

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

1987

Review of Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice

Patricia L. Yongue
University of Houston

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Yongue, Patricia L., "Review of Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice" (1987). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 430.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/430>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice. By Sharon O'Brien. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Table of contents, introduction, notes, index. xvi + 464 pp. \$24.95.

I remain unconvinced that Willa Cather led even the emotional life of a lesbian. Cather, I think, communicates a sympathy for heterosexuality, an increasing remoteness from sexuality altogether, and a valuing of woman "unnatural" because "unAmerican." Cather early suspected—and regretted—that her intimidating reserve about sexuality, moderated by Victorian and Southern gender polity, prohibited the flowering of intimacy. Instead of the risky intimacies, Cather sought what an intellectually strong but sexually reticent woman might seek: stimulating or "useful" friendships—with women and with men. Her major characters repeat the pattern. They experience intense excitements; often they transform obvious sexual emotion into other sorts of exciting (but unrisky) ardor; always, though, they remain untouchable.

Sharon O'Brien's *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* presumes Cather's lesbianism, offers it as the source of her elegant fictive aloofness,

then analyzes the difficult development of a lesbian artistic consciousness as it runs a gamut of obstacles: "a handsome mother," societal bias, the male literary tradition, its own fears and guilt. O'Brien studiously—the research is invaluable—observes Cather as she "struggle[d] fiercely" to create and forcefully to speak "her" voice in a patriarchal literary world that heard only traditional male and female speech. Insofar as her first "strong" literary models—Carlyle, Ruskin, James—and even the rebellious Romantics were men who perpetuated conventional "soft" views of women, Cather was professionally isolated. Male-identification was ultimately unsatisfactory because it capitulated to stereotypes and offended Cather's own love of traditional feminine beauty. As a lesbian fearful of exposing her "unnatural" self, O'Brien says, Cather had to disguise herself, to create a storytelling sub-identity that is a sub-text. And it is in this intriguing disguise that O'Brien discerns a principal weakness, for the disguise, however graceful, is retreat into patterns of negation and denial that devalue Cather's assertiveness about her professional literary ambitions.

Although O'Brien agrees that no usual "proofs" exist—Cather never declared lesbianism, nor is there yet the word of lovers—she locates Cather's "arrival at a lesbian identity by 1890" in the response to her early female models and in the "preoccupied" attachment to Louise Pound for whom Cather admitted to affections "unnatural" and discomfiting. O'Brien discovers lesbian commitment—"the thing unnamed"—in the letters to Pound.

I do not. Concealment, a habit of Cather's fiction that O'Brien superbly uncovers, became equally a habit of her correspondence, especially, if paradoxically, with her confidantes. The crafted balance between closure and disclosure in all of Cather's writing, in fact, is a fascinating subject that O'Brien encourages us to explore. Too relentless an identification of this balance with Cather's "lesbian identity," however, underestimates the poetics of "the thing unnamed."

The Emerging Voice will be an influential, as

it is a provocative, gender study. But there is an irony affecting its main argument: the presumption of Cather's lesbianism itself issued originally, as Cather surely anticipated it would, from the same traditional male perceptions against which she worked to protect herself.

PATRICIA L. YONGUE
Department of English
University of Houston