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## Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*: Art Versus The Closing Frontier

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# WILLA CATHER'S *A LOST LADY* ART VERSUS THE CLOSING FRONTIER

SUSAN J. ROSOWSKI

When *A Lost Lady* appeared in 1923, readers immediately recognized Willa Cather's achievement. T. K. Whipple wrote, "with *A Lost Lady*, Miss Cather arrived at what can only be called perfection in her art";<sup>1</sup> Joseph Wood Krutch termed it "nearly perfect."<sup>2</sup> Later readers continued the praise, calling it "perfectly modulated"<sup>3</sup> and "a flawless classic"<sup>4</sup> and generally judging it the finest of Cather's novels. While acknowledging its art, however, critics have stressed its themes in their interpretations, reading it as telling of the frontier's downfall, of the noble pioneer's passing, of materialism's onslaught, of woman's plight in a patriarchal society. These themes run through the novel, certainly; Cather begins her story with the historical decline of the West and she traces the passing of the noble pioneer and the exploitation of the land. But she posits against this decline a human need for primitive or sacred understanding, for spiritual attitudes and intuitive, symbolic art forms.<sup>5</sup> Cather's art

lies in perfectly incorporating the two kinds of experience and, in the end, celebrating symbolic possibility in the face of historical loss.

*A Lost Lady* presents the age-old tension between possibility and loss against a background of an American frontier that promised a pioneer experience of boundless opportunity at the same time it restricted that experience to a strikingly brief period.<sup>6</sup> It does so through the story of Marian Forrester, brought as a bride to the small town of Sweet Water by her road-making husband, one of the last of the pioneer aristocrats. A generation younger than Captain Forrester, Mrs. Forrester is caught in the increasingly narrow circumstances of a closing frontier: her husband suffers a loss of fortune and health, and then dies, leaving her apparently at the mercy of grasping, materialistic elements in Sweet Water. Her story is told primarily from the point of view of Niel Herbert. A generation younger than Mrs. Forrester and two generations younger than the pioneers who settled the West, Niel realizes he lives at "the very end of the road-making West. . . . It was already gone, that age; nothing could ever bring it back,"<sup>7</sup> and he seeks ennobling symbolic value in the face of this loss.

Tension between possibility and loss is further evident in the two quite different effects

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the book produces. *A Lost Lady* contains a bustle of activity that forms an overall pattern of rising and falling motion, of expectation and disappointment. The pioneers live and die, people come and go, the economy grows and declines, light dawns and fades, flowers open and close—even Mrs. Forrester's laugh rises and descends. The plot reflects this pattern: Marian Forrester comes to Sweet Water as the young bride of Captain Forrester and she leaves after his death; at the beginning of the action, the boy Niel Herbert first enters the Forrester place, and at its ending an older Niel departs "for the last time." Scenes suggest this pattern in miniature, characteristically beginning with Niel's coming up the hill approaching the Forrester house and ending with his going down the hill after leaving it.

Although movement surrounds episodes of *A Lost Lady*, there is a profound stillness at its center. Episodes contain moments of recognition that seem frozen in time, and these moments make up the essential substance of the novel. Like *Ántonia*, who could "leave images in the mind that did not fade—that grew stronger with time,"<sup>8</sup> so does *A Lost Lady* leave such images; Mrs. Forrester bringing cookies to the boys in the marsh; listening to Captain Forrester tell their dinner guests of first coming to Sweet Water and, later, presiding over her own dinner party, telling quite different guests of her meeting Captain Forrester; Niel, stooping to place a bouquet of flowers outside her bedroom window, then hearing from within the sound of her laughter mingled with that of her lover.

These effects of movement and stillness derive from two impulses that run through the novel—one historical, the other symbolic, and both focusing on Marian Forrester, the lost lady of the title. In the historical narrative, Mrs. Forrester is a woman who lives in time: she comes to Sweet Water and presides over her husband's home as a brilliant hostess, takes a lover, cares for her husband during his prolonged illness, abandons principles of his generation after his death, has an affair with a shyster lawyer, and moves from Sweet Water to seek her fortune elsewhere. Throughout this progression, she

participates in cause-and-effect relationships in time: she flourishes as a result of her husband's prosperity and suffers by his loss of fortune; she enjoys youthful beauty, then gradually grows old.

