Review of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* by Willa Cather

Robin Hackett

*University of New Hampshire*

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly

Part of the American Studies Commons, Cultural History Commons, and the United States History Commons


http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2622

Willa Cather's last novel, set in Virginia where she spent her early childhood, is often a mystery to readers who know Cather by her loving evocation of Great Plains landscapes and cultures. This scholarly edition clarifies the seeming anomaly of Sapphira and the Slave Girl by placing it in its historical and biographical contexts, and by building from it an analysis of Cather's accomplishments and aesthetic concerns over the length of her career. The most significant achievement of this edition is that it will help scholars at every level understand the novel as evidence of Cather's involvement in public intellectual debates of her era, as well as of her complex personal involvement with the interrelation of memory, aesthetics, loss, and aging. The historical apparatus includes a long and elegant essay describing the places and people from Cather's Virginia childhood, with illustrations, that Cather used as models for her characters and setting. It describes 1930s debates about literature of the American South and race relations that influenced Cather's rendering of African American characters. The historical essay also describes the personal losses that may have motivated Cather's return to memory, as well as the formally experimental elements of the novel, such as the autobiographical epilogue.

The preface and textual essay describe existing drafts and fragments of the novel and explain the editors' methods for selecting the authoritative text, down to details about paper color and print type. Appendices give readers access to material Cather cut as she worked. Most importantly, the editors use the evidence of drafts and marginal notes to piece together a story of Cather's aesthetic concerns as well as of her composing and editing processes, including some details about how Edith Lewis may have helped her. This is a welcome contribution to the scholarship about one of the most private of novelists who left explicit instructions for destroying and limiting the use of her personal papers.

One element that seemed missing from this edition is historical and biographical material that might have illuminated some of the homoerotic elements of Sapphira and others of Cather's novels, which have been noted by many critics. Ignoring this material might be faithful to what Cather wished to have reported about her life; but it also directs scholars away from what has been, over the last twenty years, a productive strain of Cather scholarship.

ROBIN HACKETT
Department of English
University of New Hampshire