

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 1983

Willa Cather And The Populists

Robert W. Cherny

San Francisco State University

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



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

Cherny, Robert W., "Willa Cather And The Populists" (1983). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1694.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1694>

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 AND THE POPULISTS

ROBERT W. CHERNY

Despite the wealth of critical and analytical treatments of the life and work of Willa Cather, few have noted the relationship between her writing and the Populist movement of the early 1890s. Some have specifically described Cather as nonpolitical or even antipolitical.¹ The two exceptions, John H. Randall III and Evelyn J. Hinz, base their conclusions on sources other than the Populist movement in Nebraska. Cather's writings, nonetheless, exhibit clear evidence of the impact of both Populism and its ideological successor, Bryanism. Cather did not like either variant of agrarian radicalism, and she expressed her distaste both explicitly and implicitly.

John H. Randall III was the first major critic to discern extensive Populist influence in Cather's work. In its treatment of Populism, *The Landscape and the Looking Glass* (1960) draws heavily on Richard Hofstadter's *The Age*

of Reform, the 1956 winner of the Pulitzer Prize for history. Unfortunately, the definitions of Populism that Randall adapts from Hofstadter were neither unique to Populist thought nor central to Populist political rhetoric. Furthermore, Hofstadter's views on Populism have not been shared by any recent student of the movement. In an article published in 1972, Evelyn J. Hinz also describes a relationship between Cather's work and Populism.² Like Randall, she relies on Hofstadter to define Populism, even while acknowledging the significance of the work of Norman Pollack, one of Hofstadter's earliest and most severe critics. Her essay is a rewarding exercise in Cather's use of the yeoman-in-the-garden metaphor, but the provenance of that metaphor owes at least as much to Jefferson and Rousseau as to Populism.³ The logical place to begin to understand the influence of Populist thought on Cather is not with Hofstadter but with a survey of Populism as it existed in Webster County, Nebraska, and in Lincoln, the two places where Cather lived when Populism was most prominent.

Nebraska Populism emerged out of more than a decade of agitation by such groups as the Farmers' Alliance, the Greenback party,

A professor of history at San Francisco State University, Robert W. Cherny has written several books and articles on the Populist movement, including Populism, Progressivism, and the Transformation of Nebraska Politics, 1885-1915 (1981).

and the Knights of Labor. A state party was formed in Nebraska in late July 1890, taking the name Independent party and dominated by leaders of the Farmers' Alliance. Similar organizations also formed in nearby states. The Nebraska and Kansas parties had the greatest electoral success that fall, spurring formation of a national third party. Calling themselves the People's party—or Populists—this new organization met in Omaha in July 1892 to nominate candidates for president and vice-president. In 1894, Nebraska Democrats forced themselves into a coalition with the new party when the young Democratic congressman from Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, led his party to endorse a number of the candidates who had been nominated by the Populist state convention some time before. In 1896, the Populists returned the favor when Bryan won the Democratic nomination for president and the Populist national convention tendered Bryan their nomination as well. Thereafter, the Populist and Democratic parties in Nebraska and surrounding states became a permanent coalition until the Populist party finally withered away in the early years of the twentieth century.⁴

Willa Cather graduated from high school in June 1890 and spent most of that hot, dry summer in Red Cloud. While she left no record of attendance at the various political meetings that summer, she would have had great difficulty avoiding politics entirely, for Webster County was part of a broad band of Populist counties stretching through central Nebraska. By May 1890, nineteen Alliance lodges had been organized in Webster County, with a membership of some seven hundred. On 4 July, the Alliance and Knights of Labor sponsored a picnic and political rally near Cowles, a short distance north of Red Cloud; three thousand people attended, the largest gathering ever held in Cowles. Labor Day, 1 September, was marked by Independent party political rallies across the state. According to the *Red Cloud Chief*, "farmers, laborers, mechanics, and hundreds of others" filled the streets and sidewalks of Red Cloud, "in countless numbers almost, with banners flying and mottos floating

in the breeze." On election day, Webster County voted 53 percent Populist for governor, and gave only 35 percent to the Republican candidate. In rural Catherton township, where Cather had lived for a time and still the home of her Uncle George, the Populists got 81 percent of the vote.⁵

By election day, however, Cather had been living in Lincoln for two months. Lincoln was not only the state capital and the fourth largest city west of the Missouri River, but also a city seething with political excitement. On Labor Day, Lincoln witnessed a Populist rally that attracted twenty thousand participants, preceded by a five-mile-long parade of Alliance groups and labor unions. One participant in that parade later concluded, "I have lived in Lincoln most of my adult life, and I have never seen anything that could remotely compare with it, even including the Armistice Day parade of 1918 and the wild jubilation of V-J Day in 1945."⁶

Throughout September and October, Lincoln newspapers carried lengthy accounts of campaign speeches and rallies, and during Cather's years at the university, the attention of Lincoln newspapers and many Lincoln residents continued to focus on Populism. In 1892, the Populist national convention took place just fifty miles to the north, in Omaha. Debates that fall attracted large crowds to hear candidates for governor and Congress. All three of the state's major political parties held conventions in Lincoln in late 1893, to nominate candidates for that year's statewide election. In 1894, coalition between Democrats and Populists elected Nebraska's first Populist governor, Silas A. Holcomb. Cather remained in Lincoln through the first six months of Holcomb's administration, then returned to Red Cloud after graduating from the university. In mid-1896, Lincoln vaulted to national prominence when William Jennings Bryan became the presidential candidate of the Democrats, Populists, and Silver Republicans. By then, however, Cather had moved to Pittsburgh.⁷