But as the historical account progresses, Cather presents a second level of significance in her characterization of Marian Forrester—a symbolic one. While the events of her life exist within time and in terms of cause-and-effect relationships, her symbolic meaning exists out of time and comes from the integration of apparently disparate elements: her suspicious past and her respectability as Captain Forrester's wife; her aesthetic otherworldliness and her sensuality; her fragility and her strength; her exquisiteness and her coarseness; her artlessness and her artifice; her mocking, guarded veneer and the living reality beneath it.

The novel's intensity builds on both levels. First, there are the increasingly desperate circumstances of Mrs. Forrester's life—of her struggle to avoid entrapment by the restricting effects of her husband's loss of fortune and death, of living in Sweet Water, of growing old. Second, and far more important, intensity builds as Mrs. Forrester expands as a symbol by incorporating ever greater discrepancies. Initially, the contrasts she presents are relatively easy to resolve: she seems a lady far above and detached from other people, yet she enters the ordinary world of childhood play when she brings cookies to young boys playing in the marsh. Gradually, she reveals wider contrasts—between the spiritual and the physical, the common and the uncommon, fidelity and betrayal—and resolution becomes correspondingly more difficult.

Niel Herbert, the sensitive observer of Marian Forrester, is the major vehicle for this expanding symbolic meaning. It is Niel who feels most intensely her "magic of contradictions" (p. 79), and it is he who attempts most arduously to deny those contradictions. The overall symbolic movement of the novel follows Niel's responses and consists of two major imaginative expansions and contractions, followed by a resolution.<sup>9</sup> In the first part, scenes expand the symbolic significance of Mrs. Forrester through a dialectic between her otherworldly grace and her physical reality. Early expansive movement

occurs when the young Niel thinks of her as a spiritual goddess, then perceives her playful, teasing, human qualities. Expansion continues as the adolescent Niel becomes aware of other incongruities in her: a scandalous past and a present respectability, a mocking manner and a deep interest in people, fragility and vitality: "from that disparity, he believed, came the subtlest thrill of her fascination. She . . . inherited the magic of contradictions" (p. 79). As other readers have observed, Niel's imaginative, emotional response is far deeper than he is conscious of: in terms of the aesthetic experience of the novel, Mrs. Forrester's symbolic meaning greatly exceeds the adolescent Niel's capacity to comprehend her. Cather prepares for this disparity by a sequence of episodes: the dinner party, culminating Niel's initial response to Mrs. Forrester, is followed by the cedarbough-cutting episode, which occurs outside Niel's knowledge and in which the non-judgmental Adolph Blum provides the lens for presenting profoundly sexual qualities in Mrs. Forrester. Thus in the following chapter, when Niel attempts to explain his interest in Mrs. Forrester, there is an enormous ironic difference between his explanation that "it was as Captain Forrester's wife that she most interested Niel, and it was in her relation to her husband that he most admired her" (p. 78) and the reader's knowledge of qualities in her that lie far outside this explanation.

Through this expansion, tension builds with intrusions by Frank Ellinger, Mrs. Forrester's lover, and culminates when Niel overhears Mrs. Forrester with Ellinger in her bedroom. Unable to accommodate sexuality in his imaginative conception of her, Niel draws back in bitter disillusionment, breaking the imaginative expansion with logic: "he burned to ask her one question, to get the truth out of her and to set his mind at rest: What did she do with all her exquisiteness when she was with a man like Ellinger? Where did she put it away? And having put it away, how could she recover herself, and give one—give even him—the sense of tempered steel, a blade that could fence with anyone and never break" (p. 100). Niel's ques-

tion reveals an analytic impulse and an underlying denial of paradoxes. He assumes that Mrs. Forrester puts away her exquisiteness when she is with her lover and that, after having given herself up to sexuality, she "recovers herself," putting aside sexuality and resuming her former nature. Intensifying the question is Niel's almost violent impulse to force a response from her, a yielding to him, as he "*burned . . . to get the truth out of her*" (my emphasis).

