CHAPTER- 5

THE WOMAN WHO WOULD BE AN ARTIST

I

Cather’s Lucy Gayheart is the “love story” yet it is her “most complex novel philosophically”.¹ The main protagonist is Lucy Gayheart, of immigrant descent. She epitomizes the German inheritance. Lucy Gayheart deals with the theme of the artistic growth and the price it has for a woman, especially one of pioneer descent, to pursue life in art. Lucy Gayheart is artfully put together and contains some of the author’s most profound reflections on art and human relationships. As perceptively remarked by Richard Giannone:

The essential drama of living for Willa Cather takes place behind the brow. “Some peoples’ lives are affected by what happens to their person or their property, but for others fate is what happens to their feelings and their thoughts—that and nothing more.” Such people whose inner being is their destiny are the heroes and heroines of Cather’s fictions. Their inward journey culminating with each character experiencing himself or herself in a new way is Cather’s story.²

Lucy Gayheart the main protagonist of an immigrant descent portrays the womanhood, the very ideal of feminine charm. Lucy Gayheart the attractive daughter of German watchmaker and flute player, whose only access to an adult world as she grows up is through men: as accompanist to the artist which eventually speaks of salvation through courtship and coupling which impedes her achievement. In Lucy

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Gayheart the title character is a rather ordinary young woman whose story is one of apparent failure rather than conspicuous success. It begins and ends in a fictional Red Cloud.

The novel likely had its source of inspiration in a real-life character who teased the author's imagination over the years; she based her central character upon two girls she had met while living there. As perceptively observed by James Woodress: “Sadie Becker, a Red Cloud girl Cather had known in her youth, had "golden-brown eyes," who used to skate on the old rink in a red jersey.” Sadie Becker was a musician, the accompanist of a local singer; who left Red Cloud to continue her music studies. In Red Cloud Sadie Becker was known for her skating, her vivacious manner, and her romance with a local boy.

The heroine's symbolic name and her general characteristics also have their foreground in another real person; “a spirited girl by the name of Miss Gayhardt” in 1895, Willa Cather once met roughly the time in which the novel is set. The vivacious young schoolteacher Cather had met and instantly liked when she was visiting Red Cloud in the summer of 1896. Cather talked about the classics and French literature with a Miss Gayhardt, “a fine, delicate, sensitive creative who seemed to her pitiably unsuited to teach school in that remote rough village.”

In Haverford on the Platte Cather describes Lucy as a girl whose essence cannot be portrayed by a static art: her "gaiety and grace" would "mean nothing" in photographs. She has to be recognized as a "figure always in motion"- joyous motion. In Haverford, Harry Gordon picks her out instantly from all the other skaters on a distant stretch of ice. Her movements are "direct and unhesitating and joyous" as she heads into the wind,

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quick and easy in her squirrel jacket, the tip of her crimson scarf floating in the air. (8) Lucy has the spontaneous vitality and is ‘happy’, ‘pretty’, and ‘best-loved girl’ in her community. Even though people especially the older women stood indoors when there was heavy snowfall Lucy “not shrinking” giving “her body to the wind” as if she were catching step with it (3).

There was something in her nature that was like “her movements, something direct and unhesitating and joyous,” and in her golden-brown eyes. Flash with “gold sparks like that Colorado stone we call the tiger-eye.” Her skin was rather dark, and the colour in her lips and cheeks was like the “red of dark peonies--deep, velvety” (4). Lucy was just thirteen, her “hair down her back, wore a short skirt and a skintight red jersey, and had the prettiest eyes in the world (20). Lucy having lost her mother wanted to be alone; but normally she was glad to meet Harry. In Haverford she sometimes stopped for only a word with him, his “vitality and unfailing satisfaction” with life put her up (18). The first time Harry ever saw Lucy it was in the old skating rink. (19). Lucy had good times in the old rink, that her sister Pauline wouldn’t let her go to dances.

The only girl who gave Harry Gordon any deep thrill was this same Lucy, who lived in his own town, “was poor as a church mouse, never flattered him, and often laughed at him.” When he was with her, life was unusual; and he loved every moment of being together with her (22). Harry Gordon handsome banker sought a highly stereotypical personal relationship with Lucy. He never missed taking out Lucy for the opera something she enjoyed in his company:

On the morning after they heard *Otello*, Lucy cut out her practicing because Harry had asked her to take him through the Art Museum. It
was rather gentle, sunny morning, and as they walked over toward Michigan Avenue they stopped to do a little shopping. The next evening Harry and Lucy appeared for the next opera *Aida*. At the opera they had excellent sets; Harry had written for them weeks ago... He enjoyed the music, and the audience, and being with Lucy. His enthusiasm for the tenor was sincere; the duet in the third act was, he whispered, his idea of music. ...Tonight they would hear *Traviata*, and for tomorrow, Saturday they had chosen the matinee instead of the evening performance, because Lucy had never heard *Lohengrin*, and she especially wanted to (103).