Throughout the years from 1890 to 1896,

when Cather was in closest contact with Populism, the movement maintained a focus on three major issues: land, money, and transportation. Populists' analysis of the political economy convinced them that the misfortunes of the farmer were due to the concentration of economic power in the hands of a few: bankers and moneylenders, land speculators and absentee landlords, grain and stock buyers, and the railroads. The leading Populist newspaper of the state described Nebraska's economy in 1890:

There are three great crops raised in Nebraska. One is a crop of corn, one a crop of freight rates, and one a crop of interest. One is produced by farmers who by sweat and toil farm the land. The other two are produced by men who sit in their offices and behind their bank counters and farm the farmers.

Populists feared this concentration of power in the hands of those who "farmed the farmers," and they found such concentration dangerous not just to the prosperity of the farmer but also to opportunity and to individual rights more generally. Their solution to these concentrations of power was collective action: government ownership and operation of the railroads, a government alternative to private banking systems, government prohibitions against absentee landlords, and cooperative grain elevators and stockyards. Populists also advocated reforms to increase the people's control of their government. As the injunction to "raise less corn and more hell" was repeated by more than one speaker in the fall of 1890, Populist campaigners quickly gained a reputation as intemperate.⁸ Although Populist orators may sometimes have made arguments using the metaphors outlined by Hofstadter, their issues and solutions were usually far more specific.

During her years in Lincoln, Willa Cather was closely associated with the *Nebraska State Journal* and with the family of its editor and publisher, Charles H. Gere. The *Journal* published her first work, an essay on Thomas Carlyle, in the spring of 1891. In the fall of

1893, she took a class in journalism from the managing editor of the *Journal*, Will Owen Jones, and soon became a regular writer for the paper. Cather's friendship with the Gere daughters meant that she was a regular guest in the Gere home.⁹ Because of these many relationships, the attitude of Gere and the *Journal* toward Populism is important to an understanding of Cather's opinions.

The *Journal*, throughout the last third of the nineteenth century, was one of the two leading Republican newspapers in Nebraska, sharing that distinction with the *Omaha Bee*. The *Bee's* editor, Edward Rosewater, usually aligned himself with the reform or antimonopoly wing of the GOP and sometimes bolted party candidates not to his liking. By contrast, Gere and the *Journal* were scrupulously regular in their Republicanism, accepting party candidates unquestioningly.¹⁰ Throughout the early 1890s, when Cather regularly encountered both the *Journal* and the opinions of C. H. Gere in his own home, the *Journal* stood adamantly against the Populist movement. One of Gere's most famous characterizations of the Populists fully matched the most hyperbolic outbursts of their campaign orators: "They [Populists] are to Nebraska what a herd of hogs would be in the parlor of a careful housekeeper, and however completely they are kicked out in November the filth they have scattered broadcast will leave its traces on our housekeeping for many months to come."

Gere and the *Journal* also described the Populists as "the sore head insurrection," "demagogues and shysters," and "arrant hypocrites." Populist leaders, according to the *Journal*, "represent the shiftless lazy and improvident among the homesteaders whose sole object in availing themselves of Uncle Sam's gift of farms to all settlers who would promise to cultivate them, appears to be to mortgage the property and live off the loan until they are foreclosed." Further, Populists were "calamity howlers" who besmirched the good name of the state by blaming others for misfortunes that actually derived from their own shortcomings. The *Journal* put much of its

feelings about Populism into a description of one candidate on the "calamity ticket":

Always seeking an office he has neglected his duties in the corn field, and his field and heart has [*sic*] grown up to pigeon grass. He attributes his poverty to the robber tariff, the robber money system, the robber railroads and the plundering land monopolies. To him every man who succeeds is a thief and those who fail are martyrs to an unjust government. His neighbors have prospered, but it recks not to him. . . . If Mr. Stewart will study the economics of agriculture, and profit by it, in the same measure that he has wracked his brain over political economy and lost by it, the world at large will be as well off and he a great deal better.¹¹

Characterization of Populists as lazy ne'er-do-wells prone to blame others for their misfortunes was by no means limited to the *Journal*. Similar descriptions can be found in the *Bee*, in most other Republican newspapers, and in the rhetoric of Republican campaign orators. If politics was discussed in the Gere household in Cather's presence, this stereotype of the Populist must surely have been part of such discussions. The same held true of another home frequented by Cather during her university years, that of Robert E. Moore, the Lincoln banker with whom Cather's father was affiliated in business. An arch-conservative within the Republican party, Moore was elected lieutenant governor at the same time Silas Holcomb, the Populist, won the governorship. Cather's own family in Red Cloud probably shared similar political views. Her father, Charles F. Cather, was in a business—farm loans—that made him a special object of hatred by the Populists. He served the Republican party in a variety of ways in the early 1890s: he was a delegate to a number of party conventions, ran for county supervisor on the Republican ticket and then put in four years in that office, and—for a short time—contributed to the ownership and management of the *Red Cloud Republican*.¹²

