in to drink at the spring after feeding. She loses her veil in her haste, which the lioness finds and shreds, staining it with her bloody face in the process. She goes back into the wild, but of course Pyramus arrives before Thisbe can return from her hiding place, and since he’s certain she has been dragged off and eaten, he stabs himself in agony. His blood spurts so high that it stains the fruit of the white mulberry tree and runs so deep that the roots take it up, coloring the fruit purple forever after. Thisbe returns in time for one last living glimpse from Pyramus, figures out what he must have deduced, and then stabs herself as well. There lie two young, beautiful people, dead beneath the white mulberry.
In Cather’s story, Emil has spent a whole winter away in Mexico, trying to find another way to live and love, and is again preparing to leave Alexandra’s farm and take up law, a thousand-some miles away. Marie tries to resign herself to a long life with her unsuitable husband. On an evening when Emil is emotionally and physically strained with his good friend Amédée’s death and his own unhappy plans, he goes to the orchard:

The sun was hanging low over the wheatfield. Long fingers of light reached through the apple branches as through a net; the orchard was riddled and shot with gold; light was the reality, the trees were merely interferences that reflected and refracted light. Emil went softly down between the cherry trees toward the wheatfield. When he came to the corner, he stopped short and put his hand over his mouth. Marie was lying on her side under the white mulberry tree, her face half hidden in the grass. (231)

Marie had made her mind up—after a night haunting the orchard and farm paths, during which she contemplated suicide and hoped that Emil would come but then was glad that he didn’t—that she must honor her vows for who knows how long. “She had lived a day of her new life of perfect love, and it had left her like this,” prostrate, exhausted, and dreaming of someone else (232). Emil and Marie surrender under the exotic and precious white mulberry tree, and it’s here that Frank, drunk and angry, blindly shoots
them in the moonlight, through the common mulberry hedge, stop-
ping Emil’s heart cold, and leaving Marie, crying out, to bleed
to death. Ivar finds them in the morning: “The story of what had
happened was written plainly on the orchard grass, and on the
white mulberries that had fallen in the night and were covered
with dark stain” (240).

When Alexandra and Carl circumvent the orchard on a walk af-
ter his return from Alaska, and they talk about Emil and Marie,
it’s less the proximity of the murder scene that brings the two
to mind than the orchard itself, a natural place, beyond just the
human in the trees themselves, but a place fully engaging all the
humans—the Linstrums and Bergsons and Shabatas—in its planting,
growth, and in its production for them. It is the fitting symbol
for what Carl noticed between Emil and Marie: “It was something
one felt in the air, as you feel spring coming, or a storm in
summer, [. . .] an acceleration of life” (270).

This enumeration of the trees in O Pioneers! shows how knowledge-
able Cather was of individual species and the ways she could use
them in her storytelling. Sometimes the analysis benefits from
substituting other species, as when considering a black cherry or
butternut instead of a chestnut for the central tree in “The
Elopement of Allen Poole.” They wouldn’t work. Consider a stand
of boxelder, say, for the walnuts on Alexandra’s farm. They’re a
native prairie tree, a maple that can even be tapped in the
spring for syrup and sugar. Not for Alexandra’s farm and character; only walnuts, with their ability to bring in a fortune and become longlasting useful items of great beauty, would do for Cather to make another point about this woman. Besides, Cather thought little of boxelders. Kari Ronning found that she once referred to them “as travesties of trees” (Cather, Obscure Destinies 280).

The accuracy in the construction, arrangement, and placement of the osage-orange and mulberry hedges and the unfailing location of willows always on water are a great reassurance for the reader. This author can be believed. If she is going to be so specific with the species, she really must get it right, and she does.

Finally, the eye of an artist is always a delight to share as well—in her description of the apricot branch and the “glossy green” of the osage orange, whose ovate, citrus-like leaves truly are beautiful. Cather solidly knew all these things about trees—their individuality, farm use, native growing habits on the prairie—and was plainly alert to trees in her reading as well, pulling into O Pioneers! ancient knowledge and a tree tale from the classics. Willa Cather did know her trees.
As in O Pioneers! an orchard helps tell part of the story in My Ántonia but not until the very end. First there is the same lack of trees, disbelieved by ten-year-old Jim Burden, after leaving Virginia and upon viewing his new home in Nebraska. Jim’s impression, “that the world was left behind” and he’d gone “outside man’s jurisdiction,” was Cather’s very own experience (7). She told a Philadelphia reporter in 1913, “I would not know how much of a child’s life is bound up in the woods and hills and meadows around it, if I had not been jerked away from all these and thrown out into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron” (Bohlke 10).

But then appear the wild upland trees of the story: the ashes and cottonwoods down in the ravine where the creek flows, the old elm with the hawk’s nest, and the few cedars that stand out so strong and green after the first snowfall. Farm trees include the boxelders that look as if the prairie grass would overrun them, the “rusty willow bushes” around Jim’s grandparents’ pond, the neighbor’s catalpa grove, and apples and cherries in the Cuzak orchard, surrounded by mulberry and locust. There are town trees: arching maples, black in the night, and cottonwoods circling a vacant lot. There are the Harlings’ ornamental mountain ash, the spire-shaped Lombardy poplar that guards their gate, their orchard, and the willow hedge that separates their property
from Jim's grandparents' second house. Unlike the little wild trees in the draw, big cedars thickly obscure the Cutter house. River trees include an elm, sunset-lit willows, and the bluff-top "scrub-oaks."

This novel contains many mentions of Bohemian woodland, remembered so fondly by the Shimerdas: the forest where Old Hatal lives (38); "the great forest full of game,—belonging, as Antonia said, to the 'nobles,'—from which she and her mother used to steal wood on moonlight nights" (98); the woods of Antonia's father's conversations, when he talked "beautiful talk" back home with his friend, "about music, and the woods, and about God, and when they were young" (228); and the river woods of which Antonia could remember every root on the path (230).

In My Antonia, Cather is not commencing construction of the heroic farm of O Pioneers! when she introduces Jim's new home and his grandparents. They are clearly well enough off—with a frame house, barns, outbuildings, a stack of pine lumber brought out from town with which to make repairs, and the ability and desire to be generous with the Shimerdas—but Cather doesn't grace them with double rows of dark green osage-orange hedges or a high-value black walnut grove. For their trees, she mentions only a quarter-mile-long strip of short, thick-set boxelders north of the house, and "rusty willows" around the muddy pond (14). "Box Elders are the Maples' poor relations," Donald Culross Peattie writes, the relationship, poor or not, proven by the seeds—the
winged samara of that genus. The boxelder’s leaves have the com-
pound arrangement of the ash (another of its common names is
“ash-leafed maple”). Boxelders are short-lived and not often par-
ticularly beautiful or even noticeable, but their value, Peattie
goes on, is as “a true friend of man and beast in the West.” The
tree is “able to endure extremes of climate, drought, wind,
dust,” and “abuse of all sorts,” making it one of the tree spe-
cies perfect for shelter planting on a homestead (473).

The scrubby willow bushes may have suffered by comparison to
the tall weeping willow trees of Willow Shade for Cather, who at
about the same age as Jim would have been feeling their loss.
Mildred R. Bennett records the story of how Cather would have
nothing to do with her little Nebraska cousins upon arriving at
such a farm as Jim’s grandfather’s, but that Roscoe, her younger
brother, beneath similar pondside willows, told the two small
girls all about Virginia “long-pawed growlies” and “short-pawed
growlies” as they hunted for the creatures among the trees (18).
With the boxelders and willows, Cather makes the grandparents’
farm an adequate place, practical but austere, and not in the
least a foregrounded picture to behold like Alexandra’s place.

More interesting for Jim than these two strips of trees is a
neighbor’s catalpa grove. He mentions it just once in his tale of
getting to know the new land and people, but it was clearly a
sight worth a visit. This tree with a Native American name has
bright green heart-shaped leaves the size of dinner plates, big
clusters of white blooms two inches long and showy as an orchid, and a seed pod like a two-foot-long green bean. The tree’s crowns become taller than wide, and the trunks and branches grow wonderfully huge and rugged, in a manner similar to the cottonwoods. Also like the cottonwood, the catalpa’s wood is on the weak side, but because the tree grows fast it was widely planted. James T. Allan in *Forests and Orchards in Nebraska* writes that “the hardy catalpa promises to be the coming tree for prairie forests, on account of its easy propagation, rapid growth, adaption [sic] to almost every kind of soil, ability to withstand drouth [sic], almost certainty of growth when transplanted, and its valuable timber.” Weak or no, the wood was still durable and useful for posts, railway ties, and bridge timbers, he adds (9).

Jim also made the acquaintance of the plains cottonwoods, on the fall day when Ántonia insisted on learning first his name, then the name of these glittering gold trees, and finally how to say the blue color of Jim’s eyes. Down in the ravine the ashes—green ash, trees native to Nebraska—have also turned their quieter gold. They are thick-twigged trees with evenly furrowed, closely fit bark, and seem to have the extremes of continental weather figured out: they are among the last to risk their new leaves in spring, avoiding late frosts, and among the first to drop them in the fall, preventing damage from early autumn snows. Enough of all of these tree species are in the vicinity so that the two Russians and eventually the Shimerdas can have log homes.
The undistinguished little cedars become beautiful after a
snow lades their branches and provides a brilliant contrast
across the landscape for their dark coloration. Jake, the hired
hand who escorted Jim from Virginia to Nebraska, comes home with
one across his saddle on his return trip from delivering Christ-
mas presents to the Shimerdas. There is nothing else he could
have brought home for a Christmas tree; both east and west of the
prairie there are pines, firs, and spruces, but the red cedar is
the only evergreen conifer native to the mixed-grass prairie of
Cather’s Red Cloud locale.

Allan writes that “this tree accommodates itself to any
soil,” and to any situation, Albert Constantine Jr. adds, some-
thing very few trees can do. The Christmas tree seems to do this
figuratively—and seems to witness and participate in accommodat-
ing home soil and situation—in the grandparents’ sitting room.
Brought into a Protestant home and decorated so magically, the
innocent Juniperus virginiana carries forward both the ancient
traditions of pagan times—the endowment of a tree with meaning by
peoples who for millennia had believed in dozens of gods and god-
desses represented in sacred groves and individual tree species—
and the profoundly revolutionary Bible stories, filtered through
the old nations of Europe. When Jim’s grandmother first views the
decorated little cedar, she thinks of the “Tree of Knowledge”
from the Bible (80). Jim recalls Hans Christian Andersen’s story
“The Fir Tree,” in which a small tree finally stops thinking only
of what it wants and wishes to become and recognizes what it has had and lost (Rossel 11-18).

On Christmas evening, after the candles are lit among the paper angels, wise men, and infant Jesus from Otto’s trunk, Mr. Shimerda, who had come to visit, kneels and prays before the tree. “There had been nothing strange about the tree before,” Jim notices, “but now, with some one kneeling before it,—images, candles, . . .” His imagination stops when he notices his grandfather’s bowed head with “finger-tips to his brow,” revealing his disapproval of Shimerda’s Catholicism but also his complete tolerance (84).

Eastern red cedars also surround the Black Hawk house of evil Wick Cutter and his combative wife. They are big evergreens, like the tall, dark graveyard trees of “The Elopement of Allen Poole.” The Cutters’ “fussy, scroll-work house” is ominously “buried” in them (204). They figure in the couple’s relationship: “Cutter often threatened to chop down the cedar trees which half-buried the house. His wife declared she would leave him if she were stripped of the ‘privacy’ which she felt these trees afforded her. That was his opportunity, surely; but he never cut down the trees” (206-07). Later, the couple’s “quarrels [. . .] passed the boundary of the close-growing cedars, and were heard in the street by whoever wished to loiter and listen” (350). The trees’ dark scale-type needles hide the house from the street when Cutter commits murder and suicide. They also surround Jim’s errant
kiss and new, proud understanding of himself and Ántonia, and Jim’s violent beating when Cutter discovers that he is not who he expected to find lying in his hired girl’s bed.

In sharp contrast to her use of dark graveyard-reminiscent trees around the Cutter house is Cather’s use of cottonwoods around the Vannis’ dance pavilion, which they bring to Black Hawk one summer. On several occasions in her works, Cather uses cottonwoods in association with gaiety, excitement, and characters who express an irrepressible joie de vivre, like Ántonia. This time she surrounds a flag-bedecked, open-sided tent with “tall, arched cottonwood trees” (188). Mothers, doing needlework while their children take lessons, the man with the popcorn cart, and the boys selling lemonade enjoy their shade. “Even on the hottest afternoons,” Cather wrote, “the cottonwoods made a rustling shade”—cool patches for eye and body, with the sound of soft applause from the breeze moving among the stiff, fluttering leaves, adding to the animated atmosphere below. Children and grownups alike are drawn to the “most cheerful place in town” (189).

Bennett explains that Cather experienced a similar dance platform in her youth, but she references a “Bowery Dance” (155). This particular dance took place not under a traveling tent but a “roof” of freshly cut willow branches brought up from the Republican River. Italian minstrels, traveling from Colorado with their dancing bear, played the music. A cottonwood also shades the yard behind Anton Jelinek’s saloon, gracing both the upright
man, who had helped the Shimerdas, and his business, which we are
to understand is like an Old World beer hall and community center
and not the stereotypical American sink of immorality.

Black Hawk, replicating the real Red Cloud, Nebraska, has
more trees than just the cedars and cottonwoods. Jim describes
his second home as being in a “clean, well-planted little prairie
town,” with “shapely trees growing along the wooden sidewalks”
(141). Maples are specifically mentioned on two occasions—most
likely river maple, or silver maple, which is one of the soft
species. They have long branches but short silvery-gray trunks,
with bark that flakes in long strips. Their leaves are beautiful.
They are the most deeply and sharply lobed and jaggedly but evenly
toothed of all the maples. They are green on top (yellow in
the fall) and white beneath, so in a high wind, portions of or even
the whole crown of the tree seems to turn pale and inside out.
Like many other tree species planted on the prairie, it is
fast-growing, short-lived, and susceptible to breakage. Cather
hated it that they became a more popular landscape tree than the
cottonwood, which she viewed as representing mindless sameness
among the generation following the pioneers, with the lamentable
result of loss of distinction of individual and place (Bohlke 40).

In My Ántonia, the maples are mentioned only in night
scenes. Jim imaginatively describes them as providing a roost for
the oppressive silence of the small-town existence that bears
down on the young people and drives them to fruitlessly pace the streets, a condition that was relieved one summer by the Vannis’ dance pavilion. Also, it’s under the “arching maple trees, where the moonlight filtered through the lush June foliage” where Ántonia, Lena, and Anna mill, waiting for Jim to return from commencement activities, and where they tell him how wonderful his oration was. “I have had no other success that pulled at my heartstrings like that one,” Jim recorded, referring especially to his brief exchange with Ántonia about her father and his influence on him. From under those trees, Jim is launched into the wider world; the next day he takes up trigonometry and Virgil on his own, working toward his college education and passport out of Black Hawk.

In Red Cloud, many of the streets were named for trees, which is not uncommon in any Midwestern town. Cather lived at Third and Cedar Streets, and one of her walks would have taken her by Locust, Elm, and Walnut within minutes. The names call no real attention to themselves until one considers, curiously, that no thoroughfare was named Bluestem Street, Big or Little, even though this pair of grasses dominated the Nebraska landscape and provided huge economic benefit to the cattlemen overwintering their herds in the Republican valley and to the ensuing homesteaders with their livestock. Bluestem was (and is) highly nutritious and a palatable grass for animals, according to J. E. Weaver (Native Vegetation 58). Although Grama Avenue or Wheat-
grass Street were also perfectly suitable, trees and the names of men of noticeable accomplishment (and ordinal numbers) earned the permanence of street names in the community.

A few more town trees are at the Harlings, Jim’s next-door neighbors in Black Hawk. At their gate they have a Lombardy poplar, a distinctive, formal-looking tree closely related to the cottonwood but native to northern Italy and perhaps, long ago, originating further east in Asia (Elias 468). Cather commented on seeing this tree in the wheat-growing region of France in articles she sent back to the *Nebraska State Journal* during her first trip to Europe (Kates 98, 134). Sometimes it was planted in Nebraska windbreaks, according to Allan, but the tree’s branches begin to decay after only about a decade’s growth (6). These slender branches emerge from the trunk and grow immediately up, giving the Lombardy poplar the appearance of the tall, narrow Mediterranean cypresses that Cather also saw in Europe (Kates 130, 138, 140). This tree, as well as a mountain ash on the front lawn, serve to set the Harlings apart as special people, more extraordinary and superior in many ways from the majority of Black Hawk residents.

