CHAPTER-1
UNDERSTANDING WILLA CATHER

I

INTRODUCTION

Willa Cather was the embodiment of America. She was one of the finest women and artists of the first decades of the twentieth century who best illustrates the contribution of women to American fiction at the end of the literary era. Cather as an American novelist, short story writer, essayist, journalist and poet portrayed the lives of Old World immigrants on the American Midwest frontier in a manner that is both realistic and romantic.

Willa Cather's reputation as one of the most distinguished American novelists rests on her novels about Nebraska and American Southwest. These novels express her deep love of the land and her distaste for the materialism and conformism of modern life.

As observed by Susan J. Rosowski,

Cather’s fiction once assumed to be transparent and artless is now recognized for its depth and complexity. Cather is known to be the one of the most prolific of major U.S. Writers, with eighteen volumes and seven hundred periodical pieces to her credit. A writer once dismissed as regional is now included in the Encyclopedia Britannica Great Books of Western World.

Cather was fascinated by Europe and European history, art, and literature from a very early age. There is a sense in which she felt a connection with
Europe, probably as a result of growing up in a town largely populated with recent immigrant people of European descent.

The novels of Willa Cather have been described as “classic” by Katherine Porter. She was one of the writers selected for inclusion in Sixteen Modern American authors (1973) a volume that generally establishes the canon of America’s most important writers of the first half of twentieth century and in that work she was the only woman represented. Recent biographers and critics have manifested a renewed surge of interest in Willa Cather as an important writer with a wide range of psychological, social, literary and metaphysical themes.

Cather has never been widely read or much studied in the UK, like other great women American writers of the twentieth century such as Ellen Glasgow, Flannery O’Connor or Eudora Welty. However she has been praised for her evocation of pioneer Mid-Western life. As Lorna Sage wrote “Cather’s work spans that period of American history in which the frontier closed and generations of new immigrants sought to establish a new hybrid identity within a shifting unstable society.”

The portrayal of heroic women and their struggle in life is a central theme in many of Cather’s narratives. Particularly the idea of being a “Woman in a man’s world” and the consequences of women choices—in term of career, love and friendship is well worth focusing on.

II

IMMIGRANT CULTURE

Immigration has given to America a new exotic background and a new source of local color. Many of Cather’s main characters are immigrants or of immigrant
descent- and this fact is often the dominant force shaping their life and directing their
destiny. The idea of being transplanted from old to new soil- the sacrifices, hopes and
conflicts connected with such a fundamental change in life is almost ever-present
theme in Cather's narratives.

Cather's interest in this theme most likely originates in experience as child
growing up in a town primarily populated by more or less recent immigrants-
primarily Scandinavian, Bohemian and French. All her life, Cather was preoccupied
with the immigrant experience, and many of her stories revolve around the contrast
between the Old World in Europe and the New World in America. American
immigrant writers writing in the early twentieth century also choose to look back and
recapture the strenuous, yet inspired, pioneer life. Among the most well known of
these works are: O. E. Rolvaag's depiction of Norwegians in Minnesota, Giants in the
Earth, Conrad Richter's three- part work, The Awakening Land, about pioneers in
Pennsylvania and the Ohio Valley; and the series of frontier memoirs for young
people by Laura Ingalls Wilder, whose second volume, Little House on the Prairie,
was the inspiration for popular televisior series.

Today America has got its own distinctive identity. This is due to the entry of
the immigrants. Many Americans value their immigrant heritage as an important part
of their identity. America has got the image of the mosaic. Immigrants have
contributed a lot to this image. Immigration is a world wide phenomenon. From the
seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, millions of Europeans migrated to
North and South America, eastern and southern Africa, Australia and Asia.

Like the colonist of the past, most modern immigrants are motivated to
relocate far from their original homes by the desire to improve their economic
situation. The greatest influx of immigrants to the United States occurred between the
1840s and the 1920s. United States has been shaped by successive waves of immigrants. Established Americans often look down on new immigrants. The cultural habits of immigrants are frequently targets of criticism, especially when the new arrivals come from a different country than those in the established community. Despite such tensions, economic needs have always forced Americans to seek immigrants as laborers and settlers, and economic opportunities have beckoned foreigners. The vast majority of immigrants to the United States have come in search of jobs, farmland, or business opportunities, and the chance to create a better life for themselves and their families. They generally bring people from less developed or poorer countries. Industrialization in Europe caused the relocation of most of these immigrants. By the late 1870s, America witnessed the great changes mainly due to industrialization. It attracted the attention of Scandinavians, sending waves of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish immigrants to the United States.

By the early twentieth century, as the United States became an international power, its cultural self-identity became more complex. The United States was becoming more diverse as immigrants streamed into the country, settling especially in America’s growing urban areas. At this time, America’s social diversity began to find significant expressions in the arts and culture.

The people were as mixed as the languages they spoke. From the Atlantic coastal islands to the Mississippi and beyond, many cultures met and produced generations that blended different races and ethnic groups—English, Dutch, German, French, Spanish, African Americans and scores of native American tribes. The resulting ethnic stew was one of the most enduring legacies of westward expansion.

Colonizers and conquerors, wanderers and settlers have long been attracted to America’s abundant resources. The vast majority of Americans trace their ancestry to
one or more of these immigrant groups. The various ethnic and racial origins of the residents and immigrants remain important sources of personal identity.

During the 1860s and 1870s the Nebraska State Board of Immigration had employed an agent in Europe whose business was to attract the immigrants. The handbill campaigns of the Burlington brought in a large number of foreigners. Majority were from Germany, followed by Sweden and other Scandinavian countries than Bohemia, Prussia and the British Isles. Like the young Willa, who migrated to Nebraska these immigrants were totally unprepared for their new land.

During 1890s the so-called new immigration brought a great variety of new ethnic groups: Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Croats, Slovenes, Poles, and Jews. As aptly observed by Henry Bamford Parkes, “the new immigrants came from the more backward parts of Europe. Many of the immigrants were illiterate and accustomed to extremely low living standards; they had no previous experience with any form of democracy and knew government only as an alien and oppressive force.”

In the words of Roger Daniel: “Improvements in transportation not only quickened the pace of immigration but also, with the invention of the prepaid ticket and the development of cheap and reliable facilities for transferring funds abroad, it became easier for immigrant families to stagger, and pay for, their own migration.”

The immigrants were practical in their day to day affairs. They had a little interest in philosophical questions. According to Everett S. Lee, “Migration has been phenomenally successful for Americans. The immigrants from abroad did find superior economic opportunities and if they were fleeing oppression they found freedom.” The historian Fredrick Turner aptly opined that “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” The opportunity for self-improvement
provided by cheap land, the unimportance of hereditary status distinctions, all this led to generate the democratic spirit in its most American sense.