Although it must have been nearly impossible to escape from politics or Populism in

Lincoln, certainly in the circles in which Willa Cather moved, her writing for the *Journal* was almost entirely apolitical. One exception was a character sketch that appeared very soon after she began contributing to the paper, on 19 November 1893. She did not identify the subject of the sketch by name, only as a "public official" who "cursed wealth and monopoly, he cursed money makers and money hoarders." "Upon the finger he shook at the crowd," Cather continued, "there glittered a diamond that represented more money than any man there would ever make or spend in all his lifetime." The general treatment suggests Charles Van Wyck, the Populist candidate for governor in 1892, a man of considerable personal wealth who was attacked by the Republican press as "sinister" and "insincere" on the grounds that no person of wealth could possibly subscribe to Populist dogma. A year later, Cather published a highly complimentary sketch of William McKinley, already nationally prominent as a Republican. In January 1895, while arguing that art ought not to carry a sermon in political economy, she took a direct dig at Populist sympathizer Hamlin Garland, who had read one of his short stories at the Omaha Populist convention in 1892.¹³

Not until September 1896, after moving to Pittsburgh, did Cather write at any length on a Nebraska political figure. In an essay entitled "Two Women the World is Watching," she presented sketches of the wives of the two presidential candidates. Her treatment was complex, and by no means one-sided. She described Mary Baird Bryan as "a student and a thinker, a woman burning with enthusiasm, the votaress, perhaps the victim, of great ideals which she believes practicable." Noting that eastern newspapers had criticized Mrs. Bryan for her dress, Cather continued: "It is doubtful if she ever spent ten minutes planning the construction of a gown. But many and many an hour have she and her husband spent by their library fire talking over the future of the West and those political beliefs which may call in question their judgment, but never their sincerity."¹⁴ Cather's complimentary comments on McKinley, and

also her family and personal background, clearly show that she includes herself among those questioning the Bryans' judgment.

The same attitude, and some of the same prose, appears in Cather's next—and last—political essay, "The Personal Side of William Jennings Bryan." Appearing in 1900, when Bryan and McKinley were engaged in a rematch of their 1896 contest, the essay was one of several published under the pseudonym Henry Nickleman. Cather draws Bryan's portrait with a good deal of wit but little admiration. She describes his library in detail and takes care to point out that the "works on political economy were mostly by quacks." Bryan's smile, Cather notes, "won him more votes than his logic ever did." She describes his "dynamic magnetism" as overwhelming: "Living near him is like living near Niagara. The almighty, ever-renewed force of the man drives one to distraction, his everlasting high seriousness makes one want to play marbles." In Bryan, Cather perceived "neither an invincible principle nor an unassailable logic, only melodious phrases, a convincing voice, and a hypnotic sincerity." Describing his book on the 1896 campaign as "an almost unparalleled instance of bad taste," she was quick to add that "his honesty is unquestionable." Bryan, she concludes, "synthesizes the entire Middle West; all its newness and vigor, its magnitude and monotony, its richness and lack of variety, its inflammability and volubility, its strength and its crudeness, its high seriousness and self-confidence, its egotism and its nobility."¹⁵ These traits would, in later years, appear in several of Cather's fictional works, as would her uncomplimentary view of Bryan.

Characters identified as Populists or Bryan supporters appear in only three of Cather's fictional works. In all three, Populism or Bryanism is presented in a negative light. The first to appear, in 1913, *O Pioneers!*, included two characters identified as Bryanites. One is Lou Bergson, who always blusters when he talks about politics. When Carl Linstrum returns to the Divide after an absence of many years, Lou immediately tries to draw him into

a political discussion: "We gave Wall Street a scare in ninety-six, all right, and we're fixing another to hand them. . . . The West is going to make itself heard." Carl first responds jocularly, but that produces anger on Lou's part, so Carl replies rationally, only to provoke a threatening response from Lou. The arrival of Lou's wife cuts off further conversation. The other Bryan supporter can be identified only by implication. Frank Shabata was "always reading about the doings of rich people and feeling outraged. . . . Frank and Lou Bergson had very similar ideas, and they were two of the political agitators of the county."¹⁶

Neither Lou Bergson nor Frank Shabata is responsible for his own material success. Early in the novel, after the death of Lou's father, when hard times come to the Divide, Lou and his brother Oscar want to move to Chicago. "They were meant to follow in paths already marked out for them, not to break trails in a new country." Their sister Alexandra prevails, however, and by her planning and love for the land she succeeds in acquiring extensive holdings for the family. Once Alexandra's planning has resulted in material success for the family, Lou behaves in exactly the way the *Journal* accused Populists of acting: "He neglects his farm to attend conventions and to run for county offices." Lou is not a good farmer; he "always planned to get through two days' work in one, and often got only the least important things done." Frank Shabata, like Lou Bergson, experiences material success without having to work for it. Albert Tovesky, Frank's father-in-law, buys a farm for Frank, so that his daughter Marie may have a decent life. According to Alexandra, Frank is "one of these wild fellows. . . . Frank thinks we don't appreciate him." "Jealous about everything," Frank is "rash and violent" and frequently "outraged." Marie's father, when he first meets Frank, thinks him a stuffed shirt and considers it improper that he won't work on his mother's farm.¹⁷ Neither Frank nor Lou is responsible for his own success, both are jealous of the good fortune of others, both blame others for misfortunes, neither exercises judgment or

reason, and Lou neglects his farm for politics. In all these ways, both reflect many of the characteristics of the stereotypical Populist presented by the Republican press in the early 1890s.

