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Willa Cather: The Letters and Novels of a Romantic Modernist

Lisa Bouma Garvelink
Western Michigan University

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WILLA CATHER: THE LETTERS AND NOVELS OF A ROMANTIC MODERNIST

by
Lisa Bouma Garvelink

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the
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Department of English
Daneen Wardrop, Adviser

Western Michigan University
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While enjoying Skaggs’ gracious hospitality and studying Drew’s collection, I discovered in Cather’s letters a much more complex Willa Cather than I had envisioned, and I accepted Skaggs’ challenge to reformat my dissertation around further study of Cather’s correspondence. Thanks to the generous funding of my husband, Steven Jay Garvelink, I have been able to visit many collections around the country and have been able to receive either microfilm or xeroxed copies from many other collections. This study of Cather’s correspondence has confirmed for me the romantic modernist I had discovered in her novels, and it has revealed the same dialectic in her letters as in her novels.
of Cather’s correspondence has confirmed for me the romantic modernist I had discovered in her novels, and it has revealed the same dialectic in her letters as in her novels.

Many thanks to Daneen Wardrop for directing my dissertation and for her meticulous examination of this manuscript, with more valuable questions and suggestions than I have been able to incorporate at this point. Katherine Joslin and Nicolas Witschi also gave much patient encouragement of me in my most halting early attempts at Cather scholarship, giving a host of valuable suggestions along the way. My thanks to my whole committee—Daneen Wardrop, Katherine Joslin, Nicolas Witschi, and Kristin Szylvian—for believing in my project and for helping me always to envision it as a book. Helping to further that dream, Western Michigan University’s Dissertation Completion Fellowship generously funded an entire year of additional scholarship in 2004-05, freeing me to travel and to spend time examining over 1400 letters I would have had little possibility of reading during a year of teaching responsibilities.

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Most of all I thank my exquisitely supportive husband, for believing in my work even when I doubted, and for helping make this project possible in more ways than I could note. My daughters—Katherine, Julia, and Stephanie—I thank also for their loving
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Lisa Bouma Garvelink
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................... ii

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

CHAPTER

1. CATHHER’S MODERNIST-ROMANTIC PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST .... 15

2. CATHHER’S CREATION OF JIM BURDEN AS A PARTIALLY RELIABLE NARRATOR ........................................................................................................... 47

3. WILLA CATHHER’S VOYAGE PERILOUS: A CASE FOR ONE OF OURS ......................................................................................................................... 83

4. THE IMPACT OF GOSSIP AND COMMUNITY ON WILLA CATHHER AND ON HER LOST LADY .............................................................................. 115

5. THE PAIN OF BETRAYAL FOR WILLA CATHHER AND HER PROFESSOR ........................................................................................................... 146

6. THE MOTHER NARRATIVE IN WILLA CATHHER AND IN SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL .............................................................. 181

NOTES ........................................................................................................................................ 211

Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 211

Chapter 1 ................................................................................................................................ 212

Chapter 2 ................................................................................................................................ 217

Chapter 3 ................................................................................................................................ 223

Chapter 4 ................................................................................................................................ 229

Chapter 5 ................................................................................................................................ 238

Chapter 6 ................................................................................................................................ 250

WORKS CITED ....................................................................................................................... 257
INTRODUCTION

Willa Cather's reputation in the last century has included extremes, from bohemian nonconformist to nostalgic regionalist and from old-fashioned romantic to trendsetting modernist. Actually born in December 1873, Cather changed her official record multiple times before settling on the 1876 which her tombstone records today, leading biographers on a long chase to discover the true date.\(^1\) In the late 1890's and the early 1900's Cather was an extremely well-known and talked-about newspaper columnist and magazine editor, as well as a part-time author of poetry and short stories. Not until the 1920's and 1930's did Cather become a celebrity as a world-famous novelist, causing her to begin to value her privacy to the extent that she ultimately expressed the desire that all of her correspondence be destroyed and that surviving letters never be published. To Americans of the twenty-first century, Willa Cather is usually either an unknown name, the name of an author people remember from school, or—to a growing number—a favorite author about whose works people are passionate, but in her lifetime she was well-known.

Enormously popular in her day, with scholars as well as with a large public, Cather's reputation later waned because of her proscription against putting her books into paperback, against making movies out of them, and against anthologizing any of her work. She initially allowed *A Lost Lady* to be filmed, regretting it till her death and fighting vehemently any plans for further films of her works. She did allow special paperback editions of her books for the purpose of providing good reading for the troops during
wartime, but she preferred to have her books available only to people who were willing to buy them in hardcover. She described wanting a discriminating, intelligent readership. Hating the thought of having her books taught, wanting students to discover her fiction for themselves—rather than being forced to read it—she expressed irritability late in life toward people who wrote asking for insights which would help them teach her books. She finally allowed a few stories to be anthologized, most notably "Paul's Case." Her decision, however, to limit accessibility of her fiction to those she considered serious readers effectively prevented the greater part of two generations from discovering her for themselves.

Not until the end of Edith Lewis' life did she, as executor of Cather’s estate, finally cooperate with publishers in allowing Cather’s works to be published in paperback form. Realizing that continuing to comply with Cather’s wishes would be counterproductive because of the modern market’s need for paperbacks, Lewis released the restrictions against that form but not against film. By the time the books began to come out in paperback in the 1970’s and became readily available to a new public—a public hungry for literature by and about women—the stage was set for a much deeper understanding of a female author who previously had too often been read superficially with little understanding of her complexity and sophistication. Unfortunately, neither Lewis nor Cather’s family have ever eased restrictions against publishing her letters, which reveal a striking portrayal of Cather as a romantic-modernist author.

Willa Cather’s fiction as a whole is not primarily romantic or modernist; as multivoiced literature, it needs to be read through the eyes of readers who understand what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “dialogism,” rather than being read for a main idea, a primary
voice, or even one critical perspective. Cather’s fiction powerfully exhibits a primary dialectic between romantic and modernistic sensibilities, both struggling for dominance throughout her fiction. Even in the novels most critics would see as quite romantic—specifically her earlier works—the modernist temperament and techniques already create recognizable tension. Just as significantly, in her later, darker novels the romantic impulse refuses to be superseded. Despite the wealth of creative energy expended by scholars on Cather study, however, at this point no one has sufficiently investigated this continuity and the interdependence of these strands throughout Cather’s entire body of work. Furthermore, no one has yet read her novels through the revelatory lens of her letters, which are barred from publication. From early to late—in her correspondence, her short stories, and her novels—Cather’s romanticism and modernism work together and against each other, inexplicably bound together in creating her memorably ambivalent vision of the world.

Willa Cather’s romanticism developed early, and she articulated it consistently in her publications during the years 1893-96. In those years her reviews of theatre, opera, and literature reveal an extensive literary background, while conveying a passionate commitment to art as what makes life worth living. Bernice Slate’s careful study of Cather’s publications about art from 1893-96 enables her to summarize Cather’s thinking incisively:

I have said that Willa Cather in these years was a passionate idealist. Neither the kind, form, substance, nor principles of art would matter if there were not the "other"—the high, rare, splendid ideal that justifies the quest and the devotion. What she worked for was the sense of goodness of perfection, the linked and interchangeable "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," or even what seems to be a mystic insight. The ideal is more often directly expressed as an earthly pattern or achievement, but the human which approaches the divine is enough reason for reverence and passionate excitement. Greatness is also splendor—something half
the ideal of heaven and half the power of human excellence. Splendor in art gives
the impulse to transfigure, lift, shine, and make more than ordinary. The greatest
artists, then, become as the gods, and the highest arts are holy ground. (59)

Cather’s passionate idealism finds expression in characters as diverse as Alexandra
Bergson, Thea Kronborg, Godfrey St. Peter, and Rachel Blake. Whatever else changes
from one novel to the next, this element does not. As Cather writes in 1895, “Romance is
the highest form of fiction . . . it will never desert us . . . It will come back to us in all
its radiance and eternal freshness in some one of the dawning seasons of Time . . .
Children, the sea, the sun, God himself are all romanticists” (Slote 62).

For the purposes of this study, Cather’s romanticism will refer to her penchant for
glorifying the individual and the individual’s passions, strivings, and achievements; this
sensibility assumes the importance of ideals while seeing goodness in humanity and
visualizing the possibility of individual happiness. Probably most importantly, however,
this sensibility reveres “a love of beauty, dedication, and a belief in the greatness of art”
(Slote 31). Cather portrays human beings as being able to experience the divine through
endeavor in the artistic realm, since she sees art and God as one. Indeed, she glorifies the
individual in her fiction and in her personal comments by extending her definition of art
far beyond the fine arts. To Cather, both Alexandra and Antonia were artists, Alexandra
as lover and developer of the land and Antonia as earth mother. In the same manner, all
the Bohemian and French women she knew who cooked wonderfully were true artists.

An excerpt from an Omaha World-Herald article, reprinted by Brent Bohlke, quotes from
a Cather speech on the subject:

“No nation has ever produced great art that has not made a high art of cookery,
because art appeals primarily to the senses . . . The Americanization committee
worker who persuades an old Bohemian housewife that it is better for her to feed
her family out of tin cans instead of cooking them a steaming goose for dinner is
committing a crime against art,” declared Miss Cather, who kept her audience laughing and gasping at the daring but simple exposition she gave the meaning of art. (Bohlke 146-47)

Though her 1921 audience found her words daring, Cather’s thoughts were not new to her. From the time of her childhood to the time of her death, she saw the aspirations and achievements of human beings as powerfully beautiful art.

Although Cather’s romanticism became evident early and continued throughout her lifetime, her modernism also shows extremely early beginnings. Although other modernist techniques and themes developed more fully as her career advanced, Cather’s theory of minimalism existed in embryonic form already in her first published newspaper pieces. It appears most frequently in the comments about simplification which she weaves throughout her reviews and columns on art. In 1920 Cather first published her “On the Art of Fiction,” setting forth the principle which she would develop more fully two years later in “The Novel Démeublé.” In the first essay she states,

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 cut away is there to the reader’s consciousness as much as if 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. (WCOW 102-03)

In the next essay, beginning by describing the novel as generally “over-furnished,”

Cather proceeds to explain the importance of simplification in an often quoted passage:

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 named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself. (WCOW 41-42)

One little known fact about Cather’s simplification credo is that she put it into print twelve years before Hemingway’s famous publication of his theory of omission in 1932;
hers was passed over, while his became famous. Cather, twenty-six years older than Hemingway and often mistakenly labeled as a nostalgic regionalist, hardly occurred to critics or the public as a spokesperson for modernism. Though Cather believed in minimalism long before she began to publish fiction, her working out of this principle intensified throughout her career. Slote notes that in Cather’s comments on technique scattered throughout her early publications, the two most common emphases are simplification and contrast. Even her fuller novels demonstrate marked evidence of these principles, often characterizing a person through a single memorable action; throughout her career, however, the paring away becomes increasingly intentional and creates steadily more symbolic novels.

Modernism in this study, however, refers not only to the technique of simplification and use of symbolism but also to modern themes and preoccupations and to experimentation with techniques which both reflect and address modern complexities. It describes literature speaking to a sense of disintegration and fragmentation, responding to unfamiliar situations and difficulties. Cather’s fiction consistently dares to treat difficult issues in modern ways, often juxtaposing jarring realities with bright hopefulness in the same manner as the human subconscious or stream of consciousness. In Jo Ann Middleton’s words, modernism “views the world in its complexity, refuses to accept simple or conventional solutions, and then experiments with new answers and radical suggestions” (10). Modernism also often self-consciously uses the ideas of Freud and Darwin to illuminate psychological issues and character development, at times using dreams and the subconscious in place of traditional narrative. Consistent with Cather’s use of juxtaposition is her use of the gap, or, as Jo Ann Middleton names it, “the
vacuole." She finds this scientific term useful in such discussion because of its “double-
eness—it appears empty but is not actually empty” and as such “is suggestive for the
apparent absences in Cather’s work that are nevertheless full of meaning” (11).

Middleton emphasizes the crucial nature of these meaningful gaps in Cather’s fiction by
comparing them to these scientific cellular structures which are important for the growth
of the organism. In the same way, the information Cather leaves out is often even more
important than what she includes. As Edith Lewis says about Cather’s writing, “She
always said it was what she left out that counted” (183).

A memorable comment from Willa Cather in Not Under Forty about the world
breaking “in two in 1922 or thereabouts” has led many critics to see her early fiction as
bright, romantic visions of possibility and her late fiction as dark depictions of despair or
even failure. While a progressive trend toward darker fiction definitely exists in her
novels, more significant is the fact that this tension between old-world romanticism and
new-world modernism powerfully informs all her fiction. For example, in The Song of
the Lark, Cather’s early picture of artistic growth and success, Thea faces the tearing
apart of her world when a sick tramp commits suicide: he drowns himself in the town
water tank, causing a typhoid epidemic, to punish the town for rejecting and ousting him.
Cather gives Thea no easy answers, as she recognizes her father’s religious faith to be
completely inadequate in this situation. She wonders why all the townspeople—and
especially her father as pastor—were unwilling to help this person in trouble. Thea’s
confidant, Dr. Archie, has no answers either, and Thea faces alone the sense of pointlessness and despair modern society often experiences. Cather’s romantic novel demonstrates here both a modern theme and a questioning of accepted verities.
On the other hand, *Lucy Gayheart*, one of Cather's darker late novels, expresses romantic inspiration and triumph in the midst of grief and depression. After experiencing career disappointments and the death of her great love, Lucy strives to recapture the memory of "those flashes of promise" he had taught her "could be the important things in one's life" (183-84). As Cather leads us through Lucy's psychological struggle, she relates,

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. (184)

These two brief examples of romantic and modernist themes in places where readers do not usually find them demonstrate the importance of looking at Cather's fiction as a whole in terms of her complex dialogical vision. This study examines several significantly different and chronologically disparate Cather novels to demonstrate the consistency of this dialogical complexity in her fiction and the consequent strength of her complete vision.

When Cather writes about keeping "an idea living intact" and transferring it "on paper a living thing," she writes about the novel as her Russian contemporary Mikhail Bakhtin does in his "The Epic and the Novel." He asserts that the novel is the only living genre, still open to change and growth, as opposed to the epic and other genres which are dead and closed. As such, the novel is characterized by "an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)" (7), which can be confusing to readers who are looking for closure and single-voiced (monoglossic) literature. Cather's fiction is exactly what Bakhtin defines as "authentic" in novels: both heteroglossic in development of many
voices and dialogical in the way issues are developed without being closed off by a final answer.

His comment that “The context embracing another’s word is responsible for its dialogizing background, whose influence can be very great” (Discourse 340) speaks exactly to the problem Cather encounters in the various misperceptions of her books. Her readers often take characters’ words, feelings, and experiences out of their all-important novelistic context, placing them in the context of Cather’s life and simply attributing them to her. Readers sometimes forget that Cather creates all the voices in her fiction and uses them dialogically within their fictional worlds. Often opposing characters’ experiences represent multiple parts of Cather’s own.

Deeper than the question of how this dialectic operates within the novels, however, is the question of why. What motivates this powerfully continuous dialectic? Reading Cather’s letters clarifies multiple motivating forces. Her intense love for family and friends contrasts starkly with an equally intense need for time away from them. An abiding love for the communities of her youth in Virginia and Nebraska contrasts with her adventurous appreciation for travel and new communities: New York, Paris, numerous places in the West, Grand Manan Island off New Brunswick, and Jaffrey, New Hampshire. A veneration for the heritage of the Western literary canon, acquired at an early age, combines in an often unexpected manner with a love for modern literature and new ideas. Perhaps most quixotically, a spirit rebellious against traditional religion in early years contrasts with Cather’s recommitment to the Christian church and her close relationship with Bishop Beecher experienced in later years. Nevertheless, even in her later years her recommitment to the church appeared to be more an appreciation of
artistic liturgy and symbolism than a change in belief systems. Late in life, while nursing her paralyzed mother, she expresses the opinion that God doesn't exist in California, and none of the over 1400 letters I have read mention prayer or looking to God. When her spirits are low, she expresses despair rather than faith but finds herself turning to the church, nevertheless.

Her extant letters are prohibited from publication in any form as a term of her will but are available to scholars in 69 collections around the world. These letters when read together reveal an extreme introvert with signs of an anxiety disorder who was passionately committed to the power of literature and to furthering the life of the mind. The chapters of this book interpret Cather's modernist-romantic dialect specifically through the letters which speak most appropriately to the themes and issues of each novel. Each chapter incorporates the letters a bit differently, as they fit best into the discussion of the novel at hand.

Chapter 1 investigates letters and early published writing to uncover the impact on The Song of the Lark of Cather's early life, her early work reviewing theatre, opera, and literature, and her friendship with Olive Fremstad. These documents reveal a young Cather who is passionately idealistic and a mature Cather who never loses her love either for the power of art or her immense respect for the true artist. Although this novel clearly idealizes the birth of an artist in terms of Thea's phenomenal achievement, the idealism is, nevertheless, strongly tempered by the knowledge of the costs of artistic success. Cather's letters reveal many of these joys and costs in her own life and in the life of her good friend Olive Fremstad, the opera singer upon whose life Thea's is loosely based. One important modernist theme in Thea's life, as well as in Cather's, is the drive to
succeed as a woman in a man’s world. Eschewing most of what their societies judge as the signs of success for women, these modern women sacrifice freely for their success.

Chapter 2 discusses Cather’s attempt to have *My Antonia* read as much more than a glorification of an immigrant farm woman. An exchange of letters between Cather and her publisher reveals their opposing views of the novel. In preparing to reissue the novel, Ferris Greenslet originally insisted that the introduction be dropped because of the way it detracted from the bright spirit of the novel. In preparing to reissue the novel, Greenslet originally insisted that the introduction be dropped because of the way it detracted from the bright spirit of the novel. Because the introduction provided a necessary understanding of the person through whose perspective readers would be hearing the story, Cather insisted it was crucial. After a lengthy exchange, they agreed to compromise on a shorter version of the introduction which definitely mutes the modernist tone of the original. A similar but lengthier exchange involves Cather’s concern for the inclusion of the original illustrations. Throughout these exchanges, as in many other letters to friends and colleagues, Cather expresses both a lifelong commitment to idealism and the angst which comes from living in the modern world. Her own questioning spirit and her desire to face life’s hard realities comes through in her dual depiction of Jim, as disillusioned and yet stubbornly romantic to the end.

In chapter 3, letters Cather wrote to her Aunt Frances and others reveal her cousin G. P.’s antitheroic life in Nebraska and heroic death in France in W.W.I as the germ of *One of Ours*. In addition, Cather’s letters to two good friends, Dorothy Canfield Fisher and Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, reflect the complexity of her view of the war and its effects. Fisher, a novelist known for upholding moral and community values, believed in
the glory of the war effort and refused to see reason for despair and disillusionment.

Sergeant, on the other hand, served as a war correspondent, becoming extremely disillu-

sioned and angry with war supporters and with what she saw as Cather's false presenta-

tion of the war. Neither friend realized that her own ideology was incorporated as one

part of a dialectic in this novel nor that Cather's novel was an extremely nuanced

depiction of the war and its impact on its participants. Cather's letters throughout her

lifetime demonstrate her continued conflictedness about war, though the more wars she

lived through the more she came to feel that they were responsible for destroying the

world she loved.

Chapter 4 looks particularly at letters which reveal the genesis of the tension in A

Lost Lady between an intense fear of gossip's fragmentary power and idealistic longing

for connection with community. Cather's letters—from early in life to shortly before her

death—reveal her own preoccupation with these same competing forces. Often she writes

that she does not know how she will survive until she sees Red Cloud people again or

that people from there mean more to her than anyone else on earth; just as frequently,

however, Cather writes vindictive letters which at times express paranoia about people

she is certain are slandering her. Though she rarely mentions their names in the letters

which have survived, she refers often to her "enemies" in ways which take for granted

that the reader of the letter knows the people to whom she refers. Although in some

venues gossip can function to indicate conviviality and connectedness, in this novel

Cather uses it as a force of modern fragmentation, revealing her own lifelong fear of the

small-town tongue. Ironically, Cather always sees her community of origin as crucial to

her identity and crucial to her fiction, but she greatly fears the talk of some of the people
in the community with whom she is closest. This chapter examines the power of Cather’s ambivalent relationships with friends and acquaintances to shape this novel.

Chapter 5 investigates the depiction of many betrayals in *A Professor’s House*, usually in the service of idealism. Cather’s own experiences and comments as revealed in her letters demonstrate that over the years she had a great deal of experience betraying loved ones for her idealistic commitment to art. This novel, written at an age of maturity, indicates through her characterizations of the young Tom Outland and the older Godfrey St. Peter and their multiple betrayals of others that she has come to a sharp realization of the consequences of her earlier choices. Many of the choices her characters make resemble her own, as do many of the consequences. While it would be too simple to say that *A Professor’s House* indicates Cather’s recognition that her commitment to art as primary was misplaced, the novel reveals, nevertheless, a nuanced understanding of many of her selfish choices and their negative effect on her and on those around her.

Chapter 6 focuses particularly on how *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is influenced by Cather’s ambivalent relationships both with her mother and with her place of birth. Unfortunately, no letters between Cather and her mother have survived. In spite of this, references to their relationship dot letters to many friends and relatives. Moreover, Cather’s long months of caring for her mother during her stroke-induced final paralysis gave Cather a great deal of time to analyze the two of them, their similarities and differences, and the difficulties between them. A large number of letters from different decades reveal a conflicted adult response to her mother and to her native Virginia that Cather needed to analyze during her mother’s lengthy illness and death, before she could write *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. 

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Infused with the beauty of the past and the power of the present, with the glory of human endeavor and the bittersweet taste of success, with the wonder of human goodness and the pain of evil and loss, Cather's vision rarely falters. Cather believed the primary goal of art was to simplify, but she never believed the world to be a simple place. In a letter to another writer about a poem she found especially beautiful, Cather refers to dialectic in literature in what she describes as the musical manner in which its two voices blend and interrupt each other. When Cather wrote of this multi-voiced literature as very beautiful, she could have been writing about the novels she was yet to write. Including dialogical portrayals of farm girls and boys, artists, and adult intellectuals geographically scattered across the continent and beyond, Cather’s fiction displays a compelling understanding of the world and its people. This study examines the beauty and power of Cather’s work which lies in the fascinating interplay between the romanticism she refuses to part with and the modernism she bravely embraces.
CHAPTER 1

CATHER’S MODERNIST-ROMANTIC PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

Some of Willa Cather’s earliest and most persistent memories were of knowing herself to be different from other people and of striving to prove herself to the world. Woodress tells the story of her as a nine-year-old girl, freely exhibiting her precosity in her new town of Red Cloud: “As her father encouraged her to show off, she sat in the Miner Brothers’ general store and discoursed on Shakespeare, English history, and life in Virginia” (40). Edith Lewis tells an even earlier story of this rebellious five-year-old who shocked an elderly judge in Virginia who had been patronizingly treating her as a conventional, pretty little girl. Evidently she “horrified her mother by breaking out suddenly: ‘I’se a dang’ous nigger I is!’” (13). Such intentionally shocking behavior continued sporadically even into her twenties. But what finally channeled this fierce, nonconformist spirit into focused artistic drive was her visit to the Southwest in 1912. Like Thea before her visit to the cliff dwellings on Fred’s father’s ranch, Cather was feeling completely exhausted before her trip. While continuing to dream of doing her own writing, she had been putting enormous energy into her job as editor/writer for S. S. McClure,1 for whom she had great admiration. Her determination to do excellent work for a beloved employer—combined with messy office politics—proved creatively stultifying.2 Until she could get away from the magazine atmosphere and McClure’s influence, she found herself
unable to unleash her creative energies in developing her gift. Her letters betray turmoil over how to be a productive worker, while still taking her calling seriously.

This spirit of pride in being specially gifted inhabits *The Song of the Lark*, her *Künstlerroman*, her story of an artist’s awakening. Most scholars discuss it as “by far her most personal and revealing novel” because of its theme and the extensive use of details from Cather’s early life (Lee 120). The late Susan Rosowski observes, “Autobiography as preparation for a life’s work of creation—it is the romantic’s way, seen in its classic form in *The Prelude*” (63). Cather, however, does not end the novel with the artistic awakening. Because this novel is a story of success, with countless parallels in Romantic literature, it disturbs many of its readers by continuing past the glorious arrival of the artist to show the complexity and concomitant pain of ultimate success. True to Cather’s own experience, Thea’s success as an artist comes at great cost. This novel brilliantly explores her passions, strivings, and achievements, refusing to accept conventional paths to her desires and refusing to gloss over the costs. Cather’s determination—as a post-Victorian era New Woman—to make her artistic dreams come true in unconventional ways finds a reflection in similar ambition for Thea. Both Thea and young Cather find their inner drives greatly strengthened by people around them, sometimes through their support and sometimes through their opposition. For Thea, as for her creator, her ability to produce powerful art requires both connectedness to her community of origin and the tough-minded ability to stand alone. Both women experience significant difficulty and some self-doubt as they forge new paths, but both achieve world renown through idealistic commitment to art and through the ability to adapt to and accept the conditions of the changing world.
Dialogical tensions between this romantic and modernist discourse in Willa Cather's immediately popular *The Song of the Lark* clearly caused many readers confusion already at the time of its 1915 publication and still need to be clarified today. Most initial critics responded favorably to Cather's novel, but some wished she had ended the novel just after Thea's awakening—before she experiences any success as a singer—as do many contemporary scholars. The late Susan Rosowski's *The Voyage Perilous* suggests, "The revelation is the essential experience; what follows involves a necessary but, for the romantic, not particularly interesting working out of its implications" (67). Sharon O'Brien believes that the difficulty of representing success compellingly causes Cather to include too much conversation rather than dramatic action in her last sections, thus deserting her concept of the "romantic, individualistic" artist ("Introduction" x). In this criticism, however, both scholars assume a romantic portrait of the artist as Cather's primary aim, neglecting to see the importance of the final contextualizing voices. Cather's "representing the latter part of the story by suggestion merely," as her later preface and many letters to friends and acquaintances suggest she ought to have done (xvi), also would have necessitated the omission of multiple voices important in the novel's scheme of reality. A great part of the novel's power lies in what Mikhail Bakhtin would call its heteroglossic celebration of multiple voices and perspectives; by highlighting many voices, Cather allows her novel's context of voices and ideas to inform each other and contribute to the development of Thea and the novel as a whole. This novel refuses to tell a simple story of an artist's recognition of her gift and subsequent success, stubbornly insisting instead on maintaining the romantic elements of Cather's vision in the midst of an often-dismaying, modernly complex world.
Despite these minor contextualizing voices in the body of the novel, had Cather ended the novel where Greenslet and O’Brien would have preferred, readers would have been left with a simplistic, stereotypical depiction of an American-Dream scenario: Thea believes in herself, works hard, and achieves success against great odds. In spite of the earlier conflicting voices’ existence before the last section, their role in contextualizing Thea and her voice strengthens as they take center stage. Both the final section’s switch to Dr. Archie’s consciousness and the epilogue’s move to Aunt Tillie’s consciousness reinforce the importance of perspectives other than Thea’s and refuse to settle for a simple answer in a complex world. While the change to a different mode and different consciousnesses at the end sometimes confuses readers, it conveys Cather’s clear sense of artistic beauty struggling to redeem a broken world.⁴

This novel, which Cather once referred to as her fairy tale, exhibits Cather’s powerful, lifelong romanticism, arguably to the greatest degree of any her novels. Her Kingdom of Art⁵ explodes in bodily power, in the physical presence and personality of Thea Kronborg. Thea embodies fully everything Cather anticipated from art for herself and everything she saw in the great artists of her day, mirroring her own coming-alive experience as an artist and that of her opera singer friend Olive Fremstad. Edith notes emphatically that Thea is not simply a portrait of Fremstad, having much of young Cather and others in her as well, but that her experiences as a singer were suggested by Fremstad: “She herself recognized herself in Thea when she read the story, and at their next meeting flung her arms about Willa Cather, exclaiming that she could not tell where Thea left off and she began” (92-93).⁶ Giving Thea a personal history and desires which conflate her own experience and that of her friend allowed Cather to create a timeless
story of the fulfillment of a dream in the birth of an artist. The power of the idea and the power of personality fill this novel as they fill Thea’s singing voice.