In order to get an insight into Cather’s work it is necessary to know history of the Westward Movement. Since the formal creation of the United States, men and women have been searching the lands of this country. Exploration, encounter, and expansion constitute intricate pieces of American history. In the early nineteenth century, immigrants from multitudes of countries began to fill the ever-growing ports of American cities and towns, and the time came to move, to push further into the wilderness. Along with coming into closer contact with the cultures of the Native Americans, frontier settlers began to redefine their own roles and norms in society as they settled previously undeveloped land.

The Westward Movement in America did not begin on a certain date; indeed it encompassed a mass-migration of newly arrived Americans and those who had already begun to build families in America. Reasons for moving west were as varied as the people who forged the trails to arrive there. For people who desired to seek out a new life or better health for a family member, the west indeed was an ideal setting.

The kinds of people who journeyed west varied in ethnicity, social status and gender. Families explored the westward trails in covered wagons and comprised a significant portion of those headed west. However, the culture of the frontier society gained the reputation of being ‘male-centered’ because men primarily crossed the frontier in search of gold, jobs in the mine, or a land claim for their families. During the early nineteenth century, men were in the majority on the frontier though women and children were soon to follow. People of all ages crossed the frontier – young and old, single and married, rich and poor. Therefore, the frontier provided a common
ground for all people to come together to form their own communities and to decide individual roles of gender and age.

The roles of men on the frontier were not wildly different from general gender roles of the time period. Men, who worked on the farms, participated in farming the fields, planting and growing crops, heading the family if married, being responsible for the care of animals and the general welfare of the family. Men did not come to the West solely in the interest of farming; they may have come due to the gold rush, work with the railroad, mining interests, or various other reasons.

The roles of women on the frontier varied from those of their eastern counterparts or counterparts from other countries. In general, women took on many new roles in their participation in the western life. Women, specifically mothers, adopted new jobs and incorporated them into their everyday life on the frontier. The powerful mother is a common pivotal figure in immigrant fiction. However, traditionally “feminine” roles still existed on the frontier. In this agrarian economy mothers were their daughters’ educators and mentors training them to fulfill the farm wife’s role by transmitting essential household norms. In the year of Willa Cather’s birth—these strong mother daughter bonds still existed: Caroline Cather, Willa’s paternal grandmother wrote several letters of advice to her newly married daughter Jennie, in which she assumes the roles of mother and mentor, passing on both household and marital wisdom.

In his analysis of the roles of women in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Richard Bartlett writes, “... the doing of the man’s work was never interpreted as belonging to her by nature, nor was her doing it in any sense a part of the accepted mores of the time. Neither were women registers or receivers of land offices, nor surveyors or assayers, nor did they ride with the cowboys. While men
held various positions in town and belonged to various orders, such as the masons, women did not have such freedom. However, Bartlett does write:

The new countrywoman held her head high, and her bright eyes searched the horizon for what lay ahead. She shared with her husband a faith in their future, in the “great day a-coming” whom they would live to see... she was a builder, along with her husband; she knew her value. If her life was hard, and it was, so was that of her husband. Yet both found life rewarding, and that is a most important ingredient of mental well-being.

Though living in a male dominated society, for the most part, women managed to attain their own voice. Many women became active in church affairs and created their own relational societies. In the occupational sphere, the number of women schoolteachers increased during this time. The role of women continued to be alerted with the passage of suffrage laws of women in the late 1880s in states such as Wyoming and Utah. Though societal changes continued in support of women, “the new women’s primary task, however, was to create her family.” Whatever kind of family this involved whether a husband, children, grandparents or even the larger community, women were accepted to take this role. Wives and mothers specifically were involved in much “toil”. According to Bartlett, “they cooked and baked, sewed and knitted, milked cows, tended gardens, and raised children.” The role of daughters was essentially to imitate the tasks of their mothers while sons were called to imitate their fathers. Life on the frontier was certainly not easy for any members of the family or community.

American literature, a reflection of both our past and present things, has recorded and transmitted the Western experience to the modern audience. Within the
last twenty years specifically, many efforts have been made to look at women both
during their journey over the frontier of the United States and their eventual
settlement of the land. One woman’s portrait of the soul and sprint of pioneer women
through her fiction has caused a new generation of scholars to look more closely at
the roles of the frontier women. This woman, twentieth century novelist Willa Sibert
Cather correlated experiences of her own frontier background with fictional characters
to communicate the lives of frontier women in literature.

IMMIGRANT FICTION

As perceptively observed by Philip Lopate:

  Strictly speaking, all American novels (with the exception of those
  written by Native Americans) are in one way or another immigrant
  fiction. But we usually think of immigrant fiction more narrowly as the
  encounter of the foreign-born with a presumably dominant Anglo-
  American culture. Thematically, this fiction is the site where self-
  invention encounters its limits, where compromise and accommodation
  wrestle with the unappeasable. Linguistically, it is a fertile estuary
  infusing the Puritans’ English with the dialect seasonings, syntactical
  corkscrews and passionate utterances of the other.\textsuperscript{12}

  In Cather’s immigrant novels, the immigrant experience often begins in a
  spirit of wild open-ended adventure, as their protagonists fling themselves halfway
  around the world, breaking dramatically with past lives to settle in a big country full
  of promise, though soon enough the sphere contracts to an urban ghetto or small town,
  where they are thrown into an introverted, claustrophobic self-protectiveness amidst
their own kind. "The immigrating family distills the tensions from within and without. One the one hand, it shields its members against a hostile or indifferent environment; on the other hand, it entraps them in a prison where siblings rivalries, oedipal struggles, and marital discords have little opportunity for diffusion." 13

The movement for immigration restriction was slowly gaining strength in the late nineteenth century. The most affirmative of later American writers were those who had seen the immigrant make good of the present scenario or were themselves immigrants who had made good. Abraham Canan in *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) has the highly successful David recall his justified ecstasy at his first sight of New York. According to him the "immigrant never forgets his entry into a country which is to him, a new world in the profoundest sense of the term." 14

According to Sepp L. Tiefenthaler,

One of the inevitable, concomitant experiences of the immigrant to America has been that of the transcultural dilemma, the conflict of two cultures, and the ensuing often painful search for cultural identity: the struggle to accommodate two selves and two cultural spaces into one integral identity. The majority of immigrants and their offspring have resolved this conflict through a gradual process of assimilation and acculturation to the dominant mainstream culture of the receiving country, thereby transforming themselves into something like a palimpsest...the transformation from outsider to insider, from immigrant to American or narrate the story of an immigrant who is forever kept out of the dominant culture of the host country for reasons of class, ethnicity or race. 15
Other immigrants have tried to fight or resist such positive confirmation of the dominant culture either by negating the standard norms, values, and codes of the dominant culture or by substituting for the dominant culture a cultural alternative. They tried to accommodate to the two cultures, they to themselves and their culture to the alien. The immigrants’ awareness of their ethnicity- their cultural distinctiveness against the culturally dominant group- originated from and was sharpened by this transcultural conflict. The immigrants’ quest for cultural and geographical displacement, oppression, marginality and alienation is expressed most directly in the genre of the immigrant novels.

