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## Willa Cather's American Gothic *Sapphira And The Slave Girl*

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# WILLA CATHER'S AMERICAN GOTHIC

## SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL

SUSAN J. ROSOWSKI

Willa Cather's plains novels provide the lens through which readers approach her canon. Starting with *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, *A Lost Lady*, and the other Nebraska novels, critics have identified her major themes (the noble pioneer, the frontier, the creative imagination) and described her development (generally some version of an initial optimism over the frontier period followed by an elegiac lament for the pioneer past). From such a viewpoint, Cather's last book, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, seems an aberration, which, if treated at all, is seen as an escape into a pre-Civil War southern setting, remote from Cather's major writing (that is, the plains writing). It is time, I believe, to give our attention to this, the most neglected novel by Willa Cather, and recognize that *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, far from being in a class by itself, is the culmination of ideas that run through the earlier books, capable of standing with other major novels by Cather.

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Reexamination of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* begins with the consideration of certain similarities found throughout Cather's writing, one of which is a romantic celebration of the imagination as a means of reconciling dualities of human existence. The most memorable passages of Cather's novels present moments of transcendence, which affirm that universal truths exist and that through the imagination we can experience them: Alexandra Bergson joining with the Genius of the Divide, Thea Kronborg with art in Panther Canyon, and Jim Burden recognizing Ántonia as a mythic earth mother. In the single scene most widely recognized as Cather's, when Ántonia emerges from a fruit cave with her children, Jim does not see her simply as she appears—a woman with grizzled hair, calloused hands, and missing teeth; he sees her also as a symbol of fertility and goodness. Later Jim reflects that such an experience is one "we recognize by instinct as universal and true," in which "a look or a gesture . . . somehow revealed the meaning in common things."<sup>1</sup>

But the extreme intensity of the romantic impulse toward resolution suggests a fear that final revelations may be denied and universal truths unattainable. These two impulses comprise two sides of romanticism—the optimistic

movement toward resolution in a higher order, and the pessimistic impulse, seen when resolution is thwarted and irreconcilables triumph. As G. Richard Thompson notes, "The Gothic is the dark counterforce to optimistic Romanticism" because it "begins with irreconcilable dualities and, as a form, acknowledges the triumph of paradox and ambiguity—the impossibility of ultimate synthesis."<sup>2</sup> Acknowledgment of irresolution underlies the classic Gothic effect of reversal, which appears in the claptrap of low Gothic as well as in the high Gothic of Brontë, Poe, and James: apparent safety is revealed to be illusory, beauty to be grotesque, and good to be evil. The heroine of the Gothic romance, fleeing from the dark villain, sees ahead the cloak of a rescuer and runs toward him in relief, only to see him turn (or drop his hood). She then realizes that she has approached the villain in disguise. The spectator of a medieval church sees carving that from a distance appears graceful, but on closer view realizes it consists of writhing snakes and demons. The viewer of a Piranesi prison scene sees stairs that appear to offer escape, but upon following them, realizes they lead nowhere.<sup>3</sup>

Such reversals are basic to Cather's plains novels. In *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra's ecstasy on the Divide is followed by the love story of Marie and Emil, an American version of Keats's Gothic poem "The Eve of St. Agnes," to which Cather has added a "living" corpse and a dark graveyard in a storm. As Cather noted, *The Song of the Lark* resembles Oscar Wilde's "The Portrait of Dorian Grey," a story of a psychological double in which an initially desirable new self grows to monstrous proportions and threatens to devour a former one.<sup>4</sup> In *My Antonia* the apparently idyllic frontier town of Black Hawk contains Wick Cutter, who threatens Antonia with rape in action strongly reminiscent of the stock Gothic thriller. In *One of Ours* Claude Wheeler searches for "something splendid" and finds himself in a nightmarish world of trench warfare, where swimming holes contain corpses and hands reach out from the grave. And in *A Lost Lady*, the "noble pioneer" Captain Forrester is replaced by one

of the purest grotesques in American fiction, Ivy Peters, as the man who wields power over Marian Forrester. In each book a reversal creates the effect basic to Gothic, of anxiety when apparent security gives way to danger and pleasure to horror.