The mountain ash is also an exotic, a small tree with long, broad compound leaves that periodically bears elderberry-like clusters of ivory flowers. These grow into a decorative riot of red berries late in the summer, which contrast beautifully with its gold leaves in the fall and often remain suspended from the
twigs like ornaments all winter. The European species of the mountain ash is the rowan tree, one of the “triumvirate of sacred grove trees” along with the oak and birch (Forsell 143).

In *My Ántonia*, Jim and Mrs. Harling share a quiet reunion around the mountain ash one summer day when he is back in Black Hawk from college and wondering how Ántonia and her child are getting along and what happened to her marriage. Mrs. Harling is cultivating around the tree when Jim takes the spade from her and finishes the job. She tells him about an oriole, the black and orange songbird that weaves a fine suspended basket for its nest, that raised a family in its branches. Cather lived next door to such a mountain ash—one that grew at the Miners, the people after whom she patterned the Harlings. Bennett uses Cather’s frantic reaction to the tree’s absence to illustrate how much Cather disliked loss and change as she grew older. “She missed every tree that died,” Bennett wrote. “She was upset when she noticed strange children playing in the old Miner yard. [. . .] ‘Where is the mountain ash? Did they destroy it?’” Bennett reports that Cather had asked her good friend Carrie Miner. Carrie simply told her that it had died, and that she rather liked having new children in the house after it had been empty so long (145–46).

The willow hedge that Jim regularly dashes through on his shortcut between the two worlds of home and the Harlings’ house is a bit of a puzzle. It is unlikely that the houses are built near a creek or a draw, gully, drainage, or slough that would
gather enough water for willows. Cather makes no mention of such
topographical features in conjunction with this frequently men-
tioned hedge. But it’s also not likely that Cather would put fic-
tional willows where nonfictional willows could not grow. The on-
ly clue to their vitality is the Harlings’ windmill—one of the
items that made Jim’s grandmother so pleased to live next door to
them (143). The windmill’s well is probably fairly shallow, so it
could be that the water table is close enough to the surface to
support these water-needy plants. It could also be that the hedge
benefited from other nearby plants that were regularly watered.

The Harlings also have an orchard. Cather uses orchards al-
most at par with cottonwoods for making a setting or character
out of the ordinary. Ántonia’s own orchard is yet to come, but as
the Harlings’ hired girl, “she would race about the orchard with
us,” Jim wrote, “or take sides in our hay-fights in the barn, or
be the old bear that came down from the mountain and carried off
Nina” (150). Their orchard is a special place for Ántonia and the
children alike:

The Harling children and I were never happier, never
felt more contented and secure, than in the weeks of
spring which broke that long winter. We were out all
day in the thin sunshine, helping Mrs. Harling and Tony
break the ground and plant the garden, dig around the
orchard trees, tie up vines and clip the hedges. Every
morning, before I was up, I could hear Tony singing in
the garden rows. After the apple and cherry trees broke into bloom, we ran about under them, hunting for the new nests the birds were building, throwing clods at each other, and playing hide-and-seek [. . . ]. (187)

As a group, the immigrant girls who are working in town are related to trees when Jim and Ántonia, Tiny, Anna, and Lena go to the river to pick elderberry flowers for wine. Cather unobtrusively has them spend the afternoon and evening in a stand of scrub oak, “flat-topped, twisted little oaks,” up from the water, high on the bluffs where they can “see the windings of the river, and Black Hawk, grouped among its trees, and, beyond, the rolling country, swelling gently until it met the sky” (231). There is no better stand of trees—small bur oaks—to place this action in, not even a grove of cottonwoods, Cather’s favorite “pioneer” tree. Jim’s high esteem for the girls and Cather’s comprehension and use of the bur oak’s characteristics are perfectly paired.

Interestingly, Cather apparently had a change of heart about these stunted bur oaks as she matured. Seventeen years before My Ántonia’s publication, she had written “El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional,” a short story in which the down-and-out residents of a sham town are likened to these tough little trees, but in this case the trees get no more break from her than the poor, foolish characters do. Looking forward though, the description of the trees in this story does make it plain that she was aware of its
remarkable ability to survive all conditions well before she wrote this novel:

Beyond the river with its belt of amber woodland rose the bluffs, ragged, broken, covered with shaggy red grass and bare of trees, save for the few stunted oaks that grew upon their steep sides. They were pathetic little trees, that sent their roots down through thirty feet of hard clay bluff to the river level. They were as old as the first settler could remember, and yet no one could assert that they had ever grown an inch. They seldom, if ever, bore acorns; it took all the nourishment that soil could give just to exist. There was a sort of mysterious kinship between those trees and the men who lived, or tried to live, there. (293)

At the close of the story, “the tree itself has stopped growing altogether. It has concluded that it is not worth the effort,” Cather wrote, as she returns the abandoned town site to the sunflowers and muddy excuse of a river (310).

In My Ántonia, the cynicism and negative associations with the scrub oaks of “El Dorado” are gone. Lena yawns, reclining beneath a little oak; they all play a game, using the little trees for bases; they watch the trees turn “red as copper” when the sun goes down. Ántonia leans against one and the other three lean against her and each other, as if for a portrait, as Jim tells them what he knows about Coronado’s expedition to the area.
Bur oaks are the toughest, longest-lived trees on the prairie. They are survivors, able to grow where other trees cannot; they are resistant to all sorts of trouble—fire, drought, and disease; they are equal parts in plain view and hidden away; they are resourceful in their search for water and sustenance; and they are beautiful in a way that reveals strength, character, and longevity. Decades after this novel was written, J. E. Weaver (a member of the second generation of great University of Nebraska botanists) and his research partner excavated a bur oak. The tree’s evident resourcefulness just reinforces Cather’s choice of tree appropriate for the four immigrant girls:

The roots of a mature tree—37.5 feet tall, 14 inches in basal diameter, and 65 years old—were selected and the root system was excavated. The taproot, tapering rapidly, gave rise to about 30 large main branches, most of which arose in the first 2 feet of soil. Neither the taproot nor its branches extended deeper than 15 feet, and most of the main branches were 1 to 7 inches in diameter. They extended outward 20 to 60 feet before turning downward. Branching was profuse and a very large volume of soil was occupied. Many branches of the main roots grew almost vertically downward for 8 to 15 feet. Each, with its branches, more or less resembled the taproot system of an oak sapling. Other branches extended vertically upward and filled the surface soil
with a network of absorbing rootlets. Still other ropelike roots, a half-inch or less in diameter, extended many feet without much change in thickness. A cordlike type, only 3 to 5 millimeters thick, also was abundant. A third type clothed the widely extending skeletal framework. They consisted of fine, much-branched rootlets and furnished the bulk of the absorbing system. Mycorrhizal mats were abundant.

It was ascertained that the weight of the roots equaled that of the tops, and the volume of the roots was only one-tenth less than that of the parts above ground. That the adaptation of a species to its habitat is largely a matter of root development is a viewpoint that is strongly supported. (138–39)

The similarities between the bur oaks’ diversified root system and the immigrant girls, who came to a new nation and put down their roots, living in conditions less than ideal, who worked their family’s farms, who proudly worked for other families as well, who picked up and did whatever needed doing wherever it needed doing, who more than survived while conducting themselves about town in a way that Jim always found strong and beautiful, and who learned from life, are many. Both trees and the women survived and grew with character and beauty.

Jim, in telling his story of Ántonia, recalled that when he and his grandparents had moved to Black Hawk he discovered that
it would be the river that would preserve him, now so many miles from the farm that he had come to know as home. He can see the river’s bluffs from his bedroom window and goes skating on the ice in the winter with the Harlings. Cather knew the river well from picnics there with the Miners (Bennett 42-43). Before the four immigrant girls’ wagon trundles over the bridge on elderflower-picnic day, and just before he will leave for college rarely to return to Black Hawk, Jim walks to the river and goes for a long swim. “For the first time,” he says, “it occurred to me that I would be homesick for the river after I left it. The sandbars, with their clean white beaches and their little groves of willows and cottonwood seedlings, were [. . .] newly-created worlds” (226).

The willows and cottonwoods are trees that release their tiny seeds by the millions each summer, seeds that must land on moist sand and stay moist for a couple weeks so they can almost immediately send down a tiny rootlet and begin photosynthesizing with new tiny leaves to survive. Reliant on the wind for wide dispersal, these trees package no extra food with their seeds to help tide them over during initial development (compared to any of the trees that produce rich, heavy nuts or acorns, for example). Consequently, the river sandbars make perfect nurseries and are thick with young wands of both species during the summer.

Jim surprises himself, suddenly realizing that he “knew every inch of the river shores and had a friendly feeling for every
bar and shallow” (226). After greeting the girls as they pass over the bridge, Jim climbs up the bank behind an elm and finds a “dressing room,” taking his time, “reluctant to leave that green enclosure where the sunlight flickered so bright through the grapevine leaves” (227). This riverbank elm is no doubt an American elm, or white elm, and such nonfictional versions would have been sizable just up the bank from the water around a century before Dutch elm disease decimated their populations as the blight did to the American chestnut. “This is the grandest deciduous tree in America” Allan wrote in 1884, prefacing his recommendation for planting it as a street tree (11). Peattie advises that “if you want to be recalled for something that you do, you will be well advised to do it under an Elm—a great Elm, for such a tree outlives the generations of men. [. . .] A noble Elm is a verity that does not change with time” (238). Simply changing from swimming trunks into picnic clothes notwithstanding, Cather associates an elm with young Jim, whom we already know from the introductory framing of My Ántonia has made great professional and personal accomplishments.

A pioneer’s tree the elm is not, and fittingly Cather has no elm groves on farms in My Ántonia—the only other individual mentioned is the tree with the hawk’s nest in it that Jim observes as a child. Peattie quotes a C. A. Sheffield, who had written an article on the American elm for the Atlantic Monthly in 1948. Sheffield wrote that “they are the most useless piece of vegeta-
tion in our forests. [. . .] They cannot be used for firewood because they cannot be split. The wood cannot be burned because it is full of water. It cannot be used for posts because it rots in a short time. It can be sawed into lumber but it warps and twists into corkscrews and gives the building where it is used an unpleasant odor for years” (243).

At the end of summer, Jim goes to Lincoln to school and then goes back east to finish his degree. He returns once to Black Hawk and then again only after twenty years have passed. On this trip, he travels by train and wagon to visit the Cuzaks and finds Ántonia on a productive farm of her own with a wonderful, warm husband, Anton, and a family of ten children. On this place there is an ash grove, practical for lumber and firewood, a thorny locust hedge protecting the front yard, “two silvery, moth-like trees of the mimosa family” at the front gate, and most important, two orchards, “a cherry orchard, with gooseberry and currant bushes between the rows, and an apple orchard, sheltered by a high hedge from the hot winds” (329). It is in the apple orchard where Cather truly ends My Ántonia—where the climax of Ántonia’s labors are showcased, not with the tragedy of O Pioneers! but in complete triumph. Ántonia shows Jim the trees:

As we walked through the apple orchard, grown up in tall bluegrass, Ántonia kept stopping to tell me about one tree and another. ‘I love them as if they were people,’ she said, rubbing her hand over the bark. ‘There
was n’t a tree here when we first came. We planted every one, and used to carry water for them, too—after we’d been working in the fields all day. Anton, he was a city man, and he used to get discouraged. But I could n’t feel so tired that I would n’t fret about these trees when there was a dry time. They were on my mind like children. Many a night after he was asleep I’ve got up and come out and carried water to the poor things. And now, you see, we have the good of them.

(329–30)

They spend little time in the house and much more at the table in the orchard. Jim observes Ántonia and Anton’s children locating a burial plot for a deceased dog, finding the “deepest peace in that orchard.” It is a sanctuary, partly natural and partly manmade,

surrounded by a triple enclosure; the wire fence, then the hedge of thorny locusts, then the mulberry hedge which kept out the hot winds of summer and held fast to the protecting snows of winter. The hedges were so tall that we could see nothing but the blue sky above them, neither the barn roof nor the windmill. The afternoon sun poured down on us through the drying grape leaves. The orchard seemed full of sun, like a cup, and we could smell the ripe apples on the trees. The crabs hung on the branches as thick as beads on a string,
purple-red, with a thin silvery glaze over them. (330–31)

With the triple enclosure, the orchard is like a fortress, creating a safe and beautiful interior space for what is valuable in the world: the productive trees; the family’s food; the family itself, so often in the grape arbor; and their feelings for each other during a child’s loss. The orchard is like a microclimate, like the tiny spot a beetle finds under a chip of bark or the tunnels a mouse makes under deep snow. These are places where even though harshness can be just centimeters away, within the tiny space itself, everything is conducive to life. The orchard is like a European garden, with its tall hedges serving as walls, a structure common to English and French homes. Cather enjoyed their beauty on her many trips to Europe. The Ántonia who had to “steal wood on moonlight nights” from Bohemian nobles has become an American “noble” with her own wealth.

Ántonia is a leader in this productive and sacred space; she still “fires the imagination” for Jim, could still stop one’s breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. (342)
And the story tapers away, but there is Ántonia, brown and worn but lively as ever, who started out on the railroad siding at Black Hawk, scarcely knowing any English, surviving her father’s suicide, serving others, working like a draft animal, and at the end she has found the place and the people that give her the greatest joy, and she does not want to be anywhere else on earth.

James Woodress in the historical essay accompanying the Scholarly Edition of *My Ántonia* quotes Elizabeth Sergeant describing how Cather told her she envisioned this novel and its purpose:

She then suddenly leaned over . . . and set an old Sicilian apothecary jar of mine, filled with orange-brown flowers of scented stock, in the middle of a bare, round antique table.

‘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 moved the lamp so that light streamed brightly down on my Taormina jar, with its glazed orange and blue design.

‘I want her to stand out—like this—like this—because she is the story.’ (387)

Cather certainly accomplishes her goal in spotlighting Ántonia, but more than anything, this story is an exploration of people
and places, an exploration of aching for a place and reactions to not being satisfied with where one is, a dilemma Cather struggled with all her life.

Trees are rooted in place, going nowhere but upward from where they are, and are of such amazing designs, that they help, in turn, to define places. Jim and Ántonia embody the love and conflicts of place. When Jim comes back to Black Hawk after graduating, he “recognized every tree and sandbank and rugged draw” (298). Ántonia asks him “whether [he] had learned to like big cities.” She says that she would “always be miserable in a city. ‘I’d die of lonesomeness. I liked to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly. I want to live and die here’” (312). Nature and home soon work their magic on Jim, as they stand in the field where she was working. The sun sets and the moon rises simultaneously:

In that singular light every little tree and shock of wheat, every sunflower stalk and clump of snow-on-the-mountain, drew itself up high and pointed. [. . .] I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there.” (313)

Mr. Shimerda and the tramp who throws himself in the “thrashing” machine most violently epitomize deep homesickness for another place than where they are. Shimerda could not recon-
cile his loss of music, church, friends, and woods in Bohemia with what American prairie homesteading had to offer, and he shoots himself one winter day. James Woodress, in the Scholarly Edition of My Ántonia includes the text of the poem that the tramp carried in his pocket along with the penknife and wishbone. The poem speaks of recalling dear childhood scenes, including “The orchard, the meadow, the deep-tangled wildwood / And every loved spot my infancy knew” (5–6, qtd. in Cather 455). By omitting the poem itself from her narrative Cather makes its impact all the greater when the words are known. The tramp was less crazy than deeply heartbroken.