The next Cather character to be explicitly identified with Populism or Bryanism did not appear for nearly twenty years after *O Pioneers!*. Not until "Two Friends," published in 1932 as the concluding segment of *Obscure Destinies*, did Cather again deal explicitly with agrarian politics. Bryanism is central to "Two Friends." The two friends of the title are "the two most prosperous and influential men in our community, the two men whose affairs took them out into the world of big cities. . . . They were secure and established. . . . They were the only men in Singleton who wore silk shirts." The friendship of these "aristocrats," in the eyes of the narrator, is special. They customarily spend their evenings in conversation on the street outside the store owned by one. "Theirs was the only 'conversation' one could hear about the streets." They talk about visits to cities, of plays and concerts; they "made some of the rest of us feel less shut away and small-townish." Neither takes politics very seriously. They "sometimes discussed politics, and joked each other about the policies and pretensions of their respective parties. . . . But each man seemed to enjoy hearing his party ridiculed, took it as a compliment."¹⁸

All this changes, however, when one of the friends, Robert Emmet Dillon, banker and storekeeper, attends the Democratic convention that nominated Bryan for president in 1896. Dillon is converted. He returns to Singleton and holds forth at length "that gold had been responsible for most of the miseries and inequalities of the world; that it has always been the club the rich and cunning held over the poor; and that 'the free and unlimited coinage of silver' would remedy all this." Dillon becomes not just a convert but a proselytizer, donating funds, organizing clubs, driving about the countryside to convince farmers. His conversion changes his whole personality. "Even his voice became unnatural; there was

a sting of come-back in it. His new character made him more like other people and took away from his special personal quality." J. H. Trueman, cattleman, tolerates this change in his friend's personality for a time, but when it appears that the change is permanent, he comments "that a banker had no business to commit himself to a scatter-brained financial policy which would destroy credit," and withdraws his money from Dillon's bank. Bryanism has severed the friendship, and the damage spreads outward in concentric rings. "After that rupture nothing went well with either of my two great men. Things were out of true, the equilibrium was gone." Bryanism, in "Two Friends," is not just an irrational force but also "senselessly" and "accidentally" destructive, just as Frank Shabata had been both irrational and destructive in *O Pioneers!*.¹⁹

Cather's final characterization of a Populist came in "The Best Years," published in 1948 as part of *The Old Beauty and Others*. The story concerns the family of James Grahame Fergusson, a devout Populist and Bryanite, "a ready speaker" and the butt of humor for much of the county: "Alf Delaney declared: 'I like to see anything done well—even talking. If old Ferg could shuck corn as fast as he can rustle the dictionary, I'd hire him, even if he is a Pop.'" Fergusson draws the disdain and provokes the laughter of the community by taking a nap every afternoon, a habit his hard-working neighbors can not understand. Fergusson, however, justifies the habit as important to his thinking, necessary for "working out in his head something that would benefit the farmers of the country more than all the corn and wheat they could raise even in a good year." Much to the amusement of the countryside, he names his farm "Wide Awake Farm," and proclaims that the title is appropriate because "the important crop on that farm was an idea." Cather's account precisely parallels the *Journal's* description of a Populist in 1892: "He is confronted with theories, not conditions. He lives in the realm of speculation, and for every misfortune obtains recompense by cursing the government."²⁰

Like the stereotype of a Populist in the Republican press of the 1890s, like Dillon after his conversion, like Lou Bergson and Frank Shabata, Fergusson cannot talk, even with his own family, without relating everything to politics. "Sometimes he told them what a grasping, selfish country England was. Very often he explained to them how the gold standard had kept the poor man down." Because "experimental farming wasn't immediately remunerative," and because Fergusson's children believe that the community misunderstands their father, they feel "they must do better than other children; better in school, and better on the playground. They must turn in a quarter of a dollar to help their mother out whenever they could." Cather presents us one picture of the family in the 1890s, and another twenty years later. By then, Fergusson has prospered, not because of any work he has done, but because Woodrow Wilson is in the White House and "the Democrats are sure grand job-givers."²¹ Although Fergusson is still a stereotyped Populist—a lazy ne'er-do-well, blaming others for his own misfortunes—the poison is not so damaging as in the case of Dillon and Trueman, and Fergusson's family emerges with more of a commitment to hard work because of his behavior.