Lucy Gayheart's most vital human moments with Harry Gordon: are skating, attending an opera, and visiting a museum. Lucy's passionate response to art in the absolute sense and her openness are indicated as she observes the first star of the evening:

> That point of silver light spoke to her like a signal, released another kind of life and feeling that did not belong here. It overpowered her. With a mere thought she had reached that star and it had answered, recognition had flashed between. Something knew, then, in the unknowing waste... That joy of saluting what is far above one was an eternal thing... The flash of understanding lasted but a moment. Then everything was confused again. Lucy shut her eyes and leaned on Harry's shoulder to escape from what she had gone so far to snatch. It was too bright and too sharp. It hurt, and made one feel small and lost (11-12).
Lucy Gayheart cuddles dreamily against handsome Harry Gordon, who is giving her a ride home in his sleigh. Suddenly she feels her heart throb in her throat, a symptomatic agitation familiar to readers of popular romance as the feeling of falling in love. The object of Lucy's desire is not Harry, however, but the evening's first star. From across the sky, this bright signaling star has "overpowered" Lucy with its light-a "flash" which brings the mutual "recognition" and "understanding" missing in her relationship with Harry. Throughout the novel, Lucy yearns to renew her communion with the gleaming stars of the sky and with a glamorous singing "star" first seen on the concert stage. Both distant and unreachable, they represent to Lucy "another kind of life and feeling" to which she aspires.

On the last afternoon of the Christmas holidays before she departs for the city, Lucy is out with a party of young people of Haverford “skating on the long stretch of ice”, the two ends of her scarf floating behind her, like “slender wings” moving gracefully and athletically over the frozen river (7). Driving his horse into a lather to join the party is Harry Gordon, who, when he reaches the river, hurries into his skates and shoots past the others to take Lucy for a turn before sunset. They skate far down the river leaving the rest of the party behind; when they reach the end of an island they rest and watch the sun sinking back to town in the sleigh, which is described as “a tiny moving spot on that still white country settling into shadow and silence”(11). She skates until she is near exhaustion. Harry then adopts the role of her chivalric protector, and she becomes completely passive beneath his benevolent power.

In some aspects Lucy Gayheart is reminiscent of The Song of the Lark. Like Thea, Lucy is a small town girl who loves to study music but while Thea’s desire is for
artistic creation itself, Lucy finds the embodiment of her desire in the person of the singer Clement Sebastian.

She had gone to his studio the first time because she was asked to come; she loved being there, and went again and again. He had seemed pleased and amused, and was very kind. She even felt that he liked her being young and ignorant and not too clever. It was an accidental relationship, between someone who had everything and someone who had nothing at all: and it concerned nobody else. She had dropped down into the middle of this man’s life, and she snatched what she could, from the present and the past. Her playing for him was nothing but make believe: and is friendliness was make – believe, perhaps. Then there was nothing real about it,— except her own feeling. That was real (61).

The female heroine is the “incipient artist and her responses are shaped by this inner quality.” Lucy had given piano lessons to beginners ever since she was in the tenth grade. She is loved by children because she never treated them like kids especially the little boys. And at the tender age of eighteen Cather takes its heroine, Lucy Gayheart, to Chicago to study in preparation for a musical career. In Chicago, she gets a job accompanying a famous singer, whom she falls in love with. The singer is nearly fifty he is world-weary and unhappily married, Lucy is full of youth and vitality. Lucy’s tragedy is that “she has the desire, but not the will or talent for an artistic career” (5).

Lucy didn’t like the “pervasive informality” of the boarding place; when she first came to Chicago. She once remarked to her music teacher, Professor Auerbach that she
would never get on unless she could live alone with her piano, where there would be no gay voices" (26). Having a great lure for the German tradition Lucy took a room at once where there was a "German homely restaurant" specializing in German dishes conducted by Mrs. Schneff. Lucy for the first time in her life could come and go like a boy; "no one fussing about, no one hovering over her" (26). Born of Bavarian parents in the German colony at Belleville, Illinois, Jacob Gayheart had learned his trade under his father. Lucy's father "led the town band and gave lessons on the clarinet, flute, and violin", behind his watch-repairing shop. He took more pains to make the band boys practice than he did to keep up his interest payments on his farms which were now mortgaged (5). With the musical traits running in her family Lucy thought of music as a means of earning money to help her father.

