CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION
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SECTION I

WILLA CATHER: A SYNOPSIS OF HER LITERARY CAREER

A. BACKGROUND:

(a) Family: Willa Cather's family name is derived from Cadair Idris, a mountain in Ireland. Her ancestors were supporters of Charles I and were given a land grant by Charles II. The first Cather in America was Jasper, who settled in Shenandoah Valley, and died in 1812. His son, James, had eight children, one of whom, William, was to be Willa Cather's grandfather and serve as the model for Jim's grandfather in My Antonia. Willa inherited his vigour and independence of mind. William Cather had two sons, Charles and George. George migrated to Nebraska, while Charles stayed on at the farm in Willow Shade, near Shenandoah Valley. He married Mary Virginia, the daughter of Boak, who served as the model for Rachel Blake in Sapphira and the Slave Girl, and for the grandmother in "Old Mrs. Harris". Willa Cather was born on December 7, 1873, in Back Creek, her grandmother Boak's village. Her early education was under the care of her maternal grandmother, Boak and The Bible and The Pilgrim's Progress were the earliest influences on her. Soon after Willa Cather was born her parents moved to Willow Shade farm which was only a few miles away and
they stayed there up to 1883. Accidental burning of the family barn and the general tendency of the Americans to move Westward, were together responsible for the movement of the Cather family to Catherston in Nebraska, to join William. This change from Virginia to Nebraska was very significant. Although Virginia is invoked only in Sapphira and the Slave Girl, her last novel and only sparingly in her short fiction, nevertheless, Virginia left a permanent impression on Willa Cather's mind. As R. E. Lee pointed out the vaguely remembered life of Virginia provided to Willa Cather a "use of comparison". Barbara Bonham, an insightful critic of Willa Cather has noted:

"Life in Virginia had a smoothness and a sense of permanency that were to make the move to the rough frontier a bone-rattling shock to a child as sensitive and impressionable as Willa Sibert Cather. It was to colour her life and her writing until the day she died."\(^3\)

Everything that she loved passionately in Virginia had to be left behind, including the family dog. "It is not surprising that she and Nebraska prairie began their relationship as enemies."\(^4\)

The family arrived in Nebraska at a time when the frontier had already moved on further West and those
immigrant peasants who crossed the 100th meridian were foredoomed to failure, but they did not know it:

"Bitter cold, scorching heat, and wind without rain - these geographic facts unconsciously shaped and twisted the lives of the people. To have been there at that time, to have been the settlers of that land, must have been one of the most beautiful moments of our history; but it was also tragic."\(^5\)

But as James Woodress points out:

"The frontier of the hunter had vanished farther West, but the frontier of the farmer still existed a few miles out of town. Had the Cathers moved to Nebraska a decade later, Willa would have been too late for first-hand contact with the new Americans while their experience was still fresh."\(^6\)

After an eighteen month stay at Catherton, the family moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska, where Willa's father opened an office, making farm loans, writing title abstracts and selling insurance. Red Cloud is the locale of several novels by Cather - *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, *The Song of the Lark*, *A Lost Lady*, *One of Ours*, *Lucy Gayheart* and many stories in *Obscure Destinies*, and *The Best Years*. 
B. EDUCATION AND LITERARY APPRENTICESHIP

Willa Cather studied in Red Cloud up to High School and then went to Lincoln, to study at the University. It had "an atmosphere of endeavour" felt by Jim in My Antonia.

She went there very much like Thea-Kronborg going to Chicago in The Song of the Lark. She graduated in 1895; having put in an extra year in order to make up for her deficiencies, because of the comparatively low standards of education in the High School at Red Cloud.

She gave up her early ambition of being a doctor partly because of her inability to do mathematics, and partly because of the hypnotic effect of the simultaneous publication of her article on Carlyle, in two campus journals - Journal and Hesperian. The article was her subjective response to Sartor Resartus and The French Revolution. This article and another one on Shakespeare indicate her belief in the total devotion of the artist to his art, to the exclusion of the claims of society, including marriage.

She also worked as coeditor for Campus magazines Lasso, Hesperian and Sombrero. During the crop-failure years, when her father faced financial difficulties, she began dramatic reviews in order to support herself. Her column "One way of putting it" first appeared on November 5, 1893 and next month her first signed drama review appeared. Afterwards, her column became "The Passing Show" and continued up to 1939.
During the summer of 1894, she gave a course in journalism. A quarrel with the head of the English Department was the reason why she could not get a teaching job at the University. In June, 1896, she moved to Pittsburgh to be on the staff of *Woman's Monthly*. She also worked part-time as Drama Critic for the Pittsburgh *Leader*. After *Woman's Monthly* was sold, she became the assistant telegraph editor for the *Leader*. She reviewed Theatre, Opera and books. After mid-March 1900, she joined *Library*, which was absorbed by *Index*. For a time she worked as translator in a government office in Washington. During 1900-1901, she was back in Pittsburgh, staying with the McClungs, teaching Latin and English at the Central School, and then English at Alleghany High School. She joined the *McClure's Magazine* on June 2, 1906, after having been its editor, reporter, critic and free-lance contributor for five years up to 1901. She taught for another five years, that is, up to 1906.