In spite of being strikingly romantic, this 1915 novel resonates also with strong strains of modernism. Powerful though art is and magical though success seems to be, the complexities of the modern world complicate the vision and remind readers that life’s questions are never fully answered. Even when people achieve all they have ever hoped to as artists, the complexity of the alienating modern world endures. Thea’s story continues to remind readers of two truths. First, as Fred says, “It takes a great many people to make one—Brunnhilde” (465); second, as Harsanyi says, every artist makes himself born and owes nothing to anybody (378). Both dependent on other people and dependent on rebellion against them, artists find their own reward. Passion, “every artist’s secret . . . inimitable in cheap materials” (477), is for artists and for those they reach “the only commensurate answer” (479) to the uncertainties of life.

One clear thematic reason for a romantic reading of the novel stems from its strong identification with the German Romantic Künstlerroman tradition; as such, Cather’s novel traces the life of an artist from puberty to adulthood, delineating Thea’s specific characteristics of genius. At only eleven, when Thea makes her first appearance in the novel, she clearly exhibits a gift—that it is artistic genius becomes apparent later. Of the many people in the small town of Moonstone who recognize Thea as gifted already in childhood, Dr. Archie is the most respected. When she is sick, he half seriously examines her head to try to ascertain what makes her different from other children: “he felt her head thoughtfully with the tips of his fingers. No, he couldn’t say it was different from any other child’s head, though he believed there was something very different about
her” (10). In addition, Herr Wunsch recognizes her musical gift and does his best to help it to blossom, Aunt Tillie practically idolizes Thea for the creative gift she intuitively recognizes in her, Thea’s mother allows her extra freedom and her own private space to make an out-of-the-way nest for herself, and Ray Kennedy with his death benefit for Thea “backed a winner once in his life!” (148). All of these diverse people contribute in inimitable ways to Thea’s growth as an artist.

Young Willa Cather also had a large number of people who invested time in her education and intellectual growth, believing her to be specially gifted, first of all her father and her grandmother. Her mother’s mother, Grandma Boak, characterized best as the titular character in “Old Mrs. Harris,” spent countless hours reading Shakespeare, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the Bible, and other works with her, starting well before Willa herself could read. Her father also seemed to have decided from the very beginning that she was something special. A Jan. 22, 1874 letter from Charles Cather, addressed to “Brother and Sister,” comments that Baby Willie “grows very fast, and is just as good as she is pretty.” A few months later a letter from one of his relatives to another out-of-state relative acknowledges that, yes, Willie is a fine looking baby, though she is nothing so extraordinary in beauty and intelligence as Charles tells everyone. From the time of the birth of this first-born child, Charles Cather seems to have been determined to give her the best of everything. He always gave her his complete support—from the unusual leopard-skin print coat and hat she wore to the store the day she made such an impression on the townspeople, to his being willing to pay for part of her college education. The extant correspondence of family members suggests that none of the siblings ever made a fuss about their father’s contribution to Willa’s education, even though he couldn’t do it
for the rest of them. They all seem to have been brought up believing Willa was unusual and needed special advantages.\textsuperscript{10}

Consistent with the \textit{Künstlerroman} tradition, when Thea leaves Moonstone to study in Chicago she grows artistically, begins to assert herself, and rejects community principles: she even initially refuses a request to sing at the church funeral of a girl who has greatly admired her. Because Thea’s Chicago teacher has insisted that she rest her strained voice, having “taxed . . . [it] last winter, singing at funerals so much” (221), she dares to put her own artistic needs ahead of those of the family and community. Although she eventually makes an exception in this instance, at the encouragement of her supportive mother, this decision stands as a clear indication that Thea no longer makes decisions according to the precepts of those with whom she has grown up: “Nothing that she would ever do in the world would seem important to them, and nothing they would ever do would seem important to her” (240).

Thea’s feelings at this point are strikingly similar to Cather’s when she returned to Red Cloud after graduating from the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. Although Bernice Slote demonstrates through Cather’s newspaper columns from 1893-96 that Cather spent a significant amount of time in Lincoln in her part-time role as drama critic for two papers even after graduating, the fact that she was feeling out of place is obvious in her letters. A January 1896 letter from Red Cloud to the Gere family in Lincoln says she is writing from Siberia and describes as pathetically rustic the New Year’s dance she recently attended with her brother. Though the geographic distance between these two Nebraska locations would hardly seem to warrant such a designation, Cather experienced keenly the loss of Lincoln as a cultural center and felt extremely isolated in the small,
rural town of Red Cloud. Again, in March, a letter to Mariel Gere confirms how exiled she feels and describes the ways she attempts to allay her boredom. Then in May Cather thanks Mariel for sticking by her when everyone else has deserted her, even her mother and father, and confides her feelings of no longer fitting in. This letter explains that in her years away she has grown away from her family and their way of looking at things, until they are not much comfort to each other anymore. She also has the uncomfortable feeling that her family is expecting her to achieve in an unusual way because of her often discussed “ability.” Cather describes her feelings to Mariel Gere in a May 2, 1896 letter, shortly before accepting her job in Pittsburgh. Uncomfortable though such feelings were for her, they gave her, nevertheless, the knowledge that her family believed in her. Thea does not benefit from the same family attitude. In spite of the fact that Cather still connects with her brothers and does not seem rejected by her family the way she portrays Thea to be, her sense of disconnection and isolation from the literary, intellectual world she considers vital emanates from the same place within her as does Thea’s unhappiness in Moonstone.

At this point Cather’s readers know that Thea’s artistic life has ceased to exist in her home town; she knows the world as her stage and simply works toward confirmation of her artistic calling. Even her name—a female version of the Greek and Latin words for God—suggests that Thea has within herself the only god she desires. She serves no other god but the god of her own artistic genius. Thea’s life exemplifies twenty-year-old Willa Cather’s credo:

The further the world advances the more it becomes evident that an author’s only safe course is to cling close to the skirt of his art, forsaking all others, and keep unto her as long as they two shall live. An artist should not be vexed by human hobbies or human follies; he should be able to lift himself up into the clear
firmament of creation where the world is not. He should be among men but not one of them, in the world but not of the world. Other men may think and reason and believe and argue, but he must create. (Slote 407) 12

Echoing language of the Bible and of the traditional marriage contract, this credo clarifies Thea’s and Cather’s desires to live for art rather than for the traditional female values of marriage and family.

Each is living consciously as a “New Woman,” a term coined during the end of the Victorian era to refer to the emerging modern woman. Both Cather and Thea interpret her career options and life choices completely differently from the majority of women who came of age in the Victorian era. In many letters to friends, Cather discusses the possibility of marriage, even mentioning to Mariel feeling a real regard for one of her suitors, a doctor Dorothy Canfield especially likes. Saying that she doesn’t want to spoil the friendship by exchanging it for what she terms “the other article,” Cather refuses to give up her freedom and her commitment to art as paramount in her life. 13 In McClure’s 1913 “Three American Singers,” Cather also lauds Olive Fremstad’s ability to attain the highest reaches of art with her voice, attributing it in part to her being undistracted by husband and children. 14 Cather describes Fremstad as the only one of the three great singers “who is now aspiring to and attaining those frozen heights,” which she attributes to Fremstad’s single-mindedness. She says she is interested in nothing but work and quotes her as saying, “We are born alone, we make our way alone, we die alone” (42).

By giving art top priority in their lives, all three women redefine both what it means to be female and what it means to be an artist.

In keeping with this principle, Cather dramatically uses Panther Canyon to magnify the ever-significant female imagery of the earlier sections of this novel. In Moon-
stone Thea basks in the womblike security of her private bedroom, lying "on the floor in the moonlight, pulsing with ardor and anticipation" (140); similarly, in Panther Canyon she sleeps in the sun-baked, womblike Cliff Dwellers' home, her "nest in a high cliff, full of sun" (298), resting up for the monumental artistic effort ahead. Daily she refreshes herself in the life-giving waters of the river below the cliffs and then curls up in the warmth of the cozy room above, as she awaits her artistic birth. Only after her body has enjoyed three months of hibernation—resting and rejuvenating itself in the river, canyons, and caves—can Thea's artistic spirit make itself born. In a scene taking place in what Ellen Moers identifies as "the most thoroughly elaborated female landscape in literature" (258), Thea experiences her epiphany:

One morning, as she was standing upright in the pool, splashing water between her shoulder-blades with a big sponge, something flashed through her mind that made her draw herself up and stand still until the water had quite dried upon her flushed skin. The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself ... In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it on one's breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals. (304)

Thea feels this birth of her artistic spirit to be physically and emotionally arousing, as she dedicates herself to "achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art!" (321). Here Cather follows in Wordsworth's tradition of demonstrating the power of nature to connect a person with inner creative genius but dramatically represents nature as female in giving birth to the female artist. Although Thea has known herself to be a musician for years, it is not until this dramatic moment that she feels her full artist spirit emerge from within her in.

For Cather herself, a dramatic experience of nature in the Southwest was a crucial part of her coming into confident possession of her artistic gift. In one way the Southwest
felt like an extension of home to her, because of the sand hills not far from where she had grown up, but she also felt the pull of a civilization which was ancient yet new to her. Especially since this civilization was built right out of the natural rock, it felt to her like a unification of nature and civilization. Though she had already published a book of poetry, a book of short stories, and a novel—in addition to countless pieces in magazines and newspapers—her experience in the dramatic landscape of the Southwest was the catalyst which allowed her to feel herself born as an artist. The trip rested her and focused her artistic energies, giving her the inner sense of well being which enabled her to give up her job at McClure’s and devote herself completely to her fiction.

In addition to resting thoroughly and luxuriating in surroundings which felt both familiar and exotic, during May 1912 Cather felt freed by an intense erotic experience with a much younger man named Julio. Her letters to Elsie Sergeant from May to August rhapsodize about the wonder and beauty of this man, completely unlike anyone else she has ever known. She describes him as though he is the physical embodiment of the ancient Roman civilization and says she feels part of it through being with him. Her letters revel in the Spanish stories he told her, the places he talked to her about, and the songs he sang to her. One letter contains Cather’s translation of several verses of a song with which Julio serenaded Cather; she also tells Elsie that Julio says this is a song which propriety dictates that only a married woman may sing to either her husband or her lover. Then she says that though his songs are sultry, he is no more sultry than lightning. She claims that because all his tradition is oral, except the prayer book, he has no stale ideas. In fact, she admits that he actually hardly has any ideas, simply many fancies and feelings, along with a beautiful way of using his language. Though he completely fails to
understand her interest in the Cliff Dwellers—because he has no interest in dead people—he will drive for miles to see flowers or running water. Cather clearly loves Julio’s stories and songs, his beauty and strength, as well as his strong connections to the natural world and the present time and place. When she is at a loss to describe Julio fully, she allows herself to echo biblical language about God as she says that since Julio has no beginning and no end, she has no idea how to begin telling about him.

Recent scholars have made much of Cather’s supposed inappropriate use of the Southwest in this novel as imperialist or ethnocentric, without fully recognizing the importance of the nature of her relationship with Julio as revealed in her letters. Lisbeth S. Fuisz’s comparative essay “Discovering the Southwest: Cultural Imperialism in Willa Cather’s Song of the Lark and Sharon O’Brien’s Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice” is a good example. Unfortunately, because Fuisz has not been able to read the Cather letters herself, she is forced to rely on O’Brien’s paraphrases, which by nature must be limited. Though that may not make Fuisz unreliable about O’Brien’s text, it certainly causes her to make false assumptions about Cather’s relationship with Julio. Since O’Brien sees Cather as lesbian, she reads Cather’s letters through that specific lens. In spite of describing in some detail the stories, songs, dances, and other experiences Cather and Julio shared, O’Brien comments that Cather calls him “silent and opaque” and assumes “he did not speak enough to intrude upon her as a real human presence” (412). Although Cather does call him “opaque,” she never calls him “silent,” which would have carried an entirely different meaning. These letters, which O’Brien characterizes accurately as the “most exuberant and lighthearted” of the hundreds of Cather letters she has read, are full of stories, legends, and songs. They portray Julio as appealingly human and anything but
silent, depicting the relationship as full of a language which Cather says contains wonderful grace of expression.

Many of the characteristics Cather valued in Julio are dramatically opposed to those she valued in most of her lifelong friends, as he apparently helped her to live in the moment and forget about work of any kind. Though Cather’s letters give no evidence of any shared intellectual companionship with Julio, they express an excitement about life typical of someone in the heights of infatuation or first love. Cather’s letters are too circumspect to reveal whether or not she participated in a sexual relationship with Julio, but the intensity of language makes that seem likely. Much later Cather also recommended that Elizabeth Sergeant spend significant time writing in the Southwest, informing her that she would then find a lover there whom she would be unable to resist. Sergeant, as the primary confidant during Cather’s experience with Julio, knew the reason for Cather’s comment.

When scholars take issue with Cather’s stance on the Southwest they realize that she represents a generation who accepts the idea of the American Indian as “The Vanishing American,” but they may not realize is that it is not purely the land and apparently vanished culture to which Cather has Thea respond. It is also the freedom from sexual constraints, because of the culture Thea temporarily leaves behind. Fred and Thea agree that they cannot be free together under the eyes of either Moonstone or Chicago; they need a place where they are completely unknown, in their case Old Mexico. In Cather’s Southwest relationship with Julio, she also is free—from the eyes of New York, Pittsburgh, and Red Cloud societies. The freedom both women experience
catalytically empowers them to trust their instincts about their art and to pursue it with unparalleled devotion.

A character in the novel who shares many of Julio’s characteristics and embodies the novel’s romantic theme is the musician Spanish Johnny. Although Thea has only a filial involvement with him, he stimulates her love of music and her early exploration of the power of her voice just as Julio inspired in Cather an empowered connection to narrative. Johnny’s inviting Thea to the Mexican dance as the only Anglo and including her as the star of their concert stimulated her growing artistry and nourished her. Similarly, Cather’s attendance with Julio as the only Anglo at a Mexican dance nourished her spirit and facilitated her growing connection with the culture she was beginning to know. In her depiction of Johnny, Cather includes a scene reminiscent of Julio but with a paternal relationship rather than an erotic one. When Thea is back in Moonstone after her first year in Chicago and asks Johnny to write down for her a Mexican serenade she remembers him singing, he becomes hesitant:

Johnny ran his fingers through his curly black hair. “If you wish. I do not know if that serenata all right for young ladies. Down there it is more for married ladies. They sing it for husbands—or somebody else, may-bee.” Johnny’s eyes twinkled and he apologized gracefully with his shoulders. (226)

Cather renames Julio’s Mexican Serenade “Rosa de Noche” here for the early lines of Julio’s seductive song, in which the rose of the night comes out after the flowers of the day are gone. The rose metaphor also functions in a myriad of ways here: for the brief, passionate relationship Cather shared with Julio, for the flamboyant character of Julio himself, and for the music of Johnny which flourishes brilliantly but briefly. Spanish Johnny makes beautiful music and lives most of the time with his loving wife, but at times he goes on wild binges from which he must be brought home in humiliation. In
Moonstone, with both Spanish Johnny and Herr Wunsch, Thea moves in the company of artists who struggle with failure or disillusionment.

Thea’s piano teacher, Herr Wunsch, whose German name means “wish” or “desire,” also continues to have music in his soul, though he has been dragged down by the demon of alcoholism. He teaches Thea that “There is only one big thing—desire. And before it, when it is big, all is little” (76). Nevertheless, he personally cannot sustain this artistic desire, able only to provide initial training and inspiration for Thea and to wish for her the success which has eluded him. His dreams of being a great musician have long since given way to the disintegrating power of alcoholism, which eventually sends him drifting out of Thea’s life. This Orfeo ed Euridice motif of the book, emphasizing the passion for art before its ultimate loss, begins when Herr Wunsch introduces the opera to Thea, singing from it with great feeling. Cather often repeats the “Ach, ich habe sie verloren,” which Wunsch emphasizes in his initial singing of the aria to Thea. Woodress explicates the use of this motif insightfully:

“Ach, ich habe Sie verloren [Oh, I have lost you],” which Orfeus sings after the fatal backward look which cost him his beloved. . . . As Euridice symbolizes art, man’s desire for self-expression, Orfeus stands for the striving artist. Wunsch is a loser and mourns the loss of his Euridice before he drifts away to an alcoholic oblivion somewhere in the depths of Kansas. . . . Wunsch bequeaths his score of the opera to Thea, and she carries it with her as she scales the icy heights. Cather ends her novel with her singer at the peak of her career, but the use of the myth haunts the ending. One knows that Thea one day will lose her Euridice and some other singer will replace her, as Thea replaces an ailing Sieglinde at the end of the story. (270-71)²⁰

Despite its prediction of loss, the gift of this operatic score to Thea symbolizes the strength she receives through people who believe in her. After pondering a long while, Wunsch inscribes his gift “Einst, O Wunder!” He tells “her that in ten years she would either know what the inscription meant, or she would not have the least idea, in which
case it would not matter” (95). The German has two possible meanings, both applicable. “Einst, O Wunder” can mean “Once and only once, oh miracle!” which describes the singer Wunsch told Thea was the only one who was ever able to sing the part properly. The phrase can also signify a future “One day, oh miracle!” declaring that he believes Thea can someday be as great as the woman who was the only one with enough voice to sing the part artistically. Cather reminds readers of this in Thea’s Chicago teacher Harsanyi’s final affirming response to her opera performance (476).

Ultimately much more significant therefore than the disintegration of the artist Wunsch is the power of art, which he leads Thea to discover in herself. The losses in Wunsch’s life find recompense in the outflowing of artistic power in his student. One bittersweet moment emphasizes this for readers. After his departure from Moonstone, the Kohlers, with whom Wunsch used to board, hear from across the gulch Thea’s magnificent voice during her singing with the Mexicans: “Then at the appointed, at the acute, moment, the soprano voice, like a fountain jet, shot up into the light. ‘Horch! Horch!’ the old people whispered, both at once. . . . ‘Ah,’ said Mrs. Kohler softly, ‘the dear man; if he could hear her now!’” (235).

In a strikingly different manner, Cather’s conflicted characterization of Ray Kennedy also encapsulates the novel’s vision. This emblematic westerner contributes to the rise of Thea’s genius in two primary ways: first, by believing in and publicly acknowledging her giftedness and, second, by prescribing that his six-hundred-dollar death benefit provide her with the opportunity for advanced musical training in Chicago.21 Railroad man Kennedy functions as romantically and anti-romantically as Cather’s overall use of the railroad motif throughout her oeuvre. Just as railroads symbolize
romantic, individualistic conquering of obstacles and forging ahead into new territory, so Kennedy stands as the embodiment of the successful, rugged individualist—able to engender respect among both Mexicans and Americans, among single men and married men, among townspeople and rural loners. Even more important, however, is his heroic love for Thea. Though he is not an artist, he recognizes her as one, loving her and supporting her with his whole being. His belief in her allows her to believe in herself as she looks into his dying eyes: “Thea still saw in his wet eyes her own face, very small, but much prettier than the cracked glass at home had ever shown it. It was the first time she had seen her face in that kindest mirror a woman can ever find” (148). In spite of the accidental nature of his death, Cather makes it clear that the strength of his self-sacrificing love for Thea would have enabled Kennedy to give up his life voluntarily for her if necessary.

In spite of these heroic characteristics, Kennedy dies a senseless death crushed by the railroad he loves, because of a random, human error. Inherent in his death is Cather’s idea that the railroad exists both as symbol of human perseverance and triumph and as the ever-encroaching evil of technology. This incident which Cather uses to reinforce symbolically the dialogical nature of her romanticism and modernism Urgo calls wit: “It marks the supreme wit of Cather that Ray Kennedy is trammeled by the novel’s emblem of ambition and empire, the railroad engine” (137). Kennedy’s patient, unselfish love for Thea cannot ultimately protect her or himself from modernity’s powers of disintegration and fragmentation. Though his loss of life provides Thea with financial hope for her artistic future, the necessity of his death in the novel strikingly tears away any romantic assumption that hard work and vision automatically result in triumph or that the
individual is more powerful than his surroundings. Consequently, the knowledge that her artistic success results in part from Kennedy's death haunts Thea and propels her into greater determination to deserve his gift.

While the primary exemplification of romanticism in the novel is Thea's artistic birth and growth, the modernism takes many forms. One strikingly modern facet of the novel is the choice to write this story about the awakening of a female artist, a woman who chooses her art over the traditional path of marriage and family. Following the Romantic pattern but changing it to portray a woman of genius, Cather allies herself with the tradition while demonstrating that it needs amendment. As Linda Huf notes in her A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman, "Unlike men, women have only rarely written artist novels; that is, autobiographical novels depicting their struggles to become creative artists—to become, as the Romantics had it, as gods" (1). She quotes Sharon Spencer as saying, "The woman artist is a missing character in fiction" (2). Though Cather portrays not a writer but a singer, she, nevertheless, creates in Thea a character who struggles to reach the heights of divine artistry and who exhibits the requisite selfishness to succeed. Huf maintains in her chapter entitled "Selfishness Underlying All" that the selfishness for which Thea is often castigated is a necessary part of her growth as an artist. Huf calls attention to the fact that "readers have always excused self-love in the artist—if the artist is male" (3) but have failed to recognize that women cannot be stereotypically self-abnegating and still succeed as artists; like their artistic brothers, they need to devote tremendous time and energy to their work. As the approving Mrs. Nathanmeyer tells Fred after hearing Thea sing, "'She is very much interested in herself—as she should be'" (278). Willa Cather was also fortunate in having a similarly supportive friend in Mrs.
Fields, who approved of such characteristics in artists—even female artists. She told Cather that Aristotle’s precept “Virtue is concerned with action; art with production” was crucial and that it led her to “forgive vanity, sensitiveness, selfishness, indecision, and vacillation of will” in “the true artist” (NUF 72-73).

Thea succeeds because of her determined interest in succeeding and not because she shamelessly uses people, as readers sometimes say. Though Fred is correct when he ruefully tells her that it takes many people to produce an opera star, he is mostly expressing self-pity at the fact that she is leaving him. He does not overtly accuse Thea of simply using all of the people who love her, because he knows it to be untrue. Cather makes it abundantly clear, in the words of multiple individuals who love Thea, that they get back from her fully as much as they give. Through Thea Herr Wunsch passionately enjoys his reconnection to the art he lives for and from which he is mostly cut off at this point in his life; he is also invigorated by what he intuits about Thea’s voice and her artistry. Thea’s mother suffers the most seemingly heartless rejection by Thea: Thea’s missing the chance to see her mother before she dies, in order to remain in Germany and accept her first huge operatic opportunity. But before her death Thea’s mother expresses to Dr. Archie only gratefulness for all Thea has given her. Though she has never heard her daughter sing in concert, she cherishes the special nature of Thea and the countless times she heard her sing at home. Spanish Johnny too cherishes his hours with Thea’s voice, from the concert at the Mexican ball to the opera he attends in New York City. At the same concert, Andor Harsanyi, her former teacher, expresses his joy: “At last,” he sighed, ‘somebody with enough! Enough voice and talent and beauty, enough physical power. And such a noble, noble style!’ And when his wife comments on how much Thea owes him, “She owes
me nothing,' replied her husband quickly. ‘She paid her way. She always gave something back, even then’” (476).²³ Perhaps most dramatic, however, Ray Kennedy experiences such inspiration from feeling that he is “looking into the very soul of Thea Kronborg” immediately before his death, that all he can think is “he’d backed a winner once in his life! With all his might he gave his faith to the broad little hand he held. He wished he could leave her the rugged strength of his body to help her through with it all” (148).

Thea gives back to those who love her what only an artist can give: her art. Even before she has reached maturity, she wonders why people have cared so much to support her and spur her on. Thinking back on how her life has changed since Ray’s death, she wonders:

Why had he cared so much? And Wunsch, and Dr. Archie, and Spanish Johnny, why had they? It was something that had to do with her that made them care, but it was not she. It was something they believed in, but it was not she. Perhaps each of them concealed another person in himself, just as she did. Why was it that they seemed to feel and to hunt for a second person in her and not in each other? (217).

By the time Thea has achieved operatic success, she hears from Fred that she has this same effect even on people she does not know—the countless men he has heard talking about her and how her music moves them (451-52). Through her powerful music, she speaks to people’s souls.

Because of Cather’s deep struggle with the roles of women and men in society, including her initial belief that women weren’t much good at anything truly artistic, this manifesto is as personal as anything she wrote. It also shows a strong progression from the Cather who wrote in 1895, “Sometimes I wonder why God ever trusts talent in the hands of women, they usually make such an infernal mess of it. I think He must do it as a sort of ghastly joke” (Slote 408).²⁴ In those early years, in which she was striving to
reveal her own talent to the world, Cather attempted to distance herself from the formulaic writing of many of her female contemporaries which embarrassed her so much. But by the time she wrote this novel she had experienced artistic success herself, observed it in many women around her, and needed to herald it. In addition to her desire to highlight the success of the woman artist, Cather also also felt the need to portray it from all sides.

Another crucial modernist characteristic in *The Song of the Lark* is the fragmentation and isolation which comes as the cost of artistic success. Though Cather fought their extremes in her own life, she accepted some measure of them as part of the artistic experience. It was both a blessing and a part of her life’s fragmentation that she was free to travel and spend months at a time in disparate places—Red Cloud, Nebraska; Lavendou, France; Grand Manan Island, New Brunswick; Jaffrey, New Hampshire; Winslow, Arizona; Paris, France; and back to her home in New York City. Because of her choice of art as her life companion, her life lacked the continuity from one month to the next and from one year to the next which most people enjoy. For her the main continuity was her writing. Friends she kept in touch with mainly by mail and through seeing some of them on her travels. Her travels, however, were just as often to get away from people and to find a place either to write or to rest quietly.

