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LIGHT AND SHADOW IN THE CATHER WORLD

A PERSONAL ESSAY

LUCIA WOODS

I want to explore with you my feelings about the polarity of light and shadow in Willa Cather's world and in my own experience as illuminated by that world. Carl Jung said, "Evil needs to be pondered just as much as good, for good and evil are ultimately nothing but ideal extensions and abstractions of doing, and both belong to the chiaroscuro of life. In the last resort there is no good that cannot produce evil and no evil that cannot produce good."

I won't take on evil as much as the deeper greys. I became more aware of them in the bright light of the Southwest. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is the pivotal book in my work with Cather. *The Professor's House* comes closest to my daily life concerns, while *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* has the most disturbing hold on me. I'll refer to Cather's views on art and to a few ideas from other sources, but mostly I'll

share with you my experience in the Cather world as a reader, a photographer, and someone interested in the idea of journey in her life.

Much that follows is very personal. My intention is to stir feelings and connections in relation to the range of material before us, through a personal journey, for all devoted readers of literature and of Willa Cather in particular. My Cather world includes my ongoing experiences with the writing, the places, my own photographs, and, most importantly, the people, be they scholars or those living in Cather places—or in the Cather spirit. This world gives my life a continuity as nothing else does; it is my most valued association, vast and warm like the *Archbishop* country of the Southwest, with its accompanying strange and somber shapes. In addressing this dark side, I believe we are honoring Cather's understanding of its power and enabling ourselves to be freer of that power over our lives.

Of course, much of life is ordinary. Even the paler greys in our daily lives can lead to larger considerations. My Cather journey was influenced by my own father, out of what I feel was his grey, shadow side. He frequently challenged what he called my desire for things to be "exciting." "Why should they be?" asked this solid

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Midwestern businessman of his daughter who had gone East to live in New York City. When he invited me and my camera to come with him to Cather's home town of Red Cloud, I had already felt the pull of home and return. My father's mother and Cather had been friends during their years at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. He had collected first editions of her work and been involved with the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. I wanted to explore my Nebraska roots and thought Cather's life and work could add romance to what I assumed was my more mundane past. Soon after that initial trip, my father, who also scorned "highfalutin ideas" in general and mine in particular, mentioned something about a Cather picture book being planned.

I would recall this information, which felt like parental pushing at the time, a year or so later. My father's connection with Cather was both historic and active. He took me to Red Cloud and shared his interest and information of her world. These were positive gifts to me, out of his bright side. I believe his negative attitude was as important. He put down "getting carried away"—just the sort of passionate response, Cather suggests, an artist works from.

Reacting positively to his negative messages, I got "carried away" on an "exciting" lifelong journey, where all sorts of "highfalutin" ideas can be found and explored.

The Dane church, on the flat divide near Red Cloud, was the subject of one of my two photographs from that first Cather trip. It acted like a beacon in the following years. I would tell people of Cather's pioneers and of their struggle and triumph on the new land. My awareness of the pain and defeat of these people was still dim, but my other photograph, *Bone Gully* (fig. 1), gave me a beginning sense of the polarity of light and dark. I wasn't familiar then with Cather's paleontological interest, as revealed, along with so much more, in "Old Mrs. Harris." It was bits of mastodon and pre-Ice Age turtle that lured me to the site. The beauty of the twilight emphasized great variety in the flat, so-called monotonous Midwestern landscape and insisted on a photograph. I responded to contemporary man's movement and upward yearning in *The Dane Church*. *Bone Gully* has made me aware of a stillness and of a timeless pull downward to the mystery of the earth and its unknown darkness.



FIG. 1. Bone Gully, Webster County, Nebraska, 1969

Two years later I made my first visit to New Mexico, country newer and stranger than any I had ever encountered. Several color photographs of Indian ceremonial celebrations remain part of my initial impression but have never been a part of my Cather work. *Shadows on an Adobe Wall* (fig. 2) was the one black and white photograph of that first extraordinary visit. I made many, but this one pushed at me right away, making the others seem dull. It is the one that brought me toward the idea of dark and light.

Let me explain briefly what I mean when I use the term "photograph." Most photographers take many photographs. I use the word photograph for one I choose to put out in the world. Quite a few of those I'd like to be better, but they are adequate, the best I have to express my response to a particular place, feeling, or moment. Ordinarily I use them in a context that makes them more acceptable than they would be on their own. Most photographic attempts are eliminated altogether (never even printed), while a few "really work" and can therefore stand on their own. A black and white photograph is simpler and more profound than a color one, as here, in *Shadows on an Adobe Wall*, in both a literal and a metaphoric way. Black, shadow, and dark on the one hand; white and the two meanings of light on the other. Good and evil and the many shades between.