Lucy is "talented" but too "careless" and "light-hearted" to take herself very seriously. She never dreamed of a "career." She thought of music as a natural form of pleasure, and as a means of earning money to help her father (4). Lucy's father also an amateur astronomer (29) studies the stars. Clement Sebastian himself an established artist or "star" sings about them. Lucy did not miss a word of the 'German'. She had never heard anything sung with such elevation of style. The "mortal" view of human experience adumbrates from Sebastian and his music. When Lucy first hears him sing in Chicago, she is struck by "something profoundly tragic" about the man. Lucy is aroused by Sebastian's appearance before she hears him sing. At a concert when he comes upon the stage, she responds to his "large, rather tired eyes," in a black coat with a white waistcoat that solidly fills the space it occupies. The arousal becomes possession when Lucy hears Sebastian sing "Der Doppelganger," a song which cast over her a spell, in which she
struggles “with something she had never felt before.” Lucy lapses into unconsciousness, unaware of Sebastian’s exit, only later to realize “there was nobody left before the grey velvet curtain but the red-haired accompanist, a lame boy, who dragged one foot as he went across the stage” (29). As rightly opined by Susan Rosowski this is Lucy’s story of awakening desire, vulnerability, and possession, with Lucy when she first sees Sebastian, and we learn about her feelings when she first hears him sing.8

“When We Two Parted,” which Sebastian sings at the recital; a song of separated lovers, it laments the infirmity and the inevitable closure of human relationships. Sitting here in her cloak, shivering, she had whispered over and over the words of that last song:

When we two parted,
In silence and tears,
Half broken—hearted,
To serve for years,
Pale grew thy cheek and cold,
Colder thy kiss;
Surely that hour foretold
Sorrow to this. (32)

As Lucy listens to him sing, “the outside world seemed to her dark and terrifying, full of fears and dangers that had never come close to her until now” (31). Sebastian turns to Lucy because he knows his former self cannot be revived. Lucy is profoundly moved by what she glimpses in Sebastian’s singing, and she goes home that night “tried and frightened, with a feeling that some protecting barrier was gone—a window had been
broken that let in the cold and darkness of the night” (32). In such a world all values are human and individual; but subject to time and change, they are fragile and fleeting.

Lucy had felt an omen for herself in the Byron song, and shortly after the concert she has the opportunity to work as Sebastian’s rehearsal accompanist. Her fears of the singer are dispelled by his kindness, and after they have worked together for some time she finds herself falling in love with him. But Sebastian cannot return her love. When he sings Schubert’s *Die Winterreise* we are given an insight into his feeling for Lucy. The Schubert song cycle presents a rejected lover who is psychically resurrected in winter to experience again and express the anguish of his loss. Sebastian sings the song without dramatic involvement. He does not identify with the melancholy youth, but presents him "as if he were a memory, not to be brought too near into the presents (38).

The emotional distance Sebastian establishes between himself and the youth of the songs defines his relationship to Lucy: she revives in him a memory of his youth, but romantic love is no longer a dramatic reality for him – his thoughts and emotions are preoccupied with much grimmer facts of life. In his studio Sebastian is always kind and courteous, but when Lucy, by chance, catches a glimpse of him walking alone in the street, she sees a man whose face is filled with a profound and forbidding melancholy – his other self.9

Lucy ponders on Sebastian’s relationship with his estranged wife and wonders if she is not the source of his unhappiness. But Sebastian is not a lover grieving over failure with a woman; rather, he is a man coming to terms with the knowledge that he must some day die. Lucy comes closest to understanding this when, unnoticed, she attends the funeral service for one of Sebastian’s friends – a French singer who died suddenly while
on tour in America. As the coffin is carried to the altar of the church, Sebastian follows it with a look of anguish and despair that strikes a chill in Lucy’s heart. Unlike his rendering of *Die Winterreise*, Sebastian’s involvement at the funeral is “personal and passionate,” and Lucy feels, as at the first recital, that “a wave of black despair” had swept through the room – an image which recurs several times in the novel linking death with water. Lucy wonders if the woman had been dear to him or whether death itself is so horrible to Sebastian; but when she remembers seeing him once before emerging from a church, she realizes that his despair has to do, not with the heart, but with “the needs of his soul” (55).

Following the death of a boyhood friend, Sebastian realizes his own youth is “forever and irrevocably gone” (77). The apparently safe, normal world about him drops away, and “everything . . . had suddenly become unfamiliar and unfriendly” (78). To save himself Sebastian looks for “one lovely, unspoiled memory” (79), but to compound his horror, he is unable to recall anything worth remembering. It is then that he turns to Lucy. Sebastian embraces Lucy Gayheart, he grows stronger, fresher, younger, while she becomes increasingly passive and dependent. Her pulsating energy gives way to timidity, uncertainty, and bewilderment, until she gives herself to embraces in which Sebastian’s soft, deep breathing seemed to drink her up entirely” (87). Ultimately, her comfort is that of the womb. Lying in the dark against his shoulder, “she felt herself drifting again into his breathing, into his heart-beats” (89).