As Cather did, in choosing single-minded pursuit of her goal, Thea actually accepts her isolation and foresees a certain level of loss. Already after only one year of study in Chicago, thinking about the years of study ahead, Thea expresses her struggle aloud to Dr. Archie: “‘It’s easy to fail,’ he heard her say again, ‘and if I fail, you’d better forget about me, for I’ll be one of the worst women that ever lived. I’ll be an awful woman!’” (244). Shortly after this, as she heads back to Chicago alone, the narrator tells
us, “Something pulled in her—and broke. . . People live through such pain only once; pain comes again, but it finds a tougher surface” (246). At this point Thea accepts in advance isolation and alienation from her family and community as a necessary correlative to her artistic endeavor. Years later, when she has become a star and Dr. Archie worries to her that she doesn’t have enough personal life, she replies,

“My dear doctor, I don’t have any. Your work becomes your personal life. You are not much good until it does. It’s like being woven into a big web. You can’t pull away, because all your little tendrils are woven into the picture. It takes you up, and uses you, and spins you out; and that is your life.” (455-56)

When Rosowski comments that what follows Thea’s romantic epiphany is the “not particularly interesting working out of its implications” (67), she fails to note that this working out of the epiphany’s implications in Thea’s life crucially affects the novel. Because the novel ends not with the fulfillment of artistic power but with its alienating complications, it stands as not only romantic but also strikingly modern in vision.

Also crucial to both the modernist complexity and the dialogical nature of this early novel is the heteroglossia of voices through which Thea must make her way in order to give birth to herself as an artist. While the importance of this heteroglossia becomes significantly more important in some of Cather’s later novels, it is already crucial here. Some of these voices support, many oppose, and some contradict themselves. Bakhtin’s definition of the novel as “a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (262) speaks well to The Song of the Lark and its portrayal of Thea’s artistry in the midst of a plethora of conflicting, contextualizing voices. Bakhtin insists that this multiplicity of themes and voices is indispensable to excellent novels:
The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization—this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. (263)

Growing up in a rich heteroglossia of voices and languages herself, Cather experienced this complexity in her understanding of the world, leading her to create some form of those influences for Thea. Partly because of Cather’s internalization of the importance of these voices in her life, no visit to Red Cloud felt complete to her without a trip out to the farming country to visit her friends from all different parts of the world who lived lives so very different from hers.

To emphasize the significance of voices beautifully speaking to each other as in a symphony, Cather uses Dvorak’s New World Symphony to affect Thea powerfully in Chicago, as it did Cather herself when she first heard it. She writes Elsie Sergeant in an undated letter, probably 1913, that in this novel she has taken the little themes that hide in the long grass and worked them into her novel as Dvorak did into his symphony. She claims that, contrary to accepted belief, his symphony was built not on Negro melodies but on the grass of the American prairies. Though she asserts with excitement that she recently learned that Dvorak spent several weeks in Nebraska in the early 80’s when the country was still wild, he is generally believed to have finished his symphony during a several-week stay in Iowa during the summer of 1893.25

Crucial to this creation of heteroglossia is the voice and diction of small-town Colorado. Christine Dunn Henderson writes of this as she maintains that “The world of friends created by Thea is a microcosm of the American melting pot, and her assimilation
of Moonstone’s diversity and of ‘a broad cultural tradition of music, literature, and art’ contributes to her artistic formation” (75). While it is true that this diverse world is crucial to Thea’s development, Cather portrays it as the opposite of a melting pot. These voices and cultures remain distinct in Thea’s experience and in their contribution to her art.26 Spanish songs from Johnny, Norwegian spoken in her home, and the German songs and speech from Wunsch and the Kohlers all enrich her ability to sing opera. Nevertheless, the small-town, majority-culture voice comes through the most strongly and motivates the novel for Cather. She says in her lengthy letter to Dorothy that the Moonstone point of view is paramount, both what Thea gained from Moonstone and what she gave back to it.27 Cather relates that she initially tried to convey the significance of these different voices by using single quotes and double quotes until she gave it up in embarrassment. Despite her feelings of inadequacy, Cather succeeds in making the voices of Thea’s Moonstone community—as disparate as Johnny, Wunsch, Archie, Mr. Kronborg, and Aunt Tillie—stand out and reveal their power in Thea’s life, well before the more sophisticated voices of Harsanyi and Fred have any influence.

As the novel progresses, Thea continues to experience loss of ongoing human fellowship in the rest of her life. Though Thea works unflaggingly to achieve her artistic success, the interpersonal cost is tremendous. Although a few individuals in Moonstone do recognize Thea’s artistic temperament and encourage her, the small-town environment generally works to stifle her creativity and independence of thought through “distinctly spiteful, even vindictive” people like her sister Anna (222). As does Joyce’s Stephen Daedalus in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), Thea feels others trying to force her into the theological straitjacket she perceives the rest of the community as
wearing. Unfortunately for Thea, her father is also her pastor and a man of limited intelligence and vision. Living in the fishbowl of a pastor’s household complicates matters for Thea, as her sister and others try to coerce her into living a life of public piety. Seeing nothing but shallow hypocrisy in the lives of the most publicly pious individuals of her community, Thea refuses to conform. She initially plays piano for choir and prayer meetings, but she does so only to keep peace in her community; she in no way accedes to the belief system of her father’s church and is thus automatically shut out from a sense of wholeness and belonging within the community. She begins to feel like the broken mirror of her bedroom; she can find no personal wholeness here. By the end of the novel, Thea is not only cut off from traditional religious beliefs but has practically given up her entire community of origin, keeping minimal contact only with her Aunt Tillie.

In Chicago Thea also experiences fragmentation and despair, as the piano teacher most capable of nurturing her must turn her over to a proficient voice teacher who temporarily damages her artistic spirit. Madison Bowers provides greatly useful technical training for Thea, but his cynicism and mercenary dealings with popular performers nearly kill her idealistic dreams. Even her beloved Harsanyi allows himself to become drained by the demands of his music and nearly loses both his artistry and his ability to enjoy life. If it were not for his highly supportive wife and the chance to work away from Chicago, the stress might have nullified his gift. As a composite, these portraits of artists hardly reinforce the romantic ideal of artistic success. As Thea says of the cliff dwellers, “They taught me the inevitable hardness of human life. No artist gets far who doesn’t know that” (463). While these artists do provide the contextualizing contrast which enhances Thea’s triumph, they also reinforce the modern sense of ironic loss and frag-
mentation, a sense of being cut off from so much of what they value most. These people look to art to provide meaning for their lives, but their art often cannot produce the wholeness they seek. Because status-seeking other students and Madison Bowers, who “hated the whole race of artists,” all fail Thea as kindred spirits (250), she learns to isolate herself in desperately seeking artistic inspiration. She intentionally cuts herself off not only from what Sally Peltier Harvey refers to as the “shallow, materialistic American Dream” of the city but also from the would-be artists who seek it (44). Later, when her first big break in opera comes in Europe, Thea tells herself that “She wanted to go to her mother more than she wanted anything else in the world, but . . . she had to stay—or lose everything” (403). Thea becomes hugely famous as a result, while losing a last connection to the family member who knew and loved her best. Like Cather herself, Thea missed her mother’s funeral and never went home again. 28

Even in the last section of the novel, when Thea is extremely rich and famous, the loss of fellowship continues as her life is driven by her career to the point of devouring all the time she would have had for restorative human interactions. She treats her maid quite flippantly—as a mere functionary who is relegated to such tasks as picking up Thea’s fur coat from the floor—and interacts with no close friends. As Cather’s letter tells Dorothy, the novel seems to diminish because that is what happens in the life of a great artist. She says a true artist’s life becomes less and less personal until it arrives at the vanishing point, with just as much left of the individual as Dr. Archie saw in Thea after she sang Elsa. 29 Cather recounts noticing the same glassy-eyed vacancy in Fremstad after a magnificent performance. She says she wanted to congratulate her on her splendid performance but realized the effort would be met by blankness. 30
Additionally, Cather creates a scene fraught with alienation when many of Thea’s oldest friends are all in one place to hear her powerful rendition of Sieglinde: Dr. Archie, her one-time closest friend, feels he no longer knows Thea, “feeling admiration and estrangement” (386), and Spanish Johnny has no opportunity even to speak to her after waiting patiently on the street for just a glimpse of her. Though the Harsanyis do interact with Fred Ottenburg and Dr. Archie during the opera, Cather gives no hint that they ever reconnect with Thea. Finally, Thea’s and Fred’s parenthetically mentioned marriage comes not as the fulfillment of great passion but after the time of typical childbearing is over, seemingly only as a way of making the best of a situation in which they both crave companionship. These details capture the paradox of success and ensure that Cather’s story of artistic success reveals also the frequent bleakness of life in the modern world.

Probably the least obvious dialogical tensions exist in the area of Cather’s technical choices in this novel, since her narrative presents a much more traditional face than do many of her other novels and demonstrates modernist technical choices which are less dramatic than in many others. This novel begins in Thea’s childhood and ends about twenty years later, without use of flashback, stream-of-consciousness, or multiple focusing consciousnesses. In the manner of the typical Bildungsroman, it narrates in linear fashion the events significant to the growth of Thea’s artistic self. On the surface, this easy-to-read novel can appear completely traditional. Even though Cather rebels here against the naturalistic writing immediately preceding hers and treats Thea as an autonomous agent with freedom of will rather than as the plaything of fate, readers can miss this conscious choice and read Cather as simply continuing in the realistic mode which preceded naturalism rather than as writing against it.
Though these aspects of Cather’s technique fit well with traditional romantic literature, other elements of her technique do not. Much more modern is Cather’s use of what Jo Ann Middleton calls the “vacuole,” as noted in the introduction. Although Middleton notes the presence of vacuoles specifically in Cather’s later, more minimalist novels, they are also important in *The Song of the Lark*. Already in the first chapter of the novel, Cather carefully leaves out all details concerning the baby Dr. Archie comes to deliver, directly juxtaposing the doctor’s arrival to the laboring woman’s house with his hours-later care for the sick Thea. By leaving out the birth scene readers are expecting, Cather jolts them into the realization that a more important birth is in process than that of the baby Thor. Here we see what Middleton names “the unseen but swollen vacuoles of meaning in which the reader experiences the poetic change of consciousness that is the result of art” (56). Throughout the entire novel Dr. Archie is crucially connected with the development of Thea’s consciousness, wondering at her specialness, serving as an ever-available confidant, accompanying her to Chicago for her first serious lessons, and providing money for her European studies. All of his exquisite concern for her artistic soul already exists in this initial vacuole. From Dr. Archie’s first paternal care of her to his final appreciation of her as consummate artist, he functions as her spiritual obstetrician.

Perhaps one of Cather’s most symbolic uses of unusual juxtaposition in this novel is her ending one chapter with the romantic image of Thea lying awake in the moonlight and beginning the next chapter with the scene of Ray Kennedy’s death. One moment we see Thea, “vibrating with excitement” and learning from Dumas that true drama requires “but one passion and four walls” (140); the next moment we hear of the constant dangers of railway travel and of the crash which kills Ray Kennedy. The juxtaposition of romantic
idealism with the shock of modern realities and loss exemplifies the dialogical tensions throughout the novel. As Middleton makes clear, Cather's extremely conscious manipulation of reader response through the details she chooses and the details she omits is one of her most modern characteristics. Through the vacuole which contains the connection between these two events Cather demands that the reader discern the meaning without her explicit help.

A vacuole equally dramatic, however, is the one existing between Thea's frantic dreams the night before she leaves for her European vocal education and ten years later in Denver, when she has already become an established operatic success. This vacuole especially jars readers into making assumptions and forces us to feel that many unpleasant realities in Thea's life are being hidden by Cather and probably repressed by Thea. The desperate final sentence of the earlier section—“There was still time!” (381)—potentially has both negative and positive meanings: time for Thea to escape and time to accomplish her life's dreams. These same feelings of panic may have caused Cather to write Mariel Gere in 1897 that she felt like jumping off the train which was taking her away from Nebraska to her second year of work in Pittsburgh. Without further comment, Cather opens the next chapter with "It is a glorious winter day" (385), using weather to hint at Thea's glorious career but using the season to bring readers' attention to the passing away of much time. The fact that Cather first gives us this glimpse into Thea's frightened subconscious and then moves on, without resolving the panic, to the extremely complacent Denver scene between Fred and Dr. Archie leaves readers no choice but to wonder about the missing narrative. As Middleton comments about another novel, in this situation we feel Thea's change "more deeply because we do not see it. . . . [It] is fresh to us" (64).
This vacuole essentially makes it necessary for readers to construct their own narratives for those unexplained years of Thea’s life.

In keeping with the use of the vacuole and its juxtaposition of two disparate or non-chronological elements, Cather does much the same thing with the historical past and the fictional present of her novels by virtually compressing the past and present into one moment. Although Cather does not employ the same method as Faulkner in splicing events from different time periods together, her creation of the Cliff Dweller community and its pottery-making women within Thea’s imagination unifies Thea with these ancient women in a life-altering way. Thea realizes that “The Cliff Dwellers had lengthened her past. She had older and higher obligations” (308). Middleton notes:

Although one of the accusations against Cather is that she withdrew from modern life in disgust and indulged in nostalgia for a lost and golden past, we can see more clearly today that she merely engaged in a modernist technique of juxtaposing past and present. (46)

The Panther Canyon scenes actually serve not as nostalgic windows into the past but as connections between one era of artists and another. Thea’s living with these women imaginatively for three months enables her to envision herself as the producer of beauty she knows these potters to have been. Just as their beautiful vessels once contained life-sustaining water, her throat contains the life-giving beauty of the voice of true art which she now knows herself obligated to produce. Nevertheless, just as their vessels now exist only as broken bits, the novel suggests that Thea’s voice too will have its time of power and then will diminish.

Although Cather employs typical symbols of success—material and political prosperity for Dr. Archie and Fred Ottenberg as well as a successful artistic career for Thea—the novel’s ending makes powerfully clear the inability of these things to satisfy
completely the longings of the human heart. The ending, consistent with the rest of the novel in this respect, draws readers’ attention to the difficulty of living well in this world and to the necessity of living with difficult choices and their ramifications. This study contends that the change in the narrative which bothers many readers works compellingly when readers see it as one exemplification of this romantic novel’s modernist tone, a necessary movement from Thea’s life to the fragmented world she imperfectly impacts. Crucial to this is the novel’s penultimate book, entitled “Kronborg,” which sees the world largely through the consciousness of Dr. Archie. Because Thea Kronborg remains of primary importance for him, readers learn much about her through this new perspective; nevertheless, it also functions as a distancing tactic for Cather to present a different side of Thea: the famous Miss Kronborg. Thus, Dr. Archie’s view of her contextualizes Thea and her artistry for the reader, revealing that even her enormous artistic success brings its own multiple forms of loss and pain, such as the psychological isolation from loved ones.

Arguably Cather’s most triumphantly romantic novel, yet one infused with the disillusionment and fragmentation of modernism, *The Song of the Lark* stands both as a birth-of-the-artist novel and as a true representative of Cather’s oeuvre. Thea’s story follows much of the pattern of Cather’s own artistic awakening and accomplishment, combining biographical details of her own growing up with those of her opera-singer friend, Olive Fremstad. In so doing, Cather adopts the Romantic tradition of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* but in somewhat the same manner as Joyce’s modernist *A Portrait of the Artist*, published the same year as *The Song of the Lark*. Cather, however, continues her tale beyond the awakening of creative power, delineating both success and its disillusioning effect upon her character. This novel exemplifies some of Cather’s innovative
techniques and sheds light on the modernist manner in which her fiction can portray the world while conveying belief in romantic values. *The Song of the Lark* flies high like the eagle which inspires Thea in Panther Canyon, as it expresses the individual artist's power. Thea Kronborg, marked from the beginning of the novel as a gifted, unusual character, surprises no one either with her determination to overcome difficulties or with her eventual triumph. Whether in triumphing over the physical challenges of the canyon or over challenges to her artistic career, Thea empowers readers to see the world through her initially romantic eyes while acknowledging the presence of life's hard realities.
CHAPTER 2

CATHER’S CREATION OF JIM BURDEN
AS A PARTIALLY RELIABLE NARRATOR

Since Willa Cather herself was a modern, fiercely independent woman with a romantic core, both her fiction and her correspondence demonstrate a romanticism which continually negotiates with her modernism. Though Cather’s *My Antonia* has long been read as a romanticization of the American pioneer, in recent decades it has also been read as a distinctly modern text; in actuality, each view responds to a crucial component of Cather’s ongoing dialectic between romanticism and modernism. This dialectic becomes apparent already in the original 1918 introduction to this novel, which includes partial descriptions of Jim Burden and his wife in a manner which identifies them with the romantic and the modernist. Cather describes the young Genevieve as “a restless, headstrong girl, even then, who liked to astonish her friends” (x).1 It is not surprising that such a girl becomes a woman who continues to value her independence when married: “She has her own fortune and lives her own life. For some reason, she wishes to remain Mrs. James Burden” (xi). The fact that Jim has chosen to marry her in the first place seems especially surprising, except for the fact that he met her when “she had been brutally jilted by her cousin” (x), perhaps appealing to his romantic sense that she needed to be rescued.2

Before the main body of the text begins, Cather gives these clues in the introduction as to the competing ideas which govern the text as a whole. Such dialectic exhibits

47
what critical theorist Mikhail Bakhtin names “dialogic tension between two languages and two belief systems [which] permits authorial intention to be realized in such a way that we can acutely sense their presence at every point in the work” (314). Beyond the introduction, Jim Burden’s telling of My Antonia exemplifies this truth even more fully, as Cather has him form romantically viewed moments from both his life and Antonia’s into a modernist pastiche of memories in his attempt to convey the “incommunicable past.” Though Cather’s novel recognizably exhibits many facets of her romanticism, its modernist content and form are also provocatively important. Neither primarily romantic nor primarily modernist, My Antonia exhibits a primary dialectic between romantic and modernist sensibilities, both struggling for dominance in Jim’s choice of narrative style as well as in his choice of what to relate and what to omit. In the structure of the novel, in its themes, in its narrative voice, and in its treatment of history, Cather’s romanticism and modernism work together and against each other, inextricably bound together in creating her ambivalent vision of the world.

Cather’s romanticism comes through clearly in My Antonia’s glorification of the passions, strivings, and achievements of Antonia as well as in its assumption of absolutes, including the pursuit of the ideal in people and in life. A 1922 Cather letter to Zoe Akins revels in the fun of driving with her father through the settlements and visiting the people whose passion had inspired her as a child and continued to do so throughout her adult life.³ It describes the drama of continuing to see people’s stories unfold before her year after year. Edith Lewis sees My Antonia in this way as Cather’s romantic endeavor, saying Cather “gave herself with passion to the country and the people, the struggling foreigners who inhabited it; became at heart their champion, made their struggle her own’
Her championing of the hard-working immigrant settlers of her childhood community and their struggles became a lifelong pattern, as Cather communicated with and financially supported many of these people and their children for the rest of her life. One letter to an elderly Annie Pavelka, the real-life model for Antonia, informs Annie that the accompanying ten dollars is to cover the rest of the washing-machine expense, which Cather's fifty-five-dollar Christmas gift did not quite cover. Cather believed in rural working people and their aspirations and was eager to reward their hard work with any help she could give them.

In spite of her unshakable belief in the strength and value of the individual, Cather's romanticism is in constant dialogue with her modernism, which manifests itself in the disintegration, fragmentation, and uncertainty of the world within the text; this happens particularly in her manner of revealing Jim's psychological issues, but it also informs the unusual way the novel treats gender and gender expectations, often ambivalently, but always with an emphasis on the strong female. Bakhtin describes such dialectic as the "double-voiced discourse" in which an effective novel operates:

This zone surrounding the important characters of the novel is . . . dialogized; inside this area a dialogue is played out between the author and his characters—not a dramatic dialogue broken up into statement-and-response, but the special type of novelistic dialogue that realizes itself within the boundaries of constructions that externally resemble monologues. (320)

Thus, although the body of My Antonia resembles a monologue spoken by Jim Burden, it reveals a constant interplay between the romantic ideas represented as Jim’s and conflicting ideas Cather brings out through various stylistic devices as well as through Jim’s subconscious. As Bakhtin explains, this "special type of double-voiced discourse . . . serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different inten-
tions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author” (324).

One especially significant example of the direct intention of the narrator existing dialogically with the refracted intention of the author appears in Cather’s brief introduction to the novel, with her letters to and from her publisher highlighting its importance to her. Greenslet’s letters reveal that he wants to simplify the novel by deleting the complicating introduction. Cather’s letters make clear that she sees the complicating existence of the introduction as essential to the novel. Jim’s intention to romanticize Antonia and their childhood together conflicts with Cather’s apparent intention both to romanticize and to question these memories. The commonly published version, a brief tale of the novel’s primary narrator and an old acquaintance traveling by train together across Iowa, shows them thinking back over what Antonia and small-town life have meant to them. This introduction, revised and shortened in 1926 from the original 1918 version, presents to readers a romantic vignette of two of Antonia’s childhood friends—now both pursuing successful careers in New York—talking about how Antonia means to them “the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood” (2). Together they momentarily create their own reality, picturing Antonia as the icon of the youth they have idealized. For them she exemplifies rural, common life at its best as well as the romantic struggle “against all limitation” and the process of “yearning, striving, and becoming” (Perkins 2). Though they have both chosen to leave behind geographically the places and people of their childhood, they hold onto and recreate their memories through the person of Antonia. Cather weaves in subtly, however, references to Jim’s romantic temperament, his disappointments in life, and his habit of coming back to his memories.
of Antonia over the years. By giving us this additional information, Cather leads readers to call into question Jim’s reliability as a narrator.

Not only romantic in its idealization of Antonia, this shortened introduction also romanticizes the process of writing by representing Jim’s tale as a narrative which flowed out of him as though inspired by an unknown muse. Cather writes Marion Canby that the subject should always find the author, rather than the other way around.\(^7\) In this vein, Jim is not portrayed as a professional writer but as someone pursued by his memories. This introduction professes that he writes his memoir simply to “amuse” himself, claiming, “I didn’t take time to arrange it . . . I suppose it hasn’t any form” (2). It establishes a situation in which the person of Antonia has teased at the minds of both Jim and his friend for years, as Sarah Orne Jewett famously wrote Cather that a writer’s best subjects ought to do. As Cather explains to Canby, the best writing comes not after hunting for a subject but after having the subject hunt for and haunt the writer. Jim Burden’s saying that his mind is “full of” Antonia, motivating him to write down whatever he can remember, mirrors Cather’s statement defining invention as recalling memories and pictures and setting them free.\(^8\)

At the same time, in spite of its romantic picture of an outpouring of literature, this supposed lack of form also reflects Cather’s modernist rejection of formal restrictions and her penchant for experimentation. Knowing that she wanted primarily to present the heroine as a person rather than to construct a plot about her, she attempted to tell Antonia’s story in a radical way. As Elizabeth Sergeant relates, Cather explained that her new novel was to reveal the main character like Elsie’s beautiful vase on the coffee table:

“I want my new heroine to be like this—like a rare object in the middle of a table, which one may examine from all sides.”
She moved the lamp so that light streamed brightly down on my Taormina jar, with its glazed orange and blue design.

"I want her to stand out—like this—like this—because she is the story."

Saying this her fervent, enthusiastic voice faltered and her eyes filled with tears.

Implicit in this scene is Cather’s conflict between her two desires: creating an idealized, romantic portrait of Antonia and creating a truer picture through depicting her as though by a viewer observing her from all angles. Rather than proceeding as a linear account of Antonia’s life from the time Jim meets her till the end of the novel, Jim’s tale breaks away from Antonia to tell of his own life apart from her. This breaking away to tell of his own life enhances readers’ understanding of his perspective in much the same way the introduction does. By changing his focus in most of the second half of his story, Jim moves from a primary romanticization of the heroic pioneer woman into a more complexly modernist tale of his life and the ways Antonia has affected it. Beyond chronicling Antonia’s failures and successes, Jim’s narrative encompasses his own visions and revisions of who he is, revealing a subtle reexamination of his own identity as participant in the story. Cather’s insertion of Jim’s disingenuous “it hasn’t any form” diverts reader attention from the fact that her plan for the novel interacts dialogically with the simple, old-fashioned values Jim purports to convey while artfully leading readers to expect a simple tale.

Cather’s letters to Ferris Greenslet on the subject do not specifically mention a dialectic, but they do convey her belief in the imperative need for the introduction. An early 1918 letter to Greenslet emphasizes its significance already in her explanation that she needs to wait to write the introduction until the novel is nearly complete, so that she will know how much of the story tells itself before she decides how much she needs to
introduce it. Later Greenslet wrote her that he preferred the novel without any introduction, and he tried hard to convince Cather to allow him to publish the revised edition without it. His April 28, 1928 letter to her on the subject refers to her responding less than positively on the subject earlier and pleads with her again to consider leaving it out of the revised edition entirely, saying that what was important about Jim’s inner life was already implicit in the last part of the text. Cather disagreed, continuing to insist that it was crucial to understanding the book properly, although she did allow herself to be talked into reducing it.

The introduction is crucial in establishing Jim as a romantic whose later life has not lived up to his idealistic expectations. Knowledge of his later life allows readers to understand that he has chosen to remake his past in a way that will allow the story he tells to compensate for his later disappointments. In giving us this information, the introduction focuses our attention on Jim as a main character in his own right, fueling the questions of readers who ask whether the book has one main character or two. Had Cather wanted the novel to be primarily a portrait of one person, she would have felt no need for the introduction to establish the dialogical nature of this text at the outset and to bring Antonia alive through her impact on a person who loves her and who disproportionately treasures his memory of her.

Cather’s 1918 version of this introduction reveals these modernist undertones even more markedly than the revised one. Traveling across Iowa by railroad, Jim asks this professional writer who grew up with him and Antonia in Black Hawk why she has never written about Antonia. Their conversation motivates both of them to promise to write up their memories to share with each other. This plan for proposed dual narratives—
as opposed to the revised version of Jim’s memoir which reportedly burned its way out of his consciousness—represents the modern vision of truth as more relative and multi-faceted than the single-narrative form. It gives the sense of truth as being knowable only incompletely and from multiple directions, also raising the question of how different the tale might have been if told from the perspective of a woman. What Greenslet convinced Cather to dispense with in the revised edition was material which emphasized the disconnected, fragmented life of Jim and his wife, as well as their romantic beginnings as a couple. Greenslet’s letter explains that “the classic outline of the story would be clearer and brighter without it,” betraying his belief that the novel ought to express romantic certainty rather than risk expressing the complexity and uncertainty of life.

Greenslet may also not have liked the fact that the 1918 version gives an additional modernist sense of the transience of society, with people moving out of each other’s lives and possibly never being thought about again unless chance happenings bring them back together. The 1918 introduction presents a narrator with the same “naturally romantic and ardent disposition” (xi) he has had since childhood but with many disappointments isolating him from others in his adult life. Readers learn that this successful businessman, “legal counsel for one of the great Western railways” (1), has lost many of his romantic dreams. Presumably he rises to his old friend’s challenge to write up his memories, hoping both to recapture the time in his life when his dreams did seem capable of coming true and to preserve the value these dreams still have for them both. Although in the original introduction Jim does not sit down to write his memoir at his own impulse, it is clear that he has thought of Antonia consistently throughout the years and only needed the challenge of an acquaintance to make the memoir become a reality.
In this introduction Cather also presents more about Jim’s wife and her modernist choice to create a life quite separate from her husband’s, allowing readers to see that she may have married him for reasons having little to do with Jim:

Her marriage with young Burden was the subject of sharp comment at the time. It was said she had been brutally jilted by her cousin, Rutland Whitney, and that she married this unknown man from the West out of bravado. (x)

Some of this additional information about “Mrs. James Burden” helps readers to see how Jim could have admired this dashing girl who had been hurt. Yet the description of them as a childless, disconnected couple contrasts dramatically with the final chapter of the novel in its depiction of Antonia with her happy family and Jim’s vicarious enjoyment of them, giving readers insight into Jim and his motivations for telling this story.