In her last two novels, Cather focused on the irreconcilable contradictions that had appeared in, but were not central to, her earlier plains novels. *Lucy Gayheart* has strong ties to the dracula myth, in which a pure young heroine is drawn into the power of a dark, brooding figure who feeds upon her youth to stave off his own world-weariness. But to my mind the narrative line and the characterization, especially of Lucy, are insufficient to carry the metaphoric meaning, and Lucy Gayheart becomes to the reader as she was to Cather—a rather silly girl of whom we grow impatient.<sup>5</sup> *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is another matter, however, and the response it evokes is quite different from that of Cather's other books. In *Sapphira* we never experience that flash of recognition so characteristic of Cather's writing—that moment, for example, when reading *My Antonia* we feel, "Ah—that is Antonia." When we put down *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, it is with the sense that Sapphira Dodderidge has remained forebodingly remote, a chilly character from whom we want to turn, yet one so powerful that we are unable to do so.

What we find in the criticism is a startling silence. There simply has not been much written about this book, as if, one critic wrote, readers have run out of steam when they reach it. Of the essays that have been published, one makes no attempt to deal with the novel critically.<sup>6</sup> The second is, to my mind, unsatisfactory: unlike Lavon Mattes Jobes, I do not find Sapphira a sympathetic character, at least until her last scene, and then she is essentially changed from the Sapphira who first intrigued me.<sup>7</sup> A third essay is solid and enlightening. The book certainly contains the religious metaphors Richard Gianonne writes of in "Willa Cather and the Unfinished Drama of Deliverance," and his discussion of it as a threefold movement from "enslavement, through struggle

to release" is useful.<sup>8</sup> But major questions remain concerning the power of *Sapphira*, the darkness of her action against Nancy, the disturbing effect of the novel, and its place in Cather's canon.

At first glance, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, set in 1856, does seem remote from Cather's earlier writing. The surface of the narrative has its own appeal, as E. K. Brown and Leon Edel note in their discussion of it as "a study of manners" in which "always there is the unspoken comment: was it not a gracious and wise way, would it not have been a pleasure to live in that place at that time?"<sup>9</sup> Cather remembers social conventions, gestures, and verbal nuances from the Virginia she knew and heard about in her childhood, and she describes them in such rich detail that the novel resonates with "a culture's hum and buzz of implications," thus seeming to meet Lionel Trilling's famous definition of a novel of manners.<sup>10</sup> Details from the past weave through the book: the fichu Sapphira wears to church, the peacock feather flybrush the servant girl waves over the dining table, the shawl pin Henry Colbert uses. The narrator tells how ice cream is made in summer, and how rags are dyed, then woven into carpets; she explains that any food carried in a gourd from the big kitchen to one of the cabins is not questioned, for "gourd vessels were invisible to good manners."<sup>11</sup> The effect is to heighten the sense of a past so distant it must be interpreted, a mannered world appealingly quaint and safely remote.

Yet this is also a world of unsettling contradictions, where a graceful facade of civilization covers actions of dark cruelty, and apparent clarity reveals ambiguity. To read this book is to move through layers of meaning that appear solid, then prove unsatisfactory and give way to another: beneath the calm, mannered surface, Sapphira's attempt to bring about the rape of her slave girl is unmistakably evil. By making this the main action of the novel, Cather focused on the threat of violence she had merely suggested in previous books. To do so, she drew upon the Gothic tradition, placing within her study of manners the familiar plot of an inno-

cent young woman trapped within a castle and sexually threatened by its villainous owner. Cather makes the conventions her own, of course: she transplants the castle to America, and she makes its owner female. But Gothic elements remain, and they are the fiber from which the novel is made.

Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert is a literary cousin of the aristocratic hero-villain who lives in proud exile, a law unto himself. In defiance of the role society would assign to her as a twenty-four-year-old unmarried woman, the aristocratic Sapphira Dodderidge built a large manor house in Back Creek Valley, married a miller, and moved with her husband and her score of slaves into a self-imposed exile. There, in further defiance—this time to the Back Creek community that was fundamentally suspicious of slavery—she created a suspended world within which her power was unchallenged. Sapphira's control of that world reveals contradictions in her nature, for she acts with "shades of kindness and cruelty which seemed . . . purely whimsical" (pp. 219–20). In her is combined a baffling mixture of qualities: her courage, fortitude, and independence are heroic; at the same time, she is capricious, cold, even malevolent. Most of all, she is profoundly ambiguous. As her husband and daughter testify, other people do not understand Sapphira. It is in her ambiguity that Sapphira is most clearly a literary cousin of the complex Gothic hero-villains, "impressively grandiose characters whose undoubted stature is compounded of dark aspirations and great force of character."<sup>12</sup>

