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Review of *Willa Cather's Transforming Vision: New France and the American Northeast* By Gary Brienzo

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Willa Cather's Transforming Vision: New France and the American Northeast. By Gary Brienzo. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1994. Notes, works cited, index. 120 pp. \$28.50.

Using a fine-tuned blend of textual criticism, biography, and primary research, Gary Brienzo sheds light on the importance of the American Northeast and New France on Willa Cather's life and art.

Brienzo sees Cather's artistic life as a search for a "quiet center," a unified, comforting vision, given focus by an appreciation she developed for the "domestic qualities that enhanced life." He credits Sarah Orne Jewett for providing Cather this "alternative literary tradition," which celebrated woman-centered

communities and the power of domestic ritual. Brienzo details Cather's discovery of Quebec and the appeal of its French traditions, for there she recognized manifestations of domestic artistry and the balanced order from the city's historical and religious legacy.

Brienzo's discussion of Cather's developing vision is simply but solidly structured, moving from prefigurings in her early fiction to full realization in her mature works, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and, especially, *Shadows on the Rock*, her only novel set in Quebec. Brienzo notes, for instance, the strength of her early Plains heroines, Alexandra Bergson and Ántonia Shimerda, both of whom gain fulfillment as "unconscious domestic artists." *Death Comes for the Archbishop* advances the primary theme fully developed in *Shadows on the Rock*—the complementary forces of domestic and spiritual tranquility for a well-balanced community.

Cather's artistic pursuit in *Shadows* is expertly examined. A study of the Canadian history texts Cather surveyed, especially those of Francis Parkman, shows her selective use of details. Parkman's history, for instance, displays an anti-Catholic bias and condemns the historical Bishop Laval as a "spiritual oppressor." Cather, however, using historical details selectively, humanizes Laval, making her character part of *Shadow's* human community, fitting her pattern of domestic unity. Brienzo also illuminates the novel's structural coherence by showing how the narrative stresses spiritual and protective forces from which heroine Cecile Auclair creates her own domestic center. Central to this domestic vision is the harmonious balance connecting all of the community's members.

Brienzo's study is a solid addition to Cather criticism, admirable not only for its central critical thesis, but also for its examination of the theme as it runs throughout Cather's work. The book offers a fresh insight for all Cather readers. As Brienzo demonstrates, Willa Cather's relationship with the American landscape is more complex than is popularly conceived. For despite the pull exerted by her

adopted Plains, her heart found its place in another region.

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