Jim’s grandparents had to deal with moving to Nebraska—indeed, his grandmother advises him on occasion about how to handle being in new country. They later move to town, and she “thanked God she lived next the Harlings,” a family who makes the neighborhood more farmlike and eases her suffering. When orphaned, Jim was displaced from Virginia and then uprooted again when his grandparents moved to Black Hawk. He makes adjustments again after moving to Lincoln—compelled once to walk “slowly out into the country part of the town” after seeing a production of Camille with Lena. He goes back east and eventually all over the world, glad to be out of Black Hawk, but he still feels powerfully the pull of Nebraska:

I took a long walk north of town, out into the pastures where the land was so rough that it had never been
ploughed up, and the long red grass of early times
still grew shaggy over the draws and hillocks. Out
there I felt at home again. [. . .] I had escaped from
the curious depression that hangs over little towns,
and my mind was full of pleasant things [. . .]. (358)

Otto and Jake were footloose, holding on to work and board
with Jim’s grandparents as long as they could but eventually dis-
appearing out west. Their early neighbors, the pair of Russian
men, could never settle because of the gossip that followed them
everywhere. Ántonia herself, who can recall Bohemia, loves the
countryside but was grateful for her time in town with the Harl-
ings, even though it made her sad. She feared adjusting to Denver
when she first married, but she eventually owns her own farm with
Anton and builds the double orchard that signifies the best place
of all and the sweetest home.

Cather herself is in these characters, probably the precise
combination of both Jim and Ántonia. Ántonia could not leave the
farm, and Jim could scarcely go back to Black Hawk, but Cather
managed both—she left and lived in New York City, often traveling
west and north and overseas, but she frequently returned to Red
Cloud for lengthy stays. It was hard on her, according to Ben-
nett: “[. . .] She hated [the bleak, wild prairie] for the hold
it had on her, for the acute longing she felt for it wherever in
the world she happened to find herself. Employ it she did, mag-
nificently; overcome it, never” (xii).
Via her characters, she plumbs place, what makes a place, and the range of human response to relocation, from those who found new country so inadequate as worth giving up life, to those who became possessed by it and could live nowhere else, and in between, those who moved to distant locales, with bright lights and fascinating distractions, but could never stop thinking about a certain red-grassed country.
THE LOST AND FOUND TREES OF ONE OF OURS

In her novel about a lost and searching farm boy and his discovery of life and living in the military and across the Atlantic during World War I, Willa Cather makes use of dozens of trees. She wrote this novel in response to the brave death of her cousin, Lt. G. P. Cather, who served in the American Expeditionary Force in France (Woodress 303-04). In it the trees of two far-distant regions help to tell the story—even are the story at moments—and especially aid the portrayal of the young main character, Claude Wheeler.

On his father’s big farm, which Claude describes once as a place he “both loves and hates to come home” to, the nonspecifically timbered Lovely Creek flows through their big pasture (41). Claude watches the crows that nest in its trees (70) and notices how the trees themselves huddle in violet shadow as he drives home one day (71). Mrs. Wheeler, one Sunday afternoon, gazes at them looking like a “black thicket” under new snow (74). Claude thinks about Lovely Creek during his July training leave, how he will carry “the whole countryside in his mind, meaning more to him than it ever had before” when he goes away (219).

Willows line the creek near Frankfort, the Red Cloud-like prairie village, where Claude and Ernest picnic and smoke cigars on circus day (11, 12). They dazzle springtime with “new yellow leaves” when Claude returns from his sundown on the State House
steps in Denver. A creekside elm, the tree of portent, provides
Enid Royce and Gladys Farmer with sitting perches while Claude
collects “water-cresses,” patiently waiting to propose to Enid
(131). Another elm shaded his future father-in-law’s car while
Mr. Royce tries to talk him out of marrying his daughter (128).
The small, gnarly trees of wild plum thickets perfume the air in
spring (22) and grow thick and close to a roadside to hide prank-
sters strewing glass and slowing the wedding party on its way to
the train. Beyond these brief mentions of trees by Cather, an or-
chard, cedars, and roadside hedges of locust are present on the
farm or neighboring places and figure importantly in the story.
The Wheeler timber claim, vital to Claude’s existence, contains
ash, box-elder, and cottonwood behind its mulberry hedge. In town
are more cottonwoods, maples, and a catalpa.

Over in France, where Claude truly finds himself, are
planes, poplars, and surprising cottonwoods. At and behind the
western front are red-stemmed pines, beech, birch, lindens, oaks,
horse chestnuts, black walnuts, and yews. They fill woods and
walled gardens, some of which are battlegrounds while others lie
in ruin. Two in particular—one wood and one garden—are sanctuar-
ies from fighting. Many, many of the French trees are dead.

All these trees, in both the United States and France, pro-
vide and augment setting in Cather’s story, but in some cases
they define characters through such close association that the
characters could scarcely be the same individuals without them.
For example, Gladys Farmer, a poor teacher who lives with her mother and is courted by Claude’s financially successful but emotionally pinched brother, Bayliss, recognizes Claude’s finer side. They are old friends, and she clearly, calmly loves him. That Claude doesn’t love her in turn is one of his blunders. A “sprawling catalpa” grows in her front yard, the well-formed hardwood with huge heart-shaped leaves whose showy, ruffled flowers bloom in great bunches. It’s kept company by mint, double hollyhocks, a trumpet vine, and other garden flowers and is the biggest flowering plant growing in the garden of this women’s house. Gladys is the best musician in Frankfort, has prettier clothes than anyone in town except Enid, and is graced with a “warm imagination” and “strong feelings about places.” Cather could not have chosen a better tree to match her character.

More than any other of the major characters in her novels, Claude Wheeler is defined by trees. Even when he is most foolish, embarrassed, mistaken, or frustrated, the trees around Claude and the fact that he notices trees express his deep interior character. They foreshadow, or rather “foreshape”—what with their up-flung, spreading forms—his discovery in France that indeed there is living that is more direct, valuable, fine, and joyful than what he has known.

The first tree-associated expression of Claude’s sensitive, intense nature and furious, frustrated temper follows his fa-
ther’s sawing down of a cherry tree merely so the fruit will be easier for his mother to pick.

The ground had been ploughed that spring to make it hold moisture, and Claude was running happily along in one of the furrows, when he looked up and beheld a sight he could never forget. The beautiful, round-topped cherry tree, full of green leaves and red fruit,—his father had sawed it through! It lay on the ground beside its bleeding stump. With one scream Claude became a little demon. He threw away his tin pail, jumped about howling and kicking the loose earth with his copper-toed shoes, until his mother was much more concerned for him than for the tree. (26)

Claude glares at his father all through supper that night and then sits in the orchard, day after day—at just the age of five—watching the tree die. God will surely punish his father for his act, the little boy thinks.

Years later, Claude and Ernest walk the banks of Lovely Creek on an unseasonably warm day after Christmas. They leave their coats on an elm branch while they walk out to the timber claim and back, talking history and books, Claude growing frustrated with Ernest’s literal-mindedness, when they spot a little dogwood wreathed with a red-berried, yellow-husked bittersweet vine. “Bittersweet” almost too literally will describe their friendship, but on this day a momentary restoration of innocence
is in what these two boys find magical enough to scramble down a bank to be nearer: one usually nondescript and ignored understory tree that decorated with a vine had become like a “Christmas tree growing wild out of doors” (46). Ernest and Claude will grow apart and misunderstand one another, but the elm, the timber claim, the timbered creek banks, and the wreathed dogwood establish their mutual fine sensibilities. Their pleasure sets them apart from the likes of Claude’s brothers, Bayliss and Ralph, from his father, from farmhand Dan, and even from neighbor Leonard Dawson.

Cather’s love for Europe and understanding of a boy like Ernest, whose dream is a place of his own right where he already is, a wife and family, farming, and participation in the events of the rural community—a pattern different only in a few details from the life of his parents—shows in his daydream of the Old World. He whistles a German tune while he cultivates his corn and pictures green hills before pine-forested mountains still carrying snow. He sees his old parents quietly plowing with oxen on the lowland, and the reverie affirms his own life and progress. Although Cather herself is more like Claude, she was torn by the pull of places and appreciated that the Ernest Havels she knew had already come far and brought with them old, elegant memories and ways of living.

In Ernest’s daydream, his parents are plowing near a stream lined with polled willows just showing their first new leaves.
Cather saw these curious trees in England and France on her first trip to Europe in 1902. For the *Nebraska State Journal* she described those she saw along the level River Teme in Ludlow, England, as “never more than twelve feet high, with a trunk perhaps three feet thick, and little round bushy tops that make them look very much like the painted trees of the antediluvian world that are always found in toy Noah's arks” (Cather Willa 30). Willows, but also limes (linden, also known as basswood in the United States), planes (sycamores), and locusts are frequently polled, or pollarded, in Europe. The trunk and all the branches of the tree are cut off a yard or so above the ground, and the tall stump is allowed to sprout again. For basketmakers growing willows, this produces “withies,” long shoots that make good working materials. Baskets aside, polled trees are often maintained in cities and along roadsides for landscaping fashion and for wind-resistant plantings (Ennos 104). Pollled trees appear once more in *One of Ours*, just when Claude has arrived in his first city in France and is taking in the new, strange, and wonderful place. He sits in a little park watching some women mending and “admiring the cropped locust trees” beside a church (279).

Stateside, a powerfully defining place for Claude is his father's timber claim. It is first described while he is building the house for Enid and himself. One of the second-story doorlike windows that opens onto the porch roof looks out toward Lovely Creek; the opposite window looks out on the timber claim (153).
The wood is clearly Claude’s delight. “When he was a little boy, he had thought that grove of trees the most beautiful spot in the world. It was a square of about thirty acres, set out in ash and box-elder and cottonwoods, with a thick mulberry hedge on the south side” (150). Cather describes Nat Wheeler, Claude’s father, as having arrived on the prairie “when the Indians and the buffalo were still about” (7). With that information, along with the fact that the Wheelers call the trees a “timber claim” (and not just a “woodlot,” for example), and knowing that the amount of land that was put in trees is more than just the ten acres the Timber Culture Act was later amended to require for a patent, it’s safe to guess that Nat Wheeler planted his claim in the early 1870s, soon after passage of the federal law. That would put Claude’s favorite trees at nearly forty years of age, adequate time for even the ashes and box-elders to grow large, and plenty of time for the cottonwoods, had they received good care and enough moisture, to become enormous. The thirty-acre timber claim was a park, an area roughly equivalent to sixteen 300-foot-square city blocks, a beautiful place that could be entered like an outdoor room with limbs arching overhead, a different world that had come into its own over time.

The evening Gladys comes to see the house, Claude excitedly tells Enid he has found quail in the claim, and he invites Gladys to a picnic there the following summer. “‘There are some pretty places over there in the timber,’” he tells her (156). He pesters
his new wife to come with him to see all the beauty and birds, and she does, eventually (158). But Claude soon finds his marriage loveless and no longer welcomes her presence. “She could not understand his moods of desperate silence, the bitter, biting remarks he sometimes dropped, his evident annoyance if she went over to join him in the timber claim when he lay there idle in the deep grass on a Sunday afternoon” (181). It has become his place of respite from her and from farming. When she takes up the cause for Prohibition, he dodges her invitations to meetings and retreats to the one place on the massive farm where he feels all right.

If it was a weekday, he had something to do at the barn, or meant to clear out the timber claim. He did, indeed, saw off a few dead limbs, and cut down a tree the lightning had blasted. Further than that he wouldn’t have let anybody clear the timber lot; he would have died defending it.

The timber claim was his refuge. In the open, grassy spots, shut in by the bushy walls of yellowing ash trees, he felt unmarried and free; free to smoke as much as he liked, and to read and dream. [. . .] To lie in the hot sun and look up at the stainless blue of the autumn sky, to hear the dry rustle of the leaves as they fell, and the sound of the bold squirrels leaping from branch to branch; to lie thus and let his imagina-
tion play with life—that was the best he could do. His thoughts, he told himself, were his own. He was no longer a boy. He went off into the timber claim to meet a young man more experienced and interesting than himself, who had not tied himself up with compromises.

(182–83)

After Enid leaves for China, Claude closes the house on a snowy winter day. “At last he locked the door, put the key in his pocket, and went over to the timber claim to smoke a cigar and say goodbye to the place.” He sees his little house through every break in the mulberry hedge and finds that he believes he’ll never live in this place again. He is “vexed” at his “uncertain, purposeless trail all over the white ground” and cannot determine why he can’t “stop feeling things, and hoping.” Finally he rescues his lonesome black barn cat from the snowy hedge and departs (193).

Why did Cather pick ash, box-elder, cottonwood, and mulberry to stock the Wheeler claim? She knew every possible arboreal species and could put there what she wanted. It’s not all in black walnut, for example, as is Alexandra Bergson’s valuable grove of O Pioneers!, nor all catalpa, as in the grove that young Jim Burden goes to visit in My Ántonia, nor all cottonwood as in the Forrester grove of A Lost Lady. For that matter, why does Cather use a timber claim to associate with Claude and not stick with the orchard, the living outdoor structure which she uses so im-

portantly with Marie Shabata, Ántonia Cuzak, and Lucy Gayheart and even starts out with when Claude is just five years old? Possibly because Claude dreams large and far away, and round-topped, pruned apple, apricot, and cherry trees cannot stretch toward the sky like cottonwood, ash, and maple. Orchards provide for living so directly, through food, but the unharvested Wheeler claim provides for only the eye and soul-dreamer's food. Regarding the types of trees, all four species that Cather chose were practical to plant together in a prairie timber claim. The mulberries form the protective hedge, just as they do for Marie Shabata's and Ántonia and Anton Cuzak's orchards. They are tough, dense little mitten-leaved trees not highly valued and therefore sacrificed to the wind and heat, but in this case they also serve to feed the quail and other birds that Claude enjoys. The utilitarian box-elders, or ash-leafed maple, were not at all Cather's favorite tree, as they were so ordinary, seeming to mimic an ash with its leaf shape but not achieving its good overall characteristics. If she mixed nondescript box-elders with the rugged and energetic cottonwoods that she adored, was it to illuminate the two halves of Claude—his can't-do-anything-right, ordinary farm boy aspect juxtaposed with his passion for learning and finding more in life? She finds an opportunity to bring sparkling cottonwoods to almost every place or character that is fine or striving forward to goals and dreams. The ashes, while not a spectacular tree either, were valued for their strong and heavy wood, useful in so
many ways on a farm. Ash has a long recorded human history in Eu-
rope, stretching from deep in pagan times forward. Yggdrasil, the
great ash that held up the sky, whose leaves were clouds and
fruit were stars, was the origin of all life (Martin 19). Just as
Claude thinking about “beechwoods and walled towns” (41) every
time he leaves Mrs. Erlich presages his time in the Fon-
tainebleau-like woods and hidden gardens, the ashes—and the cot-
tonwoods—may also be subtle, early signals of his eventual time
in France.

Subtlety is Cather’s hallmark. On only two or three occa-
sions in One of Ours does she mention eastern red cedars, the
mixed-grass prairie’s native conifer. During the Valentine’s Day
blizzard, after Claude has been pulled out of college and put in
charge of the farm, the “soft, thick, wet snow that came down in
billows” is burying everything outside the windows, including
“the tops of the cedars in the front yard” (81, 84). Later,
Claude visits Enid while she is planting sweet peas. As he ar-
rives he notices that Enid is working “out from under the heavy
shade of the trees” in the yard (108). He listens to her explana-
tion of why she wants to go to China and “glance[s] up at the
sombre mill house, hidden in cedars” (110). Around the two houses
that ought to more than anyplace else mean love and home for
Claude—his own home and that of his future wife’s—Cather places
the same species as the graveyard trees of “The Elopement of Al-
len Poole,” the dark evergreens that hide the fights, beating,
and deaths in the Wick Cutter house in *My Ántonia*, and the “dark, still cedars” in the “deep ravine that winds back into the hills,” where Marian Forrester and Frank Ellinger carry out their affair in *A Lost Lady* (65–66). Claude’s future in Frankfort is clearly as dark as the foliage of the cedars.

Such subtlety is also in a scene that takes place after the wheat harvest before the United States has joined the fighting in Europe. Following his father’s directions, because prices are up, Claude is driving two loads of grain a day to Vicount to sell. He hasn’t seen his friend Ernest for more than a week, so they plan to meet one evening on the road home. England that day has declared war.

Late in the afternoon of the sixth of August, Claude and his empty wagon were bumping along the level road over the flat country between Vicount and the Lovely Creek valley. [. . .] On every side the wheat stubble stretched for miles and miles. [. . .] Claude peered anxiously along the distant locust hedges which told where the road ran. [. . .] At last he recognized the Havels’ team a long way off, and he stopped and waited for Ernest beside a thorny hedge, looking thoughtfully about him. The sun was already low. It hung above the stubble, all milky and rosy with the heat, like the image of a sun reflected in grey water. In the east the full moon had just risen, and its thin silver surface
was flushed with pink until it looked exactly like the setting sun. Except for the place each occupied in the heavens, Claude could not have told which was which. They rested upon opposite rims of the world, two bright shields, and regarded each other,—as if they, too, had met by appointment (140-41).