Like a god, Sapphira presides over the Mill House, expressing contradictory impulses through her surrogates: Till represents her impulse for order and Martin that for chaos. Her home, too, is an extension of her nature, a Gothic setting adapted to the New World. As early as 1799, Charles Brockden Brown lamented the absence in America of castles, labyrinthian structures that could represent the recesses of the mind.<sup>13</sup> In American literature, castles were replaced by manor houses, with the similar function of projecting their inhabitants' minds. The Mill House does so in several ways.

In the contrast between its orderly facade and the "helter-skelter" private reality behind it, it contains contradictions between the public and private dimensions of Southern society—and of its owner, Sapphira. Built on the Mount Vernon pattern familiar to all Virginians, it is a symbol of the Southern caste system of which Sapphira is a product.

But this was a Southern caste system that in 1856 was dying, and the Mill House, despite the "air of settled comfort and stability" (p. 41) of its parlor, has the qualities of a crypt. It is situated deep in a wooded valley, as though underground: around it the earth rises like walls, and within it there is, as Till says, the feeling of being "buried" (p. 72). An atmosphere of death and decay hangs about it, in the cold and damp that permeate it and in the rains that seem incessant, making roads impassable and further isolating its inhabitants. Unless fires are lighted to keep their invasion at bay, disfiguring spots appear on the walls, reminders of the dissolution that threatens constantly.

Within the Mill House is entombed a vanishing society that remains in signs that no longer have meaning—linen and silver for parties not given and manners that "have little chance here" (p. 69). It also contains Sapphira, a vestige of her former self, now confined to the wheelchair constructed for her by the coffin maker and attended by mournful Till, old Washington, and "shrivelled-up," mummylike Jeff (p. 33). In such a house Nancy is an anomaly, and Sapphira's action against her has the symbolic dimensions of age against the innocence and beauty of a girl untouched by death.

As Sapphira carries out her plan against Nancy, the house becomes an ominous labyrinth in which the girl is trapped, complete with stock Gothic elements: ancestral secrets; hints of incest; long, drafty, dark halls; and creaking stairs. The action itself is strikingly close to the standard Gothic one, as evident from a synopsis: the master of a large manor house, living in proud and lonely exile from society, seeks the ruin of a beautiful and innocent young woman. The girl is brought to the manor house, where

her would-be seducer is "after [her] night an' day" (p. 216). She is especially afraid at night when, lying in her sleeveless chemise on her straw pallet, she can hear the creak of his stealthy barefoot steps on the stairs and passageways of the drafty manor: she knows that if she falls asleep, the villain will slip into her bed. She has only her wit to rely upon, for the servants of the manor are under the control of their master. Although she has been able to employ ruses to escape the rake's clutches, her eventual ruin seems inevitable. As she realizes the gravity of her situation, her desperation mounts until she looks on suicide as the only way she can protect her virtue. Fortunately, however, a rescuer intervenes, who under the cover of the dark of the moon helps her escape to safety.

This basic plot is so firmly presented that we respond to it as Gothic, though we may not consciously recognize it as such. Certainly, Cather embeds the conventional plot in an extremely loose, even casual narrative: Martin Colbert doesn't appear until halfway through the book, and at times we forget about him entirely as Cather digresses with stories within stories and characters unrelated to the main action. But this, too, is characteristic of the Gothic, the "proper plot" of which is "a series of intertwined stories held together by some loose unifying pattern," for the loose narrative enables the essential effect of suddenness or surprise.<sup>14</sup>

And so we move from one layer to the next, past manners, characterization, and action, to realize that in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* Cather establishes an emotional pattern of disruption by which she explores the horror of estrangement and the psychology of evil. Here, where the grotesque constantly threatens to disrupt apparently normal situations, dark revelations are as central as sunny ones were to Cather's early novels. Like the young victim-heroine familiar to Gothic novels, Nancy is caught in a world of bewildering transformations. She is the innocent victim of changes within her body, her developing sexuality that brings upon her the jealousy of her mistress and

the pursuit of Martin. The familiar world about her has become nightmarish: the house that was her home has become threatening; the mistress who favored her has become cold and distant; the guest whom she welcomed has turned into her would-be rapist; the master who treated her with such kindness avoids her; even the cherry tree where she felt herself safely hidden turns into a trap when the man she believes only young and foolish violently turns upon her. Nancy's terror focuses upon the threat of rape by Martin, the action that links sexuality to questions of power and powerlessness in the manner of the Gothic. But her anxiety concerns her estrangement from all she had once depended upon.