I have followed the concept of immigrant novels given by William Q. Boelhower to analyse the immigrant novels of Willa Cather.

At the thematic level, the specific topic of immigration defines the text’s macroproposition, which in turn underlies the text’s macrostructure. This topic is paradigmatic in that it explains the presence of a series of deep elements common to all the works pertaining to this genre. Thus, the topic is a principal of inclusion and exclusion and provides a closed fictional reality. The macroproposition can be stated in the following way:

An immigrant protagonist(s),
representing an ethnic world view,
comes to America with great expectations,
and through a series of trials
is led to reconsider them
in terms of his final status. 16
The macrostructure of this proposition can be formulated in this fabula diagram:

![Fabula Diagram](image)

The poles of tension that ground the structuring of the fabula are OW (Old World) and NW (New World), both as locations and as sets of mental categories. Its three major moments are EXPECTATION (project, dream, possible world), CONTACT (experience, trials, contrasts), and RESOLUTION (assimilation, hyphenation, alienation). At the moment of EXPECTATION, which may already be set in the NW, the RESOLUTION is considered an ideal reality, while the OW is viewed as a negative reality. As the protagonist moves along the CONTACT axis, a descending movement, the process of reconsideration begins and, through OW-NW contrasts, implies the de-idealization of the NW. At the same time, as the protagonist discovers America first hand, he is separated from the OW. Ultimately, this leads the protagonist to idealize the OW - either through an attempt to preserve his OW culture, even though he may be assimilated into the
NW, or through a stiff criticism of an alienating set of experiences in America.

In the immigrant macrotext there is a distinct set of characters (actants) who perform a number of stock functions which are intertextual constants. Besides having proper names that are a conventional indication of their OW provenance (Jurgis Rudkis, Count Brogmar, David Schearl, the Shimerdas, the Bergsons, David Levinsky, Joe Stecher), the protagonists of this genre are modeled on the basis of a series of common senses. They are foreigners (aliens) and immigrants (uprooted) they are naïve, ignorant of American life in all its facets, have a language barrier, are unassimilated, and, crucially, hopeful (initiates). Furthermore, their actions are still motivated by an OW view characteristically immigrant frames, divided into OW coherence and NW contact, can be elaborated under the following categories:\(^{17}\)

The journey [J].

Folklore [FK]: figures (fg); wisdom (fw); superstition (fs); practises (fp).

Religion [R]: belief (rb); ritural-birth (ri); marriage (rm); death (rd).

Gatherings and feasts [C]: food and drink (cf); songs (cf); songs (cs); music (cm); dance (cd).

Speech [S]: dialogue (sd); lexemes (sl); jokes and puns (sj).

Memory [M]: cultural objects (mo); recollections (mr).

Multiple character [MC]: ethnic homogeneity (mce); ethnic conflict (mct); generational homogeneity (mcg); generational conflict (mcf).

Customs [G].

Contact [T]: work (tr); politics (tp); inter-ethnic contact (ts); judicial institutions (ti).

Acquisition and loss [AL]: land (ald); house (allh); business (alb).
Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* can serve as a demonstration of what is meant here, given its ambiguous position with respect to the immigrant macrotext. The reader witnesses a process of assimilation by which OW protagonists are reduced to culturally indistinguishable members of a mass society.

The immigrant novel introduces into American literary history a new pluricultural world view and this world view, which is strictly related to the collective consciousness of immigrant groups. A world view is, above all, a social and historical fact. William Q. Bohelhover reflects:

> The extraction of this new *vraisemblance* through a descriptive analysis of the paradigmatic elements of the immigrant novel genre and its relation to a particular construction of American history should help one to identify the narrative constants that structure individual immigrant novels. According to this presentation, then, and contrary to myth criticism, one can “rediscover” the essential newness of Cather’s novels *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* by placing them alongside Rolvaag’s *Giants in the Earth*, William’s trilogy and other immigrant novels.

There is never acculturation pure and simple but rather the presentation of a pluriculture reality depicting minority cultures with specific languages, world views, customs, and memories. In all instances, the immigrant protagonists are presented as unique historical subjects responding to a dominant culture. In the light of genre expectations, the reader is led primarily to familiarize himself an integral part of the American experience.
CATHÉR'S INTEREST IN IMMIGRANT CULTURE

The world of Willa Cather, encountered at the age of nine, was called “The Divide” is almost too appropriate as she was taken to Nebraska and spent the years of her childhood among the immigrants of a pioneer environment. After a year of Cather moving to Red Cloud, where her grandfather had settled having migrated from Ireland; Cather had developed a fierce passion for the land that remains at the core of her writing. By 1890 immigrants in Nebraska made up forty-three percent of the state population. Cather found herself surrounded by foreign language and customs. Speaking about her impulse that took her to writing Cather in one of her interviews stated:

When I was about nine, ... father took me from our place near Winchester, Virginia, to a ranch in Nebraska. Few of our neighbors were Americans--most of them were Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, and Bohemians. I grew fond of some of these immigrants--particularly the old women, who used to tell me of their home country. I used to think them underrated, and wanted to explain them to their neighbors. Their stories used to go round and round in my head at night. This was with me, the initial impulse. I didn't know any writing people. I had an enthusiasm for a kind of country and a kind of people, rather than ambition.19

The ability of Willa Cather to provide such a stirring and complete picture of frontier women and their relationship with the land lies in reasons she herself stated in multiple interviews during her life. She always said that the old immigrant women of
Nebraska gave her the first ‘real feeling of an older world across the sea’. It is through her own words that one can begin to realize the connection Cather had with her own culture and the women she represented in her writings. Cather once stated: my grandfather and grandmother had moved to Nebraska eight years before we left Virginia; they were among the real pioneers.”20 The immigrants hard struggle and determination and their unwavering belief that they could overcome, inspired Cather.

III

WILLA CATHER’S LIFE

Willa Cather lived a life that spanned two centuries, a time when the world and a women’s role in it would change radically. Well known for her literary portraits of frontier life, a literary star Willa Sibert Cather was born in Back Creek Valley, in the Gore community of Fredrick County, Virginia on December 7 1873. It was an exciting period in American history when the Middle West was settled by courageous pioneers some from the east, some form Europe. Born to Mary Virginia Boak Cather and Charles Cather they named their first-born Willella after Charles younger sister who died in childhood of diphtheria. Cather eldest among Roscoe, Douglas, Jessica, Jim, Elsie and Jack, spent her first nine years in the east living in a lovely Virginia house where her father raised sheep on his father’s farm.