While Cather's explicit use of Populism or Bryanism is limited to these three instances, the influence of the political battles of the 1890s may be traced implicitly in other of her works. In *A Lost Lady*, for example, Captain Daniel Forrester comes to financial grief because of his integrity. When a Denver bank fails, Captain Forrester insists that the depositors be paid in full. "The other directors . . . claimed that the bank was insolvent . . . because of a nation-wide financial panic, a shrinking in values that no one could have foreseen. They argued that the fair thing was to share the loss with the depositors; to pay them fifty cents on the dollar." Forrester refuses and pays the depositors' claims in full from his own securities. The affair contains echoes of the debate over silver in the 1890s, when Republican orators argued that the nation must maintain its

fiscal honor by maintaining the gold standard and condemned Bryan for proposing to reduce the value of the dollar by silver coinage. The *Journal*, in 1894, insisted that Nebraska "cannot secure . . . respect more easily than by showing the whole country that the people here stand for the payment of honest debts in honest money."²²

Of all Cather's works, *My Ántonia* shows the most extensive, albeit implicit, influence of her anti-Populist attitudes. *My Ántonia* clearly operates at many levels of understanding, and to suggest the importance of Cather's anti-Populist views is not to detract from other influences on her in its writing. Cather was explicitly anti-Populist in *O Pioneers!*, which preceded *My Ántonia* by a few years, and she was implicitly anti-Populist in "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," an essay written shortly after *My Ántonia*. It is therefore reasonable to search in *My Ántonia* for indications linking the attitudes of *O Pioneers!* with those in "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle." When examined in this light, many of *Ántonia's* experiences fall into a pattern suggesting anti-Populist influence.

Throughout the novel, *Ántonia* is identified both with the land itself and with the pioneer farmer who transformed the land. It is in the latter capacity that *Ántonia* encounters the chief figures of Populist complaint: the land speculator, the grain buyer, the moneylender, and the railroad. All bring her misfortune. Some are portrayed as hyperbolically as in Populist rhetoric, others are developed with greater complexity of character. Some are purely evil, others have their positive attributes as well as being the cause of *Ántonia's* distress. A cursory reading might suggest that Cather is acknowledging the legitimacy of the Populists' complaints, but a more careful study shows that, at each juncture, *Ántonia* (or her family) has options and that she (or they) chooses an option that brings misfortune. Furthermore, a close reading shows that Cather denies not only the legitimacy of the Populists' complaints, but also the efficacy of their solutions. *Ántonia's* misfortunes do not radicalize her (cf. the

impact of a similar series of misfortunes on Jurgis Rudkus in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*), but instead serve as a series of tests through which she develops character. Her misfortunes are a winnowing process that only the fittest could survive.

Ántonia and her family first encounter the land speculator, Peter Krajiek. Krajiek, described as "a fellow countryman" of the Shimerda family, sells the family their farm and charges them more than it is worth. They are dependent upon him as their interpreter, and he "could tell them anything he chose." Krajiek is like the rattlesnake in the prairie dog town—the Shimerdas "kept him in their hole and fed him . . . because they did not know how to get rid of him." They dislike him, "but they clung to him because he was the only human being with whom they could talk or from whom they could get information." The Populists, like the Shimerdas, disliked land speculators; the Omaha platform of 1892 declared: "The land, including all the natural resources of wealth, is the heritage of the people, and should not be monopolized for speculative purposes."²³

Ántonia, sometime later, becomes the "hired girl" in the home of the town's leading grain buyer, Christian Harling. Harling is "a grain merchant and cattle-buyer, . . . generally considered the most enterprising business man in our county. He controlled a line of grain elevators in the little towns along the railroad to the west of us." He casts "an arrogant shadow" and is "autocratic and imperial in his ways. He walked, talked, put on his gloves, shook hands, like a man who felt that he had power." Jim Burden, the narrator, compares Harling to the Austrian nobles of whom Ántonia talks. Ántonia is very happy employed in the Harling household, loves the Harling children, and learns a great deal from Mrs. Harling. Ultimately, however, Mr. Harling discharges Ántonia, after she slaps a young man who tries to kiss her after walking her home one evening. Given the choice of foregoing future evening dances or leaving the Harlings, Ántonia chooses to leave. Harling, a grain buyer and cattle buyer,

belongs to a group who were of great concern to the Populists. The Alliance, and later the Populists, charged that grain buyers and cattle buyers did not give full price for the quality of grain or stock being sold, and one common activity of Farmers' Alliance groups was the establishment of cooperative grain elevators and stock pens, as a means of avoiding the grain and stock buyers.²⁴

After Ántonia's mistreatment by the grain buyer, she turns to the moneylender. She takes a position with Wick Cutter, as purely villainous as any character in Cather's works. "When a farmer once got into the habit of going to Cutter," according to Cather, "it was like gambling or the lottery; in an hour of discouragement he went back." Cutter makes a show of his piety but is a gambler; fond of moral maxims, he is "notoriously dissolute with women." "It was a peculiar combination of old-maidishness and licentiousness that made Cutter seem so despicable." Cutter lays elaborate plans to be alone in the house with Ántonia and to seduce—or rape—her, but is thwarted by even more careful plans made by Grandmother Burden, Jim, and Ántonia. Populists focused their antagonism on moneylenders (like Cutter), as well as on high interest rates and monetary policy, and proposed that the government should provide credit facilities to allow farmers to forego reliance on moneylenders.²⁵

After Ántonia leaves the Cutters, she takes a position at the hotel but suffers no misfortune at the hands of the hotel keeper. Instead, she becomes involved with Larry Donovan, a conductor on the railroad about whom Ántonia speaks "like he was president of the railroad." Donovan holds a high opinion of himself, thinks himself one of the "train-crew aristocrats," and is aloof, cold, and distant toward other men. Ántonia and Donovan plan to marry and she spends an entire summer sewing and buying silverware in preparation. When Donovan's route is changed, he writes her to meet him in Denver. In Denver, Donovan takes advantage of Ántonia. He has been fired and blacklisted for manipulating fares; he

refuses to marry *Ántonia* and leaves her pregnant. Populists attacked the railroad companies for discriminating in their rates and for their political activities, often picturing the latter as defiling the purity of the political process. Their solution was government ownership.²⁶

