CHAPTER VIII

RESUME OF WILLA CATHRIN CRITICISM AND CONCLUSION
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Willa Cather had published six books by 1918 but the bulk of criticism began appearing only around 1920. In spite of the variety of content, tone and craft of her fiction, only one type, the pioneer-immigrant, was praised, about which she wrote before 1918. The new subject brought her praise, but afterwards she was attacked for not writing about social movements and the rise of the masses. Most of her criticism before the mid-fifties was impressionistic, depending upon the preconceptions of the critics and was concerned with ideas, attitudes and general effect, rather than technique or form. Her novels looked too simple and clear to inspire serious critical attempt at their evaluation. The general view was that she was an escapist, romanticizing a vanished past — the pioneer period. By and large there was a feeling of dissatisfaction with the unconventional structure of her novels like My Antonia, The Professor's House, My Mortal Enemy and Death comes for the Archbishop, H. W. Boynton recognised her prairie novels as part of the quest for a fulfilled literary expression in America. He felt that the finest art was rooted in the soil. This did not mean mere local color but genius determined by physical sources and early impressions of scene and atmosphere.
H. L. Mencken saw the struggle on the prairie as symbolic and felt that Willa Cather's art was evocative.  

Carl Van Doren noted the epic quality of her pioneers and artists and said that her theme was the struggle of an individual to outgrow restrictions laid on him.  

Herbert S. Gorman described her as representing the tendency of regionalism in American fiction; and praised the realism of her descriptions of the hard struggle on the Midwest which showed her individuality as well as her authenticity as an artist.  

Lloyd Morris said that she was in the main tradition of American literature, that of Emerson and Whitman, in which the cult of the individual, the democratic ideal, independence, and an epic vision of the future were dominant. In place of condemning standardization, dullness and mechanization she asked for a contemplation of the past.  

T. K. Whipple felt that primarily Willa Cather was a creator, a pioneer writer, fulfilling the prophecies of Whitman. The predominant note was of a sense of waste of possibilities.  

P. H. Boynton pointed out the direction of Cather's later criticism by saying that Willa Cather was at her best while writing about the pioneer-people, and, while not detracted by the current problems.
Thomas Beer said that she was a social critic and that she did not repeat herself on the West. 8

C. E. Bechofer (Roberts) called Dreiser and Cather the voices of revolt against the English tradition in America and considered Cather's novels dealing with immigrants in Nebraska as her best. She had brought the beauty and the mystery of her country as Dreiser had shown its strength and bulk. In Cather's work the 'Melting Pot' had become real. 9

Alexander Porterfield felt that her theme was the fusion of nationalities in America in a pattern and philosophy of American life related to the beginning of a civilization. 10

Rebecca West noted her sensuousness and her capacity to convey the difference between the things seen and remembered. 11

Regis Michaud felt that wit and pathos softened her realism but there was also inhibition and suppression and he suggested a psychological approach to her fiction. 12

Rene Rapin, in a book-length study, said that Willa Cather had sung the spiritual heritage of America with as much strength as Whitman. 13
Thus during the twenties the critics were concerned with the pioneer west in her fiction, her realism and view of Society.

In the early thirties criticism was predominantly sociological, political and often Marxist. Both, in politics and in literature, virtue was linked with protest, masses, and urban-industrial society. Since Cather's novels from *A Lost Lady* to *Shadows on the Rock* were concerned with the personal and psychological problems, legend and history, the critics felt that she was beating the retreat, escaping and romanticizing the past. For example, Newton Arvin saw a continuous decline in the strenuousness that began with *A Pioneer* because *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House* appeared to be indicating growing defeatism and *Death comes for the Archbishop*, and *Shadows on the Rock* showed weak traditionalism as the individual lost himself in Catholicism.

Kronenberger felt there was unrest in *The Professor's House* and tranquillity in *Shadows on the Rock* in place of the affirmation in early novels. He found that Cather could not give any valid interpretation of life, because of the limitations imposed by the historical and Catholic nature of *Death comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*.
Although Archer Winsten saw faults in Willa Cather, for example, looseness of structure in One of Ours, he felt that the current taste was prejudiced against her. He defended Cather by insisting that there was a unifying principle in her books — a basic idea — which had to do with values, a way of living, the peace that a man makes with his God before he dies and he raised the query whether these things were not relevant in an urban culture.  