Willa Cather’s mother, a vigorous woman dominated the family backed up by Cather’s maternal grandmother Rachel Seibert Boak who made her home with them. Willa’s maternal grand father, served in the house of Delegates of Virginia from 1845 to 1846 at the same time that James Cather Willa’s great grand father, represented Frederick County.21 Cather was enormously attracted to such families as Hermione
Lee observes, “which was a rich storehouse of native history and its powerful personalities influenced her whole life.”

As perceptively observed by Mildred Bennett,

Willa found her mother of different temperament from her gentle father ... Willa, even as a child, sensed that some of the neighbors thought her mother haughty, and perhaps Willa as an adult took on some of the characteristics that casual acquaintances had found a little upsetting in her mother. She was well aware that her mother was behaving in the southern genteel tradition and throughout her life shared something of her mother the desire to champion the underprivileged or the misunderstood.

Life in the lush Shenandoah Valley in Western Virginia near Winchester had a smoothness and a sense of permanency where Cather found life full and fascinating. Even since Willa was born; Charles Cather had been toying with the idea of coming west. The Cathers' were susceptible to tuberculosis and hoped the dry Nebraska climate would be more favorable than that of humid Virginia. Further more stories about the farming opportunities in the central Nebraska region and from earlier homesteaders, including his father and close relatives, whetted his interest still more. When in 1883 his four storied sheep barn burned, Cather and her family journeyed by rail to join their extended family in the small settlement west of Red Cloud that was already known as Catherton and lives for a year and a half on grand parents farm. Having passed her earliest years amidst a settled landscape and established traditions where the land grants had been passing from father to son where life was ordered and settled where the people in good families where born good and the poor mountain people were not expected to amount too much, the move to the rough frontier in April
1883, to the open plains of Red Cloud Nebraska was a shock to a sensitive child like Willa Cather. As Cather drove further in the country she felt a good deal. Cather compared coming to Nebraska of being “thrown onto a land as bare as piece of sheet iron.”

Willa Cather, daughter of a gentleman sheep-rancher was pretty nine-year old with reddish brown-curls, fine skin and dark blue eyes. Her positive personality was apparent even at this age. Willa as a child was surrounded by older women whose arduous tasks-tending the vegetable garden, raising animals, sewing and quilting, preparing and preserving food, managing the household, childbearing and rearing—were as vital to the family’s survival as their husbands’ farming duties.

Willa’s first playmates were the neighbor’s children. The Lambrechts whose parents came from Germany, “Leedy” Lambrecht was of the same age as Willa. Cather soon adapts to the prairie. Briefly attends school during winter and riding on the pony, she chose to explore the thinly settled country, a cosmopolitan community the homesteads of immigrant settlers. As she was growing up she observed first hand development of a civilization, knew intimately the day-to-day struggles of the pioneers with the land. Cather later reflected that two experiences of that move shaped her within: being gripped with a passion for the “shaggy grass country” that was “the happiness and curse of my life.”

After eighteen months on a ranch her family moved into small house in ‘Red Cloud’, a “scrappy western town” sixteen miles southeast rich with possibility for a child with an eager mind. During the trip from her birthplace in Virginia, Cather imagined that, “I had left even their spirits (her grand parents) behind me. The wagon jolted on, caring me I knew not whither... between that earth and sky I felt erased, blotted out.” The land of Nebraska was the great fact; it was wild and barren and
awesome. The move from the restrictive social order in Virginia to the open pioneering life on the plains forms the backdrop for much of Willa Cather's fiction.

As observed by Anne Lindhard,

The settlers who inhabited the town were mainly Scandinavian, Bohemian, French immigrants trying to cultivate the obstinate land. "Americans" were a minority. This childhood environment greatly influenced Cather's life as an artist and became one of the main resources from which she extracted her vivid depictions of character and setting. It oriented her toward the land, the immigrants and Europe in short, toward the essence of American pioneer experience.28

Drawing from her childhood in Nebraska, Cather brought to national consciousness, the beauty and vastness of the western plains. She was able to evoke this sense of place for other regions as well, including the Southwest, Virginia, France and Quebec. Ahearn Amy writes,

Willa Cather established a reputation for giving breath to the landscape of her fiction. Sensitive to the mannerisms and phrases of the people who inhabited her spaces, she brought American regions to life through her loving portrayals of individuals within local cultures. Drawn together in their homesickness, Cather felt a certain kinship to the immigrant women of the plains.29

Cather was an unusual girl in Red Cloud who liked the older people with intellectual taste. Cather's childhood was a great and a well-sorted harvest, winnowed and refined, that memories from youth would provide the material for page upon page of her writing. Cather had met these immigrant people in the childhood who appear in her novels. Many of the experiences and people that played significant role in Willa
Cather's past more importantly her childhood friends, helped pave the road that led to her writing of *My Ántonia*. Cather did not realize that so much of this story was based on her memories. She thought that she had created these characters, this story in her mind. But through lots of digging into her past, the similarities between the two are remarkably obvious.

Willa Cather's first playmate in Red Cloud was Mary Miner daughter of a local storekeeper. Cather became friends with all of the Miner children, but especially Carrie. She wrote to Carrie regularly throughout her life and her book *My Ántonia* is dedicated “To Carrie and Irene Miner, in memory of affections old and true.”

Of Mrs. Miner Cather wrote:

> I have never drawn but one portrait of an actual person. That was the mother of neighbor family in *My Ántonia*. She was the mother of my childhood chums in Red Cloud. I used her for this reason: While I was getting under way with the book in the White Mountains, I received the word of her death. One clings to one's friends so-I don't know why it was- but the resolve came over me that I would put her into that book as nearly drawn from the life as I could do it.

Through her friendship with the Miner children Willa came to know Annie a hired immigrant who worked for them. Miss Cather said in 1921: One of the people who interested me most as a child was the Bohemian hired girl of one of our neighbors, who was so good to me. She was one of truest artist I ever knew in the keenness and the sensitiveness of her enjoyment, in her love of people and in her willingness to take pains. I did not realize all this as a child but Annie fascinated one and I always had in mind to write a story about her.
Another friend of Willa’s early days was hired girl, Margie, who appears as “Mahailey” in *One of Ours* as “Mandy” in “Old Mrs. Harris” and as “Poor Marty” in *April Twilights*. Margie’s mother had worked for Mrs. Cather in Virginia, and when the poor woman, mother of fifteen, heard that the Cather’s were moving to Nebraska, she begged them to take the girl along. Willa Cather was a long personal friend of the Garber’s and eventually used them as prototypes for Captain and Mrs. Forrester in *A Lost Lady* of which Miss Cather later said:

A Lost Lady was a woman I loved very much in my childhood.