I called my photograph shadows, not light, on an adobe wall, intuitively, out of my own experience. So much of American society, and many people I know, do not speak directly of our darker side or even of our common daily struggles. A constant tone of pleasantness, of "everything is fine," doesn't seem to me either

useful or considerate. Born with poor vision and separated out because of it, both physically and emotionally, I became aware, at an earlier age perhaps, of the dark and pain we all experience. All such wounds are very real and can preclude the pleasant world that was the only one socially allowed in my past and, too often, today. Literature and art, psychology and religion confirm my experience of the polarity of dark and light, but my photography has especially moved me along by giving me tangible means to work with these ideas.

I wanted *Shadows on an Adobe Wall* to be part of my Cather work. While reading *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, exploring its amazing country, and meeting its variously individual people, I was stirred by everything, including "the air itself." I had recalled my father's picture book information and made further connections in the Cather world. My journey had taken form. I was working with Bernice Slote and Virginia Faulkner on *Willa Cather: A Pictorial Memoir*. We had a full year to go; I would return to New Mexico and go to Arizona, but my first coming together with the light, texture, and some larger meaning in this new-found land and with Cather's sense of it called for its own acknowledgment, which a photograph can be. I felt confined, however, by some idea of literalness. Cather wrote of Santuario de Chimayo, where I had made my picture, but my piece of wall was nowhere a part of her work.

Later that fall, reading deep in Cather, I came on her unfinished essay, "Light on Adobe Walls." She wrote that an artist "cannot . . . paint those relationships of light and shade—he can only paint some emotion they give him,

some man-made arrangement of them that happens to give him personal delight." I took Cather's authority and decided that this photograph, in which I emphasize the shadow, was very much a Cather one for me. It has been on the lead wall of all my exhibits. I invite you to let go, as I did, in the sense that we are all artists, by which I mean individuals responding to what is about us. We each have a selection of images hanging in our mind's-eye gallery. Most of them keep shifting, some are more permanent. I came to think of my photographs as my attempts to meet up with the Cather world, to come together with it, to satisfy, or to fulfill.

"Art is a concrete and personal and rather childish thing after all," Cather continued, in "Light on Adobe Walls": "It is no good unless it is let alone to be itself—a game of make believe, of re-production, very exciting and delightful to people who have an ear for it or an eye for it." I do cut Cather's reference to science here, to her dismissing a psychological approach, which I do not. Looking into inner shadow places is certainly psychological, but in Cather's own spirit, it can be thought of as another sort of game, for me as essential as those having to do with art.

Cather's essay, while offering a literal, almost illustrative connection with my photograph, as indicated by our titles, tells me to be free from literalness—and at the same time says I can only be specific. I will try to look at the polarities of dark and light more specifically from the dark, as this side is generally harder, I find, for me and others to look at, and so often feels the heavier because of our neglect. Yet its power, the tragedy of life, makes our delight in things the more intense, as Edith Lewis said it did for Cather. This statement by Cather's closest friend in her later years, acknowledging Cather's sense of the dark as necessary and inevitable, yet making for her intense delight, has been crucial to my understanding of her life and work, even while I have too often let the power of such insight slip away.

That Cather chose to write *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in the style of legend, making

all events of equal importance, speaks strongly to her belief in polarity. Whereas I respond to different ideas, events, and characters at each reading or working with the book and my photographs, the wonder of the work is how it makes me feel the naturalness of the human (bright and dark, positive and negative) and the ultimate. Death is made to seem a positive moment between life and the hereafter. Both life and a hereafter, indeed, seem possible to me, with death the meeting point of light and dark, or dark and light, or a mix of greys, as you choose.

The Southwest has become my psychic homeland, necessary to return to as I can—more regularly, at least, through reading *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. The book can take me to a heightened state—or nearer that possibility of the meeting of the human and the ultimate. Shadow, in the Jungian sense, is one's undeveloped, or unrecognized, side, not necessarily negative at all. The *Archbishop* opened my spiritual side and made me recognize a need there. Working with the book, and returning to the Southwest as I can, seem the best ways to develop this less explored and therefore darker side.