In the novel's second part, Niel's response is again expansive as scenes further present Mrs. Forrester's complexity, this time primarily through disparities between her self-renunciation and her independence. Seldom leaving Sweet Water during her husband's last years, Mrs. Forrester reveals gentleness in her ministrations to her dying husband and fierceness in her own desire to live, exhaustion and strength, generosity and greed. This expansion culminates when Mrs. Forrester presides at her own dinner party after her husband's death and, despite her great fatigue and her guests' insensitivity, transforms those present with the story of her first meeting Captain Forrester.

Throughout this expansion, tension builds as Ivy Peters assumes the role previously held by Frank Ellinger—on a narrative level of lover, on a symbolic level of eliciting contradictory features in Mrs. Forrester. Contraction occurs when Niel, seeing Ivy Peters "unconcernedly put both arms around her, his hands meeting over her breast" (p. 169), turns from her in bitter disillusionment, resolving never to return to the Forrester place. Again Niel attempts to deny contradictions in her: she is either common or uncommon, worthy or unworthy. Recalling her, Niel wishes to "challenge [her], demand the secret of that ardour," just as he had earlier wished "to get the truth out of her." Yet the futility of this last wish is apparent. Mrs. Forrester "had drifted out of his ken"—she had moved to South America, remarried, and died—and the image of her drifting away combines with Niel's wish "to call up the shade of the young Mrs. Forrester, as the witch of Endor called up Samuel's" (p. 171), to convey a dreamlike, imaginative quality in his response.

Resolution comes when Niel, ceasing his attempts to explain Mrs. Forrester or to force her to explain herself, acknowledges her value on another level. Removed in time and place from the cause-and-effect relationships of the narrative, Niel hears once again of his "long-lost lady," an account relayed by a childhood friend, Ed Elliott. In this final description, Mrs. Forrester remains enigmatic: she had aged, yet hadn't changed in essentials; she had married a man reputed to be "quarrelsome and rather stingy," yet "she seemed to have everything"; most remarkably, she had "come up again" after having "pretty well gone to pieces before she left Sweet Water." But Niel responds, "So we may feel sure that she was well cared for to the end . . . Thank God for that!" The resolution here is in Niel's attitude to Mrs. Forrester, an acknowledgment of the truth of his subjective experience of her. His "Thank God!" reveals the strength of his feeling; his friend interprets the reaction as feeling ("I knew you'd feel that way"); then the narrator affirms this interpretation in the novel's final clause, "a warm wave of feeling passed over his face" (pp. 172-74).

At the end, we too try to "get at" Mrs. Forrester's secret—to explain and judge her as strong or weak, noble or fallen. But just as there is a problem with the "real" meaning in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," so there is a problem with the "real" meaning of Marian Forrester and, through her, of *A Lost Lady*. We finally return to the images of the woman that live in the book and, as we do so, recognize as Niel does the expanding significance that radiates from her, infusing every part of the novel: "she had always the power of suggesting things much lovelier than herself, as the perfume of a single flower may call up the whole sweetness of spring" (p. 172).