Transformations threatening the other characters take different forms. The miller, Henry Colbert, is an enlightened person haunted by a demonic double, his "family inheritance" of a carnal sense that is the "bad blood in the Colberts" (pp. 191-92). As Nancy feels an alien in her own home, so Henry fears losing himself and becoming his dark counterpart, whom he sees embodied in his licentious nephew, Martin. His horror is that "he had begun to see through Martin's eyes. Sometimes in his sleep that preoccupation with Martin, the sense of almost being Martin, came over him like a black spell" (p. 209).

As befitting the complex hero-villain, Sapphira is more ambiguous than the other characters, an ambiguity Cather maintains by seldom revealing her character's thoughts. Yet she gives to Sapphira one revelation scene, important because it so fully expresses the anxiety that runs through the novel. Following the burial of her oldest servant, Sapphira retires to her room where, alone, "her usual fortitude seemed to break up altogether. She reached for it, but it was not there. Strange alarms and suspicions began to race through her mind," and she begins to question her servants' loyalty, then her husband's, until, "scarcely breathing, overcome by dread," she almost loses consciousness. Finally, she breaks the spell by ringing the bell to call Nancy, whose "sleepy, startled voice" reestablishes the familiar: "It

was over. Her shattered, treacherous house stood safe about her again. She was in her own room, wakened out of a dream of disaster" (pp. 105-7).

The irony is that Sapphira's "dream of disaster" is the reality, her sense of safety the illusion, for the threat that the familiar will fall away and reveal a grotesque reality is pervasive in Sapphira's world. By presenting seemingly casual digressions, then including in them a dark twist, Cather suggests there is no escape from the irrational, which without warning can break through the ordinary world we depend upon. Stories within stories present a past that disrupts an apparently serene present. Till appears as a highly competent housekeeper, a figure of calm and order; only later do we learn that in early childhood she saw her mother burn to death. Jezebel first appears as a venerable matriarch, a figure of wisdom and justice, and only later do we realize that she "saw her father brained and her four brothers cut down" (p. 90) by the slave traders who captured her, then brought her to America under the most brutal conditions.

Similarly, in idyllic digressions that offer an apparent release from the world of the Mill House, the irrational threatens, usually in the form of underworld figures. For example, when the Colberts' daughter, Rachel, leaves the valley to visit Mrs. Ringer on Timber Ridge, she believes she is leaving behind the troubling ambiguities of the Mill House and plans to enjoy herself in a simple world of natural good manners. But her visit is interrupted when she is called to an ugly scene of torture in which she sees a young boy stripped to the waist and bound to a tree, about whom three men are lounging, one "laughing and cracking a lash of plaited cowhide thongs" (p. 127). This is Buck, for whom the expression "a-ctin' devilish" takes on ominous significance: indeed, Cather introduces and closes his brief scene with numerous references to his "deviltry." Buck is one of those minor characters in Cather's writing who resonate with symbolic significance. With his mean, mocking laugh, his whip, and the "thick fleece of red hair on his chest

and forearms" showing through his opened shirt, it is as though in Buck a demon reality is thrusting through the human facade.