I call on the two priests to aid me in my many-faceted journey as they so aided one another. When they are told the story of the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Father Vaillant wants to make a pilgrimage there at the earliest opportunity. He continues, saying, "Doctrine is well enough for the wise, Jean; but the miracle is something we can hold in our hands and love." I want to be more open to such tangible, direct experience and to have Vaillant's love and energy for daily and long-term work. I turn to Bishop Latour for guidance in the more indirect and profound realms. Here art and religion are the same in the end, for me, as for Professor St. Peter in *The Professor's House*, giving man his main comfort and highest challenge. The French bishop, imbued with his own culture but also sensitive to the color, shape, and texture of the Southwest, built his cathedral in Santa Fe in this spirit.

After watching his dear friend Vaillant, and

musings, the bishop responds to the Guadalupe story and to his fellow priest's comment on miracles. As someone interested in the idea of journey, and certainly as a photographer, I consider what he says my favorite "doctrine" in the book. Both human and ultimate, it also seems to have developed clearly in contrast to Vaillant's very different view: "Where there is great love, there are always miracles. One might almost say an apparition is human vision corrected by divine love. I do not see you as you really are, Joseph; I see you through my affection for you. The Miracles of the Church seem to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from

afar off, but upon our perception being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what there is about us always."

In a letter about *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather wrote that "writing the *Archbishop* was like a happy vacation from life, a return to childhood, to early memories." The happiness of her childhood is stronger than the pain of her early uprooting and the oppression and loneliness of the artist growing up in a small prairie town. Although Cather indicates how positive an experience writing the *Archbishop* was, her statement also implies a grim view of life—a life from which we need a vacation.



FIG. 2. Shadows on an Adobe Wall, *Santuario de Chimayo, New Mexico, 1971.*

I wonder if we ever really get a full vacation from life. Vacations seem as much a mix of dark and light as most memories if we but recall them more fully. I went to Barbizon while in France, following *Willa Cather in Europe, Her Own Story of the First Journey*. It was the place I felt most congenial to the many Franco-philic influences in Cather's life and work. The reputation of the hotels Cather mentions had been reversed during the some seventy years between our visits, but the empty dining room of *Les Charmettes* (fig. 3) seemed to invite the best company, food, and wine of both times. I pondered what viewers of such a photograph might imagine: Claude, from *One of Ours*, might be here, or Cather herself with Isabelle McClung and Jan Hambourg. But, of course,

these musings and the attempt with my camera did not assure a photograph; it would be weeks later, back in New York, that I would see if I had anything near my feelings. I had walked from the Forest of Fontainebleau on the one end of town to the wheat fields at the other end, the day long, and I was very discouraged. Wheat fields were such an important link to Nebraska and to making French bread, and I knew I had not a prayer of a photograph of them. I'd also searched in vain for a garden and would miss my chance to meet with Professor St. Peter and Archbishop Latour in their making of French gardens in America. I passed a sleepless night; the sense of loneliness always comes harder to me in a lovely place when things are not going well.



FIG. 3. Les Charmettes, Barbizon, France, 1973.

The next morning it was time to return to Paris. I wish I had a photograph of the woman cab driver who took me to the train station—and to this *Garden in Barbizon* (fig. 4) when I halfheartedly asked if she knew of “un jardin?” The old couple invited me in, but, time being short, I used the fence as a design element and didn’t see it as a barrier at all. How filled with (imagined and real) people were those lonely vacation days! These photographs do not tell of my boring non-photographs or of the dark moments in between.

What we need for our life’s journey, Cather suggests to me, is what she calls “hardihood of spirit.” She wrote she got this sense of joyful energy from the letters of Father Machebeuf, the prototype for Vaillant, and that she tried to convey that mood in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. This seems the bright side of the pioneer spirit that many have admired in Cather and in her characters, sometimes at the expense of their sufficiently acknowledging the necessary and inevitable dark.

The formal, old-fashioned aspect of language that Cather used to convey the mood in the

Archbishop seems a part of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as well. This language, with the hardihood of some of its characters, and my own longing for order and reconciliation, contribute to my being taken in by the book and by Sapphira herself. I have admired Sapphira Doddridge Colbert for her caring, her courage, and the degree of reconciliation she achieves by the end of her life. To her daughter, Sapphira’s “shades of kindness and cruelty . . . seemed . . . purely whimsical.” Rachel, however, knew her mother to be “entirely self-centred.” I have sometimes suppressed this narrowness and even the book’s larger meaning—the terrible hold Sapphira and the system of slavery have on everyone’s life. Her husband’s expression of love for her near the end confuses my view of both her and him. They achieve a reconciliation, but I want to know if there were words, as well as actions, of reconciliation between Henry Colbert and his daughter. Whereas I feel a pervasive sense of light, reading the *Archbishop*, I feel a necessity for human reckoning reading *Sapphira*, with darkness ever to be got through.



FIG. 4. Garden in Barbizon, France, 1973.