Her meeting with Isabel McClung was a turning point in her career. Isabel was the daughter of a conservative judge. She was a patron of artists and in her hands art was a weapon of revolt. The two friends shared a room in the McClung household, where after dinner they used to discuss literature free from disturbance. For once, Willa Cather was free from cares of the world, including financial difficulties, she had known as a student. The room as a sanctuary is reflected in Thea's room in *The Song of the Lark*, and in St. Peter's study.
in The Professors' House.

In June 1902 Willa Cather and Isabel went to England and France. Willa's expenses were met by her savings, and a commission from the Nebraska State Journal. Isabel's father also helped her, as he helped the publication of her poems April Twilights (1903). Her fourteen articles together described her first actual experience of European civilization, "feeling deeply its weight and glory, its past and present." Till then she had met European immigrants on the Divide, and through her wide reading of European literature had formed only a somewhat bookish impression of Europe. This journey was the usual expression of an American's desire to water his cultural roots by going to Europe. The places she visited, particularly in France, were the ones associated with the masters she admired - Maupassant, Flaubert, Rousseau, de Musset, Balzac, and Henry James. She also paid a visit to the Papal Palace in Avignon, to which her last incomplete novel was devoted. In England, she saw old ruins and the feelings stirred in her were expressed in Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock. Of some significance may be her disappointment with the poet Houseman in their meeting left unreported in the Nebraska State Journal both in respect of her understanding of literary men and her response to poetry.
C. LITERARY EMERGENCE:

April Twilights (1903) was a collection of thirty-three poems. One poem "The Night Exorsa" was about the journey home of the body of a boy killed in a train accident. Afterwards, the theme was transmuted in "The Sculptor's Funeral". In "Aftermath", there was nostalgia, which pervaded most of her later work. Some of the poems echoed her experiences in London and Provence, and her reading of Shakespeare, Houseman, and the painting of Burne-Jones. Willa Cather was an indifferent poet and rated as such. She herself wrote later - "I do not take myself seriously as a poet."9

Her second volume The Troll Garden appeared in 1905. It contained seven stories mostly derived from other sources. The stories deal with the temptations of the world of art and the artist's fate. Four out of these stories - "Paul's case", "A Wagner Matinee", "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "A Death in the Desert" were included in Youth and Bright Medusa, (1920) which had "Coming Aphrodite", "The Diamond Mine", "A Gold Slipper" and "Scandal" also. Three stories - "Flavia and Her Artist", "The Garden Lodge" and the "Marriage of Phaedra" - were dropped by her. Other important stories of the period were "El Dorado", "The Treasure of Far Island" (1902), "Alexandra", "The Bohemian Girl" and "The White Mulberry Tree".
During her McClure-period (1906-1912) preoccupation with the magazine work did not leave her the time to devote herself to literature. Fascination of life in New York and personal loyalty to McClure weighed against her conviction that journalism was not for her. A financial reorganization in the magazine made her leave it at a time when she was already tired of it. Miss Jewett had already advised her to leave the Magazine world and write about her Nebraska experience.

Dissatisfaction with "On the Gull's Road" had made her write "The Enchanted Bluff" which introduced the theme of quest in her fiction, which remained basic to her subsequent major work.

Three life-long friendships were made at McClure's - Iza Atkins, Edith Lewis and Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant. She shared an apartment with Edith Lewis from 1913-1927, and their cook Josepahne Bourda created a French environment, which is portrayed in Shadows on the Rock (1932).

Willa Cather visited Europe in 1909 and 1911 and met the celebrities in the theatre world in London. This provided the material for her first novel - Alexander's Bridge (1912) serialized in McClure's. The Novel was inspired by Ibsen's The Master Builder and the collapse of the Quebec Bridge on August 29, 1907. This novel marks the end of her beginning. Her next novel O Pioneers! (1913) was to be in a different key -
the bringing together of the themes of "Alexandra" and "The White Mulberry Tree".

She wrote a ghost-autobiography of McClure in order to settle some of his debts with the new owners of the Magazine. She also worked on Georgine Milaines' Mary Baker G. Eddy: The story of her life and History of Christian Science. One of her last commitments with the Magazine brought her in contact with Olive Fremstad, who served as the model for Thea in The Song of the Lark (1915).

Her second visit to the South West, Mesa Verde, and to Taos in New Mexico, provided the material for Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927).