Now the problem was to get her not like a standardized heroine in fiction, but as she really was not to care about anything else in the story except that one character. And there is nothing but that portrait. Everything else is subordinate...  

As Hermione Lee observes:

“The model for the not-so-lovable Myra Henshawe in *My Mortal Enemy* is somebody Cather knew well and whose friends all recognized her when the novella was published. ‘Lucy Gayheart’ is Sadie Becker, a girl she rememberd vividly from childhood.”

While researching articles, hunting for talented contributors in Europe and at home, and meeting people in the publishing world, Cather still found to write her own stories. Still, at nearly forty she had not yet written a novel. Some people have called this journalistic period a “literary detour” which delayed her career as a novelist until the second half of her life. She herself called it her “apprenticeship” she evidently learned her trade well, because in the next thirty years she produced a dozen novels, several of which have become classics of American literature. *My Ántonia* is probably the most famous.
Despite her continuing success with popular reviewers and the general reading public, Cather's last years were far from serene. Having maintained many close and enduring friendships, some of these as with the Miner sisters dating from her early life, Ferris Greenslet, at Houghton Mifflin; her publisher, Alfred Knopf she also enjoyed new ones, most importantly with the Yehudi Menuhin children, that lasted all her life. Willa Cather enjoyed public notice yet she loved anonymity. She sought fame but disliked attention. She felt fame became a kind of thief stealing time. Aware of so much still to be done she often said, “The end is nothing; the road is all.”

Although she suffered from bouts of poor health, writing remained her passion. But unlike the sunny themes of her early novels drawn from childhood memories, in her last novels are Gothic stories in which dark passions breakthrough the apparent calm of everyday lives. For during her final years Cather felt the horror of events leading to another world war, the pain over deaths of family and friends, and the frustration from an inflammation of her hand. However she continued to write, publishing short stories and working on an Avignon novel that remained unfinished at the time of her death. From the first passionate essays to the more reserved manuscripts of later years, her work is filled with a personal intensity characterized by a quality of voice that is hers alone.

Cather was not interested in any analysis of art and artist neither did she have a high opinion of the feminists of her day, such as the suffragettes. Her life and art were so intertwined, indeed, that at times not even she could tell them apart. Her stubborn devotion to her art created a body of work that has enduring value. A revival of interest in Cather and her work began with the publication of several biographies in the early 1950s and accelerated as the women’s movement gained momentum in the late 1960s and 1970s. New scholars, attuned to issues of women’s abilities and
contributions, became aware that Cather’s life was an exceptional one for a woman of her times.

**WORKS OF WILLA CATHER**

Willa Cather was a prolific writer whatever she has written has got universal appeal and as such her workmanship is exquisite. Her novels were popular when she was alive, and are now considered among the century’s finest examples of the form. Cather published her first literary work *April Twilights* (1903), a book of poetry and a collection of short stories, *The Troll Garden* (1905). Throughout a long productive career she produced twelve novels, more than sixty stories and several volumes of critical essays that focused on her Nebraska experience and her early years in Virginia, her life in New York and Pittsburgh and her travels to New Mexico, Canada and Europe. However, it is for the series of novels focusing on her beloved Nebraska that Cather will be remembered.

Cather’s first novel, was *Alexander’s Bridge* (1912), appeared serially in McClure’s as *Alexander’s Masquerade*. This novella is a charming period piece, a love story of an engineer, and a fatalistic fable about a doomed love affair and the lives it destroys. Bartley Alexander’s accidental meeting with the Irish actress he loved as a young man seems full of promise but leads instead to dishonesty and betrayal. With *O Pioneers!* (1913) she turned to the Nebraska prairies to tell of the heroic and creative qualities of the passing frontier. *O’ Pioneers!* is the story of Alexander Bergson, the daughter of Swedish Immigrant farmers, whose devotion to the land sustains her against the hardships and suffering of prairie life. No other work of fiction so faithfully conveys both the sharp physical realities and the mythic sweep of the land. Willa Cather wrote her longest novel *The Song of the Lark* (1915). Beautiful and lyrical this third novel by Willa Cather follows the life of an immigrant
woman's character. Thea Kronborg, a minister's daughter in a provincial Colorado town, seems destined from childhood for a place in the wider world. She portrays the awakening and struggle of the self-making of an artist to maintain personal integrity in materialistic culture.

Cather continued in her autobiographical frames as she wrote My Ántonia (1981) her masterpiece episodic in construction like her other novels, she tells of a Bohemian immigrant girls life on the frontier, and the pioneer strength that preserves her numerous adversities. Infused with gracious passion for the land, this classic work embraces its uncommon subject- 'the hard life of the pioneer woman on the prairie'- with poetic certitude, rendering a moving portrait of an entire community.

As perceptively observed by H.L. Mencken – “No romantic novel ever written in America, by man or woman, is one half so beautiful as MyÁntonia”. The book consists of the loosely structured memories of Jim Burden, who recounts tales of his Nebraska farm upbringing, and especially of the beautiful immigrant girl from Bohemia, Ántonia Shimerda, whom he loves with a pure innocence.

Cather won the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 for her novel One of Ours (1922), which depicted a boy from the Western plains, who leaves home to fight in World War I and is killed in France. Her judgment of contemporary society was seen in her mid career novel, A Lost Lady (1923) depicting the conflict between heroic builders of the west and cruel men of the present. A portrait of a woman who reflects the conventions of her age as she defies them and whose transformation embody the decline and coarsening of the American frontier. The Professor’s House (1925) deals with spiritual and cultural crisis for the main characters. Later Cather published a short novella My Mortal Enemy (1926) where love for money goes unrequited and the heroine is seen dying alone in a squalid shabby Los Angeles suburb.
Willa Cather’s writings entered into its third stage. The period was initiated by the novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) in which she reveals a new found theme the vanished past of the American southwest where nature and Christianity is opposed to modern urban life and society. It is a chronicle of the early missions of Bishop Jean Latour and Vicar Father Joseph Valliant in Santa Fé as they organize the new Roman Catholic Diocese of New Mexico. A glow of grandeur suffuses in her writings and the details of layout made this the most handsomely produced book of her career.

*Shadows on the Rock* (1931) this time centering on seventeenth-century Canada, an evocation of North American origins highlights the men and women who struggled to adapt to the new world as they clung to the one they left behind. *Lucy Gayheart* (1935) is the story of Midwestern girl who gives up an early love affair to study music, then abandons her career to become the mistress of an egotistical concert singer, and meets an accidental death after he deserts her. *Sapphira and SalveGirl* (1940) is her last complete novel based on a story recalled from her Virginia childhood.