My encounter with *Mrs. Poole* (fig. 5) and my photograph of that meeting have been important to me, but difficult to hold constant in my mind's eye. The woman lived with her husband at Willowshade, Cather's second home in Virginia and the one the slave girl returns to in *Sapphira*. Mr. Poole showed me through the house and first impressed me with his spirit of hardihood and survival, but it was Mrs. Poole whose very being spoke of the difficulty from which that spirit came: she stretched out her hands and gave me this photograph. I returned

in the spring to find she had gone to live in town with a daughter who could better care for her; soon after that I learned she had died.

This photograph has been essential to the sense of wholeness I wanted to express in trying to meet with Cather in the body of my work, because I have few photographs that suggest hardship or suffering of any kind. I wonder how much it is the power of painful images from our own experience that makes me, at least, less able to look at or photograph anything close to those feelings?



FIG. 5. Mrs. Poole, Gore, *Virginia*, 1971.

I could have let go of most photographs I didn't get in my fall visit, but Cather's dogwood haunted me; it was for them I had to return in the spring. My joyful memory of the dogwood trees from my childhood home in Illinois softened my bittersweet memories of my parents, two people whose geographic and social backgrounds, like *Sapphira* and Henry Colbert's, were so very different and were never reconciled, as the Colberts were. I had also been to college in Virginia, where spring was the season I remember best—because everyone talked about its beauty. I was numb to the dogwood there, my senses dulled by the feeling of being an outsider. The loudest words in my college experience remain those of one Southern classmate, a leader in the student Christian Association. She said: "I wish Abraham Lincoln had never been born." My Cather work and the college's genuine interest in it have done much to leaven those four grey years.

Cather herself returned to Virginia in the spring when she was writing *Sapphira*. I went out of a sense of incompleteness, and for the dogwood, "for their unexpectedness. . . . In all the blushing and blooming of a Virginia spring, the scentless dogwood is the wildest thing and yet the most austere, the most unearthly." It was as if I had to make an image of *Dogwood* (fig. 6) to confront Cather's words. I could then also connect this Southern world with the *Archbishop* world where the Acoma plain is clearly austere and unearthly and Cather's depiction of darkness and evil more outright. The insidiousness in the tangled inner and outer landscape of Virginia makes feelings difficult to keep in place. The clarity of the one book is as powerful for me as is the irresoluteness of the other, but the weight of the dark in each goes to make my delight in things the more intense.



FIG. 6. Dogwood, Gore, Virginia, 1972.

For me, *Woman and Child, Bernalillo* (fig. 7) has the warmth, sense of kinship, human strength, and frailty of both *Sapphira* and the *Archbishop*; I find the homely detail and the mix of cotton fabrics comforting in themselves. On my second trip to New Mexico for the Cather book, I was delighted to hear of a festival in Bernalillo, the town where Father Vaillant "won" Angelica and Contento. I thought how I would make pictures of feast-

ing and dancing. What I have is a color slide of red and gold flowers and this one black and white. How often I have wished for such a woman to protect the vulnerability and the child that is in me, in all of us. Willa Cather might have chosen to see past the older woman's sneakers, but I welcome them, in all their brand-newness, for coping with today's faster world. What games of make-believe we can play!