This infusing power of the symbol is its essential quality. As Coleridge wrote, a symbol "partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible [and] . . . abides itself as a living part in that unity, of which it is a representative."<sup>10</sup> It follows then that we would expect the parts of a symbolic prose narrative—as Karl Kroeber

does those of a symbolic poem—"to be dynamically interrelated."<sup>11</sup> And so they are. To develop the expanding symbolic significance that radiates from Mrs. Forrester, Cather uses a form of incremental repetition, repeating descriptive phrases so that the significance of the reference changes in the progress of the novel. By repetition, the things to which phrases refer become familiar: they appear, then reappear, with each reappearance bringing forward the accumulated associations of their past. When the boy Niel is taken into Mrs. Forrester's bedroom after breaking his arm, for example, he sees light coming through closed green shutters; later, an older Niel, having gathered a bouquet for Mrs. Forrester in the early morning, goes "softly round the still house to the north side of Mrs. Forrester's own room, where the door-like green shutters were closed" (p. 86). The familiar shutters subtly evoke the earlier scene in which Niel was inside the room and secure in his youthful idealization of Mrs. Forrester, and thus they contribute to the dramatic impact of the disillusionment scene.

As the effect of incremental repetition expands, objects take on qualities of their perceivers, further suggesting a world informed with symbolic significance. The poplars bordering the road to the Forrester place are initially simply objects in a rather flat nature: "the Captain's private land [was] bordered by Lombardy poplars" (p. 11). Gradually, however, the trees become sentinels of the coming and going of visitors to the Forrester place, familiar landmarks in a world we come to recognize. Eventually, they participate in the symbolic meaning that radiates from Mrs. Forrester, transformed by Niel following his experiences with her. Leaving the Forrester place, "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" (p. 42). When Niel leaves the Forrester place "for the last time," the narrator affirms, "it was even so; he never went up the poplar-bordered road again" (p. 170)—and the reference to the poplars, with their

many associations from the past, suggests the symbolic resonances Niel is turning from.

Finally, by building to symbolic climaxes, the accumulative meaning of images enables moments of recognition. Rose imagery, for example, underlies the novel's first major expansive movement. When Mrs. Forrester sees Niel and the other boys on their way to the marsh, she is arranging roses; when she comes to the door to talk with them, she is holding a single rose. The rose, apparently tamed and domesticated inside Mrs. Forrester's parlor, reappears in the marsh in profusion as "wild roses [that] were wide open and brilliant" (p. 17), the image subtly foreshadowing the sensual, even wild potential in Mrs. Forrester's own nature and suggesting Niel's response to that potential. On the one hand, the intimation of sensuality is a major element in his fascination with her; on the other hand, it is this quality in her that he is unable to face. Rose imagery climaxes in the early morning scene in which Niel gathers a bouquet for Mrs. Forrester. The extended image begins with a relatively objective description of "thickets of wild roses, with flaming buds, just beginning to open." Then, as if the objects by their own beauty and by their past association with Mrs. Forrester draw forth fuller perception, the description moves from the roses themselves to Niel's mind as he perceives them: "Where they had opened, their petals were stained with that burning rose-colour which is always gone by noon,—a dye made of sunlight and morning and moisture, so intense that it cannot possibly last . . . must fade, like ecstasy." The image unifies aesthetic and sensual responses into a single intense moment. Finally, Niel begins to cut stems of the flowers, resolving, in highly metaphorical terms, that "he would make a bouquet for a lovely lady; a bouquet gathered off the cheeks of morning . . . these roses, only half awake, in the defenselessness of utter beauty" (p. 85). Far more than the action, the imagery here conveys the transitoriness of such a moment and the vulnerability of one who experiences it, anticipating Niel's disillusionment at the end of that scene. As preceding rose

imagery foreshadows this scene, succeeding imagery echoes it. Roses, again reduced to objects but now containing symbolic resonances, reappear after Captain Forrester's death when the Blum brothers bring a box of yellow roses to Mrs. Forrester and, later, when she resolves to plant some of her husband's rose bushes over his grave (pp. 145–46).