When Sebastian takes Lucy into his studio, it is as to a place as isolated, remote, and strange as Count Dracula’s mountaintop castle. With him there, Lucy is “shut away from the rest of the world. It was as if they were on the lonely spur of a mountain,
enveloped by mist” (75). Lucy Gayheart is unspoiled youth, and Sebastian clings to her as desperately as though more elegantly than his accompanist Mockford will later cling to him. In doing so he immerses Lucy in emotions for which she is unprepared.

Lucy instinctively hates Mockford, for she is his antithesis – an embodiment of life with all its energy and desires. Fumingly, it is because of Mockford’s diseased hip that Lucy is ensnared in the mortal chain that leads to her own death. While Mockford is resting for an operation, Lucy becomes Sebastian’s pianist and falls in love with in. But, as we know from his singing, Sebastian is in death’s train: he remarks to Lucy that Mockford is “one of the few friends who have lasted through time and change” (52). There is perhaps another grim double meaning intended when Sebastian says to Lucy at the piano, “Catch step with me” (41).

David Stouck perceptively observes that:

At first the singer is simply courteous to Lucy, for he is completely absorbed by a sense of life’s futility, but gradually he begins to respond to the freshness and spontaneity of Lucy’s presence in his studio. As she would make her way along the lake from, the sharp air off the water “brought up all the fire of life in her,” and she would take into the studio “the freshness of the morning weather.” Sebastian watches for her from the window and delights in seeing her tripping along the street in the cold wind. Her figure hurrying along recalls to him a passage from Montaigne: “in early youth the joy of life lies in the feet.” 10

The worth of the vision is affirmed in Lucy Gayheart as well as in the Song of the Lark. As Janis Stout remarks: “Art is seen as a discipline and as redeemer of life from
shabbiness or inadequacy and thus as a goal well-worth the sacrifices it requires.” Lucy admires a vase of flowers Sebastian sends to her. “‘Yes, they’re nice, aren’t they? Very suggestive: youth, love, hope – all the things that pass’” (69). Lucy asks him if he never got any pleasure from being in love, and he answers, “‘N-n-no, not much’”. News of an old companion’s death makes him reflect on all of life as a hopeless failure. But Lucy’s eager sympathy revives his spirits, and he leaves her looking forward to the morning again.

The following day he tells Lucy that he loves her, and although he confesses he has “renounced life” and will never share it with anyone again, he still believes in “the old and lovely dreams of man,” which he will teach her and share with her. Sebastian is, in fact, falling in love with life again, with its movement and its ardor as embodied in Lucy. He says to her, “When I caught sight of you tripping along in the wind, my heart grew lighter . . . When you knocked, it was like springtime coming in at the door” (88-99).

At Sebastian’s recital a baritone voice opened her consciousness to suffering, during The Bohemian Girl a soprano shows Lucy the way to heal the pain. The soprano on stage is Lucy’s doppelganger in mature form; she is the musical counterpart to old Mrs. Ramsay, Cather’s wisdom figure. The soprano conspicuously reflects Lucy’s sense of loss and displacement. She "sang so well that Lucy wondered how she drifted into a little road company like this one" (152). Lucy at twenty naturally equates achievement with successful living and love with protection against loss. One of Lucy’s virtues is that she has the courage to bear gentleness. Richard Giannone notes that “she holds firm as her heart expands under the burden placed on her consciousness by Sebastian’s exceptional artistry. The lieder send melodic wave after melodic wave of their dark male
beauty over this young woman.”¹² To keep her heart from sinking, Lucy must struggle; but the music overcomes her resistance. Schubert’s songs immerse Lucy in "a discovery about life, a revelation of love as a tragic force... of passion that drowns like black water" (26).

At that October recital in Chicago, an ingenuous Nebraska woman of twenty has the first flush of her enthusiasm for life. During the performance, Lucy draws near to the vortex of what Joan Acocella, calls Cather's tragic sense of life.¹³ Yes, this music jolts Lucy into a maelstrom of emotion. The disturbance is seismic on impact, glacial in outcome. Sebastian's singing causes a shift in Lucy's inner world that alters her perception of the "outside world." Once bright and welcoming, reality becomes "dark and terrifying, for Lucy as life is full of fears and dangers that had never come close to her until now" (26). Somehow, Lucy was not afraid of the cold. "She slipped into her only evening dress and put on the velvet cloak she had bought before Christmas. Tonight there was a bitter wind blowing off the Lake, but she was going to have a cab – She rather liked the excitement of winding a soft, light cloak about her bare arms...and running out into glacial cold (37).

