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Review of *Redefining the American Dream: The Novels of Willa Cather* By Sally Peltier Harvey

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Funda, Evelyn I., "Review of *Redefining the American Dream: The Novels of Willa Cather* By Sally Peltier Harvey" (1995). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 998.

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Redefining the American Dream: The Novels of Willa Cather. By Sally Peltier Harvey. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995. Preface, notes, works cited, index. x + 190 pp. \$34.50.

Willa Cather's novels were written during a period when Americans were radically altering their perceptions about social mobility, material gain, and individual accomplishment. Considering that as context, Sally Peltier Harvey traces Cather's efforts to get beyond disillusionment and mere criticism of the American Dream and move toward an understanding of the tension between individual and community that underlies the struggle toward success. For Cather, the question becomes how does our culture maintain the values of individualism and autonomy without forsaking those of family and community, without turning self-fulfillment into self-centered egotism.

In the early novels Cather defines success as personal fulfillment rather than fame and fortune. *Alexander's Bridge*, which Harvey calls "an inverted and subverted Horatio Alger story," chronicles the failure of Alexander's financial success; in *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*, Cather either treats financial success as a by-product of a woman's effort to find imaginative or artistic fulfillment or demonstrates that the most self-fulfilled characters "are, not surprisingly, the ones whose material success seems only modest."

According to Harvey, Cather's novels take a pessimistic turn during the first half of the 1920s as they examine the possibilities of ful-

fillment within a society "mired" in a "jungle" of materialism where "communities prove unresponsive or detrimental" to individual self-development. In *One of Ours*, for example, Cather's consistent images of imprisonment portray an American Dream that limits Claude physically and spiritually, while in *A Lost Lady*, Marian Forrester "represents the American Dream boldly focused on self, almost fully disengaged from the morals and ethics" that Captain Forrester represents. In *The Professor's House* intellectuals like St. Peter are depicted struggling with the "debased values and emotional emptiness" of materialism. Ultimately, in *My Mortal Enemy*, the most pessimistic of the novels according to Harvey, a "poisoned and fragmented" Myra is trapped in a world where "she can neither achieve success nor ignore it."

Moving "toward an understanding of success that is community-oriented and fundamentally at odds with wealth and position," Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock* demonstrate how a "synthesis" of tradition and new ways allows characters to successfully build a viable community.

Written in a time when "a Depression-racked America still reflected the sense of failure and guilt" about the possibilities of the American Dream, Cather's *Lucy Gayheart*, which Harvey calls Cather's "anatomy of failure, hardship, and loss," portrays a woman who turns away from opportunities to define herself, allowing others to direct her life because she is unable to use the past to construct a positive future. Although Cather never goes so far as some of her contemporaries, Harvey writes, in encouraging some variety of Marxist collectivism or sacrifice to community, she does express, in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, a continued faith in community while continuing to celebrate individual achievement.

Harvey's book will be of interest not only to Cather scholars, but to an audience more widely concerned with literature as an expression of culture. By citing some of Cather's contemporaries (Andrew Carnegie's exegesis

of the "Gospel of Wealth" and William James's identification of success as the country's "bitch-goddess," for instance) as well as her literary peers (Howells, Dreiser, Fitzgerald, and Steinbeck among them), then complementing this with more recent cultural studies of the early twentieth century (such as Jackson Lears's examination of intellectual transformation and Warren Sussman's study of the changing perceptions of the individual), Harvey gives us a solid framework for understanding Cather's personal redefinition of the American Dream within a wider cultural and intellectual context.

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