There is tension in the boys’ friendship caused by their differing European-immigrant and American viewpoints of the war, and it is felt while the sun and moon are in opposition above the earth. The looming war feels so big and troubling as to involve the entire sky. However, it is the mention of “distant locust hedges” and the “thorny hedge,” that chill this hot July scene. No festive cottonwoods line this road nor even the stout and bristly osage orange. Also, Cather could have called the trees by their full common name, honey locust, but she leaves out even the remotest gentling reference. These locusts native to Nebraska are bristling with thorns, stout at the base, strong, and sharp-pointed as a needle. They grow in menacing bunches the entire length of the trunk and individually from smaller branches and twigs; some are an inch or two long and others exceed the length of a hand. In addition to their sharp profusion, the thorns of the most recent year’s growth are blood red and shiny as polished metal. All the coils of barbed wire along the miles of trenches in France are suggested by these hedges between the wheat fields and the road on the evening of August 6.
Cottonwoods are always associated with something or someone out of the ordinary or exciting in Cather’s books. For example, the old Trevor place, so much like the Garber residence in Red Cloud (and the fictional Forrester home in *A Lost Lady*), is a big comfortable house with a billiard room, where “a great deal of money” was spent “very joyously” before its abandonment (95). Cather wrote that “it sat on the top of a round knoll, a fine cottonwood grove behind it” (96). Viewed from the sleigh, when he takes Enid, Gladys, and, reluctantly, his brother, Bayliss, for a ride, Claude thinks the grove of “tall, straight trees” looks like a “big fur cap put down on the snow” (96). Bayliss announces that he has just bought the place and plans to tear down “that old trap,” whose cellar was full of whiskey bottles, but Cather drops his affairs for Claude’s story alone, and no one has to see the result of his careless and selfish decision come to pass.

Another example of a special cottonwood association is that of Claude and Mr. Royce when they meet on the subject of Claude’s marrying his youngest daughter, Enid. They together drive out south of the river to inspect his alfalfa field, and after Mr. Royce parks his car under an elm, they walk to the upper corner of the field and sit beneath a “slender young cottonwood, with leaves as light and agitated as the swarms of little butterflies that hovered above the clover. Mr. Royce made for this tree,” Cather wrote, “took off his black coat, rolled it up and sat down on it in the flickering shade” (129). He is a fine but troubled
man—the black coat is appropriate—who recognizes similar fine characteristics in Claude and remarks that they will be friends. He recalls thinking that Claude was probably the only person in the county who was sorry when he replaced the water wheel of his mill with an engine. Mr. Royce is a man Gladys later thinks of as “strong and heavy” but “dead,” “a big machine with the springs broken inside” for his unfortunate marriage to Mrs. Royce, and that Claude is heading down the same tragic road with Enid (135). Mr. Royce gives young and eager Claude, so like the agitated sapling, no blessing but a warning, which he ultimately is unable to heed. For all his errors though, Claude is still cottonwood worthy on the inside.

A scene at the Frankfort courthouse takes place in early summer when Claude is off at training. August Yoeder and Troilus Oberlies, two immigrant German farmers, are put on trial for disloyalty. Cather writes that the courthouse is “surrounded by a grove of cotton-woods” standing on a fresh-cut lawn among blooming flower beds (204). Mildred R. Bennett gives evidence that the Red Cloud courthouse square was indeed planted with great cotton-woods. Although the event she relates took place a decade after One of Ours was published, the story shows that Cather could picture this setting. It also tells how much she loved the trees. In 1931, she was making what turned out to be her last visit to Red Cloud. She heard chopping one morning, and in a horrified state, she rushed to her friend Carrie Miner Sherwood’s house. Together
the two went over to the courthouse, where the cutting was going on, and persuaded the workmen to leave the cottonwoods alone. Bennett writes that Cather reported she didn’t sleep for two weeks because she continuously heard chopping (143–44). In the second edition of her book, Bennett added a note explaining that a Red Cloud attorney and his wife convinced the workmen to wait with their felling until Cather had gone back to New York. Evidently the old trees truly had become dangerous to people with business at the courthouse (246). In One of Ours, the trial turns out to be comical but serious. It is the judge’s wise words and mercy that fit Cather’s selection of cottonwoods: that “a man can speak his mind, but even here [. . .] must take the consequences” and that “the element of appropriateness [. . .] must be regarded in nearly all the transactions of life” (207). He tells the two farmers that he thinks they made “extravagant statements” but is confident that neither of the men meant them. He orders them to desist and pay a three-hundred-dollar fine, and everyone leaves in peace and good humor. Cather could have left out the trees in this scene, and she did sometimes switch trees from what she knew in Webster County to something else in her fiction when it suited her, so cottonwoods didn’t have to surround the Frankfort courthouse—imagine the trial surrounded by dark cedars or even river maples or box-elders—but she elected to keep and use them for this outcome.
The treatment of cottonwoods drives a wedge between Claude and his community but conversely forms a bond between him and the French. When Ralph comes home for Christmas from the new Colorado ranch wearing a big diamond ring, Claude finds it too absurd and sinks into a twenty-one-year-old’s depression and disgusted lament.

Claude felt sure that when he was a little boy and all the neighbours were poor, they and their houses and farms had more individuality. The farmers took time to plant fine cottonwood groves on their places, and to set osage orange hedges along the borders of their fields. Now these trees were all being cut down and grubbed up. Just why, nobody knew; they impoverished the land . . . they made the snow drift . . . nobody had them any more. With prosperity came a kind of callousness; everybody wanted to destroy the old things they used to take pride in. The orchards, which had been nursed and tended so carefully twenty years ago, were now left to die of neglect. It was less trouble to run into town in an automobile and buy fruit than it was to raise it. (88-89)

Once in France, having survived the trans-Atlantic trip, Claude and his men are amazed by the cottonwoods they see as their train carries them nearer the front.
Pear trees, trained like vines against the wall, did not astonish them half so much as the sight of the familiar cottonwood, growing everywhere. Claude thought he had never before realized how beautiful this tree could be. In verdant little valleys, along the clear rivers, the cottonwoods waved and rustled; and on the little islands, of which there were so many in these rivers, they stood in pointed masses, seemed to grip deep into the soil and to rest easy, as if they had been there for ever and would be there for ever more. At home, all about Frankfort, the farmers were cutting down their cottonwoods because they were “common,” planting maples and ash trees to struggle along in their stead. Never mind; the cottonwoods were good enough for France, and they were good enough for him! He felt they were a real bond between him and this people. (289)

Cather loved France, and she herself was delighted to find cottonwoods there when she made her first trip in 1902. She noticed them in Paris, growing alongside “sycamores” (Cather Willa 113). She may have learned but perhaps did not know that the cottonwoods, the poplars, in France were chiefly human planted, just as they were by the thousands in the Webster County of her youth. J. L. Reed in Forests of France explains their history:
The plantations of poplar which fill the valleys of the great rivers and their tributaries in the north of France are one of the most striking features of its landscapes. So familiar have they become and so happily integrated with the scenery that few people realize that they are a comparatively new innovation introduced within the last hundred years. (267)

For Cather traveling in France in 1902, those plantations and field-edge rows would have been only about fifty years old, not much older than the plantings on the prairie that she could see and wrote about in One of Ours twenty years later. Reed goes on to explain that trees of the poplar family were perfect for income-producing timber plots on France’s small farms. What is even more interesting is that most of the French poplars are actually Euroamerican hybrids. Reed writes that the “social history” of the poplar “is like one of those exhausting novels which describe the adventures and alliances of several generations of an international family established in different capitals” (268). American cottonwood stock began traveling back to Europe at the end of the seventeenth century with explorers and colonists, and two varieties—Carolina and Virginiana—were crossed with European black poplar to generate new varieties—Serotina, Robusta, and Regenerata—planted with favorable results all over France. Variety Regenerata, first planted in the mid-1800s, grows throughout Paris and in “walls” down the Seine and Yonne Rivers. Pure Virginiana stock
was also planted along the quays in Paris and in the Loire valley. Reed sounds a bit like enthusiastic James T. Allan in his nineteenth-century planting handbook when he writes that “in suitable conditions a [cottonwood] tree thirty-five years old will attain a height of over ninety feet and a girth of six” (270). Cather might have liked his description of the American cottonwood along the Seine in Paris: “its moving branches form[. . .], as it were, a link between the swift-flowing water and the still, grey beauty of the streets and river walls” (271).

Cather doesn’t say what species of trees Claude sees through the porthole the first moment he views the “great grey shoulder of land standing up in the pink light of dawn” after they had made the crossing. Only “pale trees” are part of the scene (271). Claude has had an increasing, irrepressible sense of freedom and of leaving behind his past despite the many difficult days on the ship. Not even illness and death among men he has come to know can diminish his relief, anticipation, and joy, although he thinks of his comrades, buried at sea: “for them this kind of release,—trees and still shore and quiet water,—was never, never to be” (272).

When they first touch land, he and his men wander through a town. Claude stops to rest and regroup under a plane tree, grateful for its comfort and protection, and soon learns from his dejected men, who come upon him, each one armed with a baguette, that they need him to be a plane tree for them. He comprehends
his role and shoulders it gratefully, for the moment simply helping them find a fromagerie.

The plane trees of Europe are common but elegant. There are many varieties, but the London plane is the most common species. It may also be a Euroamerican hybrid, perhaps a cross between stock from Greece and Turkey and the sycamore (or buttonwood) of North America (Johnson 134). Planes grow fast and tolerate dust and smoke better than many other trees, hence their frequency in cities and alongside roads. Besides their fruit, which are perfectly round brown balls suspended from short stems like ornaments, their bark is their most distinctive feature. It peels off in plates, leaving the smooth, muscular limbs with green and buff dapples, uncannily, in One of Ours, predating the look of modern military uniforms. Claude enjoys plane trees again in the town’s entertainment district, observing soldiers and sailors from all over the world drinking their “sirops and cognac and coffee” where “the wide-spreading branches of the plane trees met overhead” (283).

Claude’s most pleasant, life-affirming experiences in France happen after he meets Lt. David Gerhardt, with whom he will serve his entire time in Europe. Gerhardt invites him to billet where he is staying, with the Jouberts, who own a small home with a beautiful walled garden—a sandy courtyard—containing a locust and cherry tree. Meals are taken outdoors in the cherry’s shade by ivory, pink-tipped roses. Everything is old, elegant, and wonder-
ful to him and he wakes the first morning “with such a sense of physical well-being as he had not had for a long time” (297). The second evening, after a rain has cleared, they dine outdoors under the tree, with “bright drops” shaking down onto the table cloth when the breeze blows. They enjoy the cat and watching the pigeons find earthworms. As the evening grows longer, “the shadow of the house fell over the dinner-table, but the tree-tops stood up in full sunlight, and the yellow sun poured on the earth wall and the cream-coloured roses” (302). The scene is reminiscent of the feel of Marie Shabata’s and Ántonia Cuzak’s orchards, where daily living goes on and hospitality is extended under the trees. Claude’s difficulty with home is apparent if the Jouberts are pictured cutting down their cherry tree to pick the fruit; obviously they would not have, any more than they would have cut off their own arms and legs.

Cather was calling upon her 1902 trip to Europe for the Jouberts’ home in its village at the edge of a big wood. She traveled to Barbizon and the forest of Fontainebleau, just south-east of Paris, in September that year. George N. Kates comments, based on her article sent back to Nebraska, that “we see this France, this life, becoming a part of her own. It will later give to Claude the meaning even of his existence” (Cather Willa 118). She stayed at a hotel in Barbizon with a “stone-paved court, which led into a garden,” which was “almost entirely roofed by an enormous horse chestnut tree.” Under this “mighty tree” were
“several dozen small tables” where she and Isabelle McClung, her traveling companion, and the other hotel guests took their meals (121). She describes one supper, on which a tiny bit of rain fell, throwing everyone into a hysteria until it quit, as “particularly gay, and for no particular reason.” She goes on to reason why, however: “Because the moon was soon to rise, forsooth, or because there were such fine green chestnut trees in the world, and such good salads in that happy part of the world called France” (125).

Before Claude had even reached the Jouberts’ gate that first day, he had noticed the start of a big woods at the edge of the village, “a wood so large one could not see the end of it; it met the horizon with a ridge of pines” (295). Their work constructing new barracks and “extending the sanitation system” is rained out the next afternoon, and “determined to get into the big wood that had tempted him ever since his arrival,” Claude takes the opportunity to go exploring in this refuge much bigger and older than his father’s timber claim (300). He walks over, choosing increasingly faint roads and wagon trails until the soggy ferns have him wet to his middle and his feet are sinking in “spongy, mossy earth.” Here he finds

the light about him, the very air, was green. The trunks of the trees were overgrown with a soft green moss, like mould. He was wondering whether this forest was not always a damp, gloomy place, when suddenly the
sun broke through and shattered the whole wood with gold. He had never seen anything like the quivering emerald of the moss, the silky green of the dripping beech-tops. [. . .].

The winding path turned again, and came out abruptly on a hillside, above an open glade piled with grey boulders. On the opposite rise of ground stood a grove of pines, with bare, red stems. The light, around and under them, was red like a rosy sunset. Nearly all the stems divided about half-way up into two great arms, which came together again at the top, like the pictures of old Grecian lyres.

Down in the grassy glade, among the piles of flint boulders, little white birches shook out their shining leaves in the lightly moving air. (300–301)

Among beech, Scots pine, and little birches Claude finds David, sitting on one of the boulders, looking dejected. They talk for half an hour of music, talent, and the war—a thing “too big for exceptions”—and return to the Jouberts with a new level of friendship.

Of her own field trip in the woods, Cather wrote that the next day we spent in the forest, walking all morning through the western section of it. Sometimes we kept to the white roads under the arching elms, and sometimes we went for miles over the blossoming
heather, and again over glades of slippery pine needles or clambered over masses of tumbled rocks. (126)

She recalls that Robert Louis Stevenson met his future wife in Fontainebleau and comments on how often they encountered sweethearts and families out walking, talking, and singing.

Claude and David are able to visit the big woods once again, this time in the fall, when they are on leave after being shelled in the waterway of the little town they were ordered to clear out. Claude’s ankle is sprained, and he is recuperating by limping to the wood every day, leaning on a “holly-wood” cane.

The forest rose about this open glade like an amphitheatre, in golden terraces of horsechestnut and beech. The big nuts dropped velvety and brown, as if they had been soaked in oil, and disappeared in the dry leaves below. Little black yew trees, that had not been visible in the green of summer, stood out among the curly yellow brakes. Through the grey netting of the beech twigs, stiff holly bushes glittered.

He has begun to wonder whether he takes too much for granted about France, feeling “more at home here than he had any right to feel” (344). He thinks about staying in France after the war on a small farm of his own. “There was no chance for the kind of life he wanted at home, where people were always buying and selling, building and pulling down. He had begun to believe that the Americans were a people of shallow emotions” (345). Against a back-
drop of beautiful old woods, within a landscape veined with poplar, cottonwoods, and willows turning gold and silver along the rivers, streams, and horizons, and among generous, beautiful people who bring such lovely exteriors into their interior spaces, Claude finds a beautiful life. He continues to discover the long traditions that he first finds in France: "Life was so short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together" (345).

Although Cather keeps the big wood unnamed in One of Ours, it is clearly modeled on Fontainebleau, a forest with an interesting history. First, the tradition of forestry in France is about one thousand years old. That alone is a deep difference from Claude’s prairie, farm, and timber claim experience, about which everything feels so recent. Even for Cather, whose sense of forest history may have gone back several generations as a result of her great grandfather’s interest in forest conservation, the timeline doesn’t compare. French forestry encompasses religions, as the pagans valued the spirited oak forests, France’s chief vegetative cover for most of its land’s millennia. In fact the early monastic orders served chiefly as logging enterprises, trying to make their Christian conversions by removing the haunts of their many deities. Retreat and expansion of the forests varied with empires, religions, and population growth. Cutting was so
rapid during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that Louis XIV’s chief minister, Colbert, sounded an alarm: “France will perish [. . .] for lack of timber” (Reed 23, 27, 41-42).

