

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 1984

Willa Cather Today An Introduction

Mildred R. Bennett

Willa Cather Memorial and Educational Foundation

Susan J. Rosowski

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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



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

Bennett, Mildred R. and Rosowski, Susan J., "Willa Cather Today An Introduction" (1984). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1742.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1742>

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 TODAY

AN INTRODUCTION

The essays in this volume were originally presented in June 1983 at the second national seminar on Willa Cather, "Willa Cather Today." For nearly a week, 125 people gathered in Hastings and Red Cloud, Nebraska, some coming from nearby homes and some traveling from twenty-eight other states, India, China, and Sweden. In doing so, participants had in substance one of the most basic ideas in Cather's writing, that place and movement are complementary. In coming to Webster County, participants affirmed the importance of not only place in Cather's writing but also the journeys that connect lives. In 1981, the theme of the first national seminar on Cather was "Willa Cather and Nebraska"; in 1983, we focused on the complementary aspect of that theme—the various paths that Cather's writing suggests.

Cather was fond of quoting Michelet, "The end is nothing, the road is all." "In fact," she wrote in an essay on Thomas Mann, "the road and the end are literally one." The road and the end—the journey and its destination—come together in Cather's life and writing. Cather is as firmly identified with Red Cloud, Nebraska, as Faulkner is with Oxford, Mississippi, yet her life was filled with movement: as a child she moved with her family to Red Cloud, which she later left to move to Lincoln, Pittsburgh, and New York. While maintaining an apartment in New York, she engaged in travel that was almost migratory: in the summer to Red Cloud and Grand Manan; in the autumn to Jaffrey, New

Hampshire. As she had explored Red Cloud when she was young, so her characters explore Moonstone, Black Hawk, Sweet Water, and Haverford, their walking lending purpose to a scene and color to an individual. Older characters take broader journeys, their travels enabling connections of the Old World and the New, East and West, past and present.

Mona Pers discusses the journey of Cather's books to Sweden, where their fortunes have been affected by an even more complex set of factors than in America: to the influence of publishing houses and politics is added that of translations. Pers notes that Cather's reputation has grown slowly but steadily; she then interprets that slowness by a general tendency among Swedes to overlook American literature and by a pre-World War I orientation by Swedish intellectuals toward Germany. At the same time, other factors contributed to the growth of Cather's reputation: graceful translations appeared (Signe Undset, sister of Sigred Undset, translated three of Cather's novels), and readers responded to Cather's authenticity in treating the Swedish immigrant personality.

Next Susan J. Rosowski takes a journey of the mind to antebellum Virginia to discuss *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as a Gothic novel in which Cather focuses on the dark possibilities that run as an undercurrent through her earlier writing. Rosowski suggests that this last novel, often dismissed as escapist, may be the most directly political of Cather's writing and

demonstrates that through it we may more fully recognize the Gothicism of the Nebraska fiction.

By interpreting Cather's Nebraska writing within the literary traditions of Norris, Howells, and James, John J. Murphy traces an intellectual journey. Cather's early stories reveal close ties to naturalism; in them, Cather wrote of a primitive midwestern frontier that lent itself to the characteristics of naturalism, such as a stress on environment. Later, as if in counterpoint to the influence of the young naturalists and the Nebraska experience, Cather wrote of a Jamesian perceiving artistic consciousness making rather than responding to its world. By the time she wrote *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, Cather fused the two literary worlds, enclosing her naturalistic materials within Jamesian frames.

Marilyn Arnold discusses Cather's last volume of short stories, *The Old Beauty and Others*, noting that in them Cather turns from her early stress on youthful exuberance to admire survivors and endurance. Arguing against the assumption that Cather's last works reveal a "surrender to nostalgia and [a] wish for death," Arnold interprets three stories in detail. In "The Best Years," Cather pays tribute to stoicism, love, and acceptance of loss; and in "Before Breakfast," she reaches "a new faith in nature's and humanity's ability to endure."

In a photoessay Lucia Woods evokes for the reader a personal journey through Cather's world of light and shadow. Cather wrote that an artist "cannot . . . paint those relationships of light and shade—he can only paint some emotion they give him," and in this spirit Woods has created photographs "to express [her] response to a particular place, feeling, or moment." Woods's photographic journey moves the reader through places of which Cather wrote: an early photograph presents Nebraska, later ones New Mexico, France, and Virginia.

L. Brent Bohlke discusses ways in which Cather combined her Nebraska experiences with other ones in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. For her southwestern novel Cather used Fathers Jean Lamy and Joseph Machebeuf as her models, but she drew also upon her knowledge of the Right Reverend George Allen Beecher of

Hastings and the Reverend John Mallory Bates, rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Red Cloud. Bohlke provides background about these two Nebraska clergymen, noting parallels between them and Cather's characters. Although Bishop Beecher traveled by horse and buggy through the Nebraska panhandle and Latour by mule in the southwestern desert, both were on a frontier, and their experiences were similar.

In a final essay, a summing up, James E. Miller, Jr., views Cather studies from the vantage point of thirty-five years of personal involvement. From 1947, when he first read *My Antonia* in a graduate seminar, to 1983, Miller saw Cather studies grow "from a cottage craft to an international industry," and he offers his views of that growth. By using representative feminist, sociological, and psychoanalytic works that may "appear to be striking out on new paths, [but] actually lead . . . to dead ends," Miller comments upon criticism he believes has gone astray. He then turns to areas he considers especially promising and to aspects of a book that still challenges critics—*The Professor's House*, a work he places with *My Antonia* as Cather's masterpieces.

These seven essays represent just some of the paths apparent in Cather studies today. Other discussions at the seminar suggested other directions: Patricia Yongue interpreted the aristocratic theme in Cather's writing; on one panel, speakers explored women's studies and Cather, and on another, speakers focused on Cather and the classroom. What emerges from such a conference is the realization that with Cather, major subjects remain to be explored.

"New materials or studies always seem to deepen the road or extend the design," Bernice Slote wrote in *The Kingdom of Art*. Behind Cather studies remains the influence of Bernice Slote, who first charted so many territories. The writers of these essays wish to dedicate this volume—as they did the seminar itself—to her memory.

MILDRED R. BENNETT
Willa Cather Memorial and
Educational Foundation

SUSAN J. ROSOWSKI
University of Nebraska-Lincoln