This fuller narration of Jim’s marital life and its contrast with Antonia’s also contributes to the novel’s modernist edge in its treatment of gender issues. By describing—even peripherally—an ostensibly happy woman who organizes her life around artists and social causes not involving her husband, Cather enters modernism’s overt battle of the sexes. Jim’s wife apparently does not take her direction from him or even find emotional fulfillment in him as romantics would expect her to do. In her world, Jim Burden may even be a bit burdensome when he is not traveling. As Gilbert and Gubar point out in No Man’s Land, modernist male authors often express their misogyny and anxiety overtly, while modernist female authors like Cather more often focus on their own alternative views of life and gender. Cather’s fuller description here of Genevieve, Mrs. James Quayle Burden, who leads a life quite independent from her husband, suggests that modern life is different from the story Jim relates. By later allowing herself to be persuaded by Greenslet to eliminate the description of the Burden marriage in the
introduction, Cather drops part of this strand of the dialectic and allows readers to read her picture of the Cuzak marriage as normative rather than as one possibility.

Besides establishing from the outset the novel’s dialogical conflict between romantic ideals and modernist realities, this inserted narrative of the Burdens also hints at a difference between masculine and feminine views of reality. E. K. Brown declares that Cather fails by relating information about the Burdens in the original introduction, because “[u]nless Jim can satisfy the reader that his impressions and judgments about women are sound, his value as an appreciative recorder of Antonia is threatened” (201). Exactly. The original introduction gives us this clue to Jim as an only partially reliable narrator, which the shortened version makes harder to recognize. Clearly, although Jim’s “personal passion” now comes in pursuing his dreams of the greatness of his railroad and his country, rather than in pursuing happiness within his marriage, he continues to revere the woman whom he sees as having made romantic dreams come true in a traditional way. His romanticization of Antonia is both a longing for the happiness he tells himself he enjoyed in childhood and a desire to convince himself that romantic absolutes exist. The dialogical nature of Cather’s characterization of Jim in this introduction provides a clear indication of what kind of novel follows.

Adding to the idea of various truths interacting dialogically is Cather’s hint that she actually sat with Jim on that train. Countless letters from Cather describe train trips to and from Nebraska as an adult, as well as trips further west across the country. In these letters she often describes her feelings about the land and the childhood memories the land evokes in ways similar to this initial scene. In one 1933 letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Cather describes the euphoric feeling she always has when riding a train heading
west to the coast, a feeling which evokes the sense of the glorious openness of country and sky all around her which she remembers as a child. She writes that it is then, when she is enjoying the most lovely things of the world, that she is most homesick for Nebraska and her childhood experience of the country. Because of the way she describes Jim’s fellow traveler similarly, in terms which could also describe herself, she teases readers into wondering whose story the narrative actually is and whether it represents historical events, fiction, or a combination of the two. Oddly enough, Jim writes his conflicted narrative and the Cather figure never does. Yet in the first introduction Jim gives his to her, and the narrator ends by saying she passes it on to readers “substantially as he gave it to me.” Never clarifying what changes she has made to necessitate the word “substantially,” she propels readers into the realm of uncertainty. Is this a narrative begun by Jim and edited by Cather? Is it Jim’s romantic narrative with stark pictures added by Cather, subtly telling a different tale? Or is it a composite in yet another way? Cather clearly envisioned this novel as a narrative with complexly interacting aspects, while her publisher envisioned it as a simple story.

The extant correspondence between Willa Cather and Ferris Greenslet, her publisher, on the topic of illustrations for the novel makes evident that Cather saw illustrations as a crucial component of this subtly dialogical novel. Although Greenslet would not receive final copy from Cather until the following June, in October of 1917 already she asked him to think about illustrations. Asking him to come to dinner with W. T. Benda, her proposed Bohemian artist, she suggested that the three of them could plan the physical production of the novel together. She tells Greenslet that after attempting to draw her own illustrations she has come to the conclusion that My Antonia needs Benda’s
illustrations, specifically in woodcut format. Knowing illustrations are expensive, she informs him that if Houghton Mifflin can only pay for eight illustrations instead of twelve, she will accept that. But she will not accept a substitute artist. The multitude of letters exchanged on the number of illustrations, their subjects, their placement in the novel, Benda’s pay, and proper keeping of the original plates demonstrates Cather’s intense feelings on the subject. Though she never explicitly tells him why the novel needs these illustrations, she expresses outrage years later when they are removed after she had painstakingly negotiated a specific promise that the book would never be published without them.

Jean Schwind brilliantly explicates the significance of these original illustrations as counterpoint to Jim’s overtly romantic text, in her 1985 article “The Benda Illustrations to My Antonia: Cather’s ‘Silent’ Supplement to Jim Burden’s Narrative.” Schwind illuminates the use of these stark pictures as a dialogical reality check on Jim’s imaginative re-creation of Antonia and her impact on him: “That the printed text of Jim’s manuscript incorporates a series of pictures strikingly like the ‘old woodcuts’ recalled by Antonia’s photographs explains Cather’s cryptic description of My Antonia as only ‘substantially’ Jim Burden’s story” (52). The illustrations function as Cather’s unobtrusive commentary on Jim’s words. As a means of emphasizing the selective nature of Jim’s romantic memory, Cather saw in Benda’s work “the perfect, minimal art for depicting her artless Nebraska plains” (Schwind 53). In the same manner that the fuller introduction tempers Jim’s story with its modernist undertones, the Benda illustrations dramatically contrast in tone from the nostalgic tone of the narration. These pictures, like the pictures
Antonia later brings out to show Jim of their childhood, provide the reminder that human memory is incompletely trustworthy.

Cather's writing the novel supposedly told by Jim—yet presented by a fictional character resembling herself in the characteristics given—complicates matters further. From the introduction to the end of the novel it becomes clear that Jim himself is a Cather double in very real ways. Cather's good friend Elizabeth Sergeant, who comments on being "absorbed in the autobiographical elements of the book" as she first read it, refers to "Jim (or Willie, his symbolic twin-sister)" (149) and notices how Jim's experience in coming to Nebraska exactly matches Cather's. From the train trip across the country and the wagon ride to the grandparents' farm, to the sense of feeling one's personality erased by the largeness of the sky and land, their experiences are the same. Cather's desire, however, to keep the focus on Antonia as seen by multiple others prevents her from telling this story simply in her own undisguised voice. Another factor highlighting the importance of varying perspectives is Jim's narrative's title and his initial dissatisfaction with it. His final appending of the word "My" to "Antonia" in the introduction conveys the sense that he realizes the story is only his tale of the friend, not one necessarily definitive of anything other than his experience of her.

The importance of the point of view crucially affects the narrative, because, as Cather says, this is not a story trying to describe Antonia so much as trying to describe someone's feelings about her. When Cather tells Carrie Miner Sherwood, her first friend in Red Cloud, that her fiction always precisely represents her feelings rather than being a direct portrait of someone, that acts as a huge clue to understanding the novel. By telling Elsie Sergeant that her new heroine would be the story rather than have a story written
about her, Cather was conveying her point that Antonia’s impact on Jim was itself the story. For this reason, Cather and her narrator may freely idealize this friend. They need not remain true to chronologies and the inclusion of all important events; they need only include what matters to them in making Antonia meaningful. Cather tells Carrie not to let Red Cloud people see a report on the Mark Twain Society award for the novel, because she fears townspeople would make spiteful comparisons between Antonia and Annie Pavelka, Cather’s Red Cloud prototype. Cather lets readers in on the fact that she glorifies and idealizes Antonia by her comments in the introduction about Jim’s romantic disposition and by the ways she shows Jim not wanting to face some of the less ideal facts of Antonia’s life. Throughout the novel, Cather’s characterization of Antonia and her strength in being able to handle some of life’s toughest situations exists as the brightest romantic strand. Neither poverty, her father’s suicide, her near rape, nor her being cheated out of marriage and saddled with an illegitimate child can break Antonia’s strong spirit.

Jim, on the other hand, in spite of his strong love and idealistic admiration for Antonia, stands as an exemplification of Cather’s modernism: he functions as an anti-hero. Antonia thinks of him as heroic because of his boyhood slaying of a huge, old, and lethargic rattlesnake. But other than that singular instance, Jim is anything but heroic. Not only does he run from Wick Cutter in shame as Cutter assaults Jim in hopes of raping Antonia, but he holds anger against Antonia for putting him in what he sees as a shameful position. Rather than taking the opportunity to be her defender, even through having his grandparents take the man to task, he runs in fear and hides, blaming her. He represses his shame at his own cowardice and displaces his anger at Cutter onto Antonia. With-
drawing his trust and affection from her because of a situation in which she would have been the victim, he relinquishes the closeness of their friendship. Later after Antonia’s pregnancy and public humiliation, he does not demonstrate the strength of character even to treat her immediately with true kindness and friendship, much less to defend her against the town gossips. Rather than acting with courage on her behalf, he perceives only how her actions reflect on him as her friend and withdraws from her in an attempt at self-protection. Thus, Jim eventually isolates himself from Black Hawk and becomes an image of the solitary, modern American anti-hero.

Cather’s choice of the use of Jim’s male voice, as well as her choice of the memoir form, was influenced by the autobiography she wrote for her former boss Samuel S. McClure, published in 1914, a few years before this novel. Her intense feeling for the man who discovered her and made her suddenly feel that she was valuable to herself motivated her to spend a great deal of time and energy ghost writing his autobiography, at a time when she needed it for her own stories which were beginning to flow. She chose to listen to him tell his story for a few hours at a time and then to write it down later as she remembered it, thus internalizing the experiences and perspective of a male far more fully than if she had simply written as he dictated. Cather’s vivid understanding of McClure’s experience of losing his father at the age of seven and emigrating from Ireland to America at nine makes its way into Jim Burden’s experience. Also like McClure, as an adult Jim runs a very successful business in New York and becomes a world traveler. Though Jim’s childhood experience is closer to Cather’s own emigration from Virginia to Nebraska than it is to McClure’s, the added insights Cather gained from writing about the changes in her boss’s early life have direct carry-over effect into My Antonia.
Cather directly credited this experience with preparing her to write from the male perspective. In the process of ghost writing for McClure, she captured his ideas and thoughts in words which replicated his style of speech, while forming them into a book which thematically has much in common with her novels, thus teaching herself to write in a new mode. Cather was pleased to hear that McClure's friends and relatives believed the book captured his personality and way of telling his story, even down to particular phrases. Cather gave countless hours to this task and never wanted any payment or even the recognition of her name on the book, believing her gain in experience to be inestimable. Her letters tell of how difficult it was at first to capture McClure's speech on paper and of how thrilled she was with her accomplishment when she was finished. A May 1919 letter to Will Owen Jones, her former editor at the *Nebraska State Journal*, describes how the writing of McClure's autobiography taught her to handle the male point of view: by the end of that project she felt what it was like to be inside McClure's skin, which enabled her to do the same thing with Jim.  

In spite of Cather's preparation for writing this novel by writing a non-fiction autobiography, she did not use a traditional autobiographical form in this novel. Attempting to forestall objections from readers, Jim's statement that his story "hasn't any form" satisfies no one completely and entices countless readers to determine why the novel takes the shape it does. Cather's first major biographer, E. K. Brown, recalls in 1953 both Cather's impatience at some readers' complaints that the book is not really a novel and her defense of it as simply a "gathering [of] her memories of some persons and places very dear to her" (199). Here Cather disingenuously begs the question, asserting her right to choose the structure most appropriate for her work and refusing to be pushed
into producing a more traditional novel. In much less obvious—but no less real—ways
than Gertrude Stein and others of her generation, Cather creates new fictional forms as
she needs them. The apparent artlessness of her form can deceive readers into misreading
it, as Wallace Stevens commented to a friend: “She takes so much pain to conceal her
sophistication that it is easy to miss her quality” (Murphy 5). Of My Antonia’s unusual
structure, John H. Randall III in 1960 notes particularly Jim’s and Antonia’s dual roles.
He contends that people writing before him have misunderstood Antonia to be the single
protagonist, whereas in actuality “this double protagonist consists of Jim Burden and
Antonia, who, true to the best traditions of the romantic movement, stand for head and
heart, respectively” (107). By claiming this new form works romantically for symbolic
reasons, Randall seems to think the question answered and fails to note that Cather uses
modernist stylistic devices to convey these romantic ideas.

Until Cather scholars recognize the nature of the dialogical complexity of
Cather’s work, misunderstandings will persist even among her most appreciative readers.
James Woodress closely paraphrases a Cather letter explaining her choice of form:

The story would be made up of little, everyday happenings for the most part, for
such events made up the bulk of most people’s lives. It would be the other side of
the rug, the pattern that is supposed not to count. There would be no love affair,
no courtship, no marriage, no broken heart no struggle for success. (290)

Woodress sums up that “The result was the creation of a novel that gives the impression
of real autobiography rather than fiction” (290). Though correct in his assessment, he
fails to comment on the fact that even if read as autobiography, this novel inhabits a
modernist, disjointed form, with the title seeming to contradict the nature of the narrative:
the narrator, who is not the title character, sometimes leaves her out of his story for long
periods of time. One recent writer, Miles Orvell, does recognize in a 1999 essay both Cather’s romanticism and her modernism in *My Antonia*:

For Cather ... the struggle to define a structure of value in a world that assailed the writer with images of banality, commercialism, greed, squalor, and violence, led to a privileging of the past in a form that was often more than tinged with romanticism. If Cather anticipated a major preoccupation of modernist writing—the discovery of a balance between the past and the future, a positioning of the subject within time and change in a way that denied neither the past nor the evolving future—her distinction was likewise to have arrived at serenity not through any dodge of escapism but rather through the complex representation of a deeply personal engagement with the problem of change. (52)

Though Orvell writes of Cather as a romantic who only anticipates modernism, he recognizes acutely both currents in the novel and does give Cather credit for dialectical complexity in her work.

One noticeably romantic aspect of *My Antonia*’s form appears in its conscious identification with Virgilian pastoral literature. Consistent with Jim’s romantic intent, the novel’s five books remind readers of Virgil’s *Georgics*, an ever-present backdrop—from the pastoral prairie scenes of the early and late books to the central book in which Jim studies Virgil’s poetry. Book 1 sets the scene in the lives of both main characters, presenting one of Jim’s most often quoted memories, mythologizing the American immigration of the West:

> There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. . . . Everywhere, as far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but rough, shaggy, red grass, most of it as tall as I. . . . I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep. (7, 12, 14)

Early in the novel, both Jim and Antonia experience this strong sense of wonder about the world and the possibilities it opens up to them.
However, Cather’s choice to represent the country as empty when the settlers arrived is a deliberate romanticizing—a historical revision—of a much less pretty fact. Mike Fischer elucidates this in his “Pastoralism and its Discontents.” He highlights the novel’s elision of Indian history in Nebraska, discussing thoroughly Cather’s knowledge that Nebraska was under Sioux control a few years before she moved there and her memories of relatives talking of seeing great numbers of Indians moving along the plains. Fischer quotes from Cather’s 1923 *Nation* article:

> Before 1860 civilization did no more than nibble at the eastern edge of the State, along the river bluffs. Lincoln, the present capital, was open prairie; and the whole of the great plain to the westward was still a sunny wilderness, where the tall red grass and the buffalo and the Indian hunter were undisturbed. (34)

Ironically, because part of the work of the novel is to glorify the power of the human spirit through the tale of American pioneers, Cather eliminates from her pages the stories of the many Indian people whose lives were lost or sublimated by white settlement. The back cover of Houghton Mifflin’s 1988 paperback would never have been able to represent the novel so romantically if the story of conquered peoples had been included: “Here is Willa Cather’s famous portrait of a pioneer woman in whose character the strengths and passions of America’s early settlers are memorably rendered.”

Nevertheless, one of the novel’s greatest strengths lies in its affirmation of Eastern-European immigrants who were often scorned by Cather’s contemporaries, in spite of its great insensitivity toward American Indians. As Christopher Sten points out in “Against the Grain: Willa Cather and the Myths of Immigration in *My Antonia*,” Cather works hard to discredit myths which prejudiced Americans against immigrants. He refers to the opening scene in which Jake approves Jim’s staying away from Antonia, because “you
were likely to get diseases from foreigners” (6) and the final scene in which Jim “had the
sense of coming home to [him]self” in Antonia’s presence:

Surely, then, it is not “disease” that Jim acquires from the foreigners who share
his life in Nebraska, but health, a profound sense of emotional well-being that
nothing in the rest of his life—not his marriage to a “handsome, energetic, execu-
tive” woman who lives with him in New York, nor his job as “legal counsel for
one of the great Western railways”—can give him. (162)

Here Cather intentionally reverses the prejudice of Jake and others with her affirming
picture of Antonia and other strong, appealing immigrant girls.

Nevertheless, her portrait of Antonia’s value and beauty comes at the expense of
other strong, beautiful people who were being trampled underfoot by white settlers. The
few times Cather does mention Indians, such as when Jim sees the circle track in the
meadow where Indians used to run with their horses, they are mentioned almost as
mythic beings from long ago who no longer exist in the modern era. This line of thinking,
though inconsistent with Cather’s desire to respect people typically dishonored, is con-
sistent with her romantic consciousness in relating the story of the settlement of the West
as a triumph, a notable human achievement, in the same way that Frederick Jackson
Turner saw it. As Mary Paniccia Carden notes,

most of the events of My Antonia take place in the second half of the nineteenth
century, in the years directly before and after the frontier was declared “closed”
by the internal Census in 1890. [Cather] writes about the frontier in an era infused
with nostalgia for a mythologized American past and with anxiety about America’s post-
frontier purpose. (277)

Just as Turner’s Frontier Thesis of 1893 speaks of the land as the nonhuman hero in the
settling of the West but characterizes the Indians as “factors with which civilization had
to reckon” (2), Cather too romanticizes both settlers and the land itself, denigrating the
land’s earlier inhabitants by her significant silence about them. In this way her choices—
whether conscious or unconscious—to honor Eastern-European immigrants and to exclude Indians create a consistently romanticized picture at the novel’s opening. Though the narration is through Jim’s eyes, Cather provides no significant counterpoint to his opinions. 

In addition to these romantic thematic elements, readers discover modernist unexpected leaps in focus, in setting, and in chronology as the novel progresses. Because this novel focuses more on Jim than on his friend, it is not surprising to encounter his perspective and to learn only what he can tell of her. Furthermore, the story focuses a great deal on Jim’s personal migration from Virginia and his feelings about the prairie, his experience of the different social strata of Black Hawk, and later his university education in an area remote from Antonia. For many reasons, as John J. Murphy notes, “The structure of My Antonia became a difficulty for those who saw Antonia as the main character” (12). Clearly this is not primarily Antonia’s story but Jim’s story of what the memory of Antonia’s name evokes within him. His story evidences what Bakhtin calls the utterly unusual moments of a man’s life, moments that are very short compared to the whole length of a human life. But these moments shape the definitive image of the man, his essence, as well as the nature of his entire subsequent life. (116; italics in original)

Not only does the novel recount his memories but also how these events shape him in definitive ways; some of these ways he admits to, such as Antonia’s influence, but others he represses, such as his fear of intimacy. Jim’s narrative embodies clearly a definition of memory which Cather includes in a letter to Mabel Dodge Luhan. Cather comments that because memory is so many-sided, it could be described as the mass of scars which perceptions leave behind. In revealing how his perceptions have shaped and even scarred Jim, this novel presages the late twentieth-century explosion of memoirs and autobiog-
raphies which include disparate relevant details. Rather than being a failure of form, "which Willa Cather is never quite able to solve" (37), as David Daiches and many other early critics see it, it negotiates its way like a modern memoir. As such, this novel focuses on one aspect of the teller's life rather than adopting the traditional, chronologically episodic style. In the same way that Gertrude Stein's 1933 *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* purports to tell Toklas' story but actually tells the story of Stein's life as it interacts with Toklas, Cather has Jim tell the story of his own life insofar as it is affected by Antonia.

Whether we read *My Antonia* as successful memoir form or not, however, we need to recognize that Cather's choice of structure for this novel is consistent with the rest of her work as it exemplifies her oeuvre's ongoing dialogical struggle between romanticism and modernism. The fact that the novel's form succeeds has now been argued by numerous critics but not yet on the basis of its exemplification of the romantic-modernist dialectic. Indeed, when William J. Stuckey finds evidence of this dialectic he names as "a failure of technique" and "a failure of sensibility as well" (479). Unfortunately, he reads it as failure to be consistent rather than as an integral part of the dialogical vision which unifies Cather's work. Understanding that Cather "combines in one character, Jim Burden, romantic vision and realistic skepticism" (479), Stuckey goes on to say that this is where Cather fails. Stuckey compares *My Antonia* unfavorably to *The Great Gatsby*, commenting that "Fitzgerald has two narrators, one romantic, one realistic. Gatsby, the romantic, creates Daisy romantically. Nick, the realist, communicates Gatsby's romantic creation and supplies, along with it, a realistic portrait of Daisy" (479). Although Stuckey insightfully recognizes *My Antonia*’s competing elements, he unfor-
tunately assumes that Cather intends to give us the complete picture of Antonia through romantic Jim Burden’s eyes; he misses the fact that Cather integrates the complications of a romantic vision and a questioning vision within the gaze of the same narrator. As Jim exhibits psychological changes which affect his perspective, the combination of his romantic propensities and his cynicism can puzzle readers who do not understand the underlying dialectic of the novel. Stuckey’s summary of the novel as “a potential tragedy with a tacked-on happy ending” (481) does not recognize Cather’s integration of these two dialogical elements in the conclusion: Jim’s revival of his hopeful, romantic spirit through renewed contact with Antonia and her family, and his psychological fragmentation as a narrator whose life has never lived up to his personal romantic visions.

From the beginning of the novel to the end, Cather’s choice to have Jim narrate so many horrors from his childhood, interspersed with idyllic scenes, dramatically contrasts with traditional pastoral elements and gives the entire novel a modern tenor. The risks Cather takes by including such formerly taboo topics in her fiction also demonstrate her profound recognition not only of evil but of the inability of human beings to make sense out of life. Though romantic literature also often depicts evil and loss, it generally demonstrates some kind of resultant recompense. As in Wordsworth’s heightened self-knowledge and the burst of literary genius resulting in his *The Prelude* after his experience of the horrors of the French Revolution, romantic literature usually assumes some transcendent outcome through the loss. However, in *My Antonia*, despite the fact that the title character arguably grows stronger and more able to nurture her family as a result of her losses, most of the losses and traumas in the novel have no specifically redemptive outcomes.
One of the strongest examples of the modernist complexity Cather creates through telling an apparently simple tale is the incident of Antonia’s father’s death. Cather includes this disturbing topic in a manner which denies readers closure. While she gives myriad reasons for believing it to be suicide, she also undercuts any certainty by giving multiple reasons to question the suicide and suspect murder instead. Though the entire community chooses to accept the suicide explanation, Cather deliberately sets up reader uncertainty through having none of her characters hear the shot, through Krajiek’s extremely guilty demeanor and words, and through the perfect fit of his ax to the gash in Mr. Shimerda’s head:

Soon grandfather returned, bringing with him Anton Jelinek, and that important person, the coroner. He was a mild, flurried old man, a Civil War veteran, with one sleeve hanging empty. He seemed to find this case very perplexing, and said if it had not been for grandfather he would have sworn out a warrant against Krajiek. “The way he acted, and the way his ax fit the wound, was enough to convict any man.”

Although it was perfectly clear that Mr. Shimerda had killed himself, Jake and the coroner thought something ought to be done to Krajiek because he behaved like a guilty man. He was badly frightened, certainly, and perhaps he even felt some stirrings of remorse for his indifference to the old man’s misery and loneliness. (73)

The young Jim Burden’s acceptance of the “perfectly clear” verdict juxtaposed against other characters’ suspicions of the man who has lied to and cheated the Shimerda family out of all their money allows Cather to shape this pivotal incident in a manner which undercuts Jim’s reliability as narrator. In causing readers to question his perception of reality, Cather reveals the modernist underpinnings which always compete with her romanticism. A 1934 letter to Carrie Miner Sherwood refers to “Mr. Sadilek’s suicide” as the first thing she heard about when she moved to Nebraska, revealing that the event she based her incident on was commonly referred to as suicide. Her telling it here with such
contradictory details, however, suggests two possibilities: either as an adult Cather may have questioned what she learned as a child, or she may simply have chosen to use this incident to portray the uncertainty of life. Though she maintains consistent chronology in her telling of this event, she leaves readers wondering in the same way here that she often does through her temporal vacuoles.

Jim’s grandfather’s romantic commitment to high ideals establishes a standard in Black Hawk: the practice of thinking well of others whenever possible and leaving them to God’s “judgment seat” and “mercy seat” (76). Though committing suicide obviously renders Mr. Shimerda beyond the pale of public approbation,25 this community accepts his action as that of a noble man who could not live in his dire surroundings because of intense homesickness for the culture he had left behind. By contrast, pursuing Krajiek as a potential murderer would not only draw out the tragedy indefinitely, but it would also focus on human evil instead of on pathos. Focusing on the pathos of Mr. Shimerda’s situation and trying to make life better for the family he leaves behind allows these people to look past the possible brokenness and evil of a murderer living in their midst. For this reason, Mr. Shimerda can continue as a romantic symbol of a pioneer who died of a broken heart rather than as a person who suffered evil at the hands of a fellow human being.

By establishing community acceptance of this mindset, Cather romanticizes the incident; at the same time, however, she undermines this perspective through her modernist emphasis on uncertainty and human brokenness. In addition, this incident gives Cather a striking way to romanticize the original culture of the newcomers by emphasizing the irreplaceable value it holds for the refined Mr. Shimerda. It proves the error of Americans’ rejection of Eastern European immigrants as crude, by suggesting
that Mr. Shimerda can die from the loss of his culture. Nevertheless, Cather's compelling portrayal of both Mr. Shimerda's romantic yearnings and strivings and his resultant death amidst concomitant uncertainties shows both her romantic beliefs and her modernism.

This incident and many others reveal what Bakhtin refers to as the "indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)" of the novel. Throughout the novel, idyllic scenes, pronounced gaps in the narrative, and an equivocal ending contrast romantic philosophy with often equally strong modernist philosophy and narrative structure. What has been referred to in many different ways as Cather's doubleness emerges in her refusal to give closure to events and situations; ultimately, her romanticism and her modernism are two inseparable halves of one unified vision throughout the novel. In spite of Edenic scenes, such as Jim and Antonia enjoying wonderful summer weather together many times in the first book, even that book ends with Antonia's prophecy of hardships to come and her modernist determination to be as strong as a man. Four years later "The Hired Girls" ends with the traumatic scene of Wick Cutter's attack on Jim and its aftermath, strikingly juxtaposed with the following book's tranquil opening in Lincoln.