Incremental repetition illustrates, then, the way in which symbolic meaning works by accumulation, expansion, and infusion, its movement quite different from the sequential movement characteristic of the cause-and-effect patterns in the historical account. Through this contrast, the symbolic and historic elements work off one another. Scenes customarily begin in time, move to a core episode that contains a moment of recognition and an escape from time, then return abruptly to the historical, real world. The Forrester place resides at the center of this movement, offering apparent security and constancy and containing Mrs. Forrester, with her magical power of transformation. But experiences there are surrounded by ominous images of incompleteness, change, and death that suggest inevitable intrusions from the real world. When Niel is taken to Mrs. Forrester's room after breaking his arm, he becomes aware of a "different world from any he had ever known" (p. 42). His involvement intensifies until, when "Mrs. Forrester ran her fingers through his black hair and lightly kissed him on the forehead," he loses himself in the fullness of the experience: "Oh, how sweet, how sweet she smelled!" With the next line, however, the world of change intrudes—"Wheels on the bridge; it's Doctor Dennison. Go and show him in, Mary." Niel's return is dramatized as Doctor Dennison "took him home," a home "set off on the edge of the prairie" and "usually full of washing in various stages of incompleteness" (p. 29). The wholeness Niel felt with Mrs. Forrester intensifies his later sense of incompleteness; his happiness sharpens his dissatisfaction; his fleeting sense of belonging heightens the loneliness of his daily life.

Subsequent episodes follow a similar pattern. Niel feels exultation over an evening talk

with Mrs. Forrester; then, leaving the Forrester place, he stops "at the end of the lane" to look at the last skeletal poplar pointing to a hollow winter moon (p. 42). At Captain Forrester's dinner party, Niel again feels a deep sense of security, this time through loss of self in Captain Forrester's story of coming to Sweet Water; then "just before midnight" he returns to a world of separation and incompleteness as the guests sing "Auld Lang Syne" and "hadn't got to the end of it" when they hear "a hollow rumbling down on the bridge" and then "see the judge's funeral coach come lurching up the hill, with only one of the side lanterns lit" (p. 57). Other scenes come to mind: Niel's gathering flowers for Mrs. Forrester and reveling in the "almost religious purity about the morning air," then abruptly returning to the real world at the sound of laughter from within (pp. 84-87); Niel's losing himself in Mrs. Forrester's story of first meeting Captain Forrester, and then, in the next scene, planning to leave Sweet Water and feeling he was "making the final break with everything that had been dear to him in his boyhood" (p. 168).

What emerges is a buildup of tension between the encroaching real world of change and experiences of unity—of symbolic meaning—that become increasingly difficult to reach in that world. The contrasting dinner parties illustrate the heightening of tension. In the first, a young Mrs. Forrester appears effortless as she assists her husband in transforming the evening; in the second, an older, widowed, impoverished Mrs. Forrester appears haggard, and it is only by a supreme act of will that she again electrifies her guests. The strong sense of incompleteness throughout the narrative contributes to this tension: Sweet Water does not fulfill its early promise; Captain Forrester's career as a builder is cut short by an accident; the heirs apparent to the pioneer generation—Marian Forrester and Niel Herbert—leave without bringing renewal.

Finally, changes in point of view reinforce this tension. The overall progression of point of view is from the public meaning of a storyteller to the private meaning of subjective ex-

perience. The novel begins with a narrator who recalls, "thirty or forty years ago, in one of those grey towns along the Burlington railroad, which are so much greyer today than they were then, there was a house well known from Omaha to Denver for its hospitality and for a certain charm of atmosphere," then modifies this observation—"well known, that is to say, to the railroad aristocracy of that time." The effect is of ongoing reminiscence, of the actual presence of a storyteller who offers an observation as it occurs to her. Because she is casual about time (referring to "thirty or forty years ago" and to "long ago") as well as about place (referring to "one of those grey towns along the Burlington railroad"), the storyteller herself emerges strongly in the opening passage, seeming more immediate, real, and accessible than her subject.

Recounting comings and goings, sequences and changes, the storyteller provides a logical, rational organization of these movements. She establishes a chronology of events ("for the next few years Niel saw very little of Mrs. Forrester"; "during that winter . . . Niel came to know her very well"; "Captain Forrester's death . . . occurred early in December"), and she explains events through their sequence of cause and effect within that chronology ("For the Forresters that winter was a sort of isthmus between two estates; soon afterward came a change in their fortunes. And for Niel, it was a natural turning point" (pp. 31, 69, 103, 144)). The narrative conveys a sense of movement; its meaning is objective, factual, settled.