Cather received honorary degrees from numerous universities: The University of Michigan, the University of California, and from Columbia, Yale, and Princeton. Several prestigious awards came to Cather. America’s highest literary prize, the Pulitzer was awarded for her novel *One of Ours* in 1923. Following her death, her reputation has grown steadily and, in the last fifteen years, exploded with activity, with over a hundred articles and several books appearing each year on her. Willa Cather’s novels have never gone out of print, for her popularity has remained strong. Willa Cather left as her legacy some of the finest works of American literature; through her writings she also gave us a personal
chronicle of artistic development. Her artistic integrity or her literary skill of her novels makes it clear that Cather's works will go on attracting enthusiastic readers into the indefinite future. 39

LITERARY INFLUENCES ON CATHER'S WRITING

In early childhood, the young Willa was read to by her grandparents. The Bible was fundamental. It was toned for many hours. Cather's early training enabled her to conceive the language as sound. Some of her central text also included the Classics and Shakespeare. 40 Cather was lucky to have a talented Harvard graduate, Herbet Bates, teaching her, whose modesty and sensitivity, she always admired. The classical writers who influenced her, Theocritus and Virgil, were neither of them actually down on the farm when they were writing about crops and shepherds though Virgil, like Cather, carried the rural memories. 41 She had read Robert Louis Stevenson and gave the landmarks along the Republican River such names as "Robber's Cave." 42

Cather devoured the novels of Tolstoy, Turgenev, Balzac, Daudet, Dumas Flaubert, and Hugo. She was an admirer of Proust, Maupassant, Mann, Stravinsky Merrimee, Musset, Verlaine, and Zola. George Sand, whose portrait hung over her mantel, was one of her heroines. 43 It was during her college years that she learned to admire William Jennings Bryan then at Lincoln, whose influence on her latter political thinking is to be seen in many of her novels and short stories. And during this period she met a living inspiration in the person of Stephen Crane. 44

Cather had intense admiration for the work of Flaubert as she tells us in her delightful essay "A chance Meeting" in the collection entitled "Not Under forty". She set Flaubert's objectivity restraint and rhythmic sense far above the unmeasured
outpourings of Balzac. She was deeply impressed by the Great Russian realists. While Willa Cather was attending the University of Nebraska, she read and admired the great masters of prose style, particularly Henry James, whom she considered “the most interesting writer of that time.” She began by imitating James, and it was not until she wrote *O Pioneers!* that she stepped out into a style admittedly her own.

As noted by Ann M. Begley, “the observation has repeatedly been made with considerable justification, which *Alexander’s Bridge* is heavily indebted to Henry James both in form and in choice of an upper class, cosmopolitan milieu, but it is even more indebted to Carl Jung.” Cather admired his language, style, plotting; his influence is also apparent in some of the stories in *The Troll Garden*.

Henry James wrote, in reference to a Cather’s novel he hadn’t yet read:

> I find it the hardest thing in the world to read almost any new novel.

> And is hard enough, but the hardest from the innocent hands of young females, young American females perhaps above all.

Cather also admired Walt Whitman for his nation building and his respect for the “common” people who were doing that building. There were other great ones Cather liked best like Mark Twain, and Sarah Orne Jewett. Jewett influenced Cather in her writings.

Cather’s response to Jewett,

She told Jewett that McClure told her over and over that she would never be able to do much in writing stories, but she could be a good magazine executive and had better let it go at that; she lacked the originality and power to be a really original literary talent. As aptly remarked by Woodress “But she thought that one had a right to live and reflect and feel a little, that whether or not McClure was
right in thinking she would never be a writer, she thought perhaps she
ought to consider her immortal soul." 49

Cather often read the Bible which was a source of inspiration for her writings. Cather’s sensibility, her high regard for the artist and European culture, and the emphasis on the technique in her later novels link her with Gustave, Flaubert and Henry James.

IV

CATHER AND OTHER MODERNIST WOMEN WRITERS

It is very useful to study Cather as a modernist writer, as she shared many of her preoccupations with other modernist writers – both the expatriate and the ones who stayed in America. The first generation of modernist women writers were born during the crisis times leading up to the Civil War and came of age during the American awakening in the cultural tumult of reconstruction. It included Harriet Tubman, Carry Nation, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, Pauline Hopkins, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Emma D. Kelley Hawkins.

The second generation of modernist women writers was born during a period of American economic dominance and came of age in America’s Gilded Age, where Populists and Suffragists took center stage from war hawks and doves, and where discussions of black enfranchisement entered into political debates. It included: Ida B. Wells Barnett, Edith Wharton, Sui Sin Far, Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Onoto Watanna, Natalie Barney, Angelina Weld Grimke, and Jessie Fauset.
This generation witnessed waves of immigration and new forms of racism in the years before the turn of the century, as well as America's culture of institutional racism in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), and the reification of the doctrine of "separate but equal" in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). Her prominent contemporaries were Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow. They were long considered regional writers, though not all their work is set in the desert Southwest or Nebraska, as not all Glasgow's is set in Virginia. Recent Feminist Scholarship emphasizes these authors concern with sex roles and their problematic self-concepts as women writers.

Willa Cather displayed an extraordinary understanding of a central facet of regionalism like Mary Austin. Like Ellen Glasgow, Willa Cather is one of the finest women writers who wanted to express the truth for human life embracing both the world within and the world of external appearances. Miss Cather was younger than Sarah Orne Jewett, James and Henry Adams. She was still more than a literary generation away from F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner. Cather's real contemporaries in prose fiction were Stephen Crane, Theodore Dressier, Sinclair Lewis, Dos Passos, John Steinbeck and William Saroyan. She admired Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow.

Edith Wharton

Wharton's work, historically, is rooted not only in the tradition of social and psychological realism commonly associated with Howells and James the writers she admired, but also in the realism and social criticism of women writers publishing before and contemporary. They were concerned with many of the same issues that engaged Wharton, particularly issues centered on experiences of women's and their problems. Personally, Wharton treated many of the issues of her own life in her fiction: her estrangement from and anger at her mother; her frustration with the
limitations placed on women, and especially woman of the upper class; her miserable
marriage and the stigma against divorce, again particularly in her class but also
generally, her fear of the ways in which cautiousness and selfishness can corrupt
one’s soul; her knowledge that female sexuality, despite society’s repression of it, was
a potent source of creativity.51

Ellen Glasgow

Glasgow considered herself something of a philosopher. With a brilliant and
increasingly ironic treatment, Glasgow examined the decay of Southern aristocracy
and the trauma of the encroachment of modern industrial civilization. She began to
tap the full measure of her talent for depicting strong women caught by or struggling
against, their expected roles.