Fontainebleau has been protected by a château and the hunting interests of generations of royalty since the eleventh century. It is, despite Cather’s not mentioning this tree, primarily an oak forest. However, it also has, according to Reed, very large areas of beech, which she mentions several times, and the flaky orange-barked Scots pine—the red-stemmed pines that Cather described as lyre-shaped and glowing so rosily in the sunsets. The terrain of the forest is interesting. Claude wants to explore the woods’ caves on his second visit there. Fontainebleau, because of its interesting geological history, has crags, deep gorges, sandy “desert” areas, and boulder gardens—the rocks on which Claude and David perch or stretch out for naps and from which the little girl gathering horsechestnuts for her pigs watches them.

Cather doesn’t name the pines in her woods, oddly enough, but it could be that she simply wanted to avoid using “Scots” pine. The French name for the red-stemmed tree is pin sylvestre, which must not have pleased her ear either. Whatever its name or nonname, it too is a planted tree. There were no pines at Fontainebleau until about 1850. If Charles E. Bessey, the botany professor at the University of Nebraska during Cather’s student days there, studied international forestry, he would have been
excited about the pines at Fontainebleau in relation to his own Sandhills project because the Scots pines were planted to “recover” dry, sandy, “desolate,” “desert” regions of the wood (Reed 109). The plan and plantings were completely successful.

The beeches had to make the big woods look ancient. They have long toothed leaves, somewhat like a chestnut in shape but not nearly as large and stiff. The bark is pale gray and smooth as elephant skin, even when the tree is very old. In form the tree seems to divide from limb to branch to twig to twiglet more finely than other deciduous trees, which Cather noticed and mentioned, referring to “the grey netting of the beech twigs.” The nut, or three nutlets, actually, are housed inside a small bur that divides into four valves. The most interesting human history in relation to the beech is its probability for having captured the first European writings. Its smooth bark invites graffiti, and Donald Culross Peattie explains that the first Sanskrit characters were carved on beech bark. The word book, he writes, comes from the Anglo-Saxon boc, which means “letter” or “character,” which in turn is derived from beece, the Anglo-Saxon name for beech (181).

The dead trees in France are markers of the war’s progress. When the Americans are eager to get into battle and contribute to the effort, they are happy—“reassured”—to come upon “long lines of gaunt, dead trees, charred and torn,” along with craters, trenches, wrecked vehicles, and tangles of barbed wire (305). On
their first day in the trenches, they can see over the enemy’s position to “broken trees” on the hills behind the line. Claude and Sergeant Hicks wait for nightfall at a cemetery filled with German and French graves; the sun sinks in a red smear behind a margin of dead trees. Much later Claude refers to the war zone as the “region of martyred trees” (343).

One day when he is waiting for an officer to return so he can deliver a message, he visits a Red Cross station to pass the time. There he meets Louis, a one-armed volunteer handy-man, and Mlle Olive de Courcy, who runs the station. Seemingly like every inhabited place in France, it has a garden, although it is much destroyed by the war. As Claude approaches, he notices “a wall of very old boxwoods,” “a row of dead Lombardy poplars,” and “a pear tree, trained on wires like a vine [, . . . ] full of little red pears.” Little trees and shrubs are all over. Claude speculates that the small trees were too close to the ground for the shells to damage and the fire to reach. He suspects that the whole “hill must have been wrapped in flames at one time, and all the tall trees had been burned” (325).

Louis is busy building a pavilion, “as our trees are destroyed,” he explains to Claude, who helps him rig up a frame and canvas cover to cast shade. Mlle de Courcy tells Claude that “it is our trees that are the worst” and asks him, “You have seen our poor trees? It makes one ashamed for this beautiful part of France. Our people are more sorry for them than to lose their
cattle and horses" (329). Louis insists that he must get the dead
trees down and poll the locusts. Claude sees that "in front of
the barrack stood four old locusts; the tops were naked forks,
burned coal black, but the lower branches had put out thick tufts
of yellow-green foliage, so vigorous that the life in the trunks
must still be sound." He is impressed by both Louis and the
trees. "How much it must mean to a man," he thinks, "to love his
country like this, [. . .] to love its trees and flowers; to
nurse it when it was sick, and tend its hurts with one arm"
(330).

Mlle de Courcy wants to know about Claude’s home, so he dia-
grams it for her in the "shade" of the burned locust trees.

Claude took a stick and drew a square in the sand:
there to begin with, was the house and farmyard; there
was the big pasture, with Lovely Creek flowing through
it; there were the wheatfields and cornfields, the tim-
ber claim; more wheat and corn, more pastures. There it
all was, diagrammed on the yellow sand, with shadows
gliding over it from the half-charred locust trees.

(331)

He appreciates Mlle de Courcy’s intense interest, “the glow of an
unusual mind” and her “unusual sympathy” and is surprised that he
can relate so much detail to a stranger about a place he has left
behind (331). He is certain when he finally leaves the Red Cross
station that “he had left something on the hilltop which he would
never find again” (334). His thoughts combined with the ominous bars of light cast across his home by the burned locusts foreshadow a future less bright than becoming an expatriate farmer after the war.

When Claude and David leave the Jouberts in the fall, they travel to the home of family friends of David to spend an evening. This place too, where once one of David’s friends and a fellow violinist lived, has a walled garden. Before they are even out of the taxi, Claude notices “the tops of many trees show[ing] above the garden wall.” Once inside, he finds “the garden was spacious,–like a little park. On one side was a tennis court, on the other a fountain, with a pool and water lilies. The north wall was hidden by ancient yews; on the south two rows of plane trees, cut square, made a long arbour. At the back of the garden were fine old lindens” (350). After Claire and David’s touching, memorial duet, he and Claude smoke in the garden, where “the yew trees made a solid wall, blacker than the darkness” (356). David despairs that the guns have killed everything, but Claude disagrees and can see only that things are scattered. Even so young, he knows something worse than war:

No battlefield or shattered country he had seen was as ugly as this world would be if men like his brother Bayliss controlled it altogether. Until the war broke out, he supposed they did control it; his boyhood had been clouded and enervated by that belief. The Prus-
rians had believed it, too, apparently. But the event had shown that there were a great many people left who cared about something else. (357)

The planes, yews, and “fine old lindens” of the family’s garden continue Cather’s pattern of selecting trees for Claude’s encounters that reinforce the vital importance of enduring traditions and values. The ancient yews of Europe are among the oldest living things on earth. Not likely in a walled garden of relatively recent creation but as a species they approach the redwoods and sequoias for ages measured in centuries and millennia (Mitchell 25, 51). In the early summer, the linden tree blooms from top to bottom, when the palm-sized heart-shaped leaves are full out, making a giant bouquet. The strong, sweet fragrance can be sensed as far as a mile from the blooming tree. Later in summer or fall, the seeds, or “nutlets,” float down on a curious bract, a “large leafy wing” as long and wide as a finger that acts as a parachute for the cluster of fruits (Petrides 137). The whole arrangement is so pretty that Dansk has decorated blue and white china with it, and their release before the leaves fall makes the tree seem to have two autumns. The oldest trees have furrowed bark, but younger trunks have almost smooth, dark gray bark, similar to the beech’s elephant skin. During pagan times, the linden was revered in the north.

After days and nights in the rain, capturing German patrols and outrunning their provisions, David and Claude and their men
are in Beaufort, where they encounter in the houses more Germans put on the defensive by their arrival. They’re allowed a week’s rest in this place that Cather indicates any man surviving the war will remember for the rest of his life.

They will close their eyes and see a little village on a low ridge, lost in the forest, overgrown with oak and chestnut and black walnut . . . buried in autumn colour, the streets drifted deep in autumn leaves, great branches interlacing over the roofs of the houses, wells of cool water that tastes of moss and tree roots. (368)

They bury some of their fellows and townspeople there, and learn the sad story of the Curé’s niece and the Bavarian officer’s affair and double suicide. But the men also eat and sleep and dance and go on “excursions into the forest after mushrooms” with the French girls, which Claude has no intention of stopping unless the townspeople complain to him. Unbombed Beaufort, like the Jouberts’ village, captures the old beauty of France for Claude and launches the story into its final pages.

From Beaufort the men are sent into the Argonne hills for the final offensive on the western front. Their support is pinned down by German planes in the woods and then lost among the trenches. Finding them takes David’s life and galvanizing his men takes Claude’s—in the beautiful Argonne Forest.
James Woodress tells the most amazing story of Cather’s split opinions of her cousin, G. P., and the writing of this novel. She had known Claude Wheeler’s prototype since he was small and had even helped care for him. “Whatever he put his hand to,” Woodress relates, “turned out either ugly or ridiculous” (304). He quotes Cather’s words that G. P. became “‘an inarticulate young man butting his way through the world’” (304). G. P. was evidently resentful of his well-traveled, educated cousin, and she was so despairingly repulsed by him that she had once put in a letter to her college friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher (in Woodress’s words) that “to get away from him and his kind was why she wrote at all” (304). A reversal in their relationship occurred, however, after the war had begun in Europe. The two had some long visits about it, and after G. P. enlisted, Cather was very proud of his being sent off for officer training. Following his valorous death, Woodress records that Cather “was overwhelmed by the thought that anything so exalted could have happened to someone so disinherited of hope. [. . .] That he could lose himself in a cause and die for an idea seemed to her remarkable and exciting” (304). She threw herself into writing about him for several years, in “complete possession” during the long process. Cather explained that “she had to travel with him, cut off every source of income to give him a perfectly undisturbed mind,” which completely “drained her power to feel things” (304). She concluded that the intensity
and total absorption was “worth it, for a fortune could not have
brought such excitement and pleasure” (305).

The reality of Cather’s relationship with G. P. and the cre-
avative process is reflected in the pages of the novel. So is Ca-
ther’s own striving to escape—yet retain all she adores in the
landscape and values in the few others who have the same intel-
lectual and emotional fire—but to indeed escape, finally, to pur-
sue ideas and art beyond any level she could have achieved in Red
Cloud.

But where does a person go, and why? Where could G. P. find
what it was he could not know but only vaguely glimpse—something
different from what was so unsatisfactory at hand? Claude Wheeler
knew “the world was full of stimulating things, and that one was
fortunate to be alive and to be able to find out about them”
(34). He had begun to discover that some people “knew how to
live,” although for a long time he couldn’t quite make out what
the “how” was (39). The war sent him to France, willy-nilly,
where over and over again he found the warmth, graciousness,
beauty, and traditions that made living and fighting worthwhile.

Cather reached France in her twenty-ninth year. Woodress in-
dicates that she had been a Francophile since early childhood,
under the influence of a young friend’s mother’s stories, her
love for the French settlement near Red Cloud, her neighbor’s
memories of France, and French literature, and she wanted to get
there (160). Her imagination was filled with the place and people
before she ever sailed, and she was not disappointed upon arrival or many later returns.

In terms that sound stereotypically French, Bennett writes that Willa Cather had a “natural passion for trees” (143). Once again, even in this story about profoundly human subjects—war, the life of the mind, human friendships and marriages, enterprise—Cather significantly uses land and its chief visual definers, the largest vegetation that grows upon it—trees—to carry so much. Characters are knit tightly to their geographies through the plants she associates with them. Places are given an atmosphere that only a paragraph of words could otherwise supply and then ruin with wordiness.

Claude Wheeler abandons his father, who could chop down a cherry tree for a little practical joke. He stakes out his thirty-acre timber claim for his own home until that place turns bitter by association with the barren little house. Admirable people, Ernest Havel, Mr. Royce, and Gladys Farmer, are associated with favored trees: the magical bittersweet-wreathed dogwood, an elm and ash, and a beautiful catalpa, respectively. In France, the pine and beech wood, the walled gardens filled with trees (no matter how damaged), the woods of Beaufort, and the rows of poplars all over the countryside match precisely with every advance in understanding of true living that Claude Wheeler achieves. Accurate with history but truer still to her story, she leaves him in the steep hills and deciduous forest of the Argonne.
A Lost Lady is a book of cottonwoods. They form the setting of the main characters’ home, the “fine cottonwood grove that threw sheltering arms to left and right and grew all down the hillside” behind the house of Captain Daniel and Marian Forrester (8). Beyond setting though, these cottonwood trees and the Lombardy poplars, their very close relative, which border the private lane coming up to the house, virtually are the main characters. Some willows and eastern red cedars (and one unspecified Sierra Nevada pine that breaks Marian’s fall from a cliff) are the only other tree species that appear in this book and aid the tale, which, so typically of Willa Cather, is based on real people and a real place.

Willa Cather’s purpose in writing this book, she told Flora Merrill, a freelancer for the New York World, in 1925, was to capture “a woman I loved very much in my childhood [. . .] as she really was, and not to care about anything else in the story except that one character.” This Cather does. Every other person in the book, even the Captain and Niel Herbert, important as they are, exists only to help tell Mrs. Forrester’s story. Cather further explained to Merrill that a straight character study was not her intent because “I wasn’t interested in her character when I was little, but in her lovely hair and her laugh which made me happy clear down to my toes” (Bohlke 77).
The real person who Cather modeled Mrs. Forrester on was Lyra Garber, the wife of Silas Garber, a judge, state representative, banker, cattle-shipper, and Nebraska’s governor from 1874 to 1878. She was brought up in California, married Silas when she was twenty, and moved to Red Cloud, where together they built a house in a cottonwood grove Silas had planted some years back (Cather *A Lost Lady* 194–95). Their place was a social center of Red Cloud. Janis P. Stout notes that Cather wrote letters mentioning picnics and a dance in the Garber grove and simply being at the Garbers in 1889 and 1891 (1). Susan J. Rosowski and Kari Ronning found many newspaper mentions of picnics in the Garber grove in addition to the letters. They also note a letter in which Cather told a friend that for her to write well, “she needed to feel like a thirteen-year-old ready for a picnic in Garber’s grove” (Cather *A Lost Lady* 200). Such an expression tells how much Cather loved and anticipated not just the event and the social fun but the special place as well.

Mrs. Forrester, the character, is the epitome of femininity and the perfect executive’s helpmate to her wealthy railroad contractor husband. She is beautiful, tiny, and fragile in appearance, with “blue-black” hair and skin of “crystalline whiteness of white lilacs.” She smells sweet to twelve-year-old Niel when he is lying on her bed with a broken arm. He notices the “glittering rings” on her soft fingers and long, sparkling earrings against her “triangular cheeks.” Her eyes are “dark and full of
light,” [. . .] “lively, laughing, intimate, nearly always a little mocking” (33); she often has a “gay challenge in her eyes” (10). Her laugh is exceptional. Cather describes it several times as well as sound can be described in writing: “a soft, musical laugh which rose and descended like a suave scale” (32); “an inviting, musical laugh, that was like the distant measure of dance music, heard through opening and shutting doors” (39); “her many-coloured laugh” (68). Cather writes that Mrs. Forrester looks beautiful in dishabille and knows it, greeting guests at the front door before she is finished dressing and on other occasions tucking stray locks of hair back in place (10). Regarding her relations with others, there “could be no negative encounter, however slight, with Mrs. Forrester”: she “pierced the thickest hide” instantaneously and was “bewitching” (33). With their many guests, she is gracious and droll and “an excitement” (29); where she is “dull[1]ness was impossible” (67). She is captivating and so like the sparkling, energetic leaves of a cottonwood tree in a summer breeze.

Captain Forrester, in matching manner, is the epitome of masculinity and a builder of civilization—of transportation infrastructure, a financial institution, properties, municipal developments, and his own Sweet Water estate. He is a “burly figure” with “heavy folds” about his neck and a commanding demeanor (41, 45). “[. . .] Always clean-shaven, except for a drooping dun-coloured moustache” (41), he looks somewhat like Grover
Cleveland (46). He is “a man of few words” and concise in his storytelling. He values his wife, likes to see her in the jewelry that he gives her, and is paternal in being twenty-five years her senior. Ever thoughtful and considerate, he politely asks his guests for their preferences for meat and about smoking. He has “a conscience that had never been juggled with”—and clearly so as he, solo, bails out his failed bank and nearly ruins himself and Marian. For dealing with people, he has “repose [. . .] like that of a mountain” (46). He loves his Sweet Water home and grove, preserves a marshy bottomland just below the grove “because it was beautiful to him,” and raises flowers: narcissus and hyacinths in winter in a glass conservatory off the back parlour and roses, lilacs, and snowball bushes in the summer outside the windows. If Marian Forrester is the twinkling leaves of the cottonwood, Captain Forrester, aptly named, is surely the solid trunk: upright, strong, and rugged, yet with the grace of its elegant branching habit.