The overall effect of these disruptions is that this novel, which seems to offer a retreat into the past, contains the distinctly modern dilemma of individuals groping for meaning in an estranged world. Sapphira most fully illustrates the horror of an alienated life of empty forms. She lives in exile, of course, but in other, equally important ways, she is separated from transcendent values that liberate. Sapphira is the only one of Cather's major characters to lack a finely developed aesthetic sense. There is nothing in her even remotely resembling Alexandra Bergson's response to the beauty of the land, Thea Kronborg's to music, Antonia Shimerda's to people, Myra Henshawe's to music and religion, or Cecile Auclair's to domestic ritual. As Rachel recognizes, Sapphira "was entirely self-centered" (p. 220). Rather than turning to culture, nature, or religion as a means by which she might be "dissolved into something complete and great," Sapphira uses each to establish and maintain her personal power.<sup>15</sup> She uses manners as a camouflage: her laugh, her tone of voice, the topics she introduces in conversation and the letter she writes to Martin—all reflect her capacity for manipulation. She does drive out into nature when the wild laurel is in bloom, but we learn of these drives not that she perceived the beauty about her but only that she knew she looked to advantage when she stopped to visit with her neighbors. Even her religion seems hollow. In her annual Easter visit to her family, Sapphira "attended all the services of Christ Church," but in Cather's gallery of religious characters (recall Myra Henshawe's private talks with her priest and solitary death, holding her crucifix; Fathers Latour and Vailant's spiritual commitment; St. Peter's description of Easter services), Sapphira is decidedly superficial: "She was a comely figure in the congregation, clad in black silk and white fichu. . . . Her serene face and lively, shallow blue eyes smiled at old friends from under a black velvet bonnet, renewed or 'freshened' yearly by the town milliner. . . . No Dodderidge

who ever sat in that pew showed her blood to better advantage" (pp. 28–29).

Looking for a saving human nature and finding none, we reach the next Gothic twist, for we realize that the character initially presented as a lady, then as a hero-villain, is a grotesque. Swollen by illness until she has become bloated, an invalid so long she is wax-white, Sapphira is a nightmarish life-in-death figure. Only her eyes would not be affected by her disease, and Cather leads the reader to look to them for the living person imprisoned within the corpse-like shell—"but the eyes themselves were clear; a lively greenish blue,"—then adds the grotesque twist, "with no depth" (p. 15). Her "shallow eyes," the characteristic most identified with Sapphira, suggest the inner blankness of a woman from whom a moral sense is missing.

This, then, is the woman who is, as her husband says, "the Master" of the Mill House. The house, the servants, their visitor—all are extensions of her and her undisputed power, a power as ambiguous as her nature. Initially her actions against Nancy seem motivated by jealousy, the understandable suspicions of a woman too long confined. Yet once again reversal occurs when Cather introduces quite another motive, that of diversion. Observing the conflict about her, Sapphira "laughed softly. It was almost as good as a play, she was thinking" (p. 199). Her carelessness about the lives of those dependent upon her is perhaps the most chilling aspect of her action against Nancy, for there is in it the inhuman quality of a cat playing with a mouse, which leads to "that surrealistically horrible recognition of a world of moral chaos where only power has meaning."<sup>16</sup>

Sapphira's power creates a whirlpool effect, a vortex of energy against which other characters seem helpless, and tension mounts over whether someone won't oppose positive human values to the evil that is occurring. As Sapphira's husband, Henry is the one most suited to do so, yet though he is painfully aware of Nancy's danger, he exhibits at best weakness, at worst sophistry. Upon learning of Martin's designs against Nancy, he declares, "I'll look after her" (p. 191), then shrinks "from seeing her at

all" (p. 193). His daughter's question, "'Why don't you do something to save her?'" (p. 225) is a quietly sharp indictment of his struggle. When at last he provides the means for Nancy's escape, contradictions undermine the act: his money enables Nancy to escape rape, but in receiving it his daughter must act like a thief, reaching through an open window at night and taking the bills from his coat pocket. Other characters are willfully blind (believing "her first duty was to her mistress," Nancy's mother, Till, "shut her eyes to what was going on" [p. 219]), ineffectual (Washington is too old to help Nancy), or unsympathetic (the cook Lizzie and her shiftless daughter, Bluebell, are vindictive against Nancy for her earlier favoritism from Sapphira). Even Reverend Fairhead, a good man of God, is unable to hold his own against Sapphira and is banished from the Mill House, albeit under the polite guise of not being invited back.

As the courageous lover helps the Gothic heroine to escape, so Rachel Blake, the abolitionist daughter of Sapphira and Henry, helps Nancy to leave the estranged world of the Mill House and join the human community. Their journey is an ascent from the underworld: Nancy is driven in a wagon of death, containing a coffin, past a tavern filled with drunken miscreants—figures of social disorder and misrule—then transported by a silent ferryman over a roaring river to the opposite shore, where she is met by a freed black preacher who speaks to her with "the voice of prophecy" (p. 239) and welcomes her into a community of Friends, telling her "'Dey ain't strangers, where you're goin', honey'" (pp. 238–39). And so Nancy passes out of Back Creek Valley, leaving behind Rachel calling farewell to the departing chaise.