Mary Austin

Austin reflects the growing feminist awareness stemming from Austin’s
participation in the Woman’s Suffrage movement. Mary Austin’s literary
development reflects new interest in social issues-man’s adjustment to society, rather
than his adjustment to nature. Most of her novels reveal Austin’s concern with how
men and women work out of their individual and mutual roles in society. Austin
however developed a regional philosophy, which reflected this new balance when she
added society to the equation she had created between men and nature.52 Cather’s
work is very interesting to compare and contrast with Jewett’s. As a regionalist – a
writer engaged in trying to capture in detail with great accuracy and sensitivity to life
as it was experienced in a particular region, rather than attempting to fill in a huge and
more diffuse canvas.
CATH ER'S ART

Cather “did not as a rule discuss her art, however from time to time, Miss Cather would express some of her ideas on writing in interviews”. In these, she readily admitted that writing was hard work, but work, which she enjoyed as a tennis player, might enjoy working his game from the common place into the smooth and expert. If one loved the work it wasn’t really work. Not that there wasn’t a struggle in attempting perfection, but the struggle was one which stimulated. She compared the writer to the musician, writing being to the author what music is to the violinist.\(^{53}\)

On another occasion, Cather expresses that the artist’s chief concern is not in his life, but rather his work: “Life in itself is a great task and to live it well or even decently is an art....”\(^{54}\)

As perceptively observed by Mildred Bennett,

Miss Cather held that artistic appreciation should include all the activities of life, from the enjoyment of the morning bath to cooking a roast just right, “so that it is brown and dripping and odorous and saignant.” With the young authors she found the results “invariably false and hollow.... Art must spring out of the very stuff that life is made of.” Cather didn’t believe in “collecting ideas to build a story.” What the “born artist” gets is an emotion that he wants to put into a design.\(^{55}\)

She loved her freedom- her liberty to do exactly as she pleased. She wanted nothing closer than friendship. As she said in her essay on Carlyle:

Art of every kind is an exacting master, more so even than Jehovah- He says only, ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me.’ Art, Science and Letters
cry, ‘Thou shalt have no other gods at all.’ They accept only human sacrifices.\textsuperscript{56}

In Cather’s opinion: “A book is made with one’s own flesh and blood of years. It is cremated youth. It is all yours- no one gave it to you.”\textsuperscript{57} She didn’t invent or contrive. “You can’t write imaginary things. To have universal appeal, they must be true!”\textsuperscript{58}

Miss Cather held no brief for schools and courses in short-story writing. She felt that they could only teach what others had already done, and if one wished to be original, he would have to find the way by himself.\textsuperscript{59}

Cather also accepts that an artist must live in solitude to create good work, “...if an artist does any good work he must do it alone...There is much to suffer, much to undergo; the awful loneliness the longing for humans fellowship and for human love... It is a hard thing to endure.”\textsuperscript{60} Thus, in Cather’s philosophy, a person must abandon most human needs in order to totally commit himself to realizing his artistic potential. It is at such high levels of devotion and perseverance that a person is reborn an artist.

Cather disapproved of realism and naturalism; she considered it cluttered, deterministic, overtly reform minded that took away from art. The best art Cather felt, focused not on reality but on “something else”, some ineffable emotional truth plying between the mind and the world, and invoked it by subtle, indirect means Cather wrote from her heart about things she heard and saw as a child growing up in a multicultural setting where the realities of life on the prairies loomed over all realms.

As perceptively observed by Bernice Slote, “with Willa Cather, the imagination, was a way of being. What came to her of experience, in any form,
became a part of her. And in truth she became an actress creating and recreating for herself. The person, who is also the artist, becomes the instrument by which experience is absorbed and translated. Cather, in fact, describes her own writing as a penetration of the bottom of consciousness in a way that Kronborg’s singing brings her deeper into the inner zone where discovery lies. She expresses her dissatisfaction with her first novel, Alexander’s bridge, with those following by distinguishing between “the building of external stories and a story that formed itself.  

Cather’s preference is for organic form which is Kronborg’s discovery applied to Cather’s own fictive art. The “essential matter” of a story, she comes to realize, arises “in flashes that are unreasoning, often as unreasonable, as life itself”. Only a form that momentarily arrests these flashes without giving a falsifying finality will do.  

CATHER AND FEMINISM  

Since the mid-1980s, there has been an increasing feminist emphasis in Cather studies, with principal focus upon three basic gender issues in her life and work:  
1. Her depiction of man woman relationships, especially within marriage, 2. Her critical re-examination of traditional male (creative) and female (domestic) role stereotypes; 3. The nature of Cather’s own sexuality, and its relationship to her fiction.  

Willa Cather was not a radical feminist writer but she had the love for women, and in a male oriented society Cather was fascinated by the toil and forbearance of women. She has sympathy for the women folk, though she was male oriented. The feminism of Willa Cather is more subtle than that of Edith Wharton or Ellen Glasgow.  

Cather comes to her heroes as friend. Cather’s first work, the story of a man in disintegration and defeat could hardly be presented than these three succeeding
novels, *O' Pioneers!* , *The Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia* which sing of triumph
of a woman. Willa Cather’s trio of heroic women can bear any amount of strain.
Firmly coordinated, stress-sustaining in every member, the personality of Alexandra
Bergson, of Ántonia Shimerda remains a unit, regardless of live load or dead.63

The men of these books are neither literary accessories, after the
fashion of Edith Wharton’s masculine characters, nor enemies to be hunted down with
the weapons of Ellen Glasgow; they are likeable young men and well individualized.
Matched in mediocrity with women characters, they might show some force: but
against the vigor of Miss Cather’s feminine protagonists, these pleasant mannered,
smooth-faced youths appear emasculate. Through the relationship of Carl Linstrum
and Alexandra the emotional pattern may be traced not only of *O Pioneers!* but of
every significant novel by Willa Cather. It is not a sexual pattern; it is the attitude of
an older sister compassionately viewing all men as juniors.

Throughout Willa Cather’s novels, no circumstance is as variously detailed as
the plight of a superior man in the marriage trap.64 Willa Cather’s novels contain an
integrating feminine personality. The relationship of a protective attitude of
Alexandra toward young Emil in *O Pioneers!* of Thea toward Thor in *The Song of
the Lark* , in *My Antonia* , the immigrant girl Antonia finds almost a brother in Jim
Burden much of what he is to learn about the world. Woman as conservator of
civilization, woman as counselor, one function blends well with the other; and in the
novels of Willa Cather, there is always a “more or less pliant male over whom
woman’s tutelage shows effect.”65

In the course of twelve novels, Willa Cather has exhibited feminism both
varied and subtle. Almost non-existent in her first novel *Alexander’s Bridge*, which
she herself practically disavowed within a decade after publication, the desire to exalt
her own sex has provided the essential strength of succeeding works. The pioneer trilogy, on which her reputation will perhaps continue to rest, makes no pretense of sharing the heroic role between the sexes; that part belongs in turn to Alexandra, to Thea and to Ántonia and no man may venture near, except to magnify it by his own homage.66

Struggling with the growing awareness of her sexual nature and wishing desperately to be accepted by the male literary establishment, she denigrated women artists in her early newspaper writing and fiction. Like her sister feminists, Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow, Miss Cather achieves her literary purpose most effectively in prairie of her own sex. The men on the jobs, of bridge-building to excavation, the rougher phases of railroading, ranching and farming, that Miss Cather describes are the most lacking in virility. The contemporary American novel is broadly speaking, a product of humanism. Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow and Willa Cather have shown woman struggling neither to be man’s peer nor his master but to exist as an independent entity. Waiving her maternal function, the feminist heroine has sought absolute achievement, exclusive of sex.