Clifton Fadiman felt that her view of the west was partial and full of throwbacks of memory. He said that she had withdrawn from ugliness and turbulence and her artistry was ethereal, thin as brocade.  

Granville Hicks said that she did not look at contemporary life and selected only what was symbolic of her own taste.  

V. L. Parrington and Pattee were concerned with the lack of realism. Pattee said that she was without an emotional home and was merely seeing her youth through the haze of later years, in far exile.  

Blankenship grouped Cather with Hardy and Tolstoy and said that her realism was based upon the inner core of the being, and not upon external surface.
Ludwig Lewisohn justified the Catholicism of her later novels by insisting that Cather was always concerned with the realities of the soul.²³

Pelham Edgar called her anti-realist, tending to chronicles and pictures.²⁴

Harry Hartwick compared *Alexander's Bridge* with Henry James and *Mrs. Wharton; The Song of the Lark* with Balzac, Marimée, Turgenev and Sarah Orne Jewett.²⁵

Harlan Hatcher described her as a realist, satirist and romanticist all in one, after noting her humanized realism, clarity, selectivity and classical precision. He concluded that she was the most talented of the escapists.²⁶

J. W. Beach,²⁷ Hollock,²⁸ W. F. Taylor,²⁹ N. Elizabeth Monroe,³⁰ George Snell³¹ also gave variations of this outline of Cather's evaluation during the thirties. However, new insights were provided by articles.

Philip Rahv felt there had been a slump in American writing and vitality had gone from Lewis, Dreiser and Cather. Cather had turned from her early realism to pious meditation.³²

Halford E. Luccock considered Willa Cather's letter to the *Commonweal* as merely an apology and said that she had retreated from contemporary life.³³
Lionel Trilling thought that her career was of the heroic, though fallen pioneer—a characteristic American theme of the unavailing quest. It looks that Philip Rahv and Trilling had misinterpreted Cather regarding the throwing the furniture out of the room.  

Robert H. Footman emphasized her limitations and J. Donald Adams provided the most eloquent defence in various statements in *The Shape of Books to Come*.

While the American critics during the thirties were debating about the realism and escapism of Cather the British critics like Frank Kondor and Thomas Moult were stressing her humanism, her view of the nobility of the common man and the understatement of her style.

In America Howard Mumford Jones suggested the humanistic and mysterious quality of Cather's art and said that her view of life renews a tradition that the human personality is something given, not laboriously assembled. He said Willa Cather had not withdrawn from life, but had merely lived it on another plane. She was concerned with the mysterious processes by which a sympathetic personality develops or declines. He described her style as 'grave, flexible, a little austere, wonderfully transparent, everywhere economical... liquid to the ear, lucid to the eye.' He noted her quiet sympathy under which lay a Roman gravity missing from modern fiction.
Sinclair Lewis praised Willa Cather for staying quiet and alone and having greatly pictured the great life while the other writers were excited about the superficialities.\(^{40}\)

G. L. White rightly pointed out that Willa Cather had been termed classic and placed on the shelf. She was respected but not read by anybody. Critics had pronounced their judgments on her without experiencing and understanding her. He insisted that she should be experienced rather than just talked about.\(^{41}\)

Overton and Constance Rourke noted the legendary and poetic nature of her books but these were not established names.

The first major evaluation was by A. K. Quinn, who said that she was unprovincial and the important thing was the artistry of her method; her breadth of vision and understanding of different points of view.\(^{44}\)

E. K. Brown laid emphasis on her use of picture, symbol and style in her fiction and declared that her vision was of essences.\(^{45}\)

Alfred Kazin considered her traditionalism, use of memory and the poles of conflict between grandeur and meanness in her world. He saw Professor St. Peter as the archetype of all her characters and the embodiment of all her beliefs, some of which were based on futile values.\(^{46}\)
Maxwell Geismar showed her as lady in the wilderness and defined her as one of the very complex, if not difficult and contradictory minds in American literature. He noted in her a deep and tough sense of life, thereby causing a sort of reversion of the thirties. He added that between her early western scene and her late return lies the story of an evasion of social environment, of a broken framework and a dissipation of the writer's true energies. 47