Ántonia is thus mistreated or victimized, in turn, by characters representing the four most prominent objects of the Populists' anger: land speculators, grain buyers, moneylenders, and the railroads. Did Cather construct this sequence purposefully? Although a definite answer is impossible, it is relevant to consider the real people Cather used as models for these characters. Christian Harling was based on James Miner, who was not a grain buyer but a merchant and cattleman (and who was incidentally also the model for Dillon in "Two Friends"). The model for Donovan was James W. Murphy, a brakeman, who would have had no opportunities for fare manipulation. The model for Wick Cutter was M. R. Bentley, who was in real life a moneylender with a reputation as extreme as that of Cutter in the novel. There is no indication that Cather based the character of Krajiek on a real person.²⁷ In selecting and molding characters for the novel, Cather made conscious choices about the sort of people who would mistreat *Ántonia* and developed characters representative of each of the major Populist complaints.

Although Cather represents these characters unsympathetically in *My Ántonia*, this attitude does not carry over to her other works. Her treatment of Krajiek is wholly negative, but her handling of another land speculator is quite the opposite. In *O Pioneers!*, when hard times come to the Divide, Alexandra convinces her brothers to mortgage their farm and buy out their less farsighted neighbors. When Oscar moans that he wouldn't be able to work that much land, Alexandra reassures him: "The men in town who are buying up other people's land don't try to farm it. . . . Let's try to do like the shrewd ones, and not like these stupid fellows."²⁸ Alexandra understands that one need not personally work the land, that land can be bought on faith, as an investment—as a

speculation. Both Alexandra Bergson and Peter Krajiek are speculators, but Cather treats the former sympathetically for having faith in the land and in the future and she portrays the latter as a villain for cheating the Shimerdas.

A similar pattern of complexity can be found in Cather's attitude toward the railroad. Larry Donovan is drawn without sympathy, but in *A Lost Lady* Cather presents a most attractive railroad magnate. Daniel Forrester builds the railroad and hobnobs with "the railroad aristocracy," including even the president of the railroad. Forrester also figuratively builds the West, bringing culture and gaiety to Sweet Water in the form of his wife Marian. Cather presents this railroad man and bank investor as one of the "dreamers" and "great-hearted adventurers" who had settled the West and created there "the great brooding spirit of freedom, the generous easy life of the great land-holders." The first few pages of *My Ántonia* include a similar characterization of a railroad executive, for Jim Burden is first introduced as "legal counsel for one of the great Western railways," who "loves with a personal passion the great country through which his railway runs and branches. His faith in it and his knowledge of it have played an important part in its development."²⁹ In *Song of the Lark*, it is a simple and generous railroad employee, Ray Kennedy, who makes it possible for Thea Kronborg to escape Moonstone and take music lessons in Chicago.

In *My Ántonia*, the characters who mistreat *Ántonia* or her family represent the major objects of the Populists' wrath, but Cather does not portray these antagonists as a Populist campaigner would have done. A Populist would have seen in each representative a vast concentration of power, before which the individual could only stand helpless. Cather draws each as merely one person, moved by human emotions such as greed (Krajiek, Donovan), lust (Cutter), or simply a desire to maintain decorum (Harling). Their behavior derives not from flaws in the political economy (cf., again, *The Jungle*, or Garland's "Under the Lion's Paw") but from flaws in human nature.³⁰ At crucial

junctures, Cather makes clear that *Ántonia* or her family have choices. They could have evicted Krajiek from their home, but did not because they were dependent upon him. *Ántonia* would not have been discharged from the Harling household had she been willing to limit her social life. She chooses to work for Cutter knowing full well his licentious reputation. She recognizes the dangers involved in her liaison with Donovan, but continues it until he leaves her. While *Ántonia* is mistreated and victimized, and suffers misfortune, it is not because of concentrations of power over which she has no control. To be sure, her family is taken advantage of by Krajiek because of their innocence, and *Ántonia* is similarly "innocent" in her relationship with Donovan.³¹ But she nonetheless has the option, each time, of rejecting the relationship that causes misfortune.

