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## Review of The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism.* By Susan J. Rosowski. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986. Table of contents, preface, illustrations, notes, index. xvii + 284 pp. \$22.95.

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

When Cather's youthful optimism gave way to the disenchantment of middle age, the romantic imagination turned inward in its quest for truth, as in *The Professor's House* and *My Mortal Enemy*, interpreted by Rosowski as a

romantic version of the fall and as an awakening to the dangers of romantic sentimentality respectively. Redefining the process of knowing, Cather subsequently celebrated the harmony of correspondences in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*. And finally, Rosowski concludes, Willa Cather explored the dark underside of romanticism by writing her last novels, *Lucy Gayheart* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, in the Gothic mode.

The critical significance of Rosowski's study inheres as much in the breadth of scholarship it encompasses as in the depth of insight it provides, most notably with regard to the minor novels, which acquire greater prominence as representative stages in the development of Cather's romantic vision. For example, when viewed as Cather's *Prelude*, as her autobiographical preparation for a life of art, *The Song of the Lark* relates more profoundly to the novels that follow it; and in this context the distinction noted between Thea's intensely female imaginative growth and the conventional male rhythms of the narrative is especially poignant. Similarly, the much maligned *Lucy Gayheart* and the seemingly anachronistic *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* are

infused with new vitality and meaning when placed in the Gothic tradition, the dark extension of romanticism. And even the acknowledged classics like *My Antonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* are illuminated by Rosowski's approach, the former representing the individual mind's capacity to perceive the world symbolically and the latter identifying the sacramental quality of symbolization.

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

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