But the stillness at *A Lost Lady's* center derives from a quite different experience—one that is subjective, imaginative, and expanding. For it Cather moves from the storyteller's omniscience to the limited points of view of individual characters, such as Niel. This movement involves a gradual narrowing from the storyteller's long view to a specific episode, to one character within the episode, and, finally, to the episode as it is being processed in that character's mind. Beginning with the long view, for example, the storyteller explains, "It was two years before Niel Herbert

came home again," then presents Niel having come to the Forrester place, summarizes his meeting with Captain Forrester, and follows Niel "round the house to the gate that gave into the grove," where he saw first a hammock between two cottonwoods, then a still, slender, white figure in it. The account gains in immediacy as Niel, approaching, discerns more details: "as he hurried across the grass he saw that a white garden hat lay over her face" and was "just wondering if she were asleep, when he heard a soft delighted laugh," stepped forward, and caught her suspended figure. Suddenly, the point of view presents Niel's mind encountering the object: "How light and alive she was! like a bird caught in a net. If only he could rescue her and carry her off like this" (pp. 103-10).

Within specific scenes, Cather interweaves omniscience with individual perceptions, keeping the point of view in motion and maintaining dialectical tension through which symbolic meaning emerges. The storyteller contrasts descriptions from the "long ago" past (of the young Mrs. Forrester, "bareheaded, a basket on her arm, her blue-black hair shining in the sun") to later time ("it was not until years afterward that she began to wear veils and sun hats," pp. 17-18). Similar movement occurs as a result of changes in Niel. Niel's youthful idealization of Mrs. Forrester contrasts with his later disillusionment and his still later gratitude to her. And the storyteller contrasts individual points of view: Adolph Blum, seeing Mrs. Forrester come from an assignation with her lover, contrasts with Niel's seeing her only as Captain Forrester's wife; Captain Forrester, watching her with Niel and thinking of her "as very, very young" (p. 75) contrasts with Niel's general view of her as an older woman.

Within the novel as a whole, changes in point of view suggest the effects of a disintegration of traditional, communal values and a corresponding stress on personal symbolic meaning. Initially, the storyteller identifies individuals in terms of her community: Marian Forrester, seeing a group of boys approach, "knew most of them" as members of the community. Niel

is "Judge Pommeroy's nephew"; the others include the "son of a gentleman rancher," "the leading grocer's . . . twins," and "the two sons of the German tailor." Recognition is personal and intimate, based on gossip about as well as the professional standing of their fathers. Ed Elliot, for example, is the boy "whose flirtatious old father kept a shoe store and was the Don Juan of the lower world of Sweet Water" (p. 14). Similarly, the boy Niel approaches the Forrester place in terms of alignment and congruity: it represents the values he upholds and the life to which he aspires.

By the end of Part II, however, Niel returns to a community from which he is alienated. Cather has replaced Marian Forrester with Ivy Peters to describe Niel's return, and Peters identifies Niel not by community relationships but by his clothes. A shift in power and in communal values is suggested by the shift from Mrs. Forrester, who greets guests as a representative of her husband and the best of Sweet Water, to Ivy Peters, who greets guests as the leader of materialistic, unscrupulous elements that have gained power in the same community. Tension heightens as Niel believes Mrs. Forrester is aligning herself with the new "generation of shrewd young men, trained to petty economies" (p. 107), represented by Ivy Peters.