This leap from Black Hawk and the surrounding prairie to Jim's university town is a structural element that functions in an especially modernist manner and disturbs many Cather readers, both in its abrupt change in locale and in its utter desertion of Antonia. Here Jim first comes to terms with the importance of Antonia to his whole identity. Significantly, Jim entitles this Lincoln chapter "Lena Lingard," realizing during this time period how important she and the other girls are to him. After he first re-encounters Lena in Lincoln, where she is a successful and independent seamstress, he
fantasizes about the other immigrant girls at home—except Antonia, whom he pointedly
does not mention:

When I closed my eyes I could hear them all laughing—the Danish laundry girls
and the three Bohemian Marys. Lena had brought them all back to me. It came
over me, as it had never done before, the relation between girls like those and the
poetry of Virgil. If there were no girls like them, there would be no poetry. I
understood that clearly, for the first time. This revelation seemed to me inesti-
mably precious. I clung to it as if it might suddenly vanish. (173)

These last two sentences summarize Jim’s attitude toward his childhood in general. His
whole narrative of his and Antonia’s life becomes a means of clinging to something he
considers inestimably precious, though at this point he tells himself the vitality of the
whole group of girls matters to him more than any one girl in particular. His fear of
intimacy prevents him from getting too emotionally involved with any of them and
propels him out of Lena’s sphere when his emotions start to heat up toward her.

As Jim’s narrative progresses, his psychological issues predominate increasingly.
As Jim represses thoughts of Antonia, which readers expect to surface here, he wills
himself to think of her friends rather than of her. Rather than allowing himself to deter-
mine just what Antonia means to him and what his concomitant responsibilities to her
are, he refuses to think about her at all, preferring instead to intellectualize the importance
of lively girls to the world. This whole chapter, which focuses on Lena and his relations
to her while he is a student, markedly ignores his stronger feelings for Antonia and shows
him trying to forget her. Toying with the idea of being in love with Lena, he finally
decides his fantasy life is destroying his studies and leaves for Harvard without even say-
ing goodbye to Antonia. Trying to eliminate his feelings for her, he visits his grand-
parents and his rarely mentioned Virginia relatives before escaping to Harvard. As Jim’s
leaving town without seeing Antonia demonstrates his repression of feelings for her at the
time, his having to be drawn back to Antonia’s story by Widow Steavens reveals the fact that he has trouble facing his feelings for her even as he tells his story which purports to focus on her.\textsuperscript{26}

Jim’s fear of intimacy dominates Book III—which has a surreal tenor because of its radically different content from surrounding chapters—with Jim clinging to his old dream of Lena coming across the field to him in her short skirt. The first version of this dream, which occurs in Book II, includes the more dangerous Lena with her reaping hook. As Blanche H. Gelfant points out, “In Jim’s dream of Lena, desire and fear clearly contend with one another. With the dreamer’s infallibility, Jim contains his ambivalence in a surreal image of Aurora and the Grim Reaper as one” (83). By Book III, however, Jim has successfully internalized the dream to the point where it no longer carries a fearful element. Feeling now “like the memory of an actual experience,” Jim sees the dream floating before him “like a picture, and underneath it stood the mournful [Virgilian] line: ‘Optima dies . . . prima fugit’ (174). Translating the quotation, “in the lives of mortals, the best days are the first to flee” (169), Jim pictures himself already mourning the loss of his childhood while he is yet in his teens. Readers can see the older narrator’s experience coloring the young man’s supposed thoughts. Jim reports, with the wisdom which usually only comes to the mature, that he already senses in his teens through his study of literature the truth of fleeting happiness. Whatever we believe his true thoughts to be during these years, we perceive that while in Lincoln he studies literature and treasures his dreams, opting for the emotional safety of living in a fantasy world rather than in the real world of possible rejection and pain.
After abruptly leaving Lena at the end of Book III, Jim shows further repression of thoughts of Antonia by beginning Book IV with talk of “poor Antonia” but moving instead to stories of Tiny alone and then Tiny with Lena for the entire first chapter. Introducing Tiny he says, “Of all the girls and boys who grew up together in Black Hawk, Tiny Soderball was to lead the most adventurous life and to achieve the most solid worldly success” (192). Yet despite this ostensible admiration for her, he mentions his disappointment that “nothing interested her much now but making money. . . . She was like someone in whom the faculty of becoming interested is worn out” (194). The structure of Jim’s narrative here, in purporting to introduce Antonia and then moving instead to her former companions, mirrors his subconscious desire to avoid meeting her again to save himself the pain of seeing how differently her life has turned out from what he had imagined for her. Juxtaposed against Tiny’s story, the scene at the town photographer’s emphasizes Jim’s sharp disapproval of Antonia for being so proud of her illegitimate baby that she either does not recognize or does not care about the community disapproval her maternal pride incurs. Jim’s next topic, his visit to Mrs. Harling, shows him coming closer to Antonia’s story in his mental circlings, until he finally sits down to hear the whole story of “dear Antonia” from the sympathetic Widow Steavens. Through these mental circumambulations, Jim reveals his life’s fragmentation and his search for the wholeness his memory tells him he felt as a child.

The marked absence of narrative during these two years crucial for Antonia is a vacuole which forces readers to decipher meaning for themselves out of the apparent emptiness, while questioning the conclusions Jim draws for us. Immediately juxtaposed against the more modernist Book III, which plumbs Jim’s subconscious while in Lincoln,
Book IV fulfills the promise of the novel’s early sections by telling the romantic story of a young girl struggling with betrayal, community disapproval, and loneliness but having the strength of character to persevere and vindicate herself in the eyes of others. Of the two years that have just passed Jim leaves out everything other than that he completed college at Harvard. Here Jim’s jumping rapidly from his memories of one character to another reveals his subconscious fears and desires, allowing him to postpone telling what the last two years have held for Antonia, and when he does return to Black Hawk and to Antonia he romantically renames her as “the pioneer woman.” Unfortunately, though these years have been traumatic for Antonia and Jim has had no contact with her during them, he retains the emotional connection—even possessiveness—to be “bitterly disappointed in her” and even unable to “forgive her for becoming an object of pity” (192), while the once-looked-down-upon Lena has become respected. Early in this book Jim admits what was clear through his omissions in the last one: “I tried to shut Antonia out of my mind” (192). Though he has consistently repressed his subconscious love for Antonia, he ironically claims it as foundational for his life when he reconnects with her. By the end of this section Jim enjoys declaring an unspecified but intense love for Antonia—now that her disgrace provides safety for him from any expectation of his acting on his words:

I’d have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister—anything that a woman can be to a man. The idea of you is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don’t realize it. You really are a part of me. (206)

As many people have pointed out, such as James E. Miller, Jr. in “My Antonia and the American Dream,” Antonia serves more as Jim’s ideal of womanhood than she does as a real person to him: “Sister-like Antonia cannot be transfigured, even in dream, to sexual
figure. Her role in the book, and in Jim’s psyche, is destined to be more idealized, more mythic” (Bloom MA 105). As Cather shows symbolically through the memorable scene of Jim and Antonia walking together under the light of the companionable sun and moon, these two are inextricably part of each other’s lives:

As we walked homeward across the fields, the sun dropped and lay like a great golden globe in the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose in the east, as big as a cart-wheel, pale silver and streaked with rose colour, thin as a bubble or a ghost moon. For five, perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world. (206)

Cather’s emblematic scene illustrates the way Jim visualizes himself and Antonia continuing to value each other even from opposite parts of the world, apotheosizing their relationship as primal.

The romantic structure of Book IV also clarifies the vacuoles of the more modernist previous book by revealing changes in Jim which never appear in Book III. Here Jim unwittingly fills in some of the gaps which have caused him virtually to eliminate Antonia in the novel’s middle portion. Because of Jim’s need first to work through his relationship with her subconsciously, Book III narrates only matters that concern himself and characters other than Antonia. Now that the work of his subconscious is done he can bring her his conclusions but only in the safety of a might-have-been statement. He continues to repress his feelings to the extent that he still does not choose how he would have preferred to relate to Antonia; he only knows that he wants her to be his. His fear of intimacy and his preference for holding her in his heart as an icon preclude his professing erotic love to her at a time when she might have found it appealing and allow him later only to talk to her of love in intense but abstract terms.
Although this overt idealization of Antonia late in the novel helps create a romantic text, even here it is replete with the signs of modernism present throughout Cather's fiction. While Antonia earns her right to be remembered as a romantic heroine through her strength of character and her ability to overcome multiple obstacles, Jim Burden haunts readers as an ambivalent modernist anti-hero. As the man who professes to want to be a primary male figure in Antonia’s life, he unheroically leaves without seeing her again for twenty years. This largest vacuole, between the fourth and fifth books, leaves readers with the strong sense that Jim can only experience idealistic feelings for Antonia but does not have the courage to act courageously toward her.

Though the novel’s overall structure contains both romantic and modernist elements, the brief Book V of My Antonia serves as a final counterpart to the introduction in much the same way as a traditional epilogue, bringing the story to a mitigated romantic conclusion. Just as the introduction acquaints readers with Jim’s adult life and how this story comes to be told, these final pages give a snapshot of Antonia’s adult life and show the two protagonists reuniting joyfully after many years. This section closes the narrative essentially as romantic readers would expect, showing Antonia as having found happiness, despite the obstacles she was forced to overcome. Replete with images of nature and the picturesque, this section fulfills the romantic promise of the introduction and of Book I. The strong, often unconventional, girl of the early novel becomes the glorified emblem of striving to overcome odds, triumphant with her loving husband and energetic, healthy children. When Jim first sees her again after twenty years have passed, he says,

... the miracle happened; one of those quiet moments which clutch the heart, and take more courage than the noisy, excited passages in life. ... She was there, in the full vigour of her personality, battered but not diminished, looking at me, speaking to me in the husky, breathy voice I remembered so well. (213, 214)
Cather fills this section with a succession of harmonious images almost as abundant as Antonia’s children who famously pour out of the fruit cave: “a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight” (218). The harmony of people with each other and with nature produces “the deepest peace” (219) in Antonia’s orchard and in her household. This sense of fruition, fulfilling Jim Burden’s dreams for life, inspires him to stay connected to this family and to become a surrogate family member through planned regular outings with Antonia’s boys.

This same sense of peace and fullness which Cather experienced in her community of origin inspired her to write countless times to friends that she was never happier than when in Red Cloud and to convince herself that she spent more time there than she actually did. In 1916 she writes Dorothy Canfield Fisher that she wishes she could like any spot in the world as well as “the Divide” between the Platte and the Republican rivers, but she can’t. She describes the fluttery feeling in her stomach each time she comes back to it or leaves it.28 Her times of reconnection there allowed her to rejuvenate herself emotionally, giving her the energy she needed to continue with her work. In later years, when she no longer managed the visits, she still told friends she returned home at least once a year. A 1931 letter to Annie Pavelka’s boys tells them that she did not forget their commencement, though she was unable to attend. The letter relates how important they are to her, how often she shows off her pictures of them to friends and brags about what fine Bohemian boys they are. It assures them that she will be back to see them within a year. Though Cather’s intentions were undoubtedly as sincere as Jim’s, which she had described years earlier, she only saw them one more time in her life.29
In spite of the fact that both Cather and Jim are entirely sincere in their affection for these loved ones and have absolute belief in their ability to remain connected with them, the novel alerts readers to how unrealistic this belief is in a modern world. This final book of the novel contains significant elements which undermine its romanticism, despite the recompense for those who nobly overcome great odds. First of all, this meeting shows by its delay of twenty years the disintegration and fragmentation which have come into the lives of Antonia and Jim, two friends who once were integral parts of each other's lives. Even though Jim and Antonia are able to reconnect, he ultimately expresses more interest in “Cuzak’s Boys” than he does in Antonia. Despite his ostensible primary interest in Antonia, his greater attention to her family reveals that she is now primarily important to him as a link to his past and as a part of his desire to prolong his youth indefinitely, even if only by association with her children. By giving the final book its title, rather than “Antonia’s Children,” he relegates her to a subsidiary role as wife and mother and contradicts the value he gives her elsewhere in the narrative. In the end of the novel as in the beginning, Jim sees Antonia not primarily as the woman she has become but as the symbol of what matters most to him.

Though the novel concludes with the promise of continuing to share good times together, underlying these noble intentions is the knowledge that Jim lives over a thousand miles from the Cuzaks and has had good intentions to return to them multiple times in the past twenty years. As he says, “I told Antonia I would return, but life intervened” (211). Readers recognize the reality that this one return does not make permanent an intended reconnection. As Hermione Lee notes, Jim’s final pilgrimage seems more like an end-of-the-life journey home than a new beginning: “it feels much more as if
Jim’s return home is preparation for oblivion . . . more like a lament than a celebration.”

(157). James E. Miller, Jr.’s analysis agrees with this observation:

His loss is personal, because he, like the plow, once glowed in the sun and felt the expansion of life within him, life with all its promise and possibilities. But by the time we encounter him as the nostalgic narrator of My Antonia, his life has diminished and faded, and he himself seems to feel the dark descend. (101-2)

Despite the introduction’s statement that Jim “had renewed a friendship that meant a great deal to him” (2), with the original version even asserting that Jim “out of his busy life had set apart time enough to enjoy that friendship” (xii), the final book’s tone remains elegiac. Essentially both elements are true: Jim’s attempt to reconnect with Antonia and her family brings him full circle and helps him accept the fragmentation and disillusionment of the rest of his life, but it is still a requiem for the past rather than a new beginning. Besides the perceptible sense of loss underlying the happy reunion, we as readers know we are hearing only what Jim wishes us to believe. Whether he has magnified the importance of one visit in his own mind or whether he actually spends time visiting with Antonia and her family on a regular basis can only be conjectured. As Susan Rosowski comments, Jim’s intentions “to play’ with Cuzak’s boys and, after the boys are grown, ‘to tramp along a few miles of lighted streets with Cuzak’ . . . seem curiously empty, irrelevant to the center of life represented by the female world of Antonia” (91) which Jim always claims as his focus.

Despite Jim’s questionable reliability as a narrator, in middle age Jim Burden himself exemplifies Cather’s own dialectic between romantic idealism and modernist skepticism: though he remains a romantic at the core, he has lost so many of his original illusions about life that even within his own narrative he reveals counterbalancing impulses and themes. Speaking of life’s disillusioning process, he says, “In the course of
twenty crowded years one parts with many illusions. I did not wish to lose the early ones” (211). Yet his story tells the tale of the loss of many of these early illusions, as he includes murders, suicides, an attempted rape, and a seduction and desertion. The murders of the Eastern-European bride and groom fed to the wolves and of Wick Cutter’s cantankerous wife destroy any illusion Jim may have had of the world as a safe place. The suicides of Antonia’s father, the tramp in the threshing machine, and finally Wick Cutter reinforce his sense of the sadness and unpredictability of life. Likewise, Wick Cutter’s attempted rape of Antonia and unwitting battering of Jim destroy his respect for men as much as Larry Donovan’s subsequent seduction and desertion of Antonia. After all the psychological losses these early events have brought him, Jim desperately wants to preserve his greatest early illusion: Antonia as the embodiment of ideal womanhood.

While *My Antonia* reveals Cather struggling to maintain a romantic vision, it also refuses to deny her modernism, which sometimes appears thematically and often structurally and stylistically. The romantic reader reaps the reward of seeing Jim and Antonia finally together again, with Antonia the triumphantly happy mother of a large, healthy family; yet the modernist reader sees Antonia’s missing teeth and lost fluency in English and Jim’s psychological rootlessness and penchant for living in the past. The sense Jim gives of the past twenty years being lost ones in his life adds poignancy to his closing comment: “Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past.”
WILLA CATHER’S VOYAGE PERILOUS: A CASE FOR ONE OF OURS

Willa Cather’s One of Ours, despite its Pulitzer Prize, has been and continues to be one of her least understood works as readers consistently miss its complex expression of her romantic-modernist dialectic. One of her few novels which does not develop a major female character, One of Ours often puzzles readers by its unexpected treatment of a subject seen as a man’s world: war and its effect on society. While some women writers of this time wrote of the war from a disillusioned correspondent’s perspective, as Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant did, many others, like Dorothy Canfield Fisher, wrote with an overtly patriotic vision. Cather, however, does neither. Refusing to choose one perspective as definitive, she elucidates the perspectives of multiple types of participants in her “manly battle yarn” and exhibits the decided influence of both Canfield and Sergeant on her own novel. Cather’s novel reveals the strong impact of both these women—two of her closest friends—even as its reception history reveals that the women themselves each understood only parts of the novel.

Willa Cather did not live to see her story of Claude, her romantic soldier boy, read as a dialectic between romanticism and modernism. In 1896, well before she launched her literary career, she expressed the difficulty of writing to be understood properly: “To keep an idea living intact . . . to keep it so all the way from the brain to the hand and transfer it on paper a living thing . . . that is the voyage perilous.” This same difficulty
plagued her throughout her four years of writing *One of Ours*—her most difficult book to write—and in the years of reading widely varied responses to the novel. Cather spent inordinate emotional energy writing it and worrying about its reception, vacillating between hope and fear, never having the satisfaction of believing the book to be understood properly.

*One of Ours'* unusual reception history, in the eight decades since its publication, contains clues to its central dialogical vision. This novel has commonly provoked two diametrically opposed readings which reveal distinct, essential components of Cather's consistent vision. The failure of most readers to understand this complexity in *One of Ours* has historically created both patriotic fervor in its support—even resulting in the Pulitzer Prize—and vitriolic reactions against it. For a plethora of reasons, most readers respond predominantly to the romantic idealism and its high valuing of the common person, many lauding it with others deploring it. Nevertheless, countless other readers respond to the ironic undertones mocking the novel's romanticism. What remains to be recognized is the fact that both romantic and modernist ideas play significant roles in the novel. In fact, this tension creates the "truer" picture of the war a 1922 letter from Cather to Dorothy Canfield Fisher suggests she intends. She tells Dorothy she hopes that by the time the sons of this generation of soldiers read her book, they will realize that it is a truer book than Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers*. By presenting both the idealism and the horrors, Cather portrays not only the war and a close-up of one of its soldiers but also the war's conflicted world.

Three of Cather's close friends—Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, and Edith Lewis—personify the novel's dialectic in their public arguments over
what Cather does in *One of Ours*. Canfield lauds the novel, Sergeant insists Cather doesn’t even see the war she writes about, and Lewis argues for the inherent truth of the novel on the basis of affirming letters Cather later received from ex-soldiers. Canfield’s review for the *New York Times* in September of 1922 responds only to the romantic portion of the book and gives it highest marks for vitality, exuberance, and portrayal of “the very throb and pulse of life.” She says reading the novel is like seeing “an eagle soar up through all this pettiness, on broad sure wings, carrying us in spirit with her to the heights.” She echoes romantics as she articulates her vision of the novel’s purpose: to bring understanding of Claude’s “living brothers all around us, imprisoned and baffled like Claude in a bare, neutral, machine-ridden world.” She claims that the vicious, post-war argument about the war and its literature was beneath the notice of Cather, who chose instead to depict “the wonder and pathos and delicacy and power and weakness and tragedy of human beings like Claude . . . .” Although Canfield correctly delineates many of the novel’s strengths, she chooses not to mention the abrupt change of setting and tone which are crucial in revealing Cather’s vision of a world gone wrong. She understands the romantic voice of the novel but not the bitterly disillusioned voice which opposes it.

Embodying this disillusioned voice in her rejection of the novel, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant—another of Cather’s good friends—reads the novel through the lens of her own war experience and sees the romanticism as a betrayal of truth. Looking back on the immediate postwar time when Sergeant found herself interrogated by Cather as to what the war was like, she writes,

I ‘wanted to tell,’ of course, but like all returned soldiers—and I felt like one—I did not know how to bridge the gap between her idealized war vision that was to be apparent in *One of Ours*—and my own stark impressions of war as lived; of
France as overrun, not just by the Boches but by the boisterous trans-Atlantics and trans-Pacifies. (155; italics in original)

Sergeant remembers Cather’s eagerness to know all—“with that eye-in-every-pore quality that took possession of her” (155)—and her own assumption that Cather would not be able to understand her perspective.7 Ironically, her memory of the incommunicable nature of the war conveys not necessarily Cather’s blindness to reality but Sergeant’s inability to see anything but her own intense war experience, including resultant debilitating injuries. The intensity of her personal war picture understandably convinced her that any different tale was simply not true: “One of Ours seemed out of key . . . middle-aged, cold-hearted” (171). Sergeant’s firsthand knowledge of war prevented her from reading One of Ours as a dialogical novel about one soldier’s experience of the war. Though Sergeant’s war accounts undoubtedly relate the truth of her own experience, she cannot see that her reality does not encapsulate the entire truth which a dialogical account can more fully convey.

Edith Lewis’ memoir looks back on the novel and its creation with the strong sense that Cather agonized over the war: “She felt strongly about the war from its beginning, for it threatened everything in the world of the mind’s endeavour that was most precious to her; she saw it beforehand, I think, as many people saw it afterward” (117). Lewis defends the novel as successfully depicting the human situation, a means of writing about the universal through the particular individual, citing for reinforcement the numerous affirming letters Cather received from soldiers who had been there and identified with Claude as they later read her novel.8 By ignoring the modernist irony and referring only to those who identified with the romantic voices, nevertheless, Lewis perhaps unwittingly reinforces the idea that Cather wrote to glorify the war. Also, in
describing Cather’s research on the novel and her intentions in interviewing countless people, Lewis writes of Cather’s desire to express “the human spirit and the human lot on earth” (120). As she defends Cather, Lewis cogently argues that the novel relates the experiences of many, such as this ex-soldier: “I am twenty-two myself, Miss Cather, and you have created me in Claude” (123). That Lewis saw past the romanticism expressed by Claude and some of his compatriots to the irony of his world is dubious, therefore, as she does not delve below the novel’s surface in her discussion. She apparently does not recognize the central dialectic and writes simply to defend her friend, but she does sense that Cather’s One of Ours creates a true picture of the war.

Cather’s letters to Canfield Fisher and Sergeant reveal the genesis of much of the One of Ours conflict as do the books these friends wrote from their own war experiences. Janis P. Stout’s “The Making of Willa Cather’s One of Ours” not only elucidates the impact of the Canfield-Cather friendship but also posits the impact of Canfield’s publications about wartime France on Cather’s novel. Canfield’s love of France, as well as her years of war relief work, resulted in patriotic novels about the war, whereas Sergeant’s war correspondence work and subsequent injuries resulted in blistering accounts of the war and its evils. Sergeant was badly wounded by shrapnel in her work as a war correspondent in France in 1918. She tells of her guide picking up “a souvenir—which promptly exploded, killing her beside me, blowing off the arm of the French officer who was with us, and filling my legs and ankles with steel fragments. I had never even tried to go to the Front; yet I was unable to complete my work” (153). Because of Sergeant’s intense personal experience, her view of the war became unequivocal and she, understandably, saw any view different from hers as completely oppositional. Cather’s letter to
her in a Paris hospital expresses horror at the pain Sergeant is experiencing and recounts stories of the many injured soldiers she has met, wishing Sergeant would come back home. Whether Canfield and Sergeant recognized their views in *One of Ours* or not, both their experiences appear strongly in opposing strands of the dialectic dominating the novel.

Just as Cather's friends read her novel with contradictory responses, so a plethora of conflicting critical voices from the time of publication into the twenty-first century continues to reveal subtleties which first-time readers of *One of Ours* often miss. The experiences and reactions of Cather's three friends function as a microcosm of the dialectic which not only surges through this novel but also through the criticism it continues to engender. As Steven Trout notes, "the world of criticism on *One of Ours* [has broken] in two" (4), with some critics reading primarily the romanticism and others the irony. His incisive *Memorial Fictions* responds to this dialectic by refusing to join either side, asserting that "the text engages the reader in a complex and unsettling analysis . . . of military conflict" (7). True, but the "unsettling analysis" goes far beyond the war in its depiction of a world split in two between romanticism and modernism.

The first critical voice to respond to *One of Ours*’ ironic undertones was David Stouck in his 1975 "*One of Ours*: Willa Cather's Waste-Land Novel." Reading it as a satirical novel, Stouck notes that Claude serves both as the "sympathetic viewpoint, like Huck Finn's, by which society is measured" (83) and as "an unsuspecting victim of its perverse ideals" (84). As satire, the novel "is double-edged in its attack: not only does it expose the gross realities of American life but also the perversity of its romantic ideals" (84). Significantly, Stouck recognizes it as a novel not describing primarily the war but soldiers' experience of the war, even when their reactions are misguided. Steven Trout
furthers this argument by highlighting the novel’s modernism: “Cather presents—and simultaneously deconstructs—a version of the Great War that millions of Americans in 1922 still affirmed” (59). Both Stouck and Trout perceive the novel’s romanticism used for a greater purpose; Stouck sees satire as the goal, while Trout reads it as modernist “prescient insight into the new model of America and Americans that emerged from the Great War” (70).

Missing Cather’s irony completely, still believing her to be “glorifying war” (260), Marilyn Arnold’s 1978 “One of Ours: Willa Cather’s Losing Battle” accuses Cather of “simply refus[ing] at this point to write honestly about despair and its probable consequences” (263). Perhaps most damning, her penultimate comment charges that Cather’s mistaken ideas are “the sort of blind testimony that turns the book into a lie” (266). Nevertheless, she exhibits significant insight in highlighting what she calls a rather typical “complaint that [the novel] has no definable point of view” (259). In one sense, she is exactly right: although the book actually has a great many definable points of view, its presentation of these voices is dialogical, rather than presenting a unilateral point of view. Arnold’s criticism recognizes the novel’s many voices without seeing them as part of the heteroglossia necessary to this dialogical novel.

The first major critic to read the novel neither as a romantic failure nor as completely ironic is Jean Schwind in her 1984 “The ‘Beautiful’ War in One of Ours,” a detailed demonstration of the irony and romantic motifs laced throughout the book. Most significantly, she does not respond simply on the basis of Cather’s celebrated images and portrayals of lively, vital characters, but she analyzes the novel piece by piece in showing how each section is essential in creating this provocative novel. She even agrees with
some of Cather’s earlier contentious critics about the later section’s unrealistic pictures of war, but she insightfully points out that they are necessary because “the romantic vision of war in One of Ours is not Cather’s but Claude’s” (55). Cather herself wrote to Elizabeth Vermorcken in 1922 about how disturbing it was to her to see Claude continually read as a glorification of the war, when he was merely a clueless, young farmer boy.\textsuperscript{11} She writes that her intent was always to focus on Claude, the original title of the book, rather than on the war. Her experience talking to her cousin G. P. the week they became aware that war had broken out in Europe seared into her memory the impact of that world event and its potential to change individual lives. This event—which she had seen earlier as simple, homely, and as uninteresting as the features of her own face—haunted her after her cousin’s death, until she finished the novel. Before Stouck and Schwind, no one notes the important fact that the novel tells the haunting story of a romantic young man, desperately seeking meaning for his life in the war. Though Claude’s voice still represents a part of Cather’s vision—a point Trout emphasizes—his voice functions only as part of the heteroglossia rather than as the primary perspective.