Cottonwoods—Eastern and Plains, in Nebraska—truly are magnificent plants. The Eastern cottonwood at maturity is an enormous tree (one hundred to two hundred feet tall with a possible diameter of six feet) and the Plains species only slightly less so (Burns 530–41). Their size is all the more remarkable because they are surviving the extreme conditions of the midcontinent: deluges, droughts, freezing winters, and blistering hot summers. Their root systems adapt to meet the conditions they find. On a
river bank or near a marsh, a tree sixty feet tall may have a root system only two and half feet deep, but it will extend in a dense circle twenty feet out from the trunk in all directions. In a yard or timber claim, under which the water table may be distant, taproots will form and reach straight down through the soil a dozen or more feet with smaller branches spreading near the surface (Sprackling 39, 41).

The leaves are as amazing as the roots. Shaped and suspended like decorative hearts, they feel somewhat like very thin vinyl, flexible but very tough. Their cuticle, which keeps them from losing too much moisture during the growing season, is as shiny as a car with new wax, which is exactly what the cuticle is made of—waxes. In a slight breeze and from a distance, they make the trees shimmer like satin, noticeably so when they’re played off against other species, whose foliage looks like muslin or broad-cloth by comparison. In a stiff breeze on a sunny day, cottonwood leaves glitter like sequins or camera flashes firing across a darkened, packed auditorium. The waxy cuticle along with the size and shape of the leaf’s petiole, or leafstem, make these trees noisy even in a little breeze, another of their characteristics. Cather wrote that cottonwoods always sound of rain, and indeed they do. They are trees that stimulate the imagination.

It is the leafstem, which is flattened, extremely flexible, and just as long as the midrib of the whole leaf that gives the leaves their capability for excessive action. The trees shimmer
and glitter in the sun but also look like an audience convulsed in wild applause. If a big fallen cottonwood leaf held by the tip of its stem had a dot of color affixed at the uppermost part of its heart shape, the dot would carve rapid figure eights and tight tiny circles in the air as the leaf oscillates. The trees embody excitability.

All this energetic motion is suspended from mighty branches covered with light gray bark. On young trees, it is relatively smooth; on mature trees it is deeply and impressively ridged and furrowed. “The trunk of a cottonwood tree is hard to climb; the bark is rough, and the branches begin a long way up” Cather writes, as Niel climbs to find the maimed woodpecker (23). Most cottonwoods are shaped something like a vase of long-stemmed flowers, or like the single thunderheads that pile up so high on hot summer afternoons on the plains.

All spring and summer, the smooth leaves remain a light and brilliant green, and in the fall, they turn classic aspen gold. Willa Cather, as a child and teenager, would have seen the sight of these enormous, rugged yellow lights against the rich coppery red of little bluestem and the amazing blue of Nebraska’s October sky. It’s no wonder she was a little fond of them. Elsie Goth at the Nebraska Alumnus reported in April 1936 that Cather told her “a little cottonwood tree, just tall enough to brush against her window when the wind blew hard, kept her company as she read. She
loved the incessant companionable whisper of its leaves and yet today is partial to cottonwood trees” (Bohlke 129).

Although a number of scenes in *A Lost Lady* take place in or near the cottonwood grove in summertime, Cather doesn’t once mention the cotton they produce in the summer. Possibly the fictional Forrester grove (and the true Garber grove) was planted with only male trees, but more likely Cather just omitted inclusion of a summer “snowstorm” from this novel. A description of the massive cottonwood isn’t complete, however, without mentioning that its pale seeds are so small as to make a sesame seed look big and plump. They are dependent on the wind for dispersal, suspended in a tiny tuft of “cotton” that drifts on the breeze to a new location—preferably moist sand, where it can immediately sprout.

People dependent on modern technology find cottonwood fluff inconvenient. Even more than a century ago, it was driving people crazy. Olive Thorne Miller, an amateur ornithologist, wrote a wonderful complaint and description of this summer phenomenon from her Colorado birding haunts:

> A cotton storm, looking exactly like a snowstorm, is a common sight in these groves. The white, fluffy material grows in long bunches, loosely attached to the stems, and the fibre is very short. At the lightest breeze that stirs the branches, tiny bits of it take to flight, and one tree will shed cotton for weeks. It clings to one’s garments; it gets into the houses, and
sticks to the carpets, often showing a trail of white footprints where a person has come in; it clogs the wire-gauze screens till they keep out the air as well as the flies; it fills the noses and the eyes of men and beasts. But its most curious effect is on the plants and flowers, to which it adheres, being a little gummy. Some flowers look as if they were encased in ice, and others seem wrapped in the gauziest of veils, which, flimsy as it looks, cannot be completely cleared from the leaves.

It covers the ground like snow, and strangely enough it looks in June, but it does not, like snow, melt, even under the warm summer sunshine. It must be swept from garden and walks, and carted away. A heavy rain clears the air and subdues it for a time, but the sun soon dries the bunches still on the trees, and the cotton storm is again in full blast. This annoyance lasts through June and part of July, fully six weeks, and then the stems themselves drop to the ground, still holding enough cotton to keep up the storm for days. After this, the first rainfall end the trouble for that season. (17-18)

Willa Cather told people during a number of talks she gave in southeast Nebraska in 1921, the snow is a small price to pay for something so beautiful. She told them how much the French people
love their cottonwoods and how the children play with the “summer snow” and make pillows with it. In those talks she pleaded with people not to cut down the old pioneer cottonwood trees (Bohlke 146).

The Captain’s grove is loved by many people. The book begins with eight boys from town stopping at the house to find out if they can fish and wade in the marsh and then picnic in the grove. The trees they run between are tall and provide “grateful shade” when the breeze stops midday, and they spread out their lunches in the grass. Guests enjoy dances at the Forrester home on “moonlight” nights in the grove. A number of times the Captain is observed simply looking at his place, out from the windows of the house or from the chair in his rose garden. He clearly loves the place. The afternoon of his funeral, Mrs. Forrester, Niel, and Judge Pommeroy have tea as the cloudy December day ends early. They notice that “the creaking of the big cottonwoods about the house seemed to say that winter had come” (139). The trees seem to be the captain himself, not quite gone from the earth, as when he earlier had struggled into the house with two canes, and Niel thought “he looked like an old tree walking” (109).

The Captain started the grove, and his dinner story of how it came about parallels what Cather knew of the real beginning of Red Cloud and the Garber place. Mildred R. Bennett relates the real story of how Silas Garber, a captain in the Union Army, came west to find some grassy country he had heard about. He and his
brothers traveled to the Republican River valley after the war and built a stockade on a hill that commanded a fine view, with a creek and marsh at its foot, not far upstream from the river into which the creek drained. The Garbers put in a garden and built a dugout just outside the stockade, and from there the little settlement grew (70–72).

In Cather’s fiction, she employs the Captain as a freighter, and it’s during a crossing of “the sea of grass six hundred miles in width,” from Nebraska City to Cherry Creek, that he spots the land he’d like to claim (50). The hill was an Indian encampment. Here she uses another tree related to the cottonwood that wasn’t part of the Red Cloud history. The Captain cuts a young willow tree and drives it into the ground to mark where he wants to build his house. For years he dreams of his place and “where I would dig my well, and where I would plant my grove and my orchard” (53). When he has an opportunity to return, he finds, because of the growing habits of the Salicaceae family—they all start readily from cuttings—the willow stake has taken root and grown into a tree, its life seeming to bless a good man’s dream. He plants three more for the corner stakes of his house and dreams to come back for good.

Mrs. Forrester won’t let the Captain change the subject until he has finished his story with his “philosophy of life” (52). He speaks of “a thing that is dreamed of” as “already an accomplished fact” and refers to the homesteaders, prospectors, and
contractors creating the West from their imaginations. When he acknowledges that everything they have striven for will be “accomplished fact” to the next generation, he doesn’t finish his sentence. Cather finishes it by writing that “something forbidding had come into his voice, the lonely, defiant note that is so often heard in the voices of old Indians” (53).

This mention of Indians, along with the Indian encampment site of his claim, and later, Mrs. Forrester’s knowledge that her investment with Ivy Peters is cheating Indians presents a puzzle. A novelist can do whatever she wants to in her work, of course, but Willa Cather does seem remiss in ignoring the Pawnee while setting her numerous prairie works just north of the wooded Republican River. Cather’s purpose in *A Lost Lady* was to feature one woman alone, but in *O Pioneers!*, for example, Alexandra Bergson’s face was nowhere near the first “since the land emerged from the waters of geologic ages” to be “set toward it with love and yearning” (64). The statement is heartbreaking. But the exclusion of Native Americans from so many works seems more than remiss; it seems so odd that Cather’s imagination would not have been captured by these land-loving people’s culture and stories. After all, they too knew their trees and were corn farmers who lived for part of the year in “sod houses,” in somewhat the same manner as but at a far higher skill level than the westering Europeans and Americans (for example, their sod-constructed homes appear to have had something like cathedral ceilings). It could
be that Cather never heard very much about the Pawnee, whose former beloved homeland she immigrated into, although George Bird Grinnell’s *Pawnee Hero Stories and Folk-Tales* was available in 1889.

The Pawnee story is incredibly sad. According to David Wishart, up until about 1830 the Pawnee were the most powerful native American group in the central Great Plains, clearly in control of the land from the Niobrara River in the north to the Arkansas River in the south, and from the eastern Nebraska tallgrass prairie west to the shortgrass plains in eastern Colorado (an estimated thirty million acres, including just about all of that six-hundred-mile stretch of grassy sea that Captain Forrest never crossed in his freight wagon). The town of Red Cloud would have been a dot in the very center of a map of this country. In fact, one of the Pawnee sacred sites was just east of Red Cloud’s eventual location. But in 1831 the Pawnee population was reduced by half from smallpox. They lost all of their young people. And from then on there were repeated epidemics of smallpox along with cholera outbreaks, Lakota attacks, reductions in their land availability by the U.S. government, and finally pressure from the settlers moving through and then into their last bit of country along the Platte River. One of the most serious losses for the Pawnee—ranking almost as importantly as the slaughter of the bison—was the cutting of nearly all the timber along the rivers
and creeks by the pioneers. Pawnee homes too had been located along waterways for all of the necessities supplied by wood.

From an estimated twenty-five thousand people in 1830, fewer than one thousand gave up their last tiny Nebraska reservation and moved to Indian Territory, so that by 1875, barely two years after Willa Cather was born in Virginia, the Pawnee were completely gone from Nebraska. She moved into country ten years later that bore scarcely a trace of their past presence. What George Bird Grinnell and Melvin R. Gilmore (originally in his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Nebraska in botany) were able to put down in the historical record, Willa Cather would have perhaps loved to know if she hadn’t: that the Pawnee children made toy moccasins and whole tipi villages from curled cottonwood leaves, that the women would blow on the leaves to produce flute-like notes, and that on summer days the people would wear wreaths of willow and cottonwood leaves on their heads to shade their eyes from the sun (Gilmore 20–21, Grinnell 262).

In nature, the tree that made Cather happiest was the cottonwood, and had she not had Lyra and Silas Garber and their house on a knoll just southeast of Red Cloud proper, all tucked into a big cottonwood grove to draw upon, she would have created it. Had her prototypes lived in a timber claim of mixed species, like Nat Wheeler’s in One of Ours, she would have changed it to pure cottonwood. Without fail, she associates cottonwoods with superior, interesting, achieving, striving, alive characters in
her stories. Although much of Cather’s work is based on people, places, and things she truly knew, she makes adjustments to suit her purpose. In *A Lost Lady* she substitutes an “exotic” species of tree from her European memories for what truly grew along the Garber lane, her least favorite box-elder trees (Bennett 74).

To reach the grove and the “house well known from Omaha to Denver for its hospitality and for a certain charm of atmosphere” (7), guests “entered the Captain’s private lane bordered by Lombardy poplars” (9). The Lombardy poplar was brought to the United States from Europe, where it was developed from a European and “Italian” black poplar cross (Reed 277). Like all of the *Populus* species, it grows fast, and so it was available to settlers at nurseries for windbreak plantings. These are the spire-shaped trees, whose small branches sprout from the trunk from ground to tiptop and grow straight up, as if straying too far from the trunk would be dangerous. Cather saw them lining the fields and waterways in France in 1902 and they, along with the dark Mediterranean cypresses of the same tall, narrow shape, give a distinctive appearance to the landscape. They would have made the Forrester driveway a kind of grand hall, a very different place from the open prairie and fields but also one very different from that of the native trees and grove.

Marian Forrester is so much like these trees with their foreign and impressive qualities. Although she is also like a crown of rustling, sparkling cottonwood leaves, so fitting with her
ability to provide gracious hospitality alongside her husband in
the grove, she is even more like the Lombardy poplars. Mrs. For-
rester was born and raised in California and brought to Nebraska,
an “exotic,” and of such a different class and style that she
doesn’t fit in Sweet Water at all. The town scarcely exists for
her; indeed, she can go more than six weeks without setting foot
in a shop or church (107). She loves instead the Captain, her
house, Colorado Springs, California, and a constant stream of im-
portant men coming to her residence. Two more characteristics of
Lombardy poplars are that they are susceptible to decay and
short-lived. Although they bring a distinctive style to a land-
scape, it’s not for long, and this matches Mrs. Forrester’s char-
acter as well. From her own perspective, she is decaying in Sweet
Water with the old, injured, and ailing Captain, and she fights
it with parties, sherry, Frank Ellinger, and, finally, Ivy Pe-
ters. Niel is disgusted with her choices and can’t find a way to
comprehend how someone he so admires for all her vivacious char-
acteristics and apparent loyalty to the Captain could put all
that away and also be so common and coarse. Niel recognizes her
exotic “Lombardy poplar” style but is shocked to see the equiva-
lent of dead branches diminishing what he knows and loves.

Cather never puts the Captain in the poplar-bordered lane.
He is either under his own roof, in his rose garden, or away en-
tirely on business. Mrs. Forrester, on the other hand, is often
in close relation to the Lombardy poplars. The first instance is
during Niel’s driving her home from the law office when the Captain has been delayed. She is cajoling Niel into coming over to be with nineteen-year-old Constance Ogden, first to a supper and then to occupy her the next afternoon while Frank Ellinger and she have their Christmas-bough rendezvous.

Without direction the team started down the frozen main street, where few people were abroad, crossed the creek on the ice, and trotted up the poplar-bordered lane toward the house on the hill. The late afternoon sun burned on the snow-crusted pastures. The poplars looked very tall and straight, pinched up and severe in their winter poverty. (34)

This is the first full winter that the Captain and Mrs. Forrester are staying in Sweet Water—because the economic depression that is bearing down on everyone that year evidently puts their usual merry time in Colorado out of reach. Cather signals again the difficult times ahead when Niel leaves the house that evening: “Niel paused for a moment at the end of the lane to look up at the last skeleton poplar in the long row; just above its pointed tip hung the hollow, silver winter moon” (40). Although this scene is arrestingly pretty, truly the short-lived poplar, looking dead as can be in winter, is pointing at the winter moon of hardship. “Skeleton” and “hollow” reinforce the negative effect.

In March of the following year, a blizzard dumps thirty inches of snow in deep drifts on Sweet Water. After three days
pass, Niel struggles over to the Forresters, finding his way “by keeping between the two lines of poplars” (68). Mrs. Forrester is clearly suffering from acute cabin fever. With nothing to do, no way to get out, and no one to see but the Captain, she has been drinking and sleeping, but Niel’s visit and the newspapers brighten her up. After the Captain dozes off by the fire, just at sunset, she and Niel go out for a walk in the snow. “When they reached the rounded breast of the hill, blown almost bare, Mrs. Forrester stood still and drew in deep breaths, looking down over the drifted meadows and the stiff, blue poplars” (73). Her trees seem to mimic a suffocated corpse. “‘Oh, but it is bleak!’ she murmured. ‘Suppose we should have to stay here all next winter, too, . . . and the next! What shall become of me, Niel?’ There was fear, unmistakable fright in her voice’” (73–74). She needs people and dancing and gaiety to survive, and Sweet Water has too few of all three.