As Niel's alienation deepens, his subjective, imaginative response is increasingly at odds with his rational appraisal of the "lost lady." Logically and objectively, Niel comes to believe that Mrs. Forrester's generosity and her greed, her exquisiteness and her coarseness, her fidelity and her betrayal, are irreconcilable contradictions. He judges her harshly and keeps his distance from her. When Mrs. Forrester invites him to her dinner party, for example, he resists, arguing, "What do you want me for?" and later feeling "angry with himself for having been persuaded" to accept; on the night of the dinner, he is "the last guest to arrive" (p. 158). Yet against all rational preconceptions, at this dinner party Niel is still moved by Mrs. Forrester's "indomitable self," and his apprehension of her telling of first meeting



Captain Forrester is one of the timeless moments of recognition at the heart of the novel (pp. 164–67).

Niel's conflict may be illustrated by the motif "always" that runs through the novel. Initially, "always" refers to apparent permanence within time—to rituals, for example, that by repetition seem constant. Captain Forrester's toast, "Happy Days," is such a ritual, "the toast he always drank at dinner." As a hostess, Mrs. Forrester carries out other such rituals: "she was always there" (p. 12) to greet visitors; to the young Niel, she seemed "always the same" (p. 39). Such rituals serve their function: they provide a sense of security and stability. But eventually the world of change exerts itself and, in retrospect, the apparent stability offered by rituals seems illusory. Captain Forrester falls from power; Mrs. Forrester is neither always there nor always the same. But even as Niel must accept the loss of Mrs. Forrester within the historical narrative (indeed, he must accept that he never possessed her, and never could have), he comes to realize her permanence on a symbolic level. *Always* runs through the symbolic elements of the novel also, referring to a permanence that exists outside of time. In the end, Niel is certain that Mrs. Forrester "had always the power of suggesting things much lovelier than herself, as the perfume of a single flower may call up the whole sweetness of spring" (p. 172).

Significantly, Niel casts his reflection in the past tense—for him, Mrs. Forrester "*had* always the power of suggesting things"—and with this past tense, the reader departs from Niel. Niel's resolution comes with his subjective sense that Mrs. Forrester had the power to evoke a symbolic mode of perception; he has reached the point that he is no longer analyzing and judging—no longer holding it against her that "she was not willing to immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged, that she preferred life on any terms." Ironically, however, his resolution comes only after she, whom Niel believed "preferred life on any terms," has died, and we suspect that Niel's longing for perma-

nence, forever frustrated in a world of change, ends with the secure distance and detachment of an experience "recollected in tranquillity."<sup>12</sup>

For the reader, however, Marian Forrester continues to live in the novel, for in reading we, like Niel with his uncle's books, meet "living creatures, caught in the very behaviour of living" (p. 81). As a result, it is impossible to settle Marian Forrester into a fixed meaning, to put her into the past tense and set one's mind to rest about her. Although she recedes in the reader's memory, she comes forward again with each rereading and, by continuing to exert her intense individuality, evokes fresh responses and forces the reader to expand his or her perception of her. In so doing, the reader takes up where Niel left off. Each reading contains moments of recognition and resolution in which Mrs. Forrester is seen as a whole, combining contrary qualities that are logically irreconcilable. Once read, the novel evokes questions which, in turn, lead back into the work. And each time we return to the novel, expansion continues. By offering "an expanding potentiality for formulating values, an expanding area of sympathy and insight out of which values of lasting refinement can emerge and to which they can return," *A Lost Lady* is a novel of experience in Robert Langbaum's sense. The reader is "always in the process of formulating values, although he never arrives at a final formulation."<sup>13</sup> As Karl Kroeber observes, experiences of symbolic meaning "are subjective and creative; they cannot be told about; we must . . . participate."<sup>14</sup> Unlimited opportunity for the individual to engage in personal experience, to formulate values, and to create anew—the description could be of the American frontier—or of *A Lost Lady*. For in *A Lost Lady*, Cather celebrates the constantly expanding possibilities of symbolic art even as she laments the closed frontier of history.

## NOTES

1. *New York Evening Post*, December 8, 1923; 1928 revised version reprinted in *Spokesmen* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

1963), p. 143; reprinted in *Willa Cather and Her Critics*, ed. by James Schroeter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 38.

2. *Nation*, November 28, 1923; reprinted in Schroeter, *Willa Cather and Her Critics*, p. 52.