Auerbach, the only music teacher portrayed in Lucy Gayheart, and the person who links Lucy to the baritone Clement Sebastian, helps Lucy to a limited degree but on the whole is too negative and derogatory. At one critical turning point, when Lucy appeals to Auerbach for professional advice, his words to Lucy correspond eerily to those of Wunsch to Thea. However, while Wunsch cautions Thea about the dangers inherent in marrying some Moonstone "Jacob" and keeping house for him (95) instead of following her desire, Auerbach encourages Lucy to reject the musical profession in favor of "a nice
house and garden in a little town . . . a family – that’s the best life” (134). When Lucy wonders “if there were not more than one way of living,” he responds, “Not for a girl like you, Lucy; you are too kind” (134).

When Harry Gordon comes to Chicago to pursue his courtship of Lucy, he brings back to her a world which has never looked at life’s tragic side. Harry is the embodiment of self-confident youth and vigor: “He came to meet her with such a jolly smile, fresh and ruddy and well turned-out in his new grey clothes.” And Lucy recognizes at once that the thing she liked best about him was “the fine physical balance which made him a good dancer and a tireless skater” (97). But Lucy has “caught step” with Sebastian, and when she lies to Harry a tells him that she has “gone all the way” with the singer, that there is no going back; she unwittingly speaks a prophetic truth.

Lucy turns down Harry's offer of marriage but she loses her self-control in the process, and even more critically, she surrenders center stage to Sebastian. The artist requires freedom and independence in every sense: personal, emotional, financial. She needs to break away, from societal constraints in general and her roots in particular including family, friends, and place in order to find her true artistry and her voice. On the other hand, Cather succinctly summarizes circumstances or conditions that serve the artist in Lucy Gayheart: "escape, change, chance" (24), But while Lucy, like Thea sets out fearlessly to seek escape and change in the city, chance never works in her favor, and the events that befall her are unlucky one.

Lucy had temporarily rekindled in Sebastian a desire to live a revival of the heart, but having looked at life from a “long distance,” he could not turn back and evade the terrible knowledge of death. She had brought sunlight to his studio, but he could not
escape from death’s shadow. Lucy fell under the shadow of Sebastian’s vision temporarily she is seated in the shadow of a pillar when he performs *De Winterreise*, but hers is not a tragedy of death but of love’s eternal frustration. When she goes back to Haverford she must discover not only a way of continuing to live, but a way of being able to love again.

It is Mrs. Ramsay who suggests to Lucy a way of finding happiness again. She says to her, “Life is short; gather roses while you may . . . Make it as many as you can, Lucy. Nothing really matters but living. Get all you can out of it. I’m an old woman and I know” (165). Her advice is purposely a generalization, for happiness can only be sustained by life itself, not by an individual, perishable love. The importance of Mrs. Ramsay’s words to Lucy is anticipated when Mrs. Ramsay’s daughter observes the change that has come to her mother with the years. Once the older woman’s sympathy for Lucy would have been passionate and very personal, now it was “more ethereal”, like “the Divine Compassion” (147).

The fact that life must end in death does not matter to Lucy; when she feels the renewed desire to go back into the world, her mind is filled with pictures of people in movement: “She could think of nothing but crowded streets with life streaming up and down, windows full of roses and gardenias and violets . . .” (184). The words from Mendelssohn’s Elijah that Sebastian sang for her in the beginning — “If with all your heart you truly seek Him”, *you shall ever surely find Him* (41) — acquire their full value for Lucy as a description of living, not as a revelation after death; for seeking is finding, or, as Willa Cather herself quoted, “*Le but n’est rien; le chemin, c’est tout.*” 15The musical exultation takes her toward action: “Now she knew what she meant” (156).
Seeking the source of life she is committed to pursue the way of desire to its term. Immediately her plaint body is swept up into her search. Lucy stretches her arms outward to greet the winter storm and "whatever might lie behind it." With every physical fiber, she bids: "Let it come!" (156).