My Antonia (1918) celebrates the fruition of the pioneer on land, and takes the theme of O Pioneers! further. In The Song of the Lark (1915) the heroic individual is given a different role, as a singer. One of Ours (1922) is about the frustrations resulting from war, as well as from the growing commercialization. It was inspired by the death of her cousin F. P. Cather, in May 1919, at Cautigny.

Willa Cather felt more and more alienated because of repeated illnesses, the sale of McClung House, the marriage of Isabel, and the conviction that the pioneer days were over for ever. This note is struck in her early prairie novels, and is made very clear in A Lost Lady (1923). My Mortal Enemy (1926) shows her apprehensions about her own fate. The Professor's
House (1926) solved her dilemma, and she turned her ideals in art and religion in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931).

In 1922, she joined the Episcopal faith and it gave her peace. The same year she was awarded the Pulitzer prize for *One of Ours* (1922).

The pulling down of the building in 1927 in which she had shared an apartment with Edith Lewis, was a traumatic experience for her. She moved to Grosnover Hotel at 35th Avenue and stayed there for five years. On 3rd March 1928, her father died and her mother had a paralytic stroke.

In June 1928, the Columbia University, and in June 1929, Yale University conferred honorary degrees on her. She was awarded the gold medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters for *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in 1930. In June 1931, Princeton University conferred an honorary degree on her.

In 1931, her mother died. In 1932, she moved to her Park Avenue apartment, where she lived till her death in 1947.

In 1933 she was awarded Pix Femina Americaine for *Shadows on the Rock*. The same year she gave a talk over the radio at a Princeton banquet and was awarded a degree by Smith College. She could not travel to take a degree offered by Brown University for her *Shadows on the Rock* which

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is about the French immigrants in Quebec, who perpetuate the European tradition.

Lucy Gayheart (1935), written during 1933-34, after her 1931 visit to Red Cloud, was about Sadie Baker, an acquaintance, a vivacious girl who had died while skating on thin ice.

"The Old Beauty" was written during 1936 and was included in the posthumous The Old Beauty and Others (1948).

Her brother Douglass died in June and Isabel in October 1938. Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940) was written after these deaths and in this novel Willa Cather turned to Virginia of her childhood and wrote about her maternal grandmother Boak. Her great grandparents (Jacob and Ruhamah) are Mr. and Mrs. Colbert; Boak is Rachel and Till and Nancy are there without any name change. It was begun after her 1938 visit to Willow Shade. It was published on her 67th Birthday, December 7, 1940.

The Best Years (1945) was the outcome of her visit to her brother Roscoe in San Francisco, in 1941. Roscoe died in 1945, which was a big blow to her. "Before Breakfast" (1944) ends at a note of affirmation that life would go on in spite of all the scientists and businessmen, who, in her mind, were responsible for the Second World War.

In 1940, she was injured in the wrist and in 1942, she underwent a gall bladder operation. She died of cerebral
haemorrhage on 28th April, 1945 with an unfinished novel on Avignon.

In her old age she realized more and more that nothing mattered in life except the people one loved. She had begun as a rebel against the family, but ended by caring more and more for it, feeling that it provided the necessary protection. She lived with and for friends like Carla Sherwood and Elizabeth Shapley Sergeant, and was always surrounded by Menuhin children. She always helped the needy in Rod Cloud through gifts of money and material, feeling guilty for being comfortable while others in her native town suffered. She made an anonymous contribution raised for helping McClure in his old age. Till the end she retained her love for music, concerts, operas, recordings of Yehudi Menuhin and her friends in the music world included Myra Hess, Harold Samuels and Joseph Lhovinne.

She was always reticent about personal details and did not allow her works, except, A Lost Lady (filmed by Warner Bros) to be filmed, dramatized, anthologized or published in cheap editions or even read over the radio.

She was a humanitarian, who, in her own way, tried to alleviate human suffering. She was not antiprogress but her complaint was that businessman had put modern technology to the uses of war and, therefore, the arts of peace could not prosper. She felt that men had travel faster out unless they become better human beings, the world cannot be made a better
place. In her fiction she adhered to her symbols of the essentials - the elemental, the archetypal, and emphasized, more and more composition and evocation. She was thought to be getting more and more exclusive, indifferent to the present, and living in the past. But she lived very much in the present and through her works showed the way out, instead of just feeling tired of war, or satirizing the contemporary world. The way out was to follow ideals. Her solutions demanded attention. Her artlessness, and her simplicity was not regression, but very deliberate, as in *Lucy Gayheart*. As the following chapters will show there was a constant affirmation in her fiction.
8) **ANALYSIS OF INFLUENCES:**

(a) **Family:** Willa Cather's best writing is retrospective. For her art was a way of remembering youth and she considered the childhood impressions as the most significant ones. The formative influences in her case include her grandfather William - the model for Jim's grandfather (*My Antonia*) and her maternal grandmother Boak, who taught her *The Bible & The Pilgrim's Progress* - the two books that shaped her:

"She absorbed these two books, as she absorbed her Southern accent; she lost the accent, but the books remained forever a part of her. Their influence was to be present in everything she wrote, from drama criticism to her novels."