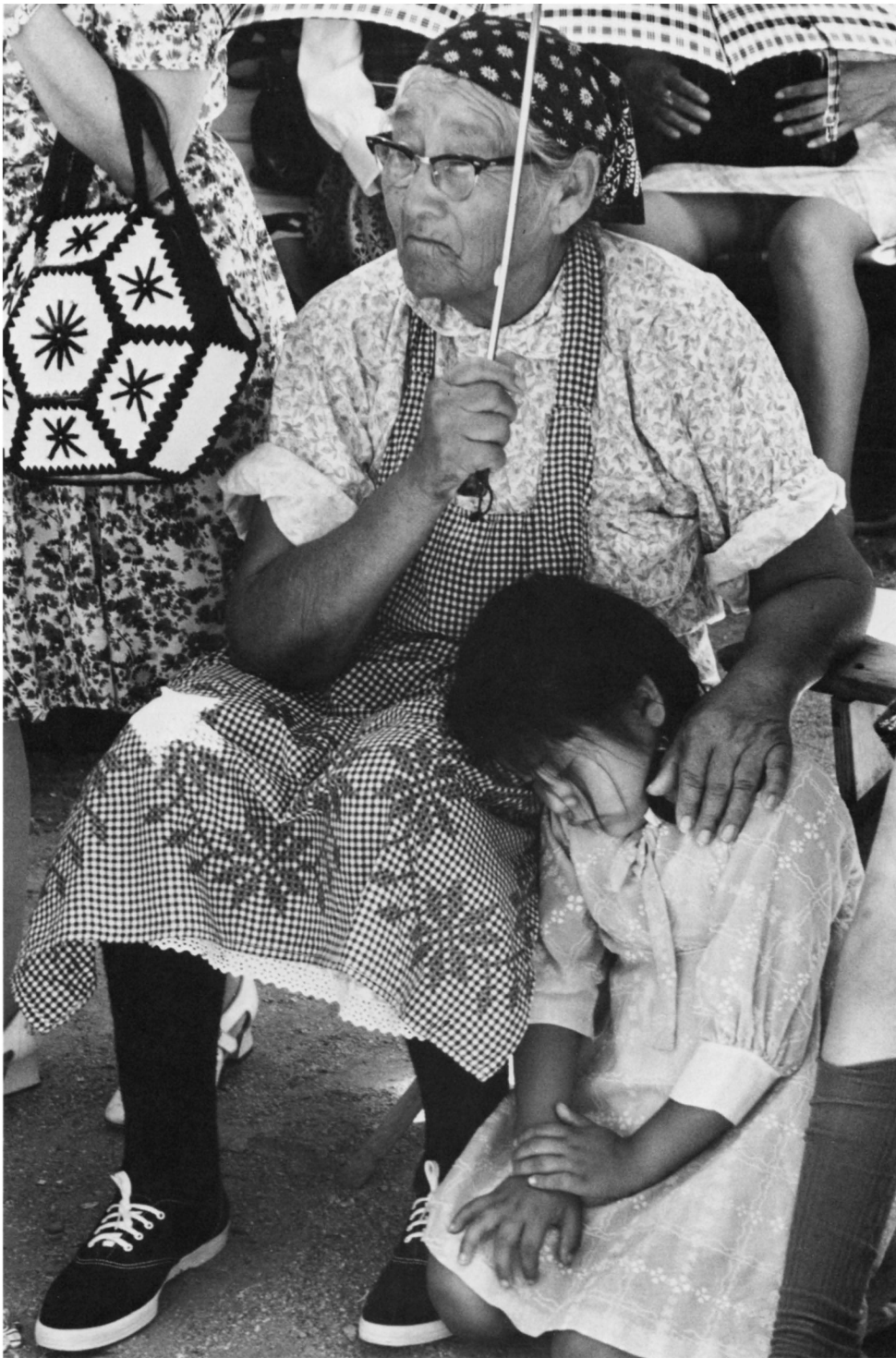


FIG. 7. Woman and Child, Bernalillo, *New Mexico*, 1972.

There is much to imagine in *Wilsford Manor* (fig. 8), Stephen Tennant's home near Salisbury. Patricia Yongue has begun serious study of Cather's friendship with this artist/aristocrat, who lives now, reclusively, in the deep English countryside, away from the ordinary and harsher struggles of life. The layers of refinement in this privileged world—of historic, literary, theatrical, even decorative, traditions—fascinate and inform me, yet close in on my larger perception.

I want the clarity of light and the spiritual possibility of the Southwest as Cather presents it to us, the relief of such a Dutch-window view as she suggests "Tom Outland's Story" is in *The Professor's House*. Trying to make a life of relationships, work, and ideals at mid-life and mid-family in mid-America, I seek to follow the traditions both of old Europe and of the new and ancient world of the American Southwest. Cather brought together the light and dark of many worlds in her work. We have this work and a richness of scholarship and biography to delight and inform the fabric of our own lives, depending on what our child-

hood memories and our middle-age dreams can allow, on what our eyes can see, and what our ears can hear.

Tom Outland studied Spanish grammar and read the twelve books of *The Aeneid* that summer on the blue mesa. That summer was, for him, "a life in itself," perhaps more so as it came after, as well as out of, his failure in Washington and his worse failure with his friend Roddy Blake. "Anyone who requites faith and friendship, as I did, will have to pay for it," he said. I keep wondering what this means for Professor St. Peter, for Cather, and for my own life.

Cather shows the difficulty of balancing art, faith, and life—and the importance of keeping a psychic place. The Southwest is that for me: in my experience through Cather, and in my imagination, it is a place to see and to be whole. It suggests that I might be able to coordinate and simplify life, art, and faith, to have bright, tireless days and dark, sleepful nights to help me face my particular "dangerous crossings," as Roddy said were painted on signposts all over the world.



FIG. 8. Wilsford Manor, near Salisbury, England, 1974.