Art, like love, provides the façade beneath which age seeks to stave off death by feeding upon youth. Lucy Gayheart seems largely unconscious when with Sebastian; she is happiest when, back in her own room at night, she recalls the day.” As discussed by psychoanalyst Phyllis Greenacre “this sense of another self is not uncommon in creative individuals. This second or artist self serves to provide Thea with a feeling of power and security no matter what obstacles come her way. Lucy doesn’t possess a distinct second self-image.” However, she is attuned emotionally to art as a realm apart from life’s more mundane aspects, even though its prospects may frighten her previously evidenced. Also, during her mourning period in Haverford, Lucy is inspired to resume her pursuit of excellence when she hears the performance of an aging soprano and senses in herself “something that was like a purpose forming... beating like another heart” (181). It is this loss of a self that is most chilling in Lucy’s relationship to Sebastian, for as he draws life from her, he leaves her with emptiness and estrangement. After their first embrace, in which he talk from her youthful love and gave to her his renouncement of life, she felt “far away from herself... as if everything were on the point of vanishing.”

Taking her youth with him, Sebastian leaves Lucy with his cast-off loneliness and sorrow. She returns to his empty study, where “all her companionship with him was shut up” (131), and she visits the church where she had seen him at a funeral, "a place sacred
to sorrows she herself had never known; but she knelt in the spot where he had knelt, and prayed for him” (136).

Later when she learns of Sebastian’s death, she returns to Haverford, a pale, lifeless ghost of her former self. Her estrangement from the human world is such that she dreads to touch anything in her own house, lies tense even in her own bed, and sometimes is afraid of sleep, for “there had been nights when she lost consciousness only to drop into an ice-cold lake and struggle to free a drowning man from a white thing that clung to him. His eyes were always shut as if he were already dead; but the green eyes of the other, behind his shoulder, were open, full of terror and greed” (157-158).

She feels again the yearning she had sought to satisfy through Sebastian, but she now confronts her independence, asking “how could she go on alone?” The answer comes as Thea reached toward ancient truths she was to find in Panther Canyon:

Suddenly something flashed into her mind, so clear that it must have come from without, from the breathless quiet. What if – what if Life itself were the sweetheart? It was like a lover waiting for her in distant cities – across the sea; drawing her, enticing her, weaving a spell over her. She opened the window softly and knelt down beside it to breathe the cold air. She felt the snowflakes melt in her hair, on her hot cheeks. Oh, now she knew! She must have it, she couldn’t run away from it. She must go back into the world and get all she could of everything that had made him what he was . . . . She crouched closer to the window and stretched out her arms to the storm, to whatever might lie
behind it. Let it come! Let it all come back to her again! Let it betray her and mock her and break her heart, she must have it! (184-85).

Lucy’s drowning when she goes skating on the river attests again to death’s inexorable presence, but the image of the wagons crawling along the frozen land, taking her body home, initiates yet another tragedy in the novel —Gordon had loved Lucy Gayheart, but he had not understood her, and after her declaration of love for Sebastian his only thoughts were of revenging himself, of punishing Lucy. When Lucy came back to Haverford after Sebastian’s death, he refused, in spite of her plea, to help or comfort her, withdrawing into the exclusive confines of his unhappy new marriage and the family bank. Indeed, on the last day of her life he had rudely denied Lucy a lift in his cutter. As if to break an evil spell, Lucy turns to her hometown suitor, Harry Gordon, to look at her in the old way, with life. Harry Gordon is the attractive and wealthy man who wished to marry Lucy, but flees not when he believes Lucy loves another man but when he believes she has had sex with him.

Twenty-five years have passed, and Gordon has attended the funeral of his one remaining friend and the last member of the Gayheart family, Lucy’s father. With Mr. Gayheart’s death, Gordon realized, “a chapter was closed, and a once familiar name on the way to be forgotten.” The Gayheart’s are on the way to “complete oblivion” (207). One of the winter afternoon of old Mr. Gayheart’s funeral; during the services the townspeople feel “almost as if Lucy’s grave had been opened” (207). Gordon, now fifty-five, reflects on the years since Lucy’s death, and at last admits to himself his guilt. He had done everything possible to make Lucy suffer: the day on which she drowned “he refuses to the most worthless old loafer in town” (220). He realizes that his guilt has
been the preoccupation of his life since that day; he thinks of it and his barren marriage as
a "life sentence." As an "act of retribution" he has kept up a friendship with Lucy's
father, and when Mr. Gayheart is gone he takes possession of the Gayheart house with its
sidewalk where Lucy's footprints are imprinted in the cement.

Cather defines the real psychological milieu in Lucy Gayheart. As rightly opined
by Dorothy Tuck McFarland Lucy Gayheart reflects Willa Cather's life long concern
with the "invisible, inviolable world", the reality of which is intuitively sensed in
childhood and in adulthood, is apprehended in art or religion. Lucy seems to represent
the thrust toward that world, the desire itself, seen like "a meteor momentarily flashing
across the sky and then extinguished." There are only two townspeople who recognize
Lucy's creative potential. One is her suitor Harry Gordon who idealizes her after she dies
but is too short-sighted and self-serving while the other is Mrs. Ramsay who remains
basically on the periphery of Lucy's life. The larger point is conveyed when Lucy's one-
time lover Harry Gordon revisits her death and finds that she still lives in his memory as
an embodiment of devotion to beauty.