Susan J. Rosowski’s 1986 The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather’s Romanticism, however, is insightful, viewing Cather’s book as a modern American retelling of the Arthurian legend and insightfully recognizing Claude as “a romantic caught in a nightmarish world of realism” (97). As she elucidates the similarities between Tennyson’s Geraint and Enid and Cather’s Claude and Enid, it becomes clear that both men are duped by their confusion “of appearance and reality” (99). True to Cather’s penchant for double meanings, the name Enid not only evokes Geraint and Enid, as Rosowski notes, but also functions ironically as a near anagram for Eden. Claude seeks marriage with Enid as his
path to Eden, despite warnings from many people, including Enid herself. But just as he
does later with the war, he initially convinces himself that marriage with Enid will be
perfect bliss. Cather later writes friends that she knows the Enid character is hard to
stomach—Cather’s publisher wanted her toned down too—but she had to write her that
way since the original was even more “Enidy” than the fictional character.\textsuperscript{12} As Claude
seeks an uncertain truth, as did Tennyson’s Geraint, the quest itself seems “valuable, for
it provides at least the illusion of purpose” (106). This “illusion of purpose” is what most
of Cather’s readers do not understand and what infuriates readers like Hemingway and
Wilson, but it is the crux of Cather’s ongoing dialectic encapsulating her novel’s compli-
cated world.\textsuperscript{13} One of Rosowski’s most fascinating insights is that these critics are unable
to understand the book partly because Cather is attacking in it the very expectations and
definitions of manhood they live by:

These are precisely the qualities of American culture Cather exposed in \textit{One of
Ours}, where to be a man is to seldom voice an opinion and never to explain it, to
dominate others, to be in control. As Claude put it, to be a man was to be “prosaic
and commonplace.” (110)

Cather’s best men, by contrast, are “admirable because they have the sensitivity to feel
depth deeply and the strength to love well” (113).\textsuperscript{14}

Present-day readers increasingly read the novel as more complex than readers did
initially; however, over the decades the many who have accused the novel of not having a
voice or who have simply responded to a single voice in the novel have not appreciated
what Bakhtin would call its dialogical or heteroglossic nature. Because they miss the fact
that Cather intentionally develops many different significant voices and perspectives,
thereby evoking a picture of a richly peopled, dynamic world in which her characters
continue to struggle with issues, they miss the fascinating subtleties and the depth of the
novel. Perhaps most importantly, they miss the dynamic struggle between Cather’s romantic, idealistic vision and her modernist, questioning vision.

In his *The Dialogic Imagination* Bakhtin writes of the novel as the only living genre, still open to change and growth, as opposed to the epic and other genres which are dead and closed. As such, the novel is characterized by “an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)” (7). Though sometimes disconcerting for readers who are looking for closure and single-voiced (monoglossic) literature, this novel exhibits “semantic openendedness” by designating multiple voices to create a living, heteroglossic discourse. *One of Ours* is exactly what Bakhtin says a good novel should be: both heteroglossic in its development of many significant voices and dialogical in the way issues are developed without being closed off by a final answer.

Bakhtin’s comment that “The context embracing another’s word is responsible for its dialogizing background, whose influence can be very great” (340) speaks exactly to the problem Cather encountered in the various misperceptions of her book. Readers often take Claude’s words, feelings, and experiences out of their all-important novelistic context, placing them in the context of Cather’s life and attributing them to her. Because Claude believed the war to be glorious, many readers assume Cather felt the same way and that she wrote the book to defend the war. Bakhtin also discusses “authoritarian discourse” and “internally persuasive discourse,” concepts which help explain that what was intrinsically meaningful to Claude may have been what Cather saw as societally imposed discourse needing to be exposed. Bakhtin explains that “in the evolution of an individual consciousness . . . what first occurs is a separation between internally persuasive
discourse and authoritarian enforced discourse” (345). In Cather’s novel we find that her intellectually impoverished hero never makes it this far: he allows the authoritarian discourse around him—in this case war rhetoric—to become internally persuasive for him because of his unswerving search for something to make his life worthwhile.

This same search for something to make life worth living plagued Cather’s cousin Grosvenor, called G. P. by family and friends. Cather explains in a letter to Dorothy that she knew her cousin well and had seen his frustrations for years, knowing that he—like Cather—desperately wanted to find a means of escape from the only life he knew and that he often made himself ridiculous trying. Because he felt contempt for her choices and she thought his absurd, however, they never really talked with understanding until one hot day on a wheat wagon together in a Nebraska field. Cather was spending some time at his family’s farm during harvest that summer of 1914 when the war first broke out, and she learned some of the things that were way back in his mind on those long rides hauling wheat together. Though she says G. P. had always had a strong need for action to help him escape the misery he seemed born to, she perceived at this point that he saw the war as a possible answer. She hoped he would find what he was looking for in the war and later wrote his mother that she was so proud of G. P. for going, trying to allay her aunt’s fears and give her reason for pride in her son. In this letter both Claude and Claude’s mother have their beginnings, though Cather did not think of writing the novel until the shock of G. P.’s death made her unable to think of anything else. Saying that she perfectly understands how Aunt Franc’s patriotism can’t quite reach to France at the moment, her letter encourages Aunt Franc to remember that her son always longed for the military life and that she should be proud of him for fighting for such a good cause.
Constructing a consistently heteroglossic novel full of the wide variety of characters, opinions, and social undercurrents she knew well, Cather creates a complex dialectic through which we come to understand the troubled, romantic main character as well as the world with which he is in dialogue. We see Claude’s internally persuasive voice, consistently romantic in telling him to expect “something splendid” from the world, and continually in conflict with the authoritarian voices of his father and his various communities. Cather develops many other characters with their own conflicting internally persuasive voices, some of whom change as they experience war, but none of these other voices has the power to affect Claude’s own voice. Consistent throughout the novel, from the hauntingly beautiful Nebraska scenes to the surrealistic depiction of life at the front, this romantically idealistic voice has convinced countless readers that Cather intended her book as a tribute to our fallen soldiers and the glory they earned. Though tribute to veterans undoubtedly factored into Cather’s choice to write this novel modeled on her fallen cousin, his voice hardly speaks alone.

Claude’s idealistic, war-loving voice necessarily speaks most noticeably in this heteroglossia, because his individual consciousness has not yet evolved to the point that he can distinguish between the authoritarian war rhetoric around him and the internally persuasive voice within him. Thus, he experiences the propagandist view as internally persuasive. Claude, as a young man who has not yet found a purpose for living, finds that the coming war lends essential excitement to an otherwise unbearably drab existence. Because he desperately wills it for himself, the war becomes the purpose-fulfilling ideal for which he has always longed. This desire is so central to his being that Cather
describes Claude’s feeling as “an intense kind of hope, an intense kind of pain,—the conviction that there was something splendid about life, if he could but find it!” (90).

Especially ironic about this desire is Claude’s concomitant fear of being fooled. Subtly, Cather reveals, by injecting a present-tense passage describing his state of mind into the midst of a consistently past-tense narrative, that this intense inner dialogue is continuous throughout the novel: “He has a dread of easy compromises, and he is terribly afraid of being fooled” (31). Nevertheless, although this fear remains with him throughout his life, it has no power to protect him. In his dialogue with other soldiers when he is finally in the war, he is vaguely aware that he sees things differently from the rest of them. At times even embarrassed by the discrepancy, he clings tenaciously to his hope of finding something splendid in the war. He has struck out too many times before in life to allow his hope to be defeated this time.

One expression of this determined idealism is Cather’s description of Claude’s state of mind upon arriving in France: “Four years on the way; now that he was here, he would enjoy the scenery a bit, he guessed” (310). Continuing in this vein, Cather describes the men bathing in “a shellhole full of opaque brown water,” which through Claude’s eyes is “even picturesquely situated,” surrounded by “what might almost be termed a grassy slope” (311). Clearly his companions do not see the situation as picturesque. First, Gerhardt warns the rest of them that in the winter they can expect to go for months before even such a crude bath as this. Next, when Claude tries to “pull out the splinters” from the bath hole and succeeds in uncovering an old German helmet, the other men scornfully rebuke him for opening up a graveyard (312). Here their choice of words reveals the chasm between Claude’s vision of the situation and his companions’.

Claude, predictably,
chooses to minimize discomforts by referring to a jagged metal helmet as a splinter; Bruger, realistically, informs Claude that by pulling up the helmet he has broken apart a decomposing body and stirred up a watery graveyard. Claude refuses to understand: “I don’t see how pulling out one helmet could stir the bottom up so” (312). Finally, Lieutenant Hammond caps the incident by posting a sign mocking Claude’s naivete: “No Public Bathing!! Private Beach C. Wheeler, Co. B. 2th Inf’ty.” (312).

Reflecting a vague awareness of his overly sentimental vision of this war, Claude ponders an epitaph he comes upon in a French graveyard. Entranced by the name “La France,” he thinks, “It was a pleasant name to say over in one’s mind, where one could make it as passionately nasal as one pleased and never blush” (335). Cather, a well-known Francophile, gives Claude her veneration for France. His naive response to the country and the bit of culture he encounters mirrors Cather’s own belief that France was one of the greatest countries of the world and one the United States could never hope to match. Knowing this, one can see why Cather could write Dorothy that Claude was part G. P. and part Cather, actually kind of a composite family character. In fact, she writes, she and he were sort of Siegmund/Sieglinde characters. Her likening the two of them to the mythical twin brother and sister who become lovers as adults reveals her sense of spiritual connection to this cousin who wished to escape his life and who spent so many years futilely seeking happiness.19 Obviously, his potential embarrassment arises from the thought of having his passionate idealism recognized by his more realistic companions. These intimations of reality cause Claude “to dread false happiness, to feel cowardly about being fooled,” but they do not shatter his surrounding bubble of idealism (344). He continues to believe that “Life had after all turned out well for him, and everything had a
noble significance. . . . He was beginning over again” (349). Unfortunately for Claude, this new beginning leads only to his imminent death. Shortly before he dies he is struck by “the deepest stab of despair he had ever known,” as he watches “his best friend and his best officer” leave together on a dangerous mission (382). Directly afterward, under the inspiration of Gerhardt’s bravery and unaware of its fatal end, Claude springs to the parapet in an act of recklessly courageous and impulsive leadership. Ironically, he dies believing he is doing all he can for a country and a cause worth dying for; moreover, he dies believing the lie of Gerhardt’s safety and the lie of the glorious cause. His worst fear is realized: he dies doubly duped. At this point within the novel an intense competition of voices arises, from the voice of belief in the glory of the war to the cynical voice of hardened skepticism, and Cather explores this heteroglossia fully.

A character with an extremely anti-romantic, simplistic view of the war who acts as a crucial part of the “dialogizing background” of Claude’s voice is his father, Nat Wheeler, with whom Claude experiences constant conflict. Mr. Wheeler—a real wheeler and dealer—has allowed the authoritarian view of the war to become internally persuasive because of the economic good he can derive from it. Mr. Wheeler expresses pleasure at the first news he hears of the “war scare in Europe,” because it is good for his wheat market: “There’s seventy cents a bushel in it, anyway” (139). Later the news pleases him even more: “If this is to be a sure enough war, wheat will go higher” (143). The war news also inspires him to work his fields as never before: “The neighbors said that nobody but the Kaiser had ever been able to get Nat Wheeler down to regular work” (147). Revealingly, in his last conversation with Claude before he leaves for the war, Mr. Wheeler talks only of the economic situation of the farm, proudly explaining to Claude
everything his son has grown up knowing. Undoubtedly afraid of negative possibilities he cannot face, Mr. Wheeler's intense belief that the war will benefit him economically prevents him from speaking of anything else as his son departs for battle. This attitude on the part of a father seeing his soldier son off to war exemplifies the cynical, modernist strand in Cather's dialectic.

Cather builds the novel's heteroglossia through depiction of myriad voices and attitudes toward the war. For example, Claude's friends Ernest and Leonard have directly contrasting voices, neither of which correlates with Claude's intense idealism. Ernest, of Austrian background, tries to make Claude understand that the conscription itself is an outrage being perpetrated upon the German people: "I tell you, nobody's will has anything to do with this. It is the harvest of all that has been planted. I never thought it would come in my lifetime, but I knew it would come" (142). On the other hand, the Wheelers' neighbor Leonard—typical of a large group of Americans—begins as isolationist and turns violently activist. Before the sinking of the Lusitania, Leonard does not care a bit what happens in Europe and wants Americans to "mind their own business"; directly afterward, he is anxious to show his manhood by ridding the world of Germans in short order. Both these voices oppose Claude's romantic idealism, with Ernest expressing anti-war despair and disillusionment and Leonard expressing selfishly pragmatic patriotism.

An excellent microcosm of the romantic-modernist, authoritarian-internally persuasive dialectic appears in the character of Mahaiy. Another memorably different voice, the Wheelers' simple-minded, longtime servant reveals her fascination with every aspect of war. She has the distinction of being the only person "who had ever seen war
with her own eyes, and she felt that this fact gave her definite superiority” (186). Unfortunately, she does not have the mental capacity to see through the atrocity stories she hears by comparing them to her prior experience. She cannot figure out how the Germans can all be as ugly and mean as the papers say they are, when she knows what nice-looking, wonderful German neighbors they have. She also cannot figure out why soldiers “go breakin’ other people’s things, an’ turnin’ ‘em out of their houses” when the enemy soldiers she remembers were gentle and pathetically worn-out (185). She accepts the explanations as absolute truth, however, and neither she nor anyone else has enough respect for her intelligence to realize that her knowledge of soldiers is a truth not represented in the newspapers.

Because of her internalization of authoritarian discourse, Mahailey rejoices when Claude announces his intention to fight the Germans. Overcome with emotion, she “kissed his unworthy hand. ‘I knowed you would,’ she sobbed. ‘I always knowed you would, you nice boy, you! Old Mahail’ knowed!’” (201). The heavy irony here is caused by Mahailey’s belief, in spite of the emaciated, suffering soldiers she has seen, that war is glorious. Mahailey loves Claude more than anyone else on earth; yet she is both rapturous at the thought of his going over to fight and spellbound by seeing him in uniform. Cather shows two distinct voices here as integral constituents of the heteroglossia: Mahailey’s original internally persuasive voice, not fully recognized, and the authoritarian voice of society, talking Mahailey out of believing her own internal voice. In a convoluted manner, Mahailey’s experiential knowledge, subsumed by national war rhetoric, becomes a romanticized vision of the war and mirrors Claude’s own.
Claude's mother's complex reaction to the war also functions as a microcosm of Cather's continuing dialectic. Although, as her name suggests, Evangeline Wheeler is extremely pious—sometimes making religiously simplistic judgments about her favorite son's needs—she sees the war more discerningly than the other characters do. Already when her husband categorizes it as only a war scare, Mrs. Wheeler knows better:

“If there’s that much, I’m somehow afraid there will be more,” said Mrs. Wheeler thoughtfully. She had picked up the paper fly-brush and sat waving it irregularly, as if she were trying to brush away a swarm of confusing ideas. (139)

Mrs. Wheeler believes war is cause for great concern “in such a disordered world” (150). As she wrestles with omnipresent authoritarian war rhetoric, she studies her map of Europe and the encyclopedia, endeavoring to understand fully what is happening; it greatly disturbs her, and the news of destruction makes her profoundly tired. Yet, she, too, is temporarily caught up in the propaganda in her quest to discover the moral stand:

They have told us all along that we could be more helpful to the Allies out of the war than in it, because we could send munitions and supplies. If we agree to withdraw that aid, where are we? Helping Germany, all the time pretending to mind our own business! If our only alternative is to be at the bottom of the sea, we had better be there! (197)

In spite of making this comment before Claude decides to go to war, she feels overwhelmed and drained by sorrow after his decision: “Mrs. Wheeler remained sitting at the foot of the deserted breakfast table. She was not crying. Her eyes were utterly sightless. Her back was so stooped that she seemed to be bending under a burden” (203). Her original response to the war is an intense desire to help those who are suffering, though she does not envision sending troops. But once her son decides to enlist, her troubled mind can no longer feel anything but pain.
Willa Cather herself followed much the same trajectory in her thoughts about the war. In 1914 she writes her Aunt Franc that she can think of little else besides the war and the large numbers of people in Europe starving to death as a result.\textsuperscript{21} She writes passionately about rousing the small towns of Nebraska to contribute to a fund to feed the starving Belgians who have done nothing to bring this horror upon themselves. Cather’s friendship with the wife of the Belgian Minister of State opened her eyes to this suffering and motivated her to try to help. Expressing an intense longing that each family in Red Cloud and other small towns could contribute even half a dollar and imagining what a vast impact such money would have on Belgian starvation, Cather ends the letter with an expression of her certainty that history will be ashamed of the United States’ stinginess if people do not help.\textsuperscript{22} Also like Mrs. Wheeler’s initial thoughts about the war, Cather’s passionate plea for starving people does not include thoughts of American troops becoming involved. Once her countrymen’s lives are at stake, she can only think of the war as evil, writing Mary Rice Jewett that true happiness will be impossible until after the war.\textsuperscript{23}

Similarly, Mrs. Wheeler—in contrast to many other voices in the novel—believes that even if joining the war effort may be the only moral thing to do, it is not something splendid and glorious but horrifying and terrible. She envisions great destruction and even foresees as Claude leaves that she will not see him again: “‘Old eyes,’ she cried, ‘why do you betray me? Why do you cheat me of my last sight of my splendid son!’” (225). In the end of the novel, she has no more illusions about any good coming from the war, as she notices, “One by one the heroes of that war, the men of dazzling soldiership, leave prematurely the world they have come back to... one by one they quietly die by their own hand” (390). The only partially mitigating factor for her is the knowledge that
Claude died believing he had finally found the "something splendid about life" for which he was eternally searching. She discerns enough to recognize the "meanness and greed" and ugliness of human nature, and "[w]hen she can see nothing that has come of it all but evil, she reads Claude's letters over again and reassures herself; for him the call was clear, the cause was glorious" (389). Mrs. Wheeler comforts herself that he is now "safe" from the disillusionment which she sees as his inevitable lot had he lived: "She would have dreaded the awakening" (389). Mrs. Wheeler embodies both Cather's romantic belief in human beings' heroic potential and her concomitant knowledge that, ironically, sometimes their heroism makes no difference.

On the other side of the ocean, the struggle between romanticism and modernist cynicism reveals itself in Claude's friends. Albert Usher, a fledgling Marine from Wyoming as idealistic as Claude, intends to set the world to rights again through the war. Reflecting on the gruesome instruments of torture he has been exposed to in training, he says, "Seems like something used to be the matter with the world," while Claude perceives "from his serious look that he believed he and his countrymen who were pouring over-seas would help to change all that" (249). Another idealist in a more limited sense is the young French woman in the Red Cross barrack who works tirelessly to improve the lives of those battered by the war. While seeing all around her the destruction of her country and her people, she views the American forces as an infusion of fresh life and as "men of destiny" (332). Cather herself had an opportunity to observe many French people venerating American soldiers as their rescuers when she was in Paris the summer of 1920. She writes Aunt Franc that she watched a huge parade of war orphans celebrating America and that she saw the American flag flying above public buildings in the French
capital. She also writes Viola Roseboro that seeing the veterans in the park with all of their battle-caused disabilities reminds her of the huge price many people must pay to uphold such a beautiful civilization.

A more cynical, despondent European who sees only the destructiveness of war is the young British soldier who has lost all his friends on the Somme. After telling Claude and Hicks, "'We went over a thousand, and we came back seventeen,'" he explains, "'Oh, a fellow can't stay out after all his chums have been killed! He'd think about it all the time, you know'" (320-21). Although this boy still appears too innocent to express his cynicism overtly, he expresses, nevertheless, the impossibility of carrying on life in a normal manner after seeing such wholesale destruction of human life. Another fatalistic character, Sergeant Hicks comments on the French and German dead in a cemetery, "it's all the same damned silly thing . . . what's the good of it?" (336). The death of his best friend, Dell Able, however, as well as Maxey's promotion on the basis of what others have done, actually cements Hicks' cynicism. After seeing Able, Gerhardt, and Claude die to no purpose—"God only knows why" (388)—he loses his belief in the purpose of life. Through these disparate characters and their variously expressed views and experiences Cather creates the heteroglossia essential to her conflicted portrait of the world.

Probably the most complex exemplification of Cather's dialogism among her soldier characters is David Gerhardt, a young violinist from New York. So complex that Claude cannot quite figure him out, he does not accept typical notions of the war but is, in fact, as ambivalent as Claude's mother. In explaining his enlistment, he says two things: that he wishes he had been in Paris when the war broke out so he "would have gone into the French Army on the first impulse" and that when he did enlist it was to avoid having
“to admit that I wasn’t a man” (346). While both of these feelings appear in contradictory ways to affirm taking part in the war, they also reveal his reaction against the authoritarian discourse being imposed on him and demonstrate his cynicism about it. Because he has lived in France, Gerhardt does not have Claude’s untraveled naivete. He participates in the war because “[t]he war was put up to our generation,” but he does not believe in it (348). The purpose of the war, he charges, is “[c]ertainly not to make the world safe for Democracy, or any rhetoric of that sort” (348). Similarly, he observes of his lost music, “If this war didn’t kill you in one way, it would in another... I’ve seen so many beautiful old things smashed... I’ve become a fatalist” (301, 347). Because of how completely different his prewar life in Europe was from Claude’s Nebraskan experience, the novel reveals the crucial role of the “dialogizing background” of both these characters’ voices. Although they make virtually identical choices in how to respond to the war, their motivations and beliefs are dialectically opposed.

Cather’s letters reveal that her own dialectical thoughts on the war come from many sources, but her primary focus is always on characters rather than on the issue. She admits to Dorothy that she never wanted to write a war story, losing six months by trying to put Claude’s story out of her head and write about something else instead. Explaining that she generally writes to escape thinking about familiar people trapped by the ordinariness of their lives, in this case the story of the cousin whose soul she understood haunted her. She muses that it is a situation where what she loves and what she hates are closely intertwined. After seeing G. P. become passionate about enlisting, Cather had originally felt pleased that he had escaped his unbearable life by finding a cause to throw himself into, and then she had gone her way and forgotten about him. When her memory
was triggered by a newspaper article detailing his heroic death, she was amazed that someone feeling and acting so completely hopeless a short while ago could have found in the war reason for such intense living. She saw it as glorious that he could have experienced something so completely out of keeping with his former life and experience and that he could be lauded as a hero on account of it.

Having originally felt ineluctably drawn to him and his particular response to war—as an individual she knew and with whom she could identify—she was later amazed at how many soldiers shared his same emotional experience. She had wanted to call the novel “Claude” but allowed her publisher to convince her to change it to the more marketable title. She often came back to the change of title as the cause of public misunderstanding of the novel. Meaning it to be the story of a haunted romantic trying to find a place for himself in a disorienting modern world, she found it read as the story of the war in general. Since her own feelings about the war were so ambivalent, she was originally greatly surprised to see her novel read as a treatise expressing one opinion. Cather does admit that it did turn into a war story, however, despite her original intentions. In a 1922 letter to Elizabeth Vermorcken, she writes of how exasperated she is that at the moment the novel seems to have no existence at all as a story but only as an opinion about war. She writes of piles of angry letters from pacifists on her desk, one saying that Cather will be forever stained with crime after this novel. No matter how unexpected Cather finds these reactions, nevertheless, she realizes she has given people reason for them. She likens her situation to a pianist in the middle of a classical concert during war time suddenly beginning to play a famous German song. She admits she has brought people’s passionate opinions out in just the same way. Spending so much time on
Claude's earlier life, she had hoped to avoid what she calls the dark secret that the novel would have to get into the war; she certainly hopes that after the decade passes, the war will no longer dominate how people read the book.

In a letter thanking Dorothy a thousand times for the countless hours she put into reading the proofs for Cather and the way she dropped all else to do this gigantic favor, she writes of feeling that she never really knew her cousin till she wrote this novel; through writing the novel she has reached an understanding of her cousin and how his war experience shaped him. She believes he didn’t even know himself until then. To Cather the strangest part of this experience has been how much more she cares about this character than about any of her others. Even if the book is deemed a failure, she hopes desperately that Claude is valued in spite of it. In these three tormented years of writing about him, he has gotten into her blood. She writes of having to have her tea by herself during these years, because she never knew when Claude would drop in and make anyone else present feel irrelevant to her. During the years of writing his story, she claims to have done everything with him in mind, noting that he was a very expensive boy to keep. She remembers feeling that nothing ever really mattered to her so much as how Claude was doing that day and that she sometimes felt like Mrs. Wheeler in having to tell him to rest his perturbed spirit. Finding the process of writing his story incredibly draining but also cathartic, she finds life afterward casual and her new novel only an external matter compared to the intense personal experience of writing about Claude.

Besides his constant presence with her, another reason he has become so much a part of her and made her feel like Sieglinde to his Siegmund is that she has gained a new understanding of herself and her own insecurities. These many letters to Dorothy, dis-
cussing the novel and thanking her profusely for the time, energy, and heart Canfield Fisher has put into helping Cather, also discuss at length the relationship of these two friends over the years and Cather's insecurities which have impacted their friendship. Cryptic references—as in her letter of Sept. 24, 1902—to a major difficulty between the two women during their weeks together in Europe that summer are clarified by these letters written two decades later.

Cather reveals that the fictional relationship she develops between Claude and his sophisticated friend David Gerhardt is modeled after her relationship with Dorothy. In response to a comment Dorothy has made to her about the young men's friendship and Claude's pained feelings toward David, Cather explains that she herself felt the same conflicted feelings. She felt extreme admiration for Dorothy and her ability to speak the language and fit in so well in France, but she too experienced hostility born of jealousy. At one point Cather responds to something Dorothy has written her about being able to understand the feelings of a roughneck American in Europe, as she says emphatically that Dorothy could not possibly understand from her own experience. She enumerates the advantages Dorothy had growing up in a sophisticated, moneyed family where both parents were also highly educated and tells her that she was the roughneck who always envied Dorothy's advantages. Cather, who usually gravitated toward people older than she, experienced something new in feeling inferior to Dorothy, who was five years younger than Cather but eminently more polished and educated in the ways of the intellectual and artistic world. Twenty years later her writing about Claude and David illuminates this long-buried pain, and her discussing the manuscript with Dorothy reveals its genesis. Both because of their shared experience in France and because of Canfield
Fisher's positive outlook on the world, which often balanced Cather's, she was an ideal person to read the novel and bolster Cather's sagging spirits after she finished writing it.