The reassessments after Willa Cather's death emphasized her concern with the permanent values. She commemorated, elegized and preserved the past. Henry S. Canby described her as the summer up of the long tradition of local color and said that her unique theme was the unique overflow of the old world into the New. She wrote of the spiritual energy of the frontier and nobly interpreted passion. The difficulty lay regarding her passion. 48 Lloyd Morris said that she was between two generations. 49

Morton D. Zabel said that in her rendering of landscape she approached the poetic art of Turgenev and Gogol but the deficiency lay in the remoteness and ideality of her art; in her view of the Church as a cultural symbol and her wish for simplification and curtailment. 50

Dayton Kohler noted her backward-looking glance, as others had done, but added that she admired the pious resignation advocated in Shadows on the Rock, through she
could not wholly accept it. He also admired her use of time, memory and the past; and her social criticism. 51

Charles Poore gave a summary of Willa Cather's essential qualities in his review of *The Old Beauty and others*. 52

J. W. Krutch, 53 George Whi cher 54 and Van Wyck Brooks 55 also wrote significant articles on Willa Cather during the fifties. Frederick Hoffman 56 discussed her traditionalism and contrasted the two worlds-East and West- in her fiction. Francis X. Connolly found *Shadows on the Rock* too preoccupied with a sense of contemplation. 57 Caroline Gordon, found her superior to Chekhov, Turgenev and Hudson in evoking landscape but ignorant of her craft. 58

Ronald Bryden felt she was born too late and was not interested in the events after 1914, and, also, that she never recognized America. 59

John Davenport felt she retained her Americanism in spite of being saturated in great literature. She was isolated because of the steady vulgarization of the American dream. He felt that *My Antonia, A Lost Lady* and *The Professor’s House* contained her essence. 60

George Greene emphasized her position as an artist, her criteria for the literary artist and her peculiar humanism. The ideal of the artist was to be a bringer of truth rather than a reporter of the status quo. 61
Leon Edel felt that her subjects were conquest and death. He saw her work through her biography. He discussed the pattern of success and failure in her works. Other significant articles were by Raymond Thorberg, H. W. Morgan and Louis Auchincloss.

Randall's book is a search for value and it is a sociological work. Dorothy Van Ghent emphasized the intuitive, sub-conscious movement of her art and her robust energy.

Sroeter surveyed critical and biographical views from 1915 to 1985. The earlier selections are representative but Mencken is not represented by his more complete studies of Cather. Louise Bogan's article is not dependable as biography. The reviewer in T.L.S. said that Sroeter's own comments were the worst, specially in regard to The Professor's House. Contrary to the claims of Sroeter there was more on the tendencies of criticism than on Willa Cather. It may not be the best anthology of Cather criticism but it provides a base for future anthologies, according to Bernice Slote.

The first critical book-length study and the best brief introduction was by David Daiches who emphasized the utilizing of courage by vision and discrimination and the search for a culture that combines all three qualities in her fiction. He found her novels civilized in the broadest sense of the term.
Mildred R. Bennet’s work brought to life her Red Cloud years and fixed her correct date of birth – 1873 instead of 1876. It served as a base for later biographical studies regarding the Nebraska background of Cather.

Brown and Edel’s Critical Biography (1953) was important both as criticism and biography. Edith Lewis’ Willa Cather Living and Elizabeth Shapley Sergeant’s Willa Cather: A Memoir also appeared the same year. These three books review Cather’s life and show her as an independent artist, robust and intense. Bennett added some more information in an article about Cather’s Pittsburgh years. William White threw light on the Houseman episode. Peter Lyon wrote about Cather’s writing of McClure’s autobiography. Bernice Slate gave more information about Cather’s Lincoln years as a journalist and her days at the university of Nebraska.

James Woodress’s biography is the best introduction to Willa Cather because it makes a judicious use of the additional material which was not available to Brown and Edel.

Ruth Crone’s book is not dependable as it depends upon personal views. Barbara Bonham’s book attempts to convey the feel of the prairies as she herself grew up in a homestead near Red Cloud; although she did not belong to Cather’s generation. It is not significant from a scholarly point of view.
A short biographical - critical summary is the book by Dorothy T. McFarland. It does not add new material but interpretations are sound.

As regards her biography there are two views:

First, her work need not be interpreted through her life. Second, her books are a better guide to her life than any biographical dictionary, provided her books are not taken too literally. Sister Lucy Schneider sees in Cather's Land-philosophy a symbolic good leading to transcendence and vision and finds it present in her entire fiction.