The footprints Gordon preserves are of a thirteen-year-old girl. The adult Lucy,
the young woman pulsating with desire, no longer exists, even in memory. Cather closes
Lucy Gayheart with an appropriate symbol and recognition of individual uniqueness:
Harry notices Lucy's three footprints; made years ago in the wet cement of the sidewalk.
They serve as a vivid reminder of this unique person. Harry Gordon, in fact, has a stronger
sense of Lucy as individual than she herself ever has. As a young-man, he admits to
himself -that there is "nobody like her"(21). After her death, he reflects that she is the
"one face, one figure" in his past that stands out (223). Harry's musing and shaping of his
recollections around Lucy Gayheart's footsteps emblematize a material and an art as remote from the art of Sebastian as the earth from the stars. Her footsteps, inevitably fleeting, are also vital, constantly present triggers in the everyday world of powers he had stifled in himself.

As aptly observed by Linda Chown:

In the persons of Lucy, Harry, and Sebastian, the novel explores delicately, yet pointedly, three early twentieth-century perspectives toward art. Sebastian personifies the artist, whose aesthetics divorce him from everyday life; Lucy is the romantic resolutely idealizing the artist's trappings; Harry is the materialist who learns to respect something of the intangible and to get closer to the ineffable in himself and his objects."18

The pursuit of art then as personified by Lucy Gayheart is redemptive for others as well as for herself. Redemption shines out of the artist "like the flash of the distant star seen through the windows" (189). For Cather's female 'artists, escape and change are associated, with the big city where, as Lucy appreciates, "the air trembled like a tuning-fork with unimaginable possibilities" (24). Lucy Gayheart sets out across the ice to escape from all that existence in Haverford had in store for her, to "get away from this frozen country and these frozen people, go back to light and freedom such as they could never know" (198), she finds herself suddenly submerged in icy black water.

Her destiny, unlike that of her counterpart Thea Kronborg appearing some twenty years earlier in Willa Cather’s career, ends not with a departure for unknown heights and fulfillment of her youthful artistic yearnings, but in a fatal plunge into the frozen deep of the Platte. Two weeks after the performance of, *The Bohemian Girl* before Christmas at
the window she calls in the spirit which she experiences both as an eternal reality and an interior presence. The result is a new knowledge of herself. She feels part of the whole. As partaker of divine nature, she knows for the moment that she is one with the world through receiving the principle of life at its source. And so Lucy's name becomes her being as she becomes transparent to the spirit of joy. Music, in Cather is a two-way bridge for the creative spirit, which can accomplish this porosity because it issues from and returns to being's source. Music for the narrator marks the course of Lucy's fate and subtly resounds in the destiny of all those touched by her vibrant spirit. Music is inseparable from her life. Lucy has the capacity to turn herself over to music again and again.

II

SECONDARY WOMEN CHARACTERS

Pauline:

Cather delineates other minor immigrant women characters like that of Lucy's elder sister Pauline, of German legacy, keeps house for her widowed father while Lucy goes off to Chicago to pursue her musical studies; In Lucy's sister, Pauline, Cather comments both compassionately critically on the need to conform or-"fit in," which she saw being taken to neurotic extremes in the America of the 1930s, thus threatening the survival of the individual. Pauline is completely immersed in community, but feels just as empty "as her passive sister.

Where Lucy is too weak ever to develop an autonomous self, Pauline is submerged in community, struggling constantly to be everything that Haverford expects
her to be. She is other-centered in an all-consuming way. Left with the responsibility of raising young Lucy when their mother dies, Pauline lives through Lucy, but continually finds herself competing with Lucy for community praise. She is torn between her motherly love and loyalty to what is "Gayheart" in Lucy (167), and her own need for a fulfilling, individual," existence. Focalized through Pauline's consciousness, the narrative lists her painful snubs and very real grievances. Although Lucy has not "the least idea of what Pauline was really like- never considered it" (171-72), it is difficult for a reader to ignore the suggestion that Pauline's dull and unrewarding life is what Lucy's life could have become had not Pauline's hard work made it possible for her father to insist that Lucy "grow up at the piano" (170).

Lucy's and Pauline's lives are two halves of one whole, knotted most tightly through economics: "Lucy had earned nothing during her first two winters in Chicago. Mr. Gayheart paid for her lessons and her living expenses. That was why he was always short of money, and why Pauline had to raise onions" (172). Pauline must raise onions so Lucy, who "earned nothing," can continue with her music in an exciting world far beyond Pauline's most suppressed desire or imaginings. What she resents about Lucy is what she sees as most individual," perhaps because she herself has trouble being "individual." Pauline is a divided person like so many of Cather's characters" always walking behind herself" (168).