Reflecting what was often true in her personal life, throughout this novel Cather reveals the power of romanticism to give hope and the power of modern reality to dash illusions. *One of Ours* progresses by representing divergent views of the war without explicitly accepting one or the other; however, by choosing to end with Mrs. Wheeler's forceful statements about the total evil of the war, Cather makes it clear that she does not write to glorify the war.\(^{31}\) As Cather undoubtedly felt about her cousin, whose death in the war first propelled her to think of writing this novel, the only good Mrs. Wheeler sees in the war is that it has allowed her poor, idealistic son—who could not face reality—to die happily. He dies deeply deluded, but at least he never has to know it. Supporting this extrapolation of the author's view, Marilyn Arnold notes, "Cather's grief over both world wars and their atrocities is amply documented. Her letters are full of agonized references to war. And scattered comments in her other non-fiction underscores the mood of her letters" (262). In the same way, grief over the war stands out in Mrs. Wheeler and contributes to this novel's tone which, as Skaggs observes, "signaled a new and darker Cather vision" from that of her earlier works (9). Unfortunately, some readers' misunderstanding of this grief and of Cather's multiplicity of voices leads to a misreading of the book. For example, Dorothy Van Ghent states that Cather's love for her cousin "led her to the mistake of *One of Ours*: 'that boy should not die unknown, the significance of his life should not go unrecorded'" (26). If Cather's true purpose, however, had been to memorialize the boy and show the significance of his life, she never would have ended the book as she did; rather, she would have shown his death as having some value.
Instead, she describes his place of death as “the Boar’s Head . . . a wallow, more like a dump heap than a trench” (378). Cather’s novel is not the simplistic setting forth of one idea but a dialogical exploration of conflicting ideas and voices.

The novel displays much more fully the modernist malaise of a young man unhappy with his world and the values of the people around him than it does either a romantic or a modernist picture of the war. Claude’s life and emotions, his reasons for doing what he does, Cather reveals. She does not have to give us much of the war, because Claude—in his own idealistic world, seeing what he wants to see—does not see much of it. His vision of the world is, for this reason, surreal: he sees the lovers rather than their disfigurement; he sees the gentleness of the French people without their tremendous sense of loss. Ironically, Claude’s surreal vision of the war causes Cather to be accused of being out of touch with reality in her war section, yet this same surrealist vision brings out the haunting pathos of Claude’s life and death. Though Claude is not essentially a hero of The Great War, he is, as Rosowski says, “a romantic caught in a nightmarish world of realism” (97). In Cather’s own terms, the novel is a “story of youth, struggle and defeat,” rather than one of glory.

From the beginning of the book, idealistic Claude, confused by the conflicting voices of his world, yearns for things to be different so that he can find fulfillment. His hopeful idealism leads him to see different situations or people as the answer: going to the state university, being with the Erlichs, being married, being part of the war. Indeed, Jean Schwind observes incisively:

The idealism that gives Claude the power to transform fetid shell holes into private beaches and to make beautiful landscapes of battle-scarred wastelands is the imaginative equivalent of a “Claude glass,” a mechanical device popularized by picturesque artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A curved mirror
with a tinted surface, the Claude glass reduced the discordant variations of color and smoothed the irregular spatial recessions of the visible world to reflect Edenic scenes of perfect harmony and order. . . . In short, the Claude glass serves as a brilliant central metaphor for the romantic idealism that frames and distorts Claude Wheeler’s vision. (63-64)33

This image of the distorting mirror perfectly correlates with a novel which not only presents varied views and voices but is dialogical in its continual manner of informing opposing views through the “dialogizing background” of each other. Just as the mirror misinforms the viewer of what he or she sees because of the way the glass interacts with the scenery, in a similar way, Claude’s reactions against his father’s, Enid’s, and Gerhardt’s voices persuade him that he thinks for himself and discerns the actual world. In reality, he sees and responds to a nonexistent world which is merely a composite of his own perceptions of the people and ideas around him.

The actual, modern world and the nonexistent, wished-for world of Claude’s imagination conflict dialogically throughout both sections of the novel; moreover, Cather heightens the tension between these modernist and romantic worlds by employing settings which themselves contrast dramatically. The Nation’s reviewer calls her writing “the passionate heart of America’s best” but points to what he calls the novel’s “structural weakness”: “The fact remains that the fable of ‘One of Ours’ breaks in the middle and another tale and epic motivation intrudes.” He applauds the verve and beauty of the book but does not understand that the hauntingly beautiful Nebraskan scenes and the depiction of Claude’s unrealistic view of the war are inseparable halves of Cather’s novel and vision, two dialogical voices purposefully at odds with one another throughout the novel. Her use of setting dialogically portrays not only two completely different parts of the world and parts of the novel—so much so that readers have sometimes accused her of
splicing two books together—but also two completely different mindsets. In this novel, Cather creates two settings as dialogical as those in her later *The Professor's House*, using setting symbolically to represent the conflicted world of *One of Ours*.

Cather sets the first half of the book in hauntingly beautiful but stultifying Nebraska. Here she presents Claude, in the midst of natural beauty and fertility, feeling as little chance for personal fulfillment as does the cherry tree his father maliciously cuts down to teach Claude and his mother a lesson. The sense of entrapment Cather felt emanating from her strong, healthy, young cousin during the harvest weeks she spent with him on his father's farm fueled her depiction of Claude's aimlessness. These chapters are rich with physical beauty and abundance but also replete with people determined that Claude not be happy and productive, unless he can be so by conforming to society's materialist values. This half of the novel depicts the same world Sinclair Lewis explores in *Babbit* and *Main Street* and reveals the influence both of materialism and authoritarian war rhetoric on its diverse inhabitants. Though Claude's father and his brother Bailey most completely exemplify this mindless materialism which threatens to suffocate Claude, the esteem both men receive from the community exacerbates the problem for Claude.

An enormous contrast from this materialist world in the first half of the novel, the second half piques many readers with its idealism. First it startles readers with Claude's perception of life as almost perfect—even on the difficult journey over to France—and then jarringly contrasts lovely, rural France with war's bloody violence and disfigurement. Irony predominates, with Claude seeing only beauty amidst the ruin and violence because of his own intense psychological need to find it. On the troop ship the narrator notes, "most of them, like Claude Wheeler, felt a sense of relief at being rid of all they
had ever been before and facing something absolutely new” (238). Claude summarizes:
“Taken one by one, they were ordinary fellows like himself. Yet here they were. And in this massing and movement of men there was nothing mean or common; he was sure of that. It was, from first to last, unforeseen, almost incredible” (243, emphasis mine). As Trout notes, One of Ours “traces the essential trajectory of the male American war experience, presenting a progression from a locally defined identity to membership in a brave new American collective” (93). While Dos Passos’ novels trace the path of disillusionment, Cather’s novel traces not only disillusionment but more noticeably “the identity-altering environment created within the AEF [American Expeditionary Forces]” which convinces Claude and others they have been given a grand new life (Trout 93).

One major difficulty Cather critics have had with the novel is failure to read it as a tale of the evolution of Claude’s individual consciousness, which never fully awakens, and his consequent failure to distinguish between various forms of authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse. This error can cause readers to find the final war section disastrously oversentimental, because they falsely attribute to Cather the same naive, idealistic dreams Claude and a few other young soldiers share. Stanley Cooperman’s statement “the naivete in One of Ours represents Miss Cather herself” reveals that he has not carefully considered voices in the dialogue other than Claude’s. He chooses quotations which highlight Claude’s idealistic vision but ignores the authorial comment. He quotes, “But the scene was ageless; youths were sailing away to die for an idea . . . Claude thought they were the finest sight in the world” (31, 33). Characteristically, however, he omits the revealing end of the first quotation. The original sentence leaves quite a different impression:
But the scene was ageless; youths were sailing away to die for an idea, a sentiment, for the mere sound of a phrase . . . and on their departure they were making vows to a bronze image in the sea. (235)

This passage reveals that Cather does not see the war as a cause worth dying for, as she likens the soldiers' actions to those of people who worship inefficacious gods shaped of wood, stone, or metal.34 Undoubtedly, however, "Claude thought" the idea was worth the sacrifice, and Cather faithfully records his idealism as an essential voice in this dialogue.

Unfortunately, Cooperman and the countless readers influenced by him over the decades have failed to absorb the beauty of Cather's dialogical portrait, focusing only on the distorted vision of poor Claude.35 As Josephine Donovan notes, lamenting its too frequent dismissal "as an unsuccessful attempt at a war novel," One of Ours is "of considerabe significance" in exhibiting "the psychic split seen in much of Cather's work" (116). It is Cather's focus on Claude and his conflicted world which made her most reluctant to change from the book's working title, Claude, to the present one as insisted on by Alfred Knopf. As Woodress points out, Knopf was certainly correct in judging that his title had greater sales appeal than hers would have had, but it was also incorrect in implying that this story was to be generally representative of all soldiers rather than of one idealistically romantic soldier (323). In the same way her new title of the book's last section, "Bidding the Eagles of the West Fly On," was catchier than her original, "The Blameless Fool by Pity Enlightened," but it allowed readers to interpret it as patriotically jingoistic instead of ironic in the tone of the Vachel Lindsay poem from which she was quoting (Woodress 328). Opening our eyes to the heteroglossia of Claude's world as Cather presents it and allowing our hearts to break with those who experienced the
breaking of their world in two in the post-war era brings us to a fuller understanding of the novel and its world.\cite{cather_post-war}

Even more impressive than Cather's evocative presentation of her characters and their world is the rich depth of characterization and psychological struggle she depicts within the mind of a provincial farm boy. Through the structure of the novel she brings alive far more than his life, making it clear that it is not primarily his naive view of the world she wants to present but the poignancy of a world which can only satisfy the yearning idealist when it is seen through the Claude glass of romanticism. What Joan Acocella says about Cather's other novels is also true here: "while . . . Cather is describing life's terrors she never stops asserting its beauties: the fingers of light, the orchard shot with gold. The dream is still there; we just can't have it" (59). Far more complex than most readers realize, One of Ours improves upon rereading, as it allows the reader ever deeper into the world it presents. Cather's own assessment says it well: "I like best of my books the one that all the high-brow critics knock. In my opinion, 'One of Ours' has more of value in it than any of the others."\cite{cather_self_assessment}
CHAPTER 4

THE IMPACT OF GOSSIP AND COMMUNITY ON WILLA CATHER AND ON HER LOST LADY

In a December 1946 letter to Trixie Florance, a friend from Red Cloud, Cather thanks her for a gift of gorgeous flowers but writes of the visit from her and her husband as more precious than all the hothouse flowers imaginable.⁠ On the other hand, multiple letters to Carrie Miner and others reveal obsessive worry about her “enemies” in Red Cloud. Recognition of the powerful capability of relationships both to enhance and to damage the lives of others permeates A Lost Lady. Gerard Dollar’s “Community and Connectedness in A Lost Lady” contends the novel demonstrates an “opposition between the will to connect that Cather associates with community, and the divisive, isolating forces which threaten and ultimately defeat community” (189). The power of these divisive forces Cather writes of in a 1945 letter to Trixie’s husband, saying that she feels timid about going back to Red Cloud because of some unspecified unpleasant things which have happened since she last visited. In A Lost Lady similar community connections are broken through gossip: Evelyn Funda notes that the novel “focuses not on the bridges possible between human souls, but on the boundaries that keep those souls always separate” (89).

Though Cather’s A Lost Lady fits well into the scheme of literature romanticizing the past, this novel does so in a profoundly modernist way, continuing to exemplify the ongoing dialectic between romanticism and modernism present in Cather’s correspond-
ence as well as in her fiction. One manifestation of this dialectic in *A Lost Lady* is the
tension between the need for community and connectedness and the concomitant fear of
the destructive force of gossip. As Janis P. Stout notes in *Willa Cather: The Writer and
Her World*, Cather was “a deeply conflicted writer who . . . structured her writing in such
ways as to control her uncertainty and project a serenity she did not, in fact, feel” (xi).
Cather’s romanticization of the West and of small-town connectedness highlights her
romantic idealism, while her potent depiction of the destructive power of gossip on
Marian Forrester and on Niel highlights her modernist vision of a complex and often
fragmented world.

*A Lost Lady* highlights the multiple functions of oral narrative, contrasting the
myths and romantic fairy tales the Forresters tell with the voyeuristic gossip of the towns­
women. Evelyn Funda notes that this novel “proves to be a turning point” in Cather’s
treatment of gossip (109). In the early novels gossip is always a negative force, such as
the “fear of the tongue, that terror of little towns” in *The Song of the Lark* (120); in later
novels, however, gossip often produces a positive response, as in the fireside stories told
“with loving exaggeration” in *Shadows on the Rock* (136). In *A Lost Lady* Cather negoti­
ates between these negative and positive poles of oral narrative, but her remembered fears
and negative experiences cause Cather to recreate for Marian Forrester a similar scenario
of breaking societal norms and paying the consequences.

Though Marian’s experience is primary, Niel, the judge, and the towns­
women illustrate contrasting experiences of gossip in this novel. Jorg R. Bergmann discusses
these multiple functions of gossip in his *Discreet Indiscretions: The Social Organization
of Gossip*. Bergmann defines gossip as containing “a piece of news involving a morally
dubious if not outright reprehensible action” (ix), such as the facts of Marian Forrester’s personal life being so freely discussed. Though Bergmann discusses gossip primarily as an illicit action, potentially harming others, he acknowledges that gossip has the positive function of uniting the group doing the talking and that the etymology of the word is actually positive:

“Gossip” is derived from the old-English expression “god sib,” which designated a specific relationship between a family and a relative or a friend of the family. This relationship had to be so strong that relatives or friends were chosen as godparents for the family’s children. In the course of time, “god sib” became “gossip” and . . . [included others] who . . . enjoyed a close contact with the family (55).

In A Lost Lady, Niel and the judge fit the description of “god sib,” whose relationships begin positively but deteriorate once the men develop judgmental attitudes. The towns­women, on the other hand, simply entertain themselves by casting slurs on someone they see as above them socially. Funda comments incisively,

By giving so much attention in the novel to gossip as a form of oral narrative, Cather demonstrates how an audience of oral narrative that is corrupted into voyeur and storytelling intimacy becomes perverted into infringement, intrusion, and invasion (90).

In A Lost Lady Cather reveals a yearning for healing oral narrative, which she associates with romantic tales, and a fear of destructive oral narrative, which she has experienced as painfully fragmenting. This yearning is never fulfilled in the novel, but it fits well with what Funda sees as a progression from the early novels, which fear gossip, and the later novels, which see a positive place for it. As a turning-point novel, A Lost Lady manifests the desire for something better but not yet the belief that such positive oral narrative is typical.

Writing this novel in 1922, the year Cather later claimed the “world broke in two” (Not Under Forty v), she depicts the earlier era as romantic in far surpassing what came
later and her present age as one of fragmentation and disconnection. Cao Jinghua explains it as a coming to terms with modernity: “The world breaking in two around 1922 . . . shattered the traditional concept of integrated selfhood, which in Cather and other writers of her time began to be replaced by a preoccupation with the fragmentary realities of selfhood” (13). Her personal life and letters during this time also reflect an attempt to find community and moral wholeness in the midst of her complex, disparate worlds. Her desire for connectedness reveals itself both in her reaching out to friends like Carrie Miner for emotional stability till the end of her life and in her joining the Episcopal church of Red Cloud with her parents in November of 1922, though she had spoken in early years of art as her only God.

Cather’s fear of the negative power that community could exert on her if she did not protect herself from it emerges in the fragmenting power of gossip on Marian Forrester, a woman both idolized and trapped by patriarchal, small-town society. Initially Mrs. Forrester revels in sociability and has great friends across the country but later is terribly lonely when cut off from them. Marian Forrester’s social needs, unfortunately, are not met by her Nebraska townsfolk, who cannot understand her the way the sophisticated Colorado friends can and who treat her as a different type of human being. Even though Cather portrays Niel as idealizing the old-fashioned patriarchal society which Cather depicts here, she also reveals its underbelly through its pettiness and pervasive, destructive gossip which nearly destroys Marian and which Cather often feared could destroy her.3 In this conflicted novel, Cather elucidates the competing positive and negative effects of a unified patriarchal community through both her glorification of many of its people and her simultaneous presentations of gender stereotypes and the
impact of small-town gossip on Mrs. Forrester. Though community and gossip do not inherently connect to romanticism and modernism, the manner in which Cather chooses to develop them in this novel exemplifies her ongoing dialectic and how it affects Marian Forrester: her idealization of community reveals Cather’s romanticism and her fear of gossip’s impact reveals her modernist sensibility.

Many of Cather’s letters to old friends—early and late—reveal her to be concerned about the destructive potential of small-town, patriarchal society on the creativity and individual identities of women. As a young woman who often enjoyed shocking staid older people with her short hair, New Woman style of attire, masculinized name, and other unconventional behavior, Cather sometimes begged friends back home to realize that she was not really “bohemian.” At twenty-two she wrote Mariel that she was going to succeed in order to prove her Nebraska enemies wrong, while years later as a famous author, she wrote to Carrie and Mary Miner about Red Cloud people she was certain were out to destroy her. Both in destroying reputations—which she greatly feared for herself—and in limiting women’s options, Cather saw great negative potential in the community. True to her romantic/modernist sensibility, she often wrote about the community she grew up in as one of her greatest strengths as a writer, yet she also expressed extreme anxiety about many of her Red Cloud townspeople. Niel exemplifies this double-sided power of the community on others through his changing relationship with Mrs. Forrester. A Lost Lady explores Niel’s power—as prime representative of the community—to bless Mrs. Forrester, yet it also depicts the power he and the rest of the community have to damage her. Niel finally contributes more to Mrs. Forrester’s pain than the Mrs. Beasleys
of Sweet Water, because he insists on seeing her as quintessential woman and punishes her for not living up to his expectations.

Niel’s mournful romanticism about the Forresters, the old West, and the pioneers has caused the novel to be read falsely as an elegy for the past ever since its publication. Patricia Lee Yongue, for instance, writes that “A Lost Lady [is] perhaps the most gloom-ridden of all of Willa Cather’s novels.... It is the story of a lost lady, of a lost generation, possibly even of a lost country” (5). Susan Rosowski notes, however, that Cather’s A Lost Lady in fact questions “how to translate the best of the past into the present, despite essential changes between the times.... Cather focuses on human adaptation to change—on characters who struggle to maintain value within a framework of mutability” (52). Mrs. Forrester eventually thrives on this mutability, finding in it new possibilities, while Niel allows it to destroy much of his enjoyment of life. Both Niel and Mrs. Forrester respond dramatically to their changing times but in opposite ways, which readers often fail to recognize. While Niel mourns the forever vanished beautiful past, Mrs. Forrester consciously decides to rescue herself and move on, first through Ivy and then through Henry Collins. Ironically, the younger Niel cannot move beyond his romanticism, whereas the older Mrs. Forrester displays the complexity of modernism in her constant ability to adapt. Essentially Cather’s romanticism resides in Niel, but her modernist response to the changing world informs Mrs. Forrester’s outlook and actions. Cather’s modernism also creates a double text which both sympathizes with and censures Niel for his idealism.

Many of Willa Cather’s letters reveal a similar ability to adapt to change, while also revealing a romantic belief in community as necessary for emotional health. An 1897
letter to Mariel Gere, a college friend, describes Cather’s sense of panic and abandonment as she rode the train further and further away from her friends and home in Nebraska to a new job in Pittsburgh. Nevertheless, she adapted to her entirely new situation, boarding in the home of her boss and family, the extremely pious Axtells, and becoming the darling of the same type of club women she mocked throughout most of her life. Just as Marian Forrester expresses to Niel her feelings of isolation from her Colorado friends because of being shut up in Sweet Water permanently, Cather felt the same panic even when leaving Nebraska for a blossoming career. Later, even after she was well settled into her new work and social life, she wrote Mariel that she couldn’t possibly stay away another year. Although Cather felt isolated in the city while longing for the town and Marian Forrester felt isolated in her small town while longing for the city, both expressed a desperate need for community. As late as January 1910 Cather wrote her Aunt Frances that nearly everyone at the glorious Christmas midnight mass she had just attended in New York was crying tears of homesickness for some small town just as she was. Letters to Carrie Miner—her earliest childhood friend—speak increasingly in the last decade of her life of how crucial her early relationships were to the person she became and the writing she was doing. These letters, especially because she could no longer manage the visits she kept hoping for, emphasize Cather’s fear of disconnection. Cather established new friends far from the ones she idealized but continued to fear being cut off from the people who knew her early in life. Though Marian Forrester Collins is loved and “well cared for” at the end of her life, she dies isolated from her small-town community, a fearful thought for Cather. In Cather’s case, life replicated art: Cather’s chosen burial place was in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, instead of Red Cloud. No written directive from Cather has
survived; nevertheless, the fact that her younger sister Elsie wrote of how disappointed she was in Willa’s decision, announced at the time of their mother’s death, makes it clear that the decision of a burial place was not made by Edith Lewis. The fact that Cather would continue to write to people in Red Cloud as the most important in her life, yet choose to be buried elsewhere, evidences her conflictedness about both the place and its people.\textsuperscript{12}

Strikingly, even while she was writing letters idealizing the people of her childhood, she wrote other letters revealing a fear of the power these usually unnamed Red Cloud people held over her through their words. One letter mentions choosing to write the recipient again only with the understanding that he will never mention or quote from anything she writes him personally. She wrote of how devastated she was at hearing excerpts of a letter she had written to him read as part of a radio broadcast. She clearly resented both the invasion of her privacy and the fact that this friend had commodified their friendship for personal gain. Other letters mention the unfeeling demands people of Red Cloud placed on her time when she came for visits. She longed to visit with the people to whom she felt close, but she dreaded the pressure of having to spend time in small talk, especially with those who were interested in her for her celebrity. Throughout her adult life, she protected her private time and space by intentionally staying in hotels rather than visiting friends.\textsuperscript{13} Stout comments that Cather’s geographical displacements early in life shaped “her personal vacillation between a powerful homing instinct and an at least equally powerful need to move, to go forth” (13). This same emotional response caused Cather to feel excessively torn between drawing close and pulling away in per-
sonal relationships. She writes explicitly about this conflict within families in her "Katherine Mansfield" essay:

One realizes that even in harmonious families there is this double life: the group life, which is the one we can observe in our neighbour’s household, and, underneath, another—secret and passionate and intense—which is the real life that stamps the faces and gives character to the voices of our friends. Always in his mind each member of these social units is escaping, running away, trying to break the net which circumstances and his own affections have woven about him. One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them. (WCOW 109)

Cather reveals here that far more than a concern for her privacy precipitated her conflicted feelings and actions toward Red Cloud. This passage uncovers some of the pain which caused Cather both to express repeated longings in her last years for a long visit home and to stay away from 1931 to 1947.

One of the clearest demonstrations in A Lost Lady of Cather’s tension between the power of community to energize and the power of gossip to destroy is the brief story of Mrs. Forrester’s early life, which moves inexorably through various tellings from fairy-tale to brokenness. Though Cather initially presents Marian’s meeting with the Captain as a romantic ideal and shows Mrs. Forrester as the center of a loving community of friends, the final telling near the end of the novel reveals her scandal-tinged youth and her parents’ desperate wish to have her escape. The first chapter merely piques readers’ interest with the comment that “Mrs. Forrester was twenty-five years younger than her husband, and she was his second wife. He married her in California and brought her to Sweet Water a bride” (6-7). At the only sophisticated dinner party to which readers are privy, the Captain relates how he came to live at Sweet Water, but he spends by far the majority of the tale describing his role in helping to develop the West. Two cursory
mentions of Mrs. Forrester reveal that when he chose his property he already had in mind a vision of the wife he had not yet met and that they married and moved there twelve years later. In the Captain’s patriarchal view, Marian Forrester completes the world he has built. The early part of the novel supports the Captain’s view through Niel’s many memories of her.

After originally setting the stage for a romantic tale of Mrs. Forrester by ending the introductory chapter with, “and even she, alas! grew older” (7), Cather follows up with Niel’s warm memory of young Mrs. Forrester bringing cookies to the boys who were enjoying the Forresters’ marsh land. This scene reveals Mrs. Forrester as a gracious goddess figure to the boys, even while she plays the mother role. Ostensibly joining the picnicking boys to bring them some homemade cookies, Mrs. Forrester also connects with them in a sensual manner. In the bright sun of midday, she disdains wearing a hat, arriving “bareheaded, a basket on her arm, her blue-black hair shining in the sun” (11). As she hands them the hot cookies, she becomes confidential about her own enjoyment of wading in the marsh: “I can’t resist it. I pull off my stockings and pick up my skirts, and in I go!” (11). She adds physical emphasis by lifting her skirt to shake her white shoe for them. Here Mrs. Forrester functions not only as the embodiment of sensual beauty but also as a symbol of patriarchy, since the boys see her as a tangible symbol of the Captain’s success and as the social pinnacle of their community. The final scene in this incident emphasizes these perceptions as the wounded Niel is carried into the most beautiful house he’s ever seen to be cared for by Mrs. Forrester: “What soft fingers Mrs. Forrester had, and what a lovely lady she was. Inside the lace ruffle of her dress he saw her white
throat rising and falling so quickly. . . . The little boy was thinking that he would prob-
ably never be in so nice a place again” (20-21).