Nancy's escape brings release from the Mill House. It does not, however, resolve the contradictions within it. Rachel returns to her home, Sapphira orders her not to call again, and as Sapphira withdraws into proud isolation, silence descends. Here, too, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* follows the Gothic pattern: the spectator/reader withdraws from the suspended world in which Frankenstein continues to pur-

sue his monster, the body of Captain Ahab remains tied even in death to the white whale, and Sapphira continues to rule within the Mill House. Ambiguities are unresolved, and the threat of the irrational continues, reified in a "dark autumn" during which rains come and disease spreads. Sapphira worsens, clearly dying; Rachel's two daughters become critically ill with diphtheria. It is as though without the youth and innocence of Nancy, the world that remains is helpless before death.

When it finally comes, the resumption of life is as inexplicable as its suspension, more understandable as an aesthetic impulse to reestablish harmony than as character motivation or plot development. Standing outside Rachel's house, Reverend Fairhead witnesses the return of a divine presence to a world from which it had departed: he sees an unearthly "white figure" drift through the room and take nourishment and recognizes the ill Mary, who had been forbidden by the doctor to take food or liquid. He is transfixed by the feeling that "there was something solemn in what he saw through the window, like a Communion service" (p. 259). The act signals a reassertion of the sacred into a world that had been estranged from it, the communion an affirmation that Christ's body and blood are present again as an expression of divine life in community.

Following the rejoining with the divine is a rejoining with the human community. First sending help to her daughter, then inviting her to live at the Mill House, Sapphira becomes, in effect, another character: she is no longer a Promethean hero-villain or a grotesque, but instead a woman facing death who gathers her family about her. Though presumably more deformed than ever by advancing dropsy, Sapphira is no longer identified by the bloated body of a swollen corpse or the shallow eyes of moral vacancy. Her husband articulates the change in her, reflecting that her "composure which he had sometimes called heartlessness . . . now seemed to him strength" (p. 268). Speaking for the first time of her approaching death, Sapphira and Henry demonstrate compassion and love through a physical harmony absent



from previous scenes: Sapphira "reached out and caught his hand"; she "gripped his cold fingers" and "put her hand on her husband's drooping shoulder"; she "felt his tears wet on her skin." He in turn "reached out for her two hands and buried his face in her palms," then leaned "against her chair, his head on her knee" (pp. 265-67).

In an epilogue Cather completes the return to the human community by advancing twenty-five years and including herself as a child observing the reunion of Nancy and Till. Continuity replaces the static time and suspended reality at the heart of the book, and the familiar world is reestablished. But it is a familiar world behind which exists dark ambiguity, for Sapphira's contradictions remain unresolved and the evil of her act unexplained. That is what distinguishes Gothic from romantic. As Robert Hume writes:

Gothic and romantic writing spring alike from a recognition of the insufficiency of reason to explain and make comprehensible the complexities of life. We may distinguish between Gothic and romantic in terms of what they do within this situation. The imagination, Coleridge tells us, reveals its presence "in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities." Romantic writing reconciles the discordant elements it faces, resolving their apparent contradictions imaginatively in the creation of a higher order. Gothic writing . . . has no such answers and can only leave the "opposites" contradictory and paradoxical.<sup>17</sup>

In her response to epistemological ambiguities, Cather resembled her Old World predecessors. But *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is an American Gothic in which the irrational assumes distinctively New World forms. Cather drew upon pre-Civil War American history to present evil in the form of slavery, then developed her subject by ideas relevant to events preceding World War II. The fall of 1937, during which Cather began work on *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, was a time of increasingly ominous tension

pointing to the war that Cather felt would be "the end of all."<sup>18</sup> One of Cather's most extended discussions of this tension was in a letter she wrote to Sinclair Lewis in January 1938, when she was in the critical early creative stages of her new novel: writing at length of events in Europe, Cather cast her comments in terms of conceptions of evil. She was concerned, she wrote, over Americans' gullibility and misplaced kindness, seen in evasive excuses for Stalin (that he must have good qualities) and Mussolini (that he did make Italy attractive for tourists), and she feared Americans would not wake up until mortally threatened. Americans tend to refuse to believe evil exists, she summarized—and that may be the problem.<sup>19</sup>