Grandmother Boak served as the model for Rachel in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. She also taught Cather Peter Parley's *Universal History*.

She inherited a strong will from her mother, Mary Virginia Boak, who was a sympathetic mother, despite being a strict disciplinarian. Her father Charles is the model for the portrait of fathers in several of her novels.

Her nurse Margie Anderson and her mother Mrs. Anderson also influenced Cather. She considered the double - S road going upto Margie's house as the most beautiful country road in the world. It is evoked in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. 
(b) Early Reading and Contact with Immigrants:

Even as a child she read Homer, Vergil, the Norsemen, the Arabian Nights; Grimm's Fairy Tales, Greek and Roman mythology and also listened to the stories about events that had become legends in the countryside, narrated by old women who used to come to Willowshade for work. Afterwards, in Nebraska, she listened to the immigrant women, whose conversation helped her in cultivating the sympathy, that later on became the essence of her art.

"I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of these old women at her baking or butter-making. I used to ride home in the most unreasonable state of excitement. I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said – as if I had actually got inside another person's skin... their stories used to go round and round in my head at night. This was, with me, the initial impulse."¹¹

These immigrant women – Swedes, Danes, Norwegian and Bohemians – relieved Cather's homesickness for Virginia:

"I particularly liked the old women; they understood my homesickness and were kind to me... these old women on the farms were the first people who ever gave me the real feeling of an older world across the sea."¹²
She conversed with these women and conceded that they embued her with a sense of the past in language that is reflected in her writings:

"When I sit down to write, turns of phrases I've forgotten for years come back like white ink before fire.""13

(c) Land: Land was a major influence on Willa Cather and in her fiction she humanized it. The struggle of the pioneers is set against the background of wild nature. She was influenced by her contact with land during her most impressionable years. As she wrote:

"That love of great spaces, of rolling open country like the sea - it's the grand passion of my life."14

She roamed about freely and tried to get over her homesickness. Her first reaction to the open country in Nebraska was of helplessness. As she told an interviewer in 1913:

"The land was open range and there was almost no fencing.... I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything - it was a kind of erasure of personality."15

Again in 1921, she told an interviewer:

"I was little and homesick and lonely and my mother was homesick and nobody paid any attention to us. So the country and I had it out together and by the end
of the first autumn, the shaggy grass country had gripped... me with a passion I have never been able to shake. It has been the happiness and the curse of my life."16

Jim expresses a similar response in *My Antonia*:

"Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out."17 And also, "The world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction."18

As a child Willa Cather was more curious about these immigrants than her family or neighbors. Papa Shimmerda is drawn out of the group of cultured immigrants, while Neighbour Rosicky belongs to the group of simple persons having a rugged spirit, never accepting defeat and deriving satisfaction out of hard work and loving land. Unconsciously Cather's mind was being nourished and when the time came these early impressions brought Nebraska on the literary map of America.

The influence of the Populist Movement on Willa Cather was considerable. It made her exalt the tiller of the soil and, it is said, turn against all commercialism, and modern progress. *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* show the pioneer virtues coming to fruition in a new land. The influence of the Populist Movement, was backward looking and may partly account for that accent on nostalgia for which she has been criticized. It is said that she ignored that the movement was a failure and was blind to the realities of the time.
(d) Teachers, neighbours and friends: The teachers that influenced Cather most were Mr. and Mrs. Goudy and Evangeline King. Mrs. Goudy was the principal of the school Cather attended at Red Cloud and the model for Miss Evangeline Knightly in "The Best Years". Mr. Goudy was the Superintendent of the School.

Her teachers helped her to learn to think and find her way in the world of imaginative thought and presented before her the early ideals of scholarship and art that gave direction to her life and work.

Her neighbours Mr. and Mrs. Wainers, who spoke German and French had a well-stocked library, and Willa Cather had free access to it. Vickie Templeton, in "Old Mrs. Harris", lost in the world of books in the Rosen Library is Willa Cather herself. Will Ducker, an Englishman, worked as a clerk in a drugstore. He taught Greek to Willa Cather, who had learnt Latin at School. Thus the base was laid for her classical learning, which influenced her writings.