James E. Miller, Jr. has compared her with Wright Morris and says that together they give the history of the American imagination. Cather deals with growth and fruition and Morris writes about its collapse in urban America.

Marion Harper sees Cather's West as feminine and Mark Twain's as masculine.

Bernice Slote and Virginia Faulkner's *The Art of Willa Cather* is the result of a gathering of eighty-five scholars from seven nations, representing forty-four institutions of higher learning. The gathering was an International Seminar (Oct. 25-28, 1973) and the subject was "The Art of Willa Cather". It was part of the year-long celebrations of the centenary of Willa Cather at Lincoln. The volume contains articles by Eudora Welty, Marcus Cunliffe, James Woodress, Michael Gervaud, Hiroko Sato, Aldo Celli, James E. Miller, Jr., Donald Sutherland in
addition to recollections by Leon Edel and Alfred A. Knopf.

It is a significant collection of critical writing representing diverse points of view regarding Cather's art. James E. Miller, Jr. traces correspondences between Cather and Henry James and James Woodress' thesis is that the intellectual content of Europe combined with the soil of Nebraska in Cather's fiction. This accounts for the validity of her fiction even though Turner's thesis is no longer valid. Celli and Gervaud trace affinities in Cather's fiction with Italy and France, respectively, while Sutherland deals with the Classical influence in Cather's fiction, and points out her deficiencies.

The recent critical studies emphasize psychological or personal relationship of writer and work and tend to analyze the form and style. The new approach lays emphasis on history, myth, symbolism, allusion, the total human experience, and the world-view replacing the earlier view that Cather was a regionalist and an escapist.

CONCLUSION

The present study has considered Willa Cather's major themes. Her protagonists -- tillers, scholars, priests, and Saints -- are embodiments of the blending of vitality, vision and sensibility and are reminders of the validity of ideals and values in the ever-recurrent conflict with materialism, irrespective of the period of history to which they belong, and the levels of culture they represent. The portrayal of the pioneers as tillers, the toiling of the wild land and its fruition in her prairie novels does not ignore the bleakness of the frontier though the emphasis is on the heroism and
piety of the continental, immigrant heroines; on their mystical experiences, and blending of their identities with that of the frontier. It has been stressed in *The Song of the Lark* that Willa Cather did not merely romanticize the pioneer period in her prairie novels. Towards the end of her career, however, she did romanticize it and it impaired her art but her best fiction had been written much earlier.

*Artist and His Environment* deals with Cather's portrait of artists in her stories and novels and emphasizes *Lady Forrester* in *A Lost Lady* as an artist. It points out that *Lucy Gayheart* takes up certain aspects of artistic life which are merely indicated in *The Song of the Lark*, like the psychological reasons for the help provided by middle-aged people to young, struggling artists. The note of affirmation towards the close of *Lucy Gayheart* is also emphasized.

*The Shadow of Europe* deals with Cather's blending of the European civilization with the native American vitality leading to a homogeneous culture, though European influence remained predominant, particularly because of her turn to Catholicism. The Europe-America polarity resolved itself into East-West and Town-country polarities in her fiction. Ultimately, she outgrew regional and national considerations and emphasized the innate goodness of the individual.
Negation and Affirmation traces the note of affirmation in each of the novels of her middle period which are generally taken to express her frustrations in the post-World War I period bordering on death-wish. It has been pointed out that she emerged victorious out of her dark-night of the soul and turned to her ideals in art and to Catholicism. She believed in the essential oneness of art and religion. Her turn to the historical past and Catholicism in her fiction was not the result of escapism. It was a natural conclusion of a long quest. She emphasized the validity of ideals in all these novels, and derived inspiration from the historical past. She was convinced that war was the result of greed and misuse of science and technology and hoped that some day these would serve the arts of peace, although for the time being war had scattered all that she cherished.

Fulfillment in Religion deals with her Catholic novels which express the peace attained by her.

The chapter on Myths explores the Classical, Biblical and European myths, as well as the American-Indian folklore in her fiction and points out that these provided a fecundity and endurance to her work.

She aimed at making her fiction evocative like painting and music and attained it in her Catholic novels, particularly, in Shadows on the Rock. Her insistence upon foreshortening was misunderstood by the critics who found her ignorant of the craft of fiction.