This is, of course, the idea Cather put at the heart of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and for which she used the Gothic, a literary form that expresses "the psychological problem of evil."<sup>20</sup> When we look beyond the Virginia setting and pre-Civil War date, we realize that somewhat ironically, Cather's last novel, long dismissed as escapist, may well be the most directly political of all her writing. In its central tension over the inaction of characters against the increasingly disturbing and, finally, evil action of a powerful central figure, Cather's novel unexpectedly resembles nothing so much as Thomas Mann's story, "Mario and the Magician."<sup>21</sup>

Finally, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* has retrospective implications. Our tendency is to use an author's early works to interpret later ones, yet to forget that a canon forms a whole, just as do the chapters in a single novel, in which the later parts illuminate their predecessors. I began this discussion by suggesting that *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is best read as a culmination of ideas running through Cather's earlier writing; I wish to end it by suggesting that the reverse is also true. For the moment, let us imagine that we read *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* first, rather than last, and then read the other books through the lens it provides. Doing so enables us to respond far more fully to the threat of the irrational that runs through

Cather's writing, and to recognize a long line of characters that are to a lesser or greater degree shades of Sapphira: Wick Cutter, Bayliss Wheeler, Ivy Peters, Buck Scales. The list goes on, but one example will suffice.

*My Antonia*, one of Cather's sunniest books, contains Wick Cutter, a small-town Gothic villain who seems an early version of Sapphira, his plot against Antonia a foreshadowing of hers against Nancy. Like the Old World castle and the New World manor house, the Cutter house is an extension of its owner, a suspended world in which power is unchallenged. Though situated in Black Hawk, it is "buried in thick evergreens" and secluded.<sup>22</sup> The brooding horror over what occurs within it is heightened because, located in the middle of a thoroughly familiar American small town, its very presence refutes our assumptions about the security of ordinary human existence.

Together, the Cutters are a composite monster type of the grotesque in whom realms usually separated are fused.<sup>23</sup> Wick Cutter erases separations between male and female habits (he brushes his whiskers as a woman brushes her hair), human and inhuman (his face contains teeth so white they appear "factory made"), and virtue and vice (he was "fastidious and prim about his house," yet dissolute with women). As Jim recognizes, "It was a peculiar combination of old-maidishness and licentiousness that made Cutter seem so despicable" (pp. 210-11). Mrs. Cutter, the physical manifestation of her husband's monstrous nature, has an appearance wildly incongruous with her habit of painting china: "She was a terrifying-looking person; almost a giantess in height, raw-boned, with iron-grey hair, a face always flushed," with "prominent, hysterical eyes," and draculean "long and curved teeth" (p. 211).

Because the Cutters exist outside human laws and restraints, it is appropriate that Cather deals with them by the extraordinary measure of exorcism, first the "intellectual exorcism" of comedy, then the rituals of demonology and art.<sup>24</sup> To save Antonia from rape, Jim takes her place in her bed at the Cutter house. The ensuing scene is one of the

funniest in Cather's fiction, the humor of displacement heightened by a Gothic base narrative in which Jim is the victim-heroine. An edited version of the scene reveals how firmly Gothic it is:

The next thing I knew, I felt someone sit down on the edge of the bed. I was only half-awake. . . . I held my breath and lay absolutely still. A hand closed softly on my shoulder, and at the same moment I felt something hairy and cologne scented brushing my face. . . . the detestable bearded countenance . . . was bending over me. . . . The hand that held my shoulder was instantly at my throat. The man became insane; he stood over me, choking me with one fist, and beating me in the face with the other, hissing and chuckling and letting out a flood of abuse. (P. 248)

Here laughter turns away the threat of Wick Cutter; later Cather uses other rituals to lay the Cutters to rest. Wick Cutter shoots his wife through the heart in a manner similar to that prescribed for vampires, then turns his gun on himself; and Antonia tells their story to her children, as if a fairy tale in which the deepest human fears are embodied, yet made safe by the art of the telling.