She tries to "fit in", in Haverford, which is no easy task with an eccentric father and a sister who has returned from Chicago under mysterious circumstances. Pauline's last verbal exchange is an argument 'with Lucy over responsibility, ending with Pauline's good-intentioned though half-hearted effort to follow her angered sister down the street in
order to give her a shawl to protect her from the cold weather. This scene characterizes the two forces struggling within Pauline: sisterly resentment and maternal love—both hinging on her relationship to Lucy. Pauline so defines herself through Lucy that after Lucy's death, Pauline disappears from the narrative, except for brief, distanced references to her death.

Mrs. Ramsay:

Mrs. Ramsay as the widow of one of Haverford's founders, Mrs. Ramsay holds a key position among the townspeople. Mrs. Ramsay is instrumental in shaking Lucy out of her grief and in pointing her toward some goal. But beyond that role in the plot, Mrs. Ramsay holds a crucial thematic role in Lucy Gayheart. She, like the other characters who achieve some degree of personal success, has—changed Lucy's way of thinking. Mrs. Ramsay's daughter, observing her mother's sympathy for Lucy, reflects that it is not the "quick, passionate sympathy" that she used to see in her mother, but is "more like the Divine compassion" (146). Mrs. Ramsay, with "divine compassion," takes responsibility for Lucy. She insists that Lucy come to visit, and she then advises her to "go right on living," despite the fact that "sometimes people disappoint us, and sometimes we disappoint ourselves" (165).

Fairy Blair:

Fairy Blair the town extrovert and tease, jumps out of the carriage and, throwing her coat in the air for the boys to catch, runs down the length of the station platform. When it was announced that the train will be twenty minutes late, she grabs two boys by
the elbows and dashes into the street “doing an occasional shuffle with her fee.” Soon she leads the whole group in a crazy chase: “She couldn’t push the boys fast enough; suddenly she sprang from between the two rigid figures as if she had been snapped out of a sling-shot and ran up the street with the whole troop at her heels. They were all a little crazy, but as she was the craziest, they followed her (14). In the depiction of secondary characters Cather has shown that all women like Mrs. Ramsay do display humanitarian attitude.

III

Lucy Gayheart is having the theme of the struggling artist. It is a sort of awakening novel. During her short life span, Lucy tried to find meaning in life, meaning in nature and in every thing else around her. She struggled in her mind and in her thoughts to reach a stage in which she could be contempt with. For Lucy is like a newborn seeking a parent; abandoned by those who could guide her. Her mother died when she was six; her sister was temperamentally unsympathetic to her. The artist she loved left her; and her hometown suitor rejected her pleas. To complicate matters, Lucy’s newborn second self reside within a woman’s body, announcing a sexuality for which she was unprepared. Lucy Gayheart tells of a girl whose only access to an adult world as she grows up is through men. As accompanist to the artist Clement Sebastian and even then, she may accompany him only in rehearsal, to be replaced by a man in performance, or as wife to the town banker, Harry Gordon. Lucy fails at love; she fails, too, in her attempt to break away from her home town of Haverford and to become a professional accompanist. When Clement Sebastian, a famous singer who has taken her under his wing, drowns
during a European concert tour, Lucy loses a lover as well as the person who could have provided her the opportunity to achieve her career goals. After Sebastian's death, Lucy returns to Haverford, feeling empty and without a goal or a direction.

Lucy is a far smaller figure than Thea, less emotionally sturdy and certainly physically vigorous. Lucy has experienced a renewal of vision that would carry her through to a life of art whether she achieved greatness as a performer or not. Clement Sebastian and Lucy's love affair, their romance consist thus of sharing of romantic aspiration. Lucy feels she must go "back to a world that strove after excellence." But she is not a lonely artist figure like Thea Kronborg who would fight for a great career by denying herself life's pleasure; rather, she would return to a life of "flowers and music and enchantment and love," those things which symbolized the fullness of her life with Sebastian. Lucy would not return to "Art", but to "Life" enriched by the arts.

CHAPTER REFERENCES

Page references in this chapter are to Lucy Gayheart (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1935).

1 David Stouck, Willa Cather's Imagination (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975) 214.


   <http://www.unl.edu/Cather/life/bios/woodress/chapter21notes.htm#449> 5/12/2005


10 Ibid., 214.


18 Linda Chown, "'It Came Closer than That: Willa Cather's Lucy Gayheart' " *Cather Studies* 2 (1993) : 120.