Mrs. Julia Minor, a Norwegian wife of a merchant, had a piano and Cather used to listen to her music as she played it in her parlour. A German music teacher, Schindelmeisser, came to Red Cloud. He used to teach piano to Willa but she could not learn from him. Still her mother kept him coming so that Willa could listen to his stories about his life in Europe. He is Prof. Wunsch in The Song of the Lark. These were the people who brought in the old world culture to Willa Cather, in her childhood in Red Cloud. And it is an important factor in her fiction.
Mr. Miner, Dr. McKeeby and Dr. Damstaal were the elderly people whose conversation she enjoyed. Dr. McKeeby, is Dr. Archie in The Song of the Lark. The other important influences were James Canfield, chancellor at Lincoln, whose daughter Dorothy, became a life-long friend; Mr. Cere, the editor of the Journal, and her employer during her last three years at Lincoln; Will Owen Jones, managing editor of Journal, who taught Journalism to her and Dr. Tyndale, a physician, who wrote drama criticism as hobby and who arranged a week for her in Chicago to see opera during the Spring of her senior year. There is a bit of him in Dr. Englehardt in "Double Birthday". Her other friends were George Selbel and his wife who introduced her to contemporary literature and German food; and Actress Lizzie Hudson Collier, in whose room she met Isabella McClung in 1898. Isabella remained a life-time friend.

Likewise, Sarah Orne Jewett was a major influence on her as she advised her to write on the material she knew most intimately.

(E) Wide Reading: She studied English, French, Greek, Latin and German, The Bible, The Pilgrim's Progress, and Elizabethan, Romantic and Victorian literature. Her literary idols were Stevenson, Kipling, Dumas pere, Thackeray (Esmond) & Flaubert (Salammbo) and Daudet. She had also read Frank Norris, Hugo, Valery, Balzac, de Musset, Maupassant, Gautier, Merimee, Austen, Eliot, Tolstoy, Turgenev and Henry James.
Thus she was steeped in European culture through her wide reading and she combined it with her regional background and that makes for her wide appeal. As Woodress puts it:

"Willa Cather's importance lies in her ability to fuse the experience of America with the tradition of Europe in a series of superbly conceived and skilfully executed novels. She is no more a regionalist than Faulkner or Shakespeare but a novelist with international appeal." 19

(f) Literary Influences: The major literary influences on Willa Cather were the Classics, Walter Pater, Flaubert, Henry James and Sarah Orne Jewett.

Although her fiction is concerned with the wild prairie, and the pioneers in Nebraska, there are echoes of her wide classical reading in *Pioneers! and My Antonia*. Besides allusions, she has made use of myth. Like the ancient epic writers, she is objective in stating the weaknesses of her characters, in spite of her sympathy for them. L. V. Jacks points out that:

"the passion of Euripides, the smooth style of Ovid, the melancholy charm of Vergil contributed their share to the quality of her thought as manifested in her art." 20

Willa Cather was influenced by Walter Pater's slogan - 'Art for Art's sake'. Randall has pointed out that Willa Cather
also believed in "the doctrine of beautiful sensations, especially in her early career; she too accepted the romantic exaltation of the individual and his sensations and impressions, holding that nothing else is knowable."21

She also wrote about the essence of art and its evocative power, like Walter Pater. He also points out that both, Walter Pater and Willa Cather were influenced by Flaubert.

Bernice Slote has observed that "'Jamesian' became a cant word to describe almost anything she wrote."22 It is well known that Alexander's Bridge was her last work that bore James' influence. Willa Cather, writing about Miss Jewett's development said:

"At that time Henry James was the commanding figure in American letters, and his was surely the keenest mind any American ever devoted to the art of fiction."23

James E. Miller, Jr. pointed out that the phrase - the art of fiction - became the basic principle of her theory of fiction. She insisted upon fiction as art, as is evident from her essay "The Novel Demeuble". The guiding metaphor in that essay is fiction as a house, which is an echo of Henry James' preface to the Portrait of the Lady, and like him, she, too, emphasized the need for severe selectivity.24

Sarah Orne Jewett advised her to devote herself completely to her art and be herself. Under her advice, also, because she
herself felt overworked and split between the claims of literature and journalism, she left the McClure's Magazine and devoted herself to fiction—different from Alexander's Bridge. Miss Jewett wanted Cather to be sure of her backgrounds and write about her Nebraska life. She emphasized her Virginia background as well as her intimate knowledge of the "Bohemia of newspaper and magazine-office life. These are uncommon equipment, but you don't see them quite enough from the outside, —you stand right in the middle of each of them when you write, without having the standpoint of the looker-on who takes them each in their relations.... to the world.

Of course, one day you will write about your own country. In the meantime, get all you can, one must know the world so well before one can know the parish."

She also asked her not to write from a man's point of view, which, at its best could only be a masquerade—

"It is better to write about male characters than to be them."