Exorcism frees victims from evil; it does not, however, resolve that evil, and in the end the Cutters' natures remain unresolved paradoxes to all we consider human. Radical contradiction appears in different forms through Cather's writing: in such characters as the reptilian Ivy Peters, the materialistic Bayliss Wheeler, the predatory Buck Scales; and in such places as the unfathomable depths of Stone Lips, the cave in which Bishop Latour seeks refuge during a blizzard. Indeed, there is no novel in her canon in which Cather did not draw upon Gothic conventions to present the threat that an ordinary reality may drop away to reveal unsuspected horrors. Usually a dark undercurrent to romantic optimism (Gothicism is the dominant impulse only in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*), Cather's Gothicism works with her

romanticism: though one ends in ambiguity and the other in resolution, both affirm the vitality of the imagination and emotion against the limitations of reason. In this affirmation Cather believed with Godfrey St. Peter that the real threat to people in a modern world is not the inexplicable but the prosaic, a world so flattened by reason that there are no mysteries:

But the fact is, the human mind, the individual mind, has always been made more interesting by dwelling on the old riddles, even if it makes nothing of them. . . . As long as every man and woman . . . was a principal in a gorgeous drama with God, glittering angels on one side and the shadows of evil coming and going on the other, life was a rich thing.<sup>25</sup>

#### NOTES

1. *My Antonia* (1918; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry, 1961), p. 353.
2. "Gothic Fiction of the Romantic Age: Context and Mode," in *Romantic Gothic Tales, 1790-1840* (New York: Harper and Row, Perennial Library Edition, 1979), p. 9. As a term to be defined, *Gothicism* is almost as elusive as *romanticism*. Recent critics agree, however, that the Gothic "is basically a mode of perception, rather than a set of things perceived." (Patricia Merivale, "The Esthetics of Perversion: Gothic Artifice in Henry James and Witold Gombrowicz," *PMLA* 93 (October 1978): 992.
3. For a discussion of the effect of alienation and estrangement, see Wolfgang Kayser's classic study, *Das Grotteske: seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1957); translated by Ulrich Weisstein as *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963; reprint, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963). For a discussion of Gothic fiction as a grotesque mode, see Maximillian E. Novak, "Gothic Fiction and the Grotesque," *Novel* 13 (Fall 1979): 50-67.
4. "Preface," *The Song of the Lark* (1915; revised 1937; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry, 1963).
5. For an extended discussion of the draculean myth in *Lucy Gayheart*, see my essay, "Willa Cather's Female Landscapes," *Women's Studies*, scheduled for a special issue on Willa Cather, 1984. Cather referred to her impatience with her character in various letters, cited by James Woodress in *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (1970; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Landmark Edition, 1982), p. 282.
6. Paul C. Wermuth, "Willa Cather's *Virginia* Novel," *Virginia Cavalcade* 7 (Spring 1958): 4-7.
7. "Willa Cather's Last Novel," *University Review* 34 (October 1967): 77-80.
8. *Prairie Schooner* 52 (Spring 1978): 25-46.
9. E. K. Brown, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, completed by Leon Edel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. 311-12.
10. Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," in *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), p. 206.
11. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940; reprint, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 21. Subsequent references to this edition will be included in the text.
12. Robert D. Hume, "Gothic Versus Romantic: A Reevaluation of the Gothic Novel," *PMLA* 84 (March 1969): 287.
13. Prefatory letter, *Edgar Huntly or Memories of a Sleep-Walker* (1799; reprint, Philadelphia: David McKay, 1887), p. 4.
14. Novak, "Gothic Fiction," pp. 54, 66, *passim*.
15. *My Antonia*, p. 18.
16. James E. Keech, "The Survival of the Gothic Response," *Studies in the Novel* 6 (Summer 1974): 136.
17. Hume, "Gothic Versus Romantic," p. 290.
18. Brown, *Willa Cather*, p. 309.
19. Willa Cather to Sinclair Lewis, 14 January 1938, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
20. Hume, "Gothic Versus Romantic," p. 287.
21. In 1935-36 Italy conquered Ethiopia, then intervened in Spain and formed an increasingly close association with Nazi Germany. In 1936 Cather described 1922, the date of Mussolini's "march on Rome," as the year when "the

world broke in two" ("Preface," *Not Under Forty* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936]). In 1937 Cather began work on *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, which would appear in 1940, the year France fell and the Vichy regime was installed.

22. *My Antonia*, p. 210. Subsequent references to this edition will be included in the text.

23. See Kayser, "An Attempt to Define the Nature of the Grotesque," in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, pp. 179-89.

24. The term "intellectual exorcism" is from Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), p. 145.

25. *The Professor's House* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925), p. 68.