Nor does Cather suggest that the Populist answer to misfortune was appropriate. The Populist solution to the problems posed by the land speculator, the grain buyer, the moneylender, and the railroad was collective action, through government ownership or cooperatives. No such collective response is suggested in *My Ántonia*. Redemption is achieved, not through collective action, but through individual hard work. All summer during her pregnancy, *Ántonia* "did the work of a man on the farm." By being "quiet and steady" she regains some of the respect she has lost. By her willingness to work, her acceptance of her lot, and her refusal to indulge in "calamity howling," *Ántonia* is able to overcome her misfortunes and to build a life that—while short on luxuries—is nonetheless far more productive than Jim Burden could have imagined. Like the land itself, like the pioneer generation, *Ántonia* undergoes harsh tests. Through hard work, she not only recovers from her misfortunes, but also fulfills her early promise to become "a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races."³²

Both *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* present central female characters who struggle with the prairie land—"not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made"—

and who succeed in converting it into productive farm land. The struggle is difficult and the obstacles significant. But for Cather, those who succeed are those like Alexandra, who sets to the task with "love and yearning," or Mrs. Fergusson, who feels that "our best years are when we're working hardest," or *Ántonia*. In 1923 Cather described the same process in an essay, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle":

The rapid industrial development of Nebraska, which began in the latter eighties, was arrested in the years 1893-97 by a succession of crop failures and by the financial depression which spread over the whole country at that time—the depression which produced the People's Party and the Free Silver agitation. These years of trial, as everyone now realizes, had a salutary effect upon the new State. They winnowed out the settlers with a purpose from the drifting malcontents who are ever seeking a land where man does not live by the sweat of the brow. The slack farmers moved on. Superfluous banks failed and money lenders who drove hard bargains with desperate men came to grief. The strongest stock survived, and within ten years those who had weathered the storm came into their reward.

O Pioneers! and *My Ántonia* portray the strongest stock, who weathered the storm. The "malcontents" and "slack farmers" are clearly related to the *Journal's* description of Populists in 1890: "soreheads" and "the shiftless lazy and improvident."³³ For Willa Cather, the Populists and Bryanites were the losers in the struggle for the survival of the fittest.

NOTES

1. For Cather's apolitical attitude, see James Woodress, *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (New York: Pegasus, 1970).

2. John H. Randall III, *The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), pp. 6-12, 75, 150, 207, 234, 274-76; Evelyn J. Hinz, "Willa Cather's Technique and the Ideology of Populism," *Western American*

Literature 7 (Spring 1972): 45-61; see also Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955).

3. Among the many works that have treated Hofstadter's thesis are C. Vann Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," *American Scholar* 29 (1959-60); Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolérant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); Norman Pollack, "Introduction," *The Populist Mind* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1967); Stanley B. Parsons, *The Populist Context: Rural versus Urban Power on a Great Plains Frontier* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973); Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); and Robert W. Cherny, *Populism, Progressivism, and the Transformation of Nebraska Politics: 1885-1915* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981). See also the bibliographies in the various works, especially the list of articles by Pollack in the bibliography of *The Populist Mind*. Probably the most complete treatment of Populism is still John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931).

4. For information on Nebraska Populism, see the works by Cherny, Parsons, and Hicks already cited. See also John D. Barnhart, "The History of the Farmers' Alliance and of the People's Party in Nebraska" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1931); J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *Illustrated History of Nebraska*, 3 vols. (Lincoln: Jacob North, 1905, 1907; Lincoln: Western Publishing and Engraving Company, 1913), vol. 3, chaps. 9-10; and Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska: The Land and the People*, 3 vols. (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1931), vol. 1, chaps. 29-31.

5. Edward K. Brown and Leon Edel, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. 33-37; *Red Cloud Republican*, 30 May 1890, p. 1; *Red Cloud Republican*, 11 July 1890, p. 8; *Red Cloud Chief*, 5 September 1890, p. 4; *Webster County Argus* (Red Cloud), 6 November 1890, p. 1. See all three newspapers from January through election day 1890, passim.

6. *Farmers' Alliance* (Lincoln), 6 Septem-

ber 1890, p. 1; Mary Louise Jeffery, "Young Radicals of the Nineties," *Nebraska History* 38 (March 1957): 25-43, esp. 39-40.

7. For political events in Lincoln, see *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), passim, and the sources cited in note 5; for Cather's activities, see Brown and Edel, chap. 3, especially pp. 54-56. See also James R. Shively, ed., *Writings from Willa Cather's Campus Years* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1950), especially p. 94 (Mary Elizabeth Lease, a Populist from Kansas), p. 127 (Cather's Union literary society associates), and p. 133 (Cather and campus politics).

8. *Farmers' Alliance*, 23 August 1890, p. 2. This summary is based on the sources cited in note 5, plus *Nebraska Party Platforms: 1858-1940* (Lincoln: n.p., 1940) and *Farmers' Alliance* (Lincoln), later *Alliance-Independent*, later *Wealth-Makers*, later *Nebraska Independent* (the major organ of the Populist party in Nebraska) for the period between the convention and the election each year. See Cherny, *Populism, Progressivism, and the Transformation of Nebraska Politics* for other sources too numerous to cite.

9. Brown and Edel, *Willa Cather*, pp. 39, 48, 50; Woodress, *Willa Cather*, pp. 62-65; William M. Curtin, ed., *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 1: 3, 103.

10. Robert W. Furnas, "Brief Biography of and Tribute to the Memory of the Late Charles H. Gere," *Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society* 15 (1907): 158-61; Wayne A. Alvord, "The Nebraska State Journal, 1867-1904" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1934); Victor Rosewater, "The Life and Times of Edward Rosewater," manuscript, Nebraska State Historical Society; Dale J. Hart, "Edward Rosewater and the Omaha Bee in Nebraska Politics" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1938).

11. *Journal*, 14 September 1890, p. 4; 31 July 1890, p. 4; 21 August 1890, p. 4; 26 September 1892, p. 4; and passim, 1890-96.