(g) Southwest: Willa Cather visited the southwest in 1912, 1915, 1916 and 1925 and it kept on haunting her. Mesa Enchantada in "The Enchanted Bluff", the reference to the story of Coronado's search for the Golden Cities in Spanish Southwest in My Antonia; Panther Canyon experience of The Song of the Lark leading to her awakening to the meaning of art, in The Song of the Lark, Tom
Outland's story in *The Professor's House* and *Death comes for the Archbishop* are all inspired by the Southwest. It helped her in solving the problems of security, fulfilment and the conflict between idealism and materialism. It served as a mystical bridge between Pueblo Indians and twentieth century America and provided a peculiar strength to her later fiction.
SECTION II

WILLA CATHER'S IDEAS ON FICTION

The essays in *Not Under Forty* (1936) and *Willa Cather on Writing* (Ed. Stephen Tennant), her stories about artists, and her journalistic writings, gathered and edited with introduction under the title *The Kingdom of Art* by Bernice Slote provide the source material for Willa Cather's ideas on art. Bernice Slote has emphasized that long before she began writing novels, Cather had arrived at some kind of theory of art, working as a journalist.

She was an advocate of beauty for its own sake, and she did not favour the infusion of didactic purpose in art. She believed that an artist need not be a social reformer but should stick to his art with devotion and total commitment. An author's only safe course, she felt, was to cling close to the skirts of his art, forsaking all others. "He should be among men but not of them, in the world but not of the world. Other men may think and believe and argue, but he must create." 26

In her famous letter to *The Commonweal* she wrote that every art required "freedom from considerations and purposes which have nothing to do with spontaneous invention." 27 She felt that "the world has a habit of being in a bad way from time to time, and art has never contributed anything to help matters—except escape." 28

She wrote to Michael Williams that art had never been anything "but escape" 29 from life.
She had written in 1894, in the same vein:

"In a work of art intrinsic beauty is the raison
d'etre. Any piece of art is its own excuse for being...
No man, or woman, is ever justified in making a book to
preach a sermon. It is a degradation of art.... An
artist should have no moral purposes in mind other than
just his art."30

Her first important statement about her difficulty
as artist was made quite early in 1896:

"Art is not thought or emotion, but expression,
expression, always expression. To keep an idea living,
intact, tinged with all its original feeling, its original
mood, preserving in it all the ecstasy which attended its
birth, to keep it so all the way from the brain to the
hand and transfer it on paper, a living thing with color,
odor, sound, life all in it, that is what art means, that
is the greatest of all the gifts of the gods. And that
is the voyage perilous."31

Even as a young drama critic Willa Cather relied on her
first instincts and aimed at reproducing to some extent the atmos-
phere of the play under review. Her emphasis was on the ability
to feel deeply and to make others feel. As a creative artist
she was to have a similar aim. As she affirmed - "To feel greatly
is genius and to make others feel is art."32 or, "To know is little
and to feel is all."33 'feel' to her is the word for the living
experience of art:

"It is all a thing of feeling, you cannot apprehend
The artist thus must have an encounter with reality. 'Feeling' implies that the artist must be intensely involved with his material. She called it 'sympathy' — an awareness of the deepest levels of reality, which the artist, after having experienced, re-creates for others through his creative imagination. She attached greater importance to imagination than to intellect and considered it to be akin to the creative power of divinity, "the eye to see." Bernice Slote has summarized Willa Cather's viewpoint thus:

"God in creating the world was the "Divine Artist:"

the human artist serves and worships, becoming both priest and the translator of God. If the God of art can also be a temporal ruler, vested with power and demanding worship, service, or renunciation from his subjects, the artist in turn has that kingly power which makes men akin to the angels. The revelation of divine things is through inspiration and the gift of genius; the artist with individual talent gives back what God put in him."  

The artist is conceived as the transmitter of ultimate truth. She believed that even a life-time devotion may not be enough for an artist to enable him to communicate his personal vision adequately:

"The artist spends a lifetime in loving the things that haunt him, in raising his mind 'toasted' by them, in
trying to get these conceptions down on paper exactly as they are to him and not in conventional poses supposed to reveal their character; trying this method and that, as a painter tries different lightings and different attitudes with his subject to catch the one that presents it more suggestively than any other. And at the end of a lifetime he emerges with much that is more or less happy experimenting, and comparatively little that is the very flower of himself and his genius. 37

Willa Cather uses the analogy of painting to suggest the process of creative writing and indicates that the drift of growth is in the direction of sparseness and suggestion, rather than too much of detail. As regards the material, it must remain in the crucible of memory for long years before it can be recreated as art. About the training of the artist and the discovery of the right subject she wrote:

"I think, usually, the young writer must have his affair with the external material he covets; must imitate and strive to follow the masters he most admires, until he finds he is striving for reality and cannot make this go any longer. Then he learns that it is not the adventure he sought, but the adventure that sought him, which has made the enduring mark upon him." 38

The master she admired most was Henry James and his influence over Willa Cather's theory of fiction has been discussed.
by James Miller, Jr. But she gradually grew to be herself:

"The soul becomes weary of the conventions that are not of it, and with a single stroke reaches out and takes by force what it cannot win by cunning." 40

She laid great emphasis on the assimilation of the subject matter to the degree that it haunted and compelled the artist. The passage of time was important in order to prevent the artist from being carried by the wonder of discovery. She wrote admiringly of Stephen Crane with whom she shared her creative process:

"After he got a notion for a story, months passed before he could get any sort of personal contact with it, or feel any potency to handle it. 'The detail of a thing has to filter through my blood, and then it comes out like a native product, but it takes forever.'" 41

In the preface to the 1922 edition of Alexander's Bridge, she wrote:

"Everything is new to the young writer, and everything seems equally personal. That which is outside his deepest experience, which he observes and studies, often seems more vital than that which he knows well, because he regards it with all the excitement of discovery. The thing he knows best he takes for granted. Since he is not continuously thrilled by new discoveries about them they lie
about the bottom of his consciousness whether he is aware of it or no, and they continue to feed him, but they do not stimulate him... After he has once or twice done a story that formed itself, inevitably in his mind, he will not often turn back to the building of external stories again... With (his) material he is another writer... A writer contrives and connives only as regards mechanical details and question of effective presentation, always debatable. About the essential matter of his story he cannot argue this way or that."

Willa Cather's childhood impressions continued to 'feed' her and provided her the creative energy and the symbols that satisfied her values. While dealing with the material that is part of his consciousness, the artist need not meddle with it. He has "less and less power of choice about the moulding of it. It seems to be there of itself, already moulded. If he tries to meddle with its vague outline, to twist it into some categorical shape, above all if he tries to adopt or modify its mood, he destroys its value. In working with this material he finds that he has little to do with literary devices.""43

In an interview to Lincoln Star, October 24, 1915, she said:

"Young writers must care vitally, fiercely, absurdly about the trickery and the arrangement of words, the beauty and power of sentences. But they must be on union until they get more
out of life itself than out of anything written."

Willa Cather wrote "On The Art of Fiction", like Henry James, emphasizing the need for writing less and less, leaving out details and yet presenting everything before the consciousness of the reader. She was against 'realism' and had a clear-cut view differentiating journalism and art. She insisted that fiction should remain an art and be suggestive like painting:

"Art, it seems to me should simplify. That indeed is very nearly the whole of the higher artistic process, finding what conventions of form and what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole - so that all that one has suppressed and cutaway is there to the reader's consciousness as much as it were in type on the page.... Any first rate novel or story must have in it the strength of a dozen fairly good stories that have been sacrificed to it. A good workman can't be a cheap workman, he can't be stingy about wasting material, and he cannot compromise. Writing ought either to be the manufacture of stories for which there is a market demand... or it should be an art, which is always a search for something for which there is no market demand, something new and untried, where the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values. The courage to go on without compromise does not come to a writer all at once - nor, for that matter, does the ability. Both are phases of natural development. In the beginning,
the artist, like his public, is wedded to old forms, old ideals, and his vision is blurred by the memory of old delights he would like to recapture." 45

In the "The Novel Demeuble" she wrote:

"How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre... the elder Dumas enunciated a great principle when he said that to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls." 45

This essay has been used by critics in order to discover some weaknesses in the base of her fiction. Lionel Trilling wrote:

"...this technical method is not merely a literary manner but the expression of a point of view toward which Miss Cather had always been moving - with results that, to many of her readers, can only indicate the subtle failure of her admirable talent." 47

But Willa Cather in this essay was formulating her own principles, and in the manner reminiscent of Henry James she wrote:

"There is a popular superstition that 'realism' asserts itself in the cataloguing of a great number of material objects,
in explaining mechanical processes, the methods of operating manufactories and trades, and in minutely and unparingly describing physical sensations. But is not realism, more than it is anything else, an attitude of mind on the part of the writer toward his material, a vague indication of the sympathy and candour with which he accepts, rather than chooses, his theme?" 48

Like Henry James she frequently referred to the analogy between painting and fiction and stressed that certain principles governed both. In "My First Novels", she wrote:

"Too much detail is apt, like any other extravagance, to become slightly vulgar; and it quite destroys in a book a very satisfying element analogous to what painters call 'Composition'." 42

Willa Cather's term 'unfurnish' the novel in 'The Novel Domestique' is close to James' term 'fore-shortening', in his preface to The Tragic Muse:

"To put all that is possible of one's idea into a form and compass that contain it only by delicate adjustments and an exquisite chemistry, so that there will at the end be neither a drop of one's liquor left nor a hair's breadth of the rim of one's glass to spare—every artist will remember how often that sort of necessity has carried with it its particular inspiration.
Therein lies the secret of the appeal, to his mind,
of the successfully foreshortened thing, where repre-
sentation is arrived at... not by the addition of items
(a light that has for its attendant shadow a possible
dryness) but by the art of figuring synthetically, a
compactness into which the imagination may cut thick,
as into the rich density of a wedding-cake."

