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Review of *The Troll Garden* By Willa Cather

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Troll Garden. By Willa Cather. Edited by James Woodress. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983. Notes, Textual Commentary, Emendations, Table of Revisions, Word Divisions. xxx + 176 pp. \$15.95.

In the introduction to this variorum edition of Cather's first collection of stories, James Woodress, distinguished American literature scholar and Cather biographer, points out that Cather regarded her short fiction as her literary apprenticeship and wrote few stories after she began publishing novels. One could also observe that Cather did not develop the genre significantly and accordingly is infrequently anthologized. At the same time, it should be pointed out that her stories are important because they anticipate the novels thematically and, perhaps more importantly, because they provide us with a venue for the development of her craft.

That interest is particularly well served by this new volume, which records all the changes Cather made in the stories and allows us to observe the author refining and polishing her work. For some stories there are as many as four versions: magazine publication, *The Troll Garden* (1905), *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920), and *The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather* (1937-41). Sometimes revisions are a matter of sonority: "gentle bitterness" becomes "quiet bitterness"; or sometimes a matter of clarification: "table" becomes "side table," "linen" becomes "new shirts." In other places Cather was toning down excess: "orgy of grief" becomes simply "behaviour." Revisions of "A Wagner Matinee" reflect family objections to Cather's creation of an unflattering portrait of her aunt, and we find her deleting passages that make Aunt Georgiana of the story appear grotesque. The largest section of the "Table of Revisions" records variants for "A Death in

the Desert," which Cather continually reworked but finally dropped from *The Novels and Stories* as unsatisfactory. Because almost no known manuscripts are available, these variants in the published versions of Cather's short stories provide scholars with a rare opportunity to assess the author's writing process.

Cather's fiction is full of subtle allusions based on her wide reading, and Woodress provides a valuable set of notes to the text. For example, he identifies Lucretius as the likely source for the phrase "the swift feet of the runners" in "A Death in the Desert" and gives explanations of unfamiliar names and places such as Rudel of Tripoli and the Ecole des Chartes. A minor point: "The Baggage Coach Ahead" in "A Death in the Desert" is not a fictitious title, as Woodress notes, but was a popular song composed by the black songwriter and railroad porter Gussie L. Davis in 1896. This sentimental tearjerker evokes the grief of a widower and child for their loved one whose body is on the train. Cather's mortally ill heroine is rejecting such sentimentality. Cather's misquotation of the title, which is actually "In the Baggage Coach Ahead," probably accounts for the editor's difficulty in tracking it down.

Woodress has collated Cather's texts and recorded the variants with meticulous care. There is also a list of emendations introduced into the copy text and a list of word divisions. But the scholarly apparatus, as the dust jacket states, in no way intrudes on the text of the stories themselves. This is a fine piece of scholarship and a worthy addition to the University of Nebraska Press library of books by and about Willa Cather.

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