One moonlit July night, Niel can’t sleep and goes out for a walk. He eventually walks up the Forrester lane, where “the black, plume-like shadows of the poplars fell across the lane and over Ivy Peters’ wheat fields” (115). He finds Mrs. Forrester on the bridge, watching the creek flow beneath her feet. His inquiry about the Captain’s health is interrupted by a slamming door and Ivy Peters coming by, telling Mrs. Forrester that he’ll be putting his horses in the barn during the wheat harvest and will be wanting lunch, a double impudence that she handles deftly and pa-
tently. After Peters departs, Niel and Mrs. Forrester speak of how she is imprisoned in Sweet Water by Peters’s lease and their lack of money, how she has given him money to invest in something that she’s sure is cheating Indians, and how she so wants to live again and knows that she can if she were free. Wide black bars across the lane and the former marsh, now in old Poison Ivy’s wheat, effectively paint prison bars over Mrs. Forrester’s existence.

In two other instances, although Mrs. Forrester does not appear in the lane herself, the Lombardy poplars signify something about her. One ecstatically beautiful summer morning, when the Captain is away in Denver solving the bank problem, “an impulse of affection and guardianship drew Niel up the poplar-bordered road in the early light” (80). Niel is thinking of Mrs. Forrester—how he’ll head off Frank Ellinger’s unconsidered visit while the Captain is out of town and how he’ll leave some exquisite wild roses where lovely Mrs. Forrester will find them when she rises. He is shocked to hear Ellinger’s laugh through the shutters of her bedroom and realize that he’s been at the Forrester place all night. Niel’s innocent dawn hike up the lane through the Lombardy poplars was his last: “he had lost one of the most beautiful things in his life” (82).

Niel attends a dinner party at Mrs. Forrester’s invitation, the dinner at which he is struck by how “only the stage-hands were left to listen to her” (159). He decides to pay one more
visit on an evening before he returns to Boston. Cather lets this scene be such a shock to Niel that she tells of it afterward, after he doesn’t even say goodbye to Mrs. Forrester. Niel witnesses Ivy Peters’s intimate embrace of Mrs. Forrester, and he simply turns and leaves. “He never went up the poplar-bordered road again” (162). He felt as “betrayed and cast off” as the Captain’s old friends and his uncle. It’s a small mention of the trees here, but noticeable, considering that the sullying of the Captain’s entire grove or removal of the poor marsh willows could have figured in any of these instances with Peters, but it’s always the Lombardy poplars.

In Cather’s works, eastern red cedars are either for Christmas, as in the little tree that Jake brings home for young Jim Burden’s first prairie Christmas in My Ántonia, or they are the darkest foliaged tree she can call upon to augment malevolence, inferiority, and unpleasantness. They are also the cemetery tree, ever green and pointing heavenward but associated with death. In A Lost Lady Cather mixes Christmas and dark intent and damns the characters in their association all the worse. Tall, handsome Frank Ellinger visits the Forresters along with the Ogden family and provides Marian with relief from her feeling that life has become a prison. Their winter encounter is during a sleigh ride supposed for collecting boughs for Christmas decorations, and she guides him to a deep ravine filled with cedars. Clearly, their intimate relationship is not new, but Mrs. Forrester’s turn of
character during the ride is a surprise. Her gay laughter turns mischievous, calculating, and nasty, and the two are common and almost rude to each other in their conversation. After they return to the sleigh, Frank remembers that their mission was to return with boughs, decorations for the celebration of the Christmas, when pure love came down to earth to all people. “‘What about those damned cedar boughs?’” he asks her (63). She can think of nothing that matters. Frank and Marian’s hiding in a cleft in the earth made dark with cedars on a gray winter day foreshadows future hardship more than the Lombardy poplar pointing at the winter moon.

Bit by bit, evil Ivy Peters takes over the Forrester place. He is the ugliest, meanest young man, Poison Ivy, who appears on the first summer day in the grove, when the eight boys are sprawled on the grass beneath the cottonwoods for their picnic. He taunts and ridicules them, and then catches the woodpecker and slits her eyes. After Niel falls and breaks his arm trying to find the bird, he carries him into the house, more to get inside the place for the first time and have a look around than out of concern for Niel’s condition. Mrs. Forrester orders Peters out to the porch but not many years pass before she and the Captain are beholden to him. He becomes a self-named shyster lawyer, buys up half of dying Sweet Water, and then leases the Forrester pasture for wheat. He drains its beautiful marsh without a backward glance. Once the Captain becomes an invalid, Peters makes himself
nearly at home at their place, coming and going as he wishes, ignoring the Captain, offended by Peters’s lack of manners, and attempting to charm Mrs. Forrester. Niel thinks he is among the men who will “splinter the primeval forest” for the “match factory” (102). When Mr. Ogden inquires about Peters as an attorney, Niel advises him to just go look at him to see if he has a “soft spot” (144). At dinner parties that Mrs. Forrester gives after the Captain’s death, Ivy Peters takes over Frank Ellinger’s role of drink maker. From his uncle, the judge, he hears back in Boston that Mrs. Forrester is still associating with Peters and that she looks unhappy. Finally she sells the place to him and makes her escape to California. The association of the cottonwood grove with excellence is polluted under Ivy Peters’s ownership. What does Cather do when ambulatory evil moves into immobile fineness? She does the same thing she did when Bayliss Wheeler bought the wonderful old Trevor place in Frankfort. She drops it. End of story; not so much as a twig of the grove is mentioned again.

However, in A Lost Lady Cather does return to Marian Forrester, her purpose, and Niel, after years of not being able to think of her “without chagrin,” learns of her relocation and remarriage and forgives. He is glad “that she had a hand in breaking him into life” and obviously chooses to remember not the decay but what was alive and exotic (163).
Most of the trees in *Lucy Gayheart*, Willa Cather’s 1935 novel, provide setting, as would normally be expected of trees in most works of fiction. But such treatment is not normal for Cather and is therefore unexpected. Unlike the bur oaks and the immigrant girls of *My Ántonia*, the Lombardy poplars and Marian Forrester of *A Lost Lady*, and several American and European trees and Claude Wheeler of *One of Ours*, in which pairings of the arboreal and character transfer so much meaning, the majority of trees in *Lucy Gayheart* do not. This was a different book for Cather, a dark romance. That said, the trees it contains are still important because the author names specific species, does lightly associate a few special trees with special characters, and mentions that one of her characters, surprisingly enough, knows trees. Although the main character, Lucy Gayheart, is made distinctive with natural elements other than trees—namely the astronomical and meteorological—Cather does make one planting vital to her, returning again to the use of an orchard. She also ensures Lucy’s death with a tree.

Mentions of trees appear early in the book, but the first are not even specific. In the opening frame, as the “older people” of Haverford recall how Lucy came down the sidewalk in all types of weather, their summer memories include seeing her on “shaded sidewalks” (3). They can picture “a mere white figure un-
der the flickering white shade of the early summer trees” who, reflecting the energetic motion of dappled shade and light, “was delighted with everything” (4). Like Cather, who James Woodress reports was going on four-mile walks at Jaffrey, New Hampshire, while she wrote part of this novel, Lucy Gayheart walks back and forth and around and through the whole town time after time to think and dream and burn off her excess energy (453):

At this hour she used often to be sitting on the church steps, looking up at that far-away moon; everything so still about her, everything so wide awake within her. When she couldn’t sit still any longer, there was nothing to do but to hurry along the sidewalks again; diving into black tents of shadow under the motionless, thick-foliaged maple trees, then out into the white moonshine. (114)

These maple trees, which she passed under night and day, also appeared in My Ántonia, over the boys and girls tramping from one end of town to the other, staving off boredom, and over the pacing hired girls, who wait for Jim Burden to return home after his commencement so they could congratulate him. They are unremarkable at Mrs. Gleason’s house, where Claude Wheeler waits for Enid while she speaks to Brother Weldon about going to China. Cather never expresses dislike for the street maples in her works—better some kind of tree than none at all in the front yard, and Red Cloud yards did have many trees—but she did express disappoint-
ment about them to various audiences and reporters in Nebraska in 1921. She finds these maples lacking in both beauty and longevity compared to cottonwoods and feels contemptuous toward the generation coming after the pioneers, which seems to want to chop down and replace her noble favorites with the short-lived river maples simply out of some sense of fashion (Bohlke 40).

The autumn of Sebastian’s drowning continues the previous summer’s drought in Nebraska with warm days and blue skies. It seems to the townspeople that the fall hangs on forever, something so rare on the plains, since the wind often strips the countryside to its bare winter appearance long before serious cold settles in. In town and out on the river, blue, gold, and silver form the color scheme of the landscape:

It seemed as if the long blue-and-gold autumn in the Platte valley would never end that year. [. . . ] The trees that hung over the cement sidewalks still held swarms of golden leaves; the great cottonwoods along the river gleamed white and silver against a blue sky that was just a little softer than in summer. The air itself had a special graciousness.” (121)

The ease and beauty seem almost a taunt thrown at poor Lucy, a wicked juxtaposition of glorious days with her misery. Truly they are a healing gift though. Her father and sister’s home, much too small and full of her childhood memories and Pauline, would have driven her mad had the fall been cold and rainy; the drought al-
allows her to escape outdoors and grieve in the sunshine at the far corner of the apple orchard.

The home of old, elegant Mrs. Ramsay, who Lucy has so loved and admired all her life and who finally gets her to visit so she can remind her to live, is under “arching elm trees, which were still shaggy with crumpled gold and amethyst leaves” (122). Of course Cather places her under big, beautiful elms (then—preceding their demise from Dutch elm disease), the trees that have so often marked special places, people, and events, both in Cather’s works and in U.S. history.

Naturally her gentle watchmaker father, a man of several “impractical pursuits” and an amateur musician, who led the town band in the summertime, would be associated with cottonwood trees for the joy he brings to people and for being interesting and kind (13). In the novel, Lucy is often noticing a pink glow in the eastern afternoon sky: “she could watch this colour come above the tall, wide-spreading cottonwood trees of the town park, where her father led the band concerts in summer” (159). He keeps the orchard after Lucy dies and on fair Sundays practices his clarinet among the trees.

Similar to many of her other story lines, the plot of Lucy Gayheart carries along a young person with a special talent and drive for achievement, dreaming of a future life of glory but already conflicted by modes of existence in different places. Most often, although hazards, obstacles, and illness sometimes tarnish
or threaten goals, the character achieves success. In this novel, Cather seems to have sat down with pen and paper to explore what happens when a young person with talent and drive has everything turn out just amiss, just shy of the necessary, or all terribly wrong.

Lucy has enough talent at the piano to study and teach in Chicago, but with the famously talented Clement Sebastian, she is the secondary musician and, as Paul Auerbach tells her, will never make it out of the practice studio. She has just enough self-possession and ambition to make her skating partner, longtime friend, and suitor, Harry Gordon, and their hometown not quite good enough for her. She encounters Sebastian, the famous singer, in Chicago, and falls in love with him and his music—but he’s married, older, foreign, and world-weary. He takes advantage of her youth for his own benefit. Lucy’s father is most memorable for his silent inability to help and Pauline for her honest jealousy and couched communications. Lucy herself has become tight-lipped with her family over the years, and she leaves them as well as their friends to wonder and worry about her. In this story, Cather lets weakness, jealousy, blind anger, rash behavior, running away, loss, grief, tragedy, and death come out on top.

Besides having already explored striving and success through characters such as Alexandra Bergson and Ántonia Cuzak and perhaps seeking to turn her artistic skill on a darker aspect of the human condition, Cather’s own life was troubled while she was
writing this novel. The early 1930s was not a good time for her. According to Woodress, she had only recently lost her mother after a prolonged illness in California and had been caring for an ill friend. Woodress wrote that Cather was tired and that the Depression was wearing on her and many of her friends, especially those living in the Red Cloud area. She also hurt her left wrist and exhausted her right hand while writing this novel, which was painful, annoying, and prevented her from writing anything at all for many weeks (450–55). She herself was growing old as well, struggling with the thoughts and memories that come when more life has already been lived than will be lived. Lucy Gayheart, as Woodress sums it up, is “not a cheerful novel” (449).

The tale of Lucy begins with ice skating on the Platte River, probably truly in Cather’s imagination the Republican River, where she spent so much time as a child. In her fiction, she uses the great river road of the pioneers, just a few counties to the north of the place she knew best, to start and finish the story of Lucy. J. E. Weaver wrote that “the Republican and Platte Rivers are preeminently sandy streams with shifting beds so that timber growth is either wholly absent from them over long stretches or consists only of scattering cottonwood and willows” (Native 33–34). At sunset in that first river scene, the sky and trees are glorious:

The sun was dropping low in the south, and all the flat snow-covered country, as far as the eye could see, was
beginning to glow with a rose-coloured light, which presently would deepen to orange and flame. The black tangle of willows on the island made a thicket like a thorn hedge, and the knotty, twisted, slow-growing scrub-oaks with flat tops took on a bronze glimmer in that intense oblique light which seemed to be setting them on fire. (8)

Here forming an inky brush in the sunset, a variety or two of willow species on the riverbanks and big sandbars are a given. That’s precisely where they grow. Cather mentions no chalk bluffs, as she does in My Ántonia, but she must have brought them and the bur oaks (scrub-oaks) that top them along in her imagination from the Republican River. After a long, fast skate with Harry Gordon, Lucy sits with him on an old bleached cottonwood log behind a screen of willows that form a black thicket. “The interlacing twigs threw off red light like incandescent wires, and the snow underneath was rose-colour” (8). They watch the sun go down, sipping whiskey, and then ride back to town in Harry’s sleigh, during which she spots the evening star that overpowers her. This scene is the first of many by which Cather will characterize Lucy Gayheart not so much with trees, incandescent willows aside, but chiefly with weather—an ability to withstand cold, in particular—and somewhat with the sky and stars. Her father, who Pauline is certain has spoiled Lucy, is a star-gazer himself.
Harry is a businessman—a banker—big, handsome, well-dressed, and active but hugely conceited and with a personality already split in half: true only rarely and for a few and put on more often than not for customers, and eventually Lucy. He loves Lucy and early in the story has decided to marry her, choosing her beauty and intensity over money, a “supreme extravagance,” but deciding in the end that he’ll have an enviable trophy. His first big mistake is jumping to conclusions and marrying instead for money and spite, serving himself his first “life sentence.” A curious little secret that Lucy knows about Harry is that he knows his botany: “he knew every tree and shrub and plant they ever came upon. Harry kept that side of himself well hidden” (159). Cather never has him use his knowledge, so it’s almost an odd thing to know about him, a “go figure” that makes him better or worse than he is, depending on the perspective. Years later, still suffering from the memory of his second error—acting as accomplice to her horrible death, he thinks of Lucy early in the morning, and remembers their duck hunts, particularly “the waking of the breeze in the tops of the cottonwoods” and how he would catch Lucy’s energy and delight (188).

Cather hands us a similar “natural” revelation about Clement Sebastian. It also is so briefly mentioned that it is easily missed. He doesn’t aspire to know every leaf and twig, but he longs for what Lucy, and Harry, have and take for granted in their little hometown and countryside environs:
Life had so turned out that now, when he was nearing fifty, he was without a country, without a home, without a family, and very nearly without friends. Surely a man couldn’t congratulate himself upon a career which had led to such results. He had missed the deepest of all companionships, a relation with the earth itself, with a countryside and a people. That relationship, he knew, cannot be gone after and found; it must be long and deliberate, unconscious. It must, indeed, be a way of living. Well, he had missed it, whatever it was, and he had begun to believe it the most satisfying tie men can have. (65–66)

He tells Lucy that when she comes to Europe he will meet her in Vienna, and what will they do? He doesn’t mention visiting museums, concert halls, and palaces or dining out at special places but showing her “gardens—forests—mountains” (107). He keeps his studio “full of flowers and growing plants because he found Lucy liked them” (78). When they escape from the final preparations for his European tour, they drive and walk in a park, with the “smell of trees and new-cut grass” (105) and “under the dripping trees” (114). Both of these big men with important careers, who so overwhelm small Lucy, one focused on business and one on the arts, have a virtually hidden aspect of their personalities receptive to nature. However, Harry’s remains buried and virtually
unused in the story and Sebastian’s is rendered only in the most generic terms.