12. Curtin, *World and Parish*, 1: 98-99; Brown and Edel, *Willa Cather*, p. 55; C. F. Cather and George P. Cather, Willa's uncle, were both elected county supervisors as Republicans in 1891. *Webster County Argus*, 5

November 1891; p. 5. C. F. Cather was a delegate to the county and state Republican conventions in 1890 and a member of the Republican central committee for the twenty-sixth senatorial district. *Webster County Argus*, 24 July 1890, p. 8, and 14 August 1890, p. 8. He was a delegate to the Republican county convention in 1891. *Red Cloud Chief*, 25 September 1891, p. 1. George P. Cather had been a supervisor before 1890 and, unlike C. F., was renominated, but defeated, in 1895. *Red Cloud Chief*, 23 August 1895, p. 2. He was active in local Republican politics in 1896. *Red Cloud Chief*, 18 September 1896, p. 4. The Cather family physician and friend of the family, G. E. McKeeby, who served as model for Dr. Archie in *Song of the Lark*, was also active in Republican politics throughout the early 1890s. *Red Cloud Chief*, 29 July 1892, p. 5; 10 August 1894, p. 4; and 23 August 1895, p. 2.

13. Curtin, *World and Parish*, 1: 17–19, 99, 125–26, 155; compare the treatment of Van Wyck in the *Journal*, 29 September 1892, p. 4, and 25 October 1892, p. 4, or in the *Omaha Bee*, 6 August 1892, p. 2; for Van Wyck, see Marie U. Harmer and James L. Sellers, "Charles H. Van Wyck—Soldier and Statesman," *Nebraska History* 23 (1929): 81–128, 190–246, 322–73.

14. Curtin, *World and Parish*, 1: 308–13.

15. *Ibid.*, 2: 782–89. Bernice Slote has suggested that Henry Nicklemaun may be a precursor of such later characters as Jim Burden; *ibid.*, 2: 722. Note 34, *ibid.*, 2: 782, is obviously in error in suggesting that Cather was referring to Morton's 1892 gubernatorial campaign, for Bryan's first campaign was in 1890. The reference should be to Morton's 1888 congressional campaign.

16. *O Pioneers!* (1913; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry, 1962), pp. 111–13, 149.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48, 56, 98, 119–20, 140, 144–45.

18. "Two Friends," *Obscure Destinies* (1932; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 197, 202, 207, 208.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 222–24, 226–27.

20. "The Best Years," *The Old Beauty and Others* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), pp. 100, 102, 103; *Journal*, 26 September 1892, p. 4.

21. "The Best Years," pp. 104, 105, 127.

22. *A Lost Lady* (1932; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 90; *Journal*, 26 August 1894, p. 1.

23. *My Ántonia* (1918; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry, 1961), pp. 20, 32; Hicks, *The Populist Revolt*, p. 443.

24. *My Ántonia*, pp. 148, 157; Hicks, *The Populist Revolt*, pp. 74–78; Parsons, *The Populist Context*, pp. 68–71; Barnhart, "History of the Farmers' Alliance," pp. 37, 100, 139–46. No cooperative enterprises were undertaken in Webster County; *Red Cloud Republican*, 30 May 1890, p. 1.

25. *My Ántonia*, pp. 209–11; Hicks, *The Populist Revolt*, pp. 20–24, 81–85. The Populist alternative to private banking may be found in the various state platforms calling for postal savings banks, the replacement of national bank notes with treasury notes, government loans at 4 percent interest, and "a system of government banks." *Nebraska Party Platforms*, pp. 165–66, 174, 191.

26. *My Ántonia*, pp. 268, 304; Hicks, *The Populist Revolt*, pp. 60–74. Jim Burden feels an obligation to "go home and look after Ántonia" (p. 268) when she takes up with Donovan, just as his family had looked after the Shimerdas since they first came. But instead he goes to Harvard (located in the heart of the region most Populists saw as the enemy's country), studies law (a parasitic occupation in Populists' eyes), and becomes "legal counsel for one of the great Western railways" (viii). He has put down his family's burden and left Ántonia on her own. The real James Burden, from whom Cather borrowed only his name, was elected Clerk of the District Court as a Republican in 1895; *Red Cloud Chief*, 23 August 1895, p. 2, and 8 November 1895, p. 4.

27. Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1951), pp. 48–49, 66, 82; Brown and Edel, *Willa Cather*, p. 27; Woodress, *Willa Cather*, p. 240. For additional information on Murphy, I am indebted to Viola S. Borton of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, Red Cloud, Nebraska.

28. *O Pioneers!*, p. 68.

29. *A Lost Lady*, p. 106; *My Ántonia*, p. viii.

30. It is tempting to suggest that Cather's view is closer to that of muckrakers such as Lincoln Steffens, who left *McClure's* shortly

before Cather was hired there. Steffen's view, in *Shame of the Cities* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Company, 1904), was that graft and corruption flourished only where good citizens refused to involve themselves, i.e., that the problem was in human nature, not in the political economy.

31. *My Ántonia*, p. 268.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 314, 353.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 7; *O Pioneers!*, p. 65; "The Best Years," p. 136; "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," *The Nation* 117 (5 September 1923): 236-38; *Journal*, 31 July 1890, p. 4, 14 September 1890, p. 4.