V

CRITICS ON WILLA CATHER

There is a critical controversy surrounding Willa Cather. Her position among American novelists is unique; no other has brought to bear quite her kind of perception on the American scene. Here are some of the critical evaluations of the critics of Willa Cather's fiction. David Daiches, in his biography opines:

Where to place Willa Cather will always puzzle the literary historians.

But the reader of her best novels is not likely to worry about that.
These novels have strength and an individuality that it is not easy for the critic formally to describe, virtues, which can be experienced even if they cannot easily be talked about. Her work transcends national problems to illuminate one of the great questions about civilization. To put the matter briefly, Miss Cather's novels are civilized; and if we interpret that term too narrowly, that is because we have not read Willa Cather carefully enough. 67

Willa Cather has been mentioned to be able to touch every generation. The critic Leonard Unger said that her work would touch the generation before and after her. She writes from the past but will deal with everyone. Her writing was based on things before her time and that is how she is reaching people in the next generation. Her writings help the people of the time now understand things back before Willa's time. Unger also states that she writes out of wisdom. 68

Elizabeth Sergeant which was a friend of hers, also a critic, said:

I saw that her intimacy with nature lay at the very root... of her power to work at all. She was a writer that came from deep down, her root, and not from the surface. Willa would always take things from deep down to write about. She really thought about all that she was writing about. Willa would get the deep down grip about everything. As I see it, all critics had nice and meaningful things to say about Willa Cather. Her work was such a positive impact that everyone thought about how creative and positive her work was. So as I see it, everyone would and does see her as a good writer. 69

Willa Cather has got very good remarks from critics of both time periods. It is obvious that she was, and still is, an extremely well respected writer. Critic Rebecca
West said: “Miss Cather builds her imagined world almost as solidly as our five senses build the universe around us.” 70

That proves that Willa could create a visual picture with her stories, and get people interested in her work. Another critic, Edmund Wilson, stated that Willa was “one of the only writers who were able to bring any real distinction to the life of the Middle West.” She did something that other writers could not by bringing the Middle West to life. As you can see, Willa Cather will forever be remembered as someone the critics loved. 71

Dorothy Van Ghent, expresses,

It is customary to speak of Willa Cather as an “elegist” of the American pioneer tradition. “Elegy” suggests celebration and lament for a lost and irrevocable past; but the boldest and most beautiful of Willa Cather’s fictions are characterized by a sense of the past not as an irrevocable quality of events, wasted in history, but as persistent human truth repossessed-salvaged, redeemed by virtue of memory and art...

Her art is a singular one. The prose style is suave, candid, transparent, a style shaped and sophisticated in the great European tradition; her teachers were Homer and Virgil, Tolstoy and Flaubert. But the creative vision that is particularly hers is deeply primitive, psychologically archaic in an exact sense. In that primitivism was her great strength, for it allowed the back door of her mind to keep open, as it were, to the rumor and movement of ancestral powers and instinctive agencies. 72
As aptly put forth by Henry Steel Commager, in his *The American Mind*,

She thought the traditional themes of love and despair, truth and beauty, the struggle for artistic honesty, far from exhausted, indeed she held, with Henry James and Ellen Glasgow, that these were the only themes capable of inspiring great art, "ideals," she wrote, "were not archaic things, beautiful and impotent; they were the real sources of power among men," and unlike so many of her contemporaries Hemingway, for example she was not embarrassed by this vocabulary. Sarah Orne Jewett had admonished her, when she was scarcely more than a girl that "you must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up Otherwise what might be strength.... Is only crudeness, and what might be insight is only observation, sentiment falls to sentimentality – you can write about life but never write life itself." ... [She] wrote life itself, wrote it so passionately that the characters she created seem to us more authentic than the characters of history. 73

VI

Cather readers are still drawn to the depth and beauty of her works. Many critical works have been published on Willa Cather. Many critics have been fascinated by her works, and scholars have turned their attention to her works to study the varied facets of her fiction. In the last twenty years there has also been an academic explosion of interest in Cather.

Cather studies has been revitalized and almost wholly transformed in the last thirty years. She is no longer merely Nebraska's first lady of letters, whose well-
wrought paeans to the “American Dream” earned the modestly respectful attention of
myth and symbol critics and new critics throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Here are a few recent studies on Cather: Willa Cather Remembered (1995)
edited by Sharon Hoover comprises reminiscences of the author written between the
1920s and 1980s by people ranging from close friends to journalistic observers and
acquaintances. The materials are drawn from newspapers and journals, portions of
books, and a few previously unpublished personal letters or reflections.

Willa Cather, (1995) by Philip L. Gerber provides an overview of Cather’s life. He
examines the early, middle, and final novels; discusses her contributions to short
fiction; and reveals criticism of Cather’s past and present biographies.

The Stuff of our Forebears: Willa Cather’s Southern Heritage. (1998) by Joyce
McDonald, begins by examining Cather’s childhood in Virginia and the Southern
influences that follow her through her literary career. McDonald continues to analyze
the works of Cather, suggesting a more political stance in her writing.

OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

In this thesis I propose to show with reference to selected novels of Willa
Cather how her works depict immigrant women’s activities. My main thrust is on
portrayal of Immigrant Women characters. The thesis also argues that though Cather
always remained faithful to Nebraska, this did not mean that she was a regionalist.
Her works possess much more than local colour. Cather transcends her native context
by making it a symbolic background for universal aspirations of her women
characters. I have examined the following select immigrant novels of Cather to study
the portrayals of immigrant women: O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, The Song of the
Lark, Lucy Gayheart in the light of the concept of immigrant novels discussed earlier in the chapter.

This section also presents the plan of study. The thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter entitled 'Understanding Willa Cather' is introductory in nature. 'The Pioneering Women' is the second chapter. It deals with O Pioneers! 'Unusual Endurance in the Feminine spirit' is the third chapter. It discusses My Ántonia. The fourth chapter entitled 'Creative Power of the Artist' presents the analysis of the novel The Song of the Lark. 'The Woman who would be an Artist' is the fifth chapter. It deals with the novel Lucy Gayheart and the sixth chapter presents conclusions.

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