After Sebastian drowns, Lucy goes home. She is shattered in Chicago and wishes never, ever to go back but Haverford offers almost nothing for her recovery. The only thing that helps is her family’s old, neglected apple orchard:

All afternoon Lucy lay in the sun under a low-branching apple tree, on the dry, fawn-coloured grass. The orchard covered about three acres and sloped uphill. From the far end, where she was lying, Lucy looked down through the rows of knotty, twisted trees. Little red apples still clung to the boughs, and a few withered grey-green leaves. The orchard had been neglected for years, and now the fruit was not worth picking. Through this long, soft, late-lingering autumn Lucy had spent most of her time out here.

There is something comforting to the heart in the shapes of old apple trees that have been left to grow their own way. Out here Lucy could remember and think, and try to realize what had happened to her [. . .].

(130–31)

Lucy has a small, ordered forest in which to hide from the human world and heal from her mountain of losses: Harry’s close friendship, Sebastian’s inspiration and love, and her own aspirations, work, and home in Chicago. Without being mowed, pruned, thinned,
and fertilized, the orchard has become a tiny wilderness of respite, filled with familiar beauty, accommodating stillness, and the freedom given by space to imagine:

When she looked about this house where she had grown up, she felt so alien that she dreaded to touch anything. Even in her own bed she lay tense, on her guard against something that was trying to snatch away her beautiful memories, to make her believe they were illusions and had never been anything else. Only out here in the orchard could she feel safe. Here those feelings with which she had once lived came back to her. [. . .] Out here in the orchard she could even talk to herself; it was a great comfort. (132)

Peace is not Lucy’s for long, however. She has learned that Pauline will have the orchard cut down so she can expand her field of lucrative Spanish onions and add potatoes. After surfacing from nightmares of Sebastian’s drowning, Lucy despairs that she will also lose her last life raft:

After one of those terrible nights Lucy was afraid to trust herself with anyone. Every little thing might shatter her self-control. She would come out here under the apple trees, cold and frightened and unsteady, and slowly the fright would wear away and the hard place in her breast grow soft. And now the orchard was going to
be cut down; the old trees were feeling the sun for the last time this fall. (133)

The thought of one more loss is simply overwhelming. Early one morning she hears an ax biting wood in the orchard. Lucy becomes nearly hysterical, she is so upset about losing this place, and she sobs bitterly at the kitchen table. Pauline has explained their needs and asks for reasonableness from Lucy, but Lucy is utterly distressed and only insists that she’ll pay for the value of the harvest if Pauline will leave the orchard standing, even adding that she will understand someday. Pauline relents but is sure that Lucy will only feel the same way next fall, to which Lucy responds that she “won’t be here then” (136). Afterward Pauline several times wakes to hear Lucy crying in her sleep—once sounding like a puppy run over on the road—and is relieved about her decision to keep the orchard another year.

Lucy’s agony at the specter of the orchard being felled is Cather’s own feeling toward the removal of cottonwoods. Mildred R. Bennett writes that “Willa could not endure to have trees cut down, particularly the cottonwoods” (143). She and Carrie Miner Sherwood once stopped men from cutting trees at the Webster County courthouse when Cather was visiting Red Cloud. Cather also pleaded with workmen to stop cutting cottonwoods around Red Cloud’s first hotel. Evidently the men asked her if it would be all right if they just trimmed them, and she agreed with reluctance (144). Lucy needs the apple trees because they form a space
in which she can relax, remember, and grieve; Cather needed the cottonwoods because, Bennett writes, “the trees and the pioneers were linked,” and she quotes her saying that “the pioneers feel that the cottonwoods are bound up with their lives” (144). Like Lucy trying to preserve her memories from becoming illusion, Cather protected the big cottonwoods as living relics from her first days on the grassy, flowered open prairie, riding horseback from sodhouse to dugout, visiting the newly arrived Bohemian, French, and Norwegian families, sensing both she and they in a state of becoming.

Mr. Gayheart takes his daughters to hear an opera one night, and after Lucy hears the soprano in *The Bohemian Girl*, she begins to return to herself. She remembers how often she had run out on a spring morning, into the orchard, down the street, in pursuit of something she could not see, but knew! It was there, in the breeze, in the sun; it hid behind the blooming apple boughs, raced before her through the neighbours’ gardens, but she could never catch up with it. (154–55)

She recalls that “flashes of promise” are “the important things in one’s life” and returns to “reaching outward” and “straining upward” (155). Everything in her wants to go on living. She doesn’t want to run away any more. She does though, one last time, after an argument with Pauline about work, money, and family relations. She goes to the river to skate, unaware by virtue
of her cloistered existence that the river has changed and it’s no longer possible to skate at the old spot. She has her fateful encounter with hurt and haughty Gordon and carelessly launches herself out onto the ice. It is a tree, propelled down the river during a spring flood and lodged in the sandy bottom, that grips her skate after she breaks through and holds her while the ice slips out from beneath her arms.

After Lucy drowns, the orchard is never cut and becomes a sort of family monument to her. Although Lucy was buried in the Haverford cemetery, at the saddest funeral the town had ever had, a real apple orchard of Cather’s aunt and uncle, Franc and George, became sacred ground and must have absorbed many tears from the Cather family. George’s (and Charles’s) sister, Virginia (known as Jennie), traveled with their parents, William and Caroline, to Nebraska, when they made the decision to follow George and Franc to the west. Jennie was already widowed then and had a new baby with her. Seriously ill, she was in Nebraska just two weeks before tuberculosis took her life. Mildred R. Bennett writes that she was “buried in an orchard of young apple trees on her brother’s farm” (10). They may have been trees grown from seeds that Jennie sent to Franc in 1873 (Rosowski, Birthing 41).

The drought that fictional Nebraska was experiencing during the summer that Lucy is practicing the piano at Sebastian’s empty Chicago studio was truly what real Nebraska was suffering during the 1930s while Cather was writing this novel. A high percentage
of the trees, both wild and planted, perished on the Great Plains during that decade. J. E. Weaver in *Prairie Plants and Their Environment* gives the figures. In his survey area, “in the most xeric places, where trees grew naturally,” he found that in dry ravines, 70 percent of the American elms had died. Hackberry losses (a common, native tree that Cather never uses) were 36 percent. Up on bluffs, 56 percent of the elms were gone, 28 percent of the hackberries, and 33 percent of the green ash. The eastern red cedar toughed out the dry conditions well with smaller losses.

On streams, if the water continued to flow continuously, only about 5 percent of the elms, hackberries, and cottonwoods was lost. If the stream dried up, the losses soared to 60 and even 75 percent. Willows on these intermittent streams were reduced to only 30 percent of their original number. Virtually all of the trees growing at springs survived, but where springs failed, 55 percent of the cottonwoods and 89 percent of the willows died. Timber claims, even those that were long established, were severely damaged. Weaver reports that short droughts prior to 1933 (1894–95 was one) had damaged many timber stands but “the great drought almost annihilated the survivors” (144). He notes that in his survey area 45 percent of the osage orange and 86 percent of the green ash were dead by 1935 and all were gone in 1939. Some lowland tree claims that he observed held up a little better: one planted to cottonwood had early in the drought lost only 14 per-
cent of its trees, but another planted in black locust had lost 75 percent.

Weaver also looked at windbreaks, where he found heavy losses as well. "Dust storms contributed greatly to this loss," he wrote, "through partial burial of the trees in great drifts of soil, sometimes 4 to 8 feet deep. Losses of green ash, American elm, hackberry, and other deciduous trees frequently were 80 to 90 percent, and sometimes higher" (144-45). One osage-orange hedge that he studied had just 15 individuals left out of 3,200. Total, on average, Weaver estimates that Nebraska lost 50 to 60 percent of its trees with another 20 to 25 percent suffering moderate to severe injury. So, of all the millions of trees planted in the late nineteenth century for timber claims, hedges, fences, and orchards, scarcely any, really, survived the state’s periodic droughts. In the aftermath of the Dust Bowl, naturally growing stands began to reseed, especially with little cedars, but no new tree growth came about in timber claims, windbreaks, and hedges (145). Shelterbelts were planted when precipitation returned but Nebraska remains only 2 to 3 percent forested.

Martha Ferrill, a graduate student in the geography department at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, learned of the huge nineteenth-century tree-planting push in Nebraska and wondered whether it was a myth perpetuated by promoters or whether trees had indeed been planted. The landscape does not show evidence of millions of planted trees today. What she discovered in her study
of York County (two counties north and two counties east of Webster County) was that indeed many orchards and forest groves were planted in the 1800s—sometimes thousands of trees on each individual farm—but by the late 1930s only windbreaks and shade trees in yards were left. Later on in the twentieth century, even the windbreaks were taken out from large farms and pretty much only ornamental trees around homes were left. The periodic droughts had had their effect, but so had farm economics and policies; land that was devoted to diversified orchards and timber claims is now primarily in corn, soybeans, and wheat.

Emotions are what Cather sets out to capture in a novel. In a letter to Carrie Miner Sherwood in January of 1934 she asks why it is that people focus on direct representations of characters and can’t figure out that her fiction is all about feeling (Stout 180). *Lucy Gayheart* is about the feelings that accompany longing and loss. In her own life, Cather was losing family, friends, health, and money and having to deal with those realities and emotions. Some of her friends back home in Red Cloud were losing everything to prolonged depression and drought. As she wrote and published *Lucy Gayheart*, including in the story a spell of drought and an old, neglected orchard about to be cut down, the Great Plains were losing a huge number of the trees that she loved so much. Although the 25 million-year-old prairie that Cather saw plowed under in the 1880s will never be back again, in-
idual trees still find a foothold in draws, along waterways, in fencerows, and are ever appreciated in yards. The huge American elms are now rare but catalpas and osage orange have gone wild, eastern red cedar and plum thickets are as common as weeds, and enormous cottonwoods still drive people crazy with drifting “snow” in June.
To select something as common and nonhuman as trees for an entrée into close study of the fiction of one of America’s most famous novelists is to start work with the expectation of being on the sidelines. With trees, looking for the contribution of scene and place and noticing the author’s sensitivity to nature will probably be the important work, one thinks; the characters with all their feelings and motivations will likely sweep along at a little distance. Fiction is all about humans and their condition and emotions, after all—not trees. In the works of Willa Cather, being attached to her trees means to be startled over and over again by the proximity of the center of the action to them; it’s to innocently perch on the curb and find oneself overrun by the parade; it’s to sit in a velvety chair in a theater and find oneself on stage with actors pounding silverware and hurling epithets; it’s to glance to one’s side while admiring the rough-barked trunk of a cottonwood and find the main character standing at one’s elbow. Trees are subtly but squarely central to Willa Cather’s novels.

An examination of Cather’s life reveals numerous influences that gave her the ability to see trees and use them so well in her writing. She knew her trees back in Virginia, probably partly from common lore and partly from her family, who may have passed down the knowledge of her forest-conservationist great-
grandfather. She knew a farm called Oakshade and lived at Willow Shade. (She and Edith Lewis stayed in a cottage called Orchard-side on Grand Manan.) In Nebraska, she spent time botanizing with her Aunt Franc and brother, Roscoe, and later on sent plant specimens to the Reverend Mr. Bates at the Episcopalian Church in Red Cloud. She suffered the contrast of places caused by a move, coming to the nearly treeless mixed-grass prairie from the heavily wooded eastern mixed deciduous forest. She spent loads of time outdoors. She saw the planted groves that resulted from the Timber Culture Act of 1873 and participated in Arbor Day events. Her extensive reading of literature exposed her to ancient and contemporary works with tree subjects. She attended the young, tiny University of Nebraska in Lincoln when Charles E. Bessey led a popular and influential botany department and seminar. Several of her friends were botany students. Finally, as her niece, Helen Cather Southwick, said at the dedication of the Fechin Cather portrait at the Sheldon Art Gallery in 2000, “she liked trees a lot.” Willa Cather simply had a fondness for trees.

The Nebraska novels contain dozens of tree species, almost all named, carefully and accurately, and almost all used to carry meaning in the stories. In O Pioneers! she advances new settlers from poverty to wealth partly with farm and orchard trees. She brings love, law, religions, and the spirit for living into a cherry orchard and beneath a white mulberry. In My Ántonia, sparkling cottonwoods charm a dance pavilion, dark-foliaged eastern
red cedars surround the evil Cutter house, deep-rooted bur oaks are a playground for the hired girls and Jim, and well-protected orchards signify profound success in a new land. Claude Wheeler, the main character of *One of Ours*, is associated with trees practically every step he makes. The most important are the downed cherry tree of his youth and the Jouberts’ cherry tree of his adulthood, his father’s timber claim, the plane tree, the French cottonwoods, the big woods with the red-stemmed pines, and the blasted and burned trees of the war zone. Cottonwoods, Lombardy poplars, and a draw filled with cedars tell the story of Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady*. In *Lucy Gayheart*, the story of loss, regret, and longing, Cather makes slight, generally nonspecific, use of trees, but once again an orchard—this time neglected, wild, and almost doomed—provides some respite and becomes a monument to loss.

Cather was deeply interested in and profoundly affected by the places she lived and encountered. Trees, or a lack of trees, had much to do with defining places in the East, Northeast, South, and West for her. They clarified urban and rural areas. They had a special way of setting off regions of Europe. In all of her Nebraska books, at least a few and often many more characters are wrestling with place—treeful and treeless, urban and rural, old and new. They reflect the agony and joy Cather witnessed in her friends and neighbors as well as her own. She was clearly
a lover of land in many places and could recognize the affliction in others.

The study of trees in Cather’s Nebraska novels brings to the fore one sorrowful aspect of the land and that is the loss of the prairie. The land was so accessible and plastic in Nebraska that the enterprises and towns built up by dreaming settlers and glorified by Cather’s writing wiped out the prairie ecosystem. Some fragments of original grassland have been preserved, but the entire ecosystem is no more. As J. E. Weaver wrote, “the disappearance of a major natural unit of vegetation from the face of the earth is an event worthy of causing pause and consideration by any nation” (North 325). He estimates the North American grasslands originated during the uplift of the Rocky Mountains 25 million years ago (5). He went on to explain that “prairie is much more than land covered with grass. It is a slowly evolved, highly complex organic entity, centuries old. It approaches the eternal” (325). In less than one hundred years, a wave of human population changed it utterly. Cather arrived in Nebraska when much of the mixed-grass prairie was still intact, and it formed the open land she initially hated but came to love. What can one conclude from her overt celebration of the plow and farms and slight attention to the prairie’s disappearance? That like Harry Gordon in Lucy Gayheart, she could name every plant, shrub, and tree—but that the vanishing of intact prairie was not of significance? She noticed the birds, the sky, the stars, the weather; that is plain
in her books. She hated the cottonwoods being cut down and made people stop whenever she could. Mildred R. Bennett knew that “when she came back to Webster County, Willa Cather liked to go out in the country, climb a hill and let the wind blow in her face. She resented any talking while she was remembering the sensations of the land” (138–39). Cather had an imagination struck by the environment, certainly, and she uses many of its aspects richly in her novels, but either she simply lived in her times or humans, separately, were ultimately more important to her. She may have thought, like so many have thought about woodlands or fisheries, it would never be possible to use up all of the prairie. There was simply too much. Perhaps she never gained adequate information about the prairie environment; perhaps she simply was not inclined to tell its stories bluntly.

Exploring Cather’s use of trees also provides the opportunity to observe a master artist at work. Knowing that at least half a dozen different species could have lined a fictional dusty road between miles of wheat stubble on the day England declared war against Germany makes the author’s choice of locust for those trees in One of Ours revelatory. She makes every word of her text work with no slack in the harness. It’s no accident or whimsical choice that in My Ántonia she sends the hired girls to the river bluffs and the bur oaks for a picnic. The trees are stunted compared to any growing in perfect conditions, but they have their own kind of beauty, and beneath the surface they are diversified
for survival, just as the immigrant girls are with their internal strength. It is fascinating and instructive to glimpse how great literature is constructed.

Cather did a fair amount of speaking and writing on the subject of writing. To close her essay titled “The Novel Démeuble,” she gives her opinion that to achieve greatness nothing excess should appear in a novel. One might guess trees in a work of fiction could be excess, but in Cather’s works they are not. In her essay she goes on to praise Dumas the elder and to agree with his notion that all a person needs to make a drama is “one passion, and four walls” (51). Maybe Willa Cather could convince some people that she believed that. Herself, for her art, she needed passion . . . and three things: one sky, one earth, and all the waving, windblown life growing on it.
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