3. David Daiches, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (1951; reprint ed., Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1971), p. 86.

4. John Davenport, *Observer*, May 7, 1966.

5. See John Milton's description of the fourth phase "in the relationship between plainsman (or his artistic representatives) and the landscape." Milton describes the four phases as an initial "romantic, idealized, Edenic vision," which gives way to a realistic shattering of vision, then "an industrialized and technological revision of the land," and, finally, "a reaction to the exploitation of the land; a partial return to a primitive or sacred understanding of the land, spiritual in attitude and intuitive and symbolic in art forms"; "Plains Landscapes and Changing Visions," *Great Plains Quarterly* 2 (Winter 1982): 61. In my view, Cather affirms symbolic art in response to her perception of the exploitation of the land and the decline of American life and letters.

6. David Lowenthal, in "The Pioneer Landscape: An American Dream," writes, "the sense of a pioneer environment rarely endured in toto more than a few years before giving way to a settled order"; *Great Plains Quarterly* 2 (Winter 1982): 10.

7. *A Lost Lady* (1923; reprint ed., New York: Knopf, 1963), pp. 168-69. All references are to this text.

8. *My Ántonia* (1918; reprint ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 352.

9. Niel's response, coming from his deep longing for permanence in a world of change, is remarkably similar in motive and form to Keats's response to the objects of his odes. The odes characteristically begin with the observer feeling the impact of the object's fullness—for example, the Grecian urn's paradoxical combination of activity and immobility, of silence and expression:

Thou still unravished bride of quietness

Thou foster child of silence and slow time,  
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme.

This initial sense of value is followed by the pain of separation from the object and an attempt to bridge that separation—to make the object give itself up to the observer. Tension builds between reason and imagination: the reason, an analyzing faculty, seeks to separate, divide, and categorize, while the imagination, a synthesizing faculty, seeks to perceive similarities, to unite, and to enter into. Increasingly intense questions addressed to the urn are frustrated by the object's self-sufficiency, and resolution comes only when the observer, ceasing his attempt to force the object to reveal its secrets, allows himself to experience it in all its paradoxical fullness. It is at this point that the observer moves beyond the object as object and experiences it as a symbol; the experience forms the lyric climax of the ode. This experience is transitory, however, and so the observer drops back into separation—but a separation different from that at the poem's beginning, for he retains a sense of the symbolic richness he participated in.

10. Samuel T. Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual* (London: Gale and Fenner, 1816), p. 37. Coleridge includes here his famous description of a symbol as "characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all the translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal." In *Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy*, Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom write, "the fundamental understanding of Cather's work is, indeed, dependent upon an understanding of her meaningful employment of a set of symbols, all of which are segments of the total theme"; they use Coleridge's definition to clarify Cather's symbolism (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1962), p. 26.

11. Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), p. 53.

12. In response to a draft of this essay, Patricia Yongue (University of Houston) commented on the paradox implicit in Niel's aestheticism: "there is aesthetic value . . . in Marian Forrester's expanding symbolic significance for Niel and for the reader. . . . Yet the same aesthetic process which gives Mrs. Forrester a dignity and makes her interesting as a symbol also limits her humanity and freedom.

Insofar as Niel and the Captain . . . ask Marian to remain unchanged, they are asking her to be an object, an urn which depicts motion but does not move in terms of human growth and expansion. It is a request, of course, which she denies, and so she moves on to California and finally to South America" (personal correspondence, October 16, 1981). For Yongue's general treatment of this "allegiance to an aristocratic ideal which often serves as a fundamental component in the dynamics of [Cather's]

fiction," see her essay, "Willa Cather's Aristocrats," in two parts, *Southern Humanities Review* 14 and 15 (1980). For my own general treatment of the relationship between Cather's narrators and the objects they describe, see "Willa Cather's Women," *Studies in American Fiction* 9 (Autumn 1981): 261-75.

13. Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), p. 26.

14. Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art*, p. 58.