Willa Cather was suggesting a similar process of
foreshortening, by figuring synthetically, when she emphasized
"unfurnishing" the novel and to present the scene by suggestion
rather than by enumeration:

"The higher processes of art are all processes of
simplification. The novelist must learn to write, and
then he must unlearn it; just as the modern painter
learns to draw and then unlearns utterly to disregard
his accomplishment, when to subordinate it to a higher
and truer effect. In this direction only, it seems to
me, can the novel develop into anything more varied and
perfect than all the many novels that have gone before.
Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically
named there — that, one might say, is created. It is the
inexplicable presence of the thing not name of the over-
tone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal
mood, the emotional aura of the factor the thing or the
deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama,
as well as to poetry itself."
In 1921 she said that the writer's self vanishes and only the created thing remains. "Objects and people could tell their own story, ... by juxtaposition, without any explanation on my part. Just as if I put here on the table a green vase and beside it a yellow orange. Now, these two things affect each other. Side by side, they produce a reaction which neither of them will produce alone... From the relation they have to each other and the effect they have upon each other. I want the reader to see the orange and the vase - beyond that, I am out of it. ... I'd like the writing to be so lost in the object, that it doesn't exist for the reader - except for the reader who knows how difficult it is to lose writing in the object. One must choose one's audience, and the audience I try to write for is the one interested in the effect the green vase brings out in the orange and the orange in the green vase." 52

Willa Cather saw a bond between art and nature, both of which had savage, merciless laws blind to human good. The artist had to go to the source of art - that is, life, with its centre in desire, instincts and passions. She always returned in her journalistic writing during the nineties to the old and deep knowledge of the few elemental facts of human life - birth and death, love and hate and deep passion. In later years perhaps this led to condensation and to an emphasis on the old.

It is generally held that memory had an important place in her fiction. She wrote about the memories that 'teased' her mind. But that was not all. "Your memories are like the colors
in paints but you must arrange them."

The comments about art, fiction and art, about the writings of others and her own, referred to above lead one to believe that she had a conscious theory of fiction. But she never wrote it. It is all scattered. Yet it is seen that she grapples with the problems that painters have faced. She saw a relationship between fiction and painting and therefore it cannot be held that she was an intuitive writer. According to George Greene she was "an artistic empiricist":

"It is a reasoned and a consecutive assemblage, a dicta, if not a theory in the more classical sense,"

Although Willa Cather absorbed from her wide reading, that included James, she exercised the freedom to experiment, and in this she was being Jamesian, as James's theory allows this freedom:

"She's Jamesian in a deeper sense in being independent of James and being experimental in her own art.... Within James's theory is the total freedom to experiment that he gives to the novelist.... She's being Jamesian when she's being most un-Jamesian."

Thus Willa Cather allied herself with the "tradition of the artist's freedom, the freedom to take his own material and to do with it what he pleases."
SECTION III

MAJOR CONCERNS

Willa Cather began by writing about her immediate environment, rejected it, went to the east and then returned to the west after considerable journalistic experience and a conviction that the time had come for her to devote herself whole-heartedly to literature.

Her prairie novels were about the experiences of European immigrants in America, the taming of the wild land and the fruition resulting from the right relationship between land and man. The pioneer spirit expressed itself first in the tiller of the soil and then in the artist. Willa Cather was personally involved in the problems of artists and the theme of artists and their environment was next only to the theme of pioneers in relation with land.

Her protagonists — pioneers, artists, scholars and churchmen — were either Europeans or Americans nurtured on the European tradition and her theme was the transplanting of European culture to America, the nostalgia of the immigrants, the tragedy and pathos of their experience in the new land and their naturalization. Her most aristocratic, religious and scholarly protagonists ultimately felt a nostalgia for America whenever they visited Europe for a brief period, after a long stay in America. She wrote about the European in America and showed how the European tradition fertilized the native vitality. She saw it as a merging of cultures. The Europe-America polarity
resolved itself as East-West and Town-Country polarity in her fiction and she was for a combination of the best of both. When she took an American to Europe, she emphasized that all places were equally good. The most important factor was the human individual.

Her post-World War I frustrations leading to a death-wish have been overemphasized by critics. There is a group of novels in her middle-period which shows negation and even death-wish on her part but she never really gave up hope. There is a note of affirmation in each of the novels of that period. She had deep faith in the validity of ideals and wrote about the historical past as it had a message for the present regarding their validity.

She was convinced about the essential oneness of art and religion and the latter was not an escape because of a sense of failure on her part. Her fiction was always moving towards Catholicism and if completed, her Avignon novel would have finally shown the significance of religion as well as of Europe in her fiction.