By the time readers first learn from Marian the full story of the Forresters’ court-
ship a few pages from the end of the novel, we know much more of her than the idealized
portrait first presented and Marian is fighting the gossip her recent behavior in Sweet
Water has precipitated. Her tale focuses primarily on her mountain-climbing accident and
rescue by the Captain, carefully neglecting to mention the scandal which originally sent
her to the mountains. In the unusual way Cather develops this narrative, she replicates the
indirectness of gossip. Her decision to include these details through Niel’s consciousness
at this point, though Niel has obviously learned them earlier, also moves him from central
in the Forresters’ supportive community to the position of disapproving gossip:

She began there, but that was not the beginning of the story; long ago Niel had
heard from his uncle that the beginning was a scandal and a murder. When
Marian Ormsby was nineteen, she was engaged to Ned Montgomery, a gaudy
young millionaire of the Gold Coast. A few weeks before the date set for their
marriage, Montgomery was shot and killed in the lobby of a San Francisco hotel
by the husband of another woman. The subsequent trial involved a great deal of
publicity, and Marian was hurried away from curious eyes and sent up into the
mountains until the affair should blow over. (141)

While Cather leaves readers to fill in the gaps of what behaviors precipitated this
scandal, she leaves no doubt that Marian’s youthful fairy-tale world blew up, leaving her
to find or create a new one. Cather also reveals gossip to be a primary determining factor
in Marian’s early life, even if only for her parents who made her decisions. Similarly,
after the Captain’s death Niel tries to hurry her away from the curious eyes of her next
disintegrating world but finds that Marian Forrester has a fierce desire to determine her
own life rather than accept his guidance.
Although early images from Mrs. Forrester’s younger years initially charm readers and reinforce Niel’s perspective that she is a romantic ideal, they resonate later with the undercurrent of a strong-spirited woman’s desire to respond to life’s vicissitudes on her own terms, heedless of the social consequences. The mature Marian is reminiscent of Cather’s own early years of becoming a New Woman, when she wore masculinized attire and adopted the unisex behaviors of bicycle riding and smoking. She wanted to prove herself as a career woman and earn enough fame for both her and her soldier uncle, whose name she appropriated for a time.¹⁶ Cather’s mindset, like Marian’s, was to do what it took to help her reach her goal. In Cather’s teens and twenties her extreme desire to establish herself in a man’s world also caused her to disassociate herself from women whom she often saw as an embarrassment,¹⁷ just as Marian deems Mrs. Beasley and her cohorts beneath her. Since Marian Forrester cares only for men and the effect she has on them, her disdain for women is not surprising.¹⁸ Though in the eyes of the “admiring middle-aged men” of the first chapter, the eternally “lady-like” Mrs. Forrester can do no wrong (6), that reputation does her no good with the women in her world. As the charming, meandering creek later overflows its banks and washes away the bridge, Mrs. Forrester cannot always contain herself within her societally prescribed roles.¹⁹

In the same way that the torrential rains cause the river and creeks to overflow and prevent Niel from visiting Mrs. Forrester to comfort her after receiving news of Frank Ellinger’s marriage, this same news causes Mrs. Forrester to overflow the bounds of propriety. Not only does she leave her sleeping husband to wade alone through rushing water up to her waist, but she also calls Ellinger to plead with him and then berate him angrily over the telephone. Her unbounded anger refuses to be quelled to protect her from
the consequences of her indiscretion: “Her blue lips, the black shadows under her eyes, made her look as if some poison were at work in her body” (112). Even in this condition, she initially manages to call up the voice “of a woman, young, beautiful, happy,—warm and at her ease, sitting in her own drawing-room and talking on a stormy night to a dear friend far away” (113). But when Ellinger refuses to accede to her wishes, her “quivering passion of hatred and wrong” (114) breaks forth, leaving her vulnerable to “Mrs. Beasley, like a boiled pudding sewed up in a blue kimono, waddling through the feathery asparagus bed behind the telephone office” (116) to spread the news of Mrs. Forrester’s passionate encounter.²⁰

Though Niel feels traumatized by Marian Forrester’s heedless descent into scandal, as he watches her tumble off the pedestal he has built for her, she pragmatically sees the situation as one in which she must decide how much she can salvage to provide for her own future. Though Marian would embarrass the New Woman of Cather’s generation by her dependence on men, her goal is the same: providing for her own financial well-being and a secure place in the world through unusual and often censured actions. Nancy Morrow comments incisively:

In the long run, Mrs. Forrester’s adulterous relationship seems a betrayal only of Niel’s romantically idealized image of her, an image that Niel himself later revises, when he comes to “value” her himself in the way Captain Forrester had and to “regain” what he had lost (297).

Never concerned with the Molly Tuckers and the Mrs. Beasleys the way Niel is, Mrs. Forrester searches for a lifeline out of her deadening life with the dying Captain. Niel’s warning reveals his own concerns much more than it does hers: “I’d rather, you know, publish anything in the town paper than telephone it through Mrs. Beasley” (111). Yes, he would rather keep her quiet. She prefers to survive, no matter how much she needs to
adapt. Though most of her choices align her clearly with a patriarchal culture she never actively rebels against, her determination to orchestrate her own life and not to be the decorative character others prefer her to be reveals in her the spirit of the New Woman of the modern era.

Willa Cather knew how it felt both to be put on a high pedestal by small town folk with whom she avoided spending time and to experience their hostile criticism when she dashed their expectations. Like Mrs. Forrester, Cather desired the freedom of picking and choosing her companions without obligation to those for whom she felt no interest. Most of all, she chose not to allow herself vulnerability with people who might make poor use of such power over her. As Marian Forrester refused to socialize with the women of Sweet Water, Cather too developed a reputation for standoffishness. To this day, some residents castigate her as having been “not very nice” to the people of Red Cloud. Though numerous letters to Carrie Miner, Anna Pavloka, and others document Cather’s lifetime of extreme generosity to the individuals and community of her youth, many could not forgive Cather her desire to be different and to establish her own space out of the control of their words. This simultaneous need for community and a fear of its power permeate both Cather’s letters and *A Lost Lady*.

Through her development of the highly structured, gossipy community of Sweet Water, Cather moves in a new direction in this novel, subtly undermining patriarchy while seeming to uphold it. While *O, Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Antonia* all develop strong female characters willing to defy society’s expectations, none of these novels undermines the social structure itself. In *One of Ours* Cather hints significantly at dissatisfaction with society’s gender expectations through depicting various unsuccessful
constructs of marriage. With *A Lost Lady*, however, Cather presents a woman who appears to be everything this patriarchal community expects of her, yet who unwittingly experiences patriarchy as a destructive force in her life. Not only does Mrs. Forrester absolutely satisfy the Captain’s criteria of a wife who completes his beautiful home through her physical person, her welcoming personality, and her rich style of entertaining, but she also charms the men and awes the women who know her. In doing so, she fulfills the Captain’s original dream: “I planned to build a house that my friends could come to, with a wife like Mrs. Forrester to make it attractive to them” (43, emphasis mine). After they marry, not only does she make his house attractive, but she pleases him by drawing people to herself like a magnet. Unfortunately, her social giftedness contributes to patriarchy’s power to trap her: she sees how to be successful within its confines and does not recognize any options other than those through which she commodifies herself. One reason readers often interpret this novel as reinforcing patriarchal expectations of women is Mrs. Forrester’s success within the system. However, it is crucial to recognize that through this character Cather sets up a dialectic between a romantic vision of women as the ideal complements to men and a modernist vision of women as individuals who measure their existence apart from relationships with men.

Rather than portraying a woman who escapes these pernicious societal expectations, Cather dialogically creates a woman who is both the patriarchal ideal and the damaged goods patriarchy can engender. Mrs. Forrester always eventually achieves her own ends through the means accorded her, as a complicit member of patriarchal society. But as soon as one man is gone, she must necessarily find the next one through whom to prosper. Cather also feared marriage for herself and for others as a destructive force, yet
in various letters she expresses admiration for women like her niece Mary Virginia and her friend Hepzibah Menuhin who gave up careers and artistic achievement for the fulfillment of home and family. Cather expresses her fears of being personally limited by marriage in an 1897 letter to Mariel Gere about a very nice doctor Dorothy Canfield wants her to marry. She writes of how much his friendship means to her and of not wanting to risk what she would lose through marriage. Toward the end of her life, after the death of Irene’s husband, she also expresses huge admiration to Irene Miner for her superb long-lasting marriage relationship. Cather’s conflictedness about marriage resonates throughout this novel. As Gilbert and Gubar point out, “modernism, because of the distinctive social and cultural changes to which it responds, is differently inflected for male and female writers . . . ‘modernism’ is itself . . . a product of the sexual battle” (No Man’s Land xii). Even though Cather’s personal response to the modern world was to reject the traditional role of wife and mother to safeguard her art the way Thea Kronborg does, she expresses this struggle differently in Marian, who does not rebel against it but is unable to escape unscathed.

The continuing dialectic between Niel’s romanticizing ideology and the ideology Cather demonstrates through its harmful effects on Mrs. Forrester is what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as “special novelistic discourse . . . a dialogue between points of view” (50, 76) not explicitly referred to by the author. Mrs. Forrester definitely subscribes superficially to Niel’s belief in woman’s need for man to act as provider and for her to be an icon in the community; yet her machinations themselves belie her belief that she cannot think for herself. Unfortunately, the only recourse she recognizes is to motivate men to care for her and provide her with the communal security she needs. She seeks to
change her own social circumstances rather than to change the structure of society.

Cather, however, reveals the need for sociological change through the unnecessary pain Mrs. Forrester experiences. She must work to salvage her reputation with Niel while continually seeking to earn financial security. Even this world which has given Mrs. Forrester such success defeats her temporarily when her man is taken away. Only through capturing and marrying another appropriate man can she finally regain a lively spirit and enjoyment of life; only through successful remarriage can she regain her identity.

When she is viewed through the romantic, idealizing lens of Niel, the Captain, Mr. Collins, and other enraptured males, Marian Forrester can enjoy life at the center of her community. She is the quintessential woman who brings life to the stodgiest male: “Even the hardest and coldest of [the Captain’s] friends, a certain narrow-faced Lincoln banker, became animated when he took her hand, tried to meet the gay challenge in her eyes and to reply cleverly to the droll word of greeting on her lips” (5). Niel expresses pride in his ability to recognize her as “belonging to a different world from any he had ever known” (33) the first moment he sees her going into church with “her swirl of snowy white petticoats” (32). Describing Niel’s first sight of her going into church subtly allies her with his own sense of moral absolutes. We know nothing of any religious faith on Mrs. Forrester’s part, but we know Niel associates her with church because of his first contact with her there. In this context she functions as his personal Madonna figure, a much more romantic mother figure than the memory of his own dissatisfied mother who has died. While Mrs. Forrester alternately functions as mother figure and object of desire for Niel, she does not fall off her pedestal in his eyes until he dramatically discovers her
affair with Ellinger. Even after that, years later, reminiscing about all the other women he has known, he thinks,

he had never found one so attractive and distinguished as Mrs. Forrester. Compared with her, other women were heavy and dull; even the pretty ones seemed lifeless,—they had not that something in their glance that made one’s blood tingle. And never elsewhere had he heard anything like her inviting, musical laugh, that was like the distant measures of dance music, heard through opening and shutting doors. (32)

This penultimate comment suggests that his early idealization of Mrs. Forrester damaged him more than it did her by breaking apart his world and spoiling him for a passionate relationship with any other woman. His rigid romanticism prevents him from responding to the changing world in the manner her flexible, opportunist ideology allows her, thus depriving him of the growth she experiences.

By the end of the novel Cather dramatically undercuts the romantic tone of Niel’s early memories through the striking contrast between the boys’ early picnic and the last dinner Mrs. Forrester gives for the boys years later. Because she requires an idealizing lens in order to function optimally, she works to create it however she can, even when she needs to train young admirers at her own table. Unlike early stories presenting Mrs. Forrester as a goddess figure, the later story reveals her as Niel’s tarnished idol. Because Niel views her through the lens of protective patriarchy, he sees her in early days as perfection itself and in later days as a worn-out, embarrassing version of her former self. Sadly, Niel attempts to protect her in ways which actually foreground his need for her to remain one of the most highly respected members of the community, as he thinks more about her reputation than he does about her needs. When given the chance to empathize with her desire to escape their stultifying tiny town, he gives her only recriminations: “you are simply wasting your life here” (133).
Because Niel has moved from idealizing Mrs. Forrester to gossiping about her, he finds himself unable to admire her desire to move beyond an identity as the Captain’s widow, an identity he has willfully misunderstood. As she attempts to acculturate these boys who have had no previous chance to participate in such gatherings, Niel cannot accept the passing of time and holds against Mrs. Forrester the boys’ inability to be the financial magnates who were her former dinner companions. Unwilling to appreciate what she has taught these young men, including dressing up for such a dinner and rising when a woman enters the room, Niel snobbishly rejects both the young people and their hostess:

Why did she do it? How would she feel about it tonight, when she sank dead weary into bed, after these stupid boys had said good-night, and their yellow shoes had carried them down the hill?

She was not eating anything, she was using up all her vitality to electrify these heavy lads into speech. (139)

Because Niel refuses to accept his Mrs. Forrester as Marian, a woman with needs and desires of her own, but insists on restricting her to her role as the Captain’s wife—even after the Captain has died—he relegates her to the past:

It was what he most held against Mrs. Forrester: that she was not willing to immolate herself, like the widow of all these great men, and die with the pioneer period to which she belonged; that she preferred life on any terms. In the end, Niel went away without bidding her good-bye. He went away with weary contempt for her in his heart. (145)

Mentally eradicating her actual identity and her ability to respond to changing times, Niel sees her as the composite “widow of all these great men” who built the West. Important to him only in her role as the wife of a great man of the past, Niel has no purpose for Mrs. Forrester after her husband is gone. Unable to admit to himself that he would rather see her dead than alive, he responds by acting as though she has died. Planning simply to
punish Mrs. Forrester by rejecting her, he causes even more damage to his own character by petrifying her in his romantic ideology and throwing away this most emotionally intimate relationship he has ever experienced.

Niel’s desertion of her devastates Mrs. Forrester because of her need for intimate connectedness with people in Sweet Water, now that those needs are no longer being met by her friends visiting from Colorado. Because of this same need for lateral human connection, with peers rather than solely with people who look up to her, Cather’s relationships to people in Red Cloud who knew her as “Willa” or “Willie” grew increasingly important as she grew older. In his remembrance of Cather, called “Publishing Willa Cather,” Alfred Knopf makes the interesting comment that for some unknown reason, throughout their close friendship Willa Cather addressed him and his wife as “Alfred” and “Blanche,” while they always addressed her as “Miss Cather.”23 The forms of address are far from incidental and puzzling, as Knopf suggests, but an integral part of the pattern of relationships Cather established and reinforced through her regular habits. She kept her distance emotionally in her professional relationships and never allowed herself the vulnerability she felt with childhood friends. Knopf’s comment reveals evidence of the extent to which Cather isolated herself emotionally from her peers even while she connected socially. Her creation of Marian’s character reveals this same pattern. With Sweet Water people she was always Mrs. Forrester, never Marian, and she was never accepted as having her own needs. Though Cather too was especially adept at maintaining emotional connections with a few people while keeping her distance from most others—because of excessive need for solitude and privacy—these contradictory
needs for connectedness and distance are sources of pain for both Cather and Marian Forrester.

One of Marian Forrester’s greatest sources of pain is Niel’s response to her multiple losses: financial poverty, the Captain’s death, and her isolation from her Colorado friends. After the Captain’s stroke, when the Forresters’ lifestyle is curtailed extremely, Niel and Mrs. Forrester experience a telling emotional reunion which should have been the beginning of a stronger connection between the two of them:

He stepped forward and caught her suspended figure, hammock and all, in his arms. How light and alive she was! like a bird caught in a net. If only he could rescue her and carry her off like this,—off the earth of sad, inevitable periods, away from age, weariness, adverse fortune! (92)

Despite his powerfully emotional attraction to her and despite her obvious flirtation with him, he dares not envision a romantic relationship with her. She talks of how handsome he is—telling him that his returns to Sweet Water are the main thing she looks forward to in life—and says that she hopes he never gets a girlfriend to prevent his coming home to her. He loves her confidences and continues his fascination with her but refuses to hear what her real needs are.\(^{24}\) Ronald Butler notes, “Niel is unable to consider himself consciously as a possible lover of his idealized lady and thus cannot come to terms with his ambivalent feelings toward her” (38).\(^{25}\) As this modernist depiction of a communication breakdown reveals, Niel’s entrapment in patriarchy’s ideology not only causes him to fail Mrs. Forrester, but it also prevents him from recognizing their need for each other.

After the Captain’s death, she attempts to break through Niel’s blindness and make him recognize her as a person on his own level: “I can’t sit in the house alone every evening and knit. If you came to see me any oftener than you do, that would make talk. You are still younger than Ivy,—and better-looking! Did that never occur to you?” (132).
Niel cannot allow this to occur to him, committed as he is to “saving” or “rescuing” Mrs. Forrester. Just as years ago he had tried desperately to put out of its misery the woodpecker Ivy Peters had blinded, though the bird was able to find its way home instinctively, he now sees Mrs. Forrester as completely helpless without the Captain and wishes she could be put out of her misery. Because Niel cannot heal her blinded eyes any more than he can heal his own, he cannot help her to find her way. She intuitively recognizes how to use her gifts within the world of patriarchy she knows so well, finding a home once again, this time in Buenos Aires with another man who adores her. Because Niel continues to think of her as the Captain’s wife and to repress his own desire for her, he unwittingly creates the distance between them he believes important for her position in society and ends the bond so important to both of them.

Cather experienced a similar disapproval and alienation from many of her early friends who read her novels as portraying negative morals. One letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher in September 2, 1916 begins very amiably about her three months out West, where she was asked to speak to a bridge club on Canfield Fisher’s novel, but becomes rather acerbic when comparing their novels and their readers. Telling her friend that she hopes she won’t be “insulted” to hear that her readers outnumber Cather’s 20 to 1, she epitomizes the difference between their writing as she sees it. Stating that Canfield Fisher’s readers find Cather’s novels “immoral” and Cather’s readers—only about 6, Cather claims—find Canfield Fisher’s “dull,” she appears amused by the arguments during which women buzz like hornets with snapping eyes. However, when she includes among her own detractors the Gere and Westermann families, some of her closest friends in Lincoln, her pain becomes evident. Though in Cather’s letter she claims great fun out
of everyone's loyalty to her friend, she admits to having been deeply hurt. The one person who may have come closest for Cather to the way Niel functions with Marian Forrester was Mariel Gere, an intimate friend from early days, the friend without whose help she claimed she never would have gotten through "the Pound scrape." Here Cather refers to Mariel as being particularly bitter against her in believing her bad morals to be most insidious because they are not vulgar. This pain of being turned on by one of her closest friends reappears in Niel's rejection of Marian Forrester as immoral.

Imprisoned by patriarchal ideology just as Niel is, Marian Forrester initially looks to him as her obvious chivalrous rescuer and pathway back to community once the Captain has died. At the same time, Niel looks only for a way to prevent her from tumbling off her pedestal and experiencing the destructive forces of social commentary, missing his possible role in a healing process for her. Even before the Captain's death, when Mrs. Forrester places her furious call to Frank Ellinger and Niel knows the operator will spread the juicy news throughout the town, he thinks he can save her by cutting the telephone wire and connection between the former lovers. Later, when he sees Mrs. Forrester's name being bandied about by common women of the town, he gives up a year away at school to care for her and the Captain and to keep the vulture townswomen away. After the Captain's death, when she has lost virtually all human connectedness—to those in Sweet Water as well as to those in Colorado—Niel tries to remedy the matter by pressuring her to live elsewhere.

In the end, however, gossip achieves its most dramatic power to fragment this community in its annihilation of the relationship between Niel and Marian. As Niel is unable to give up his romanticization of Mrs. Forrester, Cather reveals this romantic
patriarchal ideology as the force wounding both of them. At the very least, Mrs. Forrester loses the friend and advocate who could have helped in her forced navigation of unfamiliar waters without the comforts of money. At the most, Mrs. Forrester loses a life companion. Niel loses fully as much. He loses a lifetime relationship with Marian, and he loses the self respect he could have saved by supporting a friend in hard times. The saddest example of this occurs when Mrs. Forrester is at her low point and Mr. Ogden, a friend from her affluent past, comes to Niel about working “to get a special increase of pension for Mrs. Forrester” (127). Niel’s cold attitude towards her sends Mr. Ogden on his way without helping. Though Niel later feels slightly guilty, admitting to himself that Mr. Ogden “might have helped her [and] ... he had done nothing to bring this about” (130), he refuses to admit that he has actually betrayed her by talking Mr. Ogden out of his good intentions. Readers realize with a shock that Niel has become part of the gossipy group seeking to destroy Marian Forrester rather than the supportive community upholding her. Because of his opprobrium for her failure to live up to his standards, he deserts her.

Later, Cather’s careful silence on most of the particulars of Niel’s adult life leads readers to believe that he, like Jim Burden before him, has achieved financial success through his career but has experienced a fragmented modern life, motivating him to continue to idealize the past in which he experienced true community. That Cather experienced this same process is clear from her letters, especially those written to Carrie Miner about how wonderful Red Cloud is and her later letters to Trixie Florance about how she misses the connections to people who knew her as a child. Spending most of her time in New York and some in New Hampshire and Nova Scotia, she wrote often in her
last decade about her plans to return to Red Cloud, as though she couldn’t make it through the year without such a rejuvenating visit. Though these plans never materialized because of illnesses and debilitating ailments of many types, Cather needed the belief that she was on the brink of a return to Red Cloud to help her through her last years.

A Lost Lady does not include an introduction illuminating Niel’s adult life as My Antonia does of Jim’s; nevertheless, the few details Cather gives in the final chapter emphasize Niel’s adult disconnection from his community. When in a Chicago hotel he runs into Ed Elliott, a friend he grew up with in Sweet Water, he no longer knows him, though Ed immediately recognizes Niel. As Ed explains why he never contacted Niel earlier about Marian Forrester’s last message, he mentions, “I called at your office in New York . . . but you were somewhere in Europe” (149). By specifying these locations Cather emphasizes the fact that while Niel and Ed have presumably both succeeded in financial terms, Ed has kept in contact with people at home whereas Niel has not. Ed tells Niel, for instance, that up to her death Mrs. Forrester “always sent a cheque to the Grand Army Post every year to have flowers put on Captain Forrester’s grave for Decoration Day” and that after her death her second husband sent “a draft for the future care of Captain Forrester’s grave” in memory of Mrs. Forrester (149-50). Ed also cares enough to try to contact Niel and to approach him in the hotel, while we suspect Niel may have been trying to block out his earlier life entirely. Even though the damage to Niel’s character cannot all be attributed to his dashed expectations of how Marian Forrester fit into his patriarchal mold for her, the statement that he left Sweet Water permanently “with weary contempt for her in his heart” (145) indicates both a powerfully negative experience of his failed ideology and a broken sense of community.
Certainly Cather’s own ambivalence about the small-town community she grew up in, compared to the cultured places she enjoyed later in life, informs the romantic-modernist dialectic in her portrayal of Niel. On the one hand, Cather’s letters home reveal lifelong monetary and emotional support of various friends and family in Red Cloud and repeat a longing to come back to visit. Cather herself romanticized this little town and its people in many ways, sometimes saying that they were more important to her than any people she met later in life. Yet certain letters and early short stories like “Wagner Matinee” and “A Sculptor’s Funeral” also indicate exasperation with a provincial town in which she could no longer feel at home. Though in her later years she never wrote fiction which insulted Nebraskans as these stories did, she continued to express her exasperation in letters and sometimes felt emotionally compelled to leave earlier than intended when visiting Red Cloud.31 In many ambivalent letters an idealization of Carrie Miner as perhaps the best friend Cather had in life and a continual love and longing for Red Cloud play against the realities of her inability to live and work in such a small town. Cather attempted to balance this tension and never fully succeeded. Her portrait of Niel, however, reveals a person who does not even try to achieve this balance. Because of his choice, he can later do nothing but tell the story through the biased eyes of a disappointed, older man. Though Cather experienced earlier in her own life the pain of rejection and isolation similar to Marian Forrester’s, she later also experienced the pain Niel did in losing the community from which he cut himself off. The rich heteroglossia of this novel depends in great measure upon Cather’s ability to resonate with the emotions and experiences of both Marian and Niel.
Late in her life her longing for the community she remembers haunts her as does Niel’s in this story he remembers decades after its occurrence. The first letter from Cather to Trixie\(^\text{32}\) thanks her for a considerate letter of condolence after Roscoe’s death in 1945 and explains how close she was to her brother. She confides that they had written frequently and that she had even received two “jolly” letters from him after receiving the telegram announcing his death. She says that though she has experienced a great deal of loss in her life, Roscoe’s death is the first thing she knows she will never be able to recover from, that it has broken a spring in her and made her physically ill. Cather’s letters describe the sense that something in her has died with Roscoe, not simply because he was such a beloved brother but expressly because she now has virtually no contact with the people of her childhood.\(^\text{33}\) A New Woman, but romantic to the core, nevertheless, Cather reveals in her correspondence as well as in her fiction the ideal that the small-town community grounds a person in much the same way she believes the church does. As she publicly committed herself to the church in 1922, she also repented of her early rejection of small-town people. While her early rebellious strivings to break out of their old-fashioned mores reveal her need to be the modern, independent woman she became, she never completely left behind the idealist of her youth, returning to it even more fully in her later years. In his adult return to crucial memories of decades ago, Niel reveals this same need to return to the people and place which helped form his identity.

Up until the end of the novel, Niel’s abandonment of Sweet Water has created for his memory a static picture; he cuts himself off from the changes in Sweet Water which Ed Elliot’s continuing connectedness allows him to see. Through Niel, Cather presents both unmitigated romanticism and its negative consequences. Ironically, she opposes
Niel’s romantic vision by presenting readers with the fractured results of his ideology in his later life; thus, Niel’s words illustrate the truth of Bakhtin’s explanation: “each character’s speech possesses its own belief system . . . thus it may also refract authorial intentions and consequently may to a certain degree constitute a second language for the author” (DI 315). Herein lie grounds for confusion in reading Cather. The fact that Niel elicits sympathy from readers does not mean that he completely speaks for Cather. She carefully engineers the heteroglossia—or symphony of voices—to reflect the ideological dialogue the novel represents, seeing the truth as a complex composite of voices and ideological visions. Both Mrs. Forrester’s ideas and the narrative of Niel’s consciousness are constitutive parts of the dialogical language of the novel.

The comments Cather gives us about Niel’s and Marian’s later lives are the contextualizing background which helps us read the narrative of Niel’s consciousness as only one part of the dialogue. It reveals Niel and Marian as separate “ideologues” of the novel (Bakhtin 333). Niel and Marian both move away from Sweet Water, and Niel gives up all communication with the townspeople as a result of the gossip which fractures Sweet Water relationships and Niel’s ideology. By nursing his grudge against Marian Forrester for not being willing to lie down and die after the Captain’s death, Niel convinces himself that “He had given her a year of his life, and she had thrown it away” (145). Though Niel refuses to accept her explanation that she has too much life in her to live as a has-been in an empty house full of dark furniture, Marian identifies herself as a completely modern woman in her response to her tragic loss and the aftermath of swirling gossip. She values her own freedom too much to allow herself to be restricted by society’s rules. With no
idealistic notions of the way she must operate, Marian appeals first to Niel, then to Ivy Peters, and finally to Henry Collins in pragmatically reestablishing herself.

Just as Niel refuses to see Sweet Water people accurately, Cather's late letters to Trixie Florance reveal that her disconnection from her community of origin for so many years allowed her to create her own reality about Red Cloud and the family home. In 1946 Cather complains to Trixie about how betrayed she feels that her former home was sold without her having a chance to buy it, yet Red Cloud people would have had no idea she had such an emotional connection to the house that she would have wanted it. Since she hadn't been back to Nebraska for fifteen years by then, her contention that she would have bought the old house for her own use if she had had any idea it was for sale betrays a penchant for altering facts as she chose. Her own sense that she would have loved to go there to write ignores the fact that her trips to Nebraska were far too peopled for her liking and that she hadn't managed to make the trip west in many years. Over the years she usually went back to Red Cloud with longing for the places and people of her childhood, often finding after she arrived that she felt the need to escape again. She required much solitude even when among friends, relatives, and well-wishers. If she had been able to establish an upstairs bedroom in the old house as a writing center for herself earlier in adulthood, when she was closer to her childhood days of writing in her attic bedroom, she may have been able to establish it as an effective work environment. But her assertion that she still would have been able to write there if she had been given the opportunity to purchase the home late in life reveals a refusal to acknowledge the fact that those days of possibility had passed. In her seventies and hardly writing at all because of difficulties with her hand and with her emotions, Cather allowed the family home to evoke powerful
memories and function as the most powerful symbol of her past. To feel that it had been sold away from her without her consent confirmed the loss of her past brought home by Roscoe’s death. Cather’s modern-life separation from this symbol of community accentuated her romanticization of the past and her idealization of its importance.

Niel’s romantic bias which skews his view of Marian Forrester and blinds him to her complex ability to make survival choices goes far beyond his relationship to the community, as it actually allows him to create a fictionalized history for himself and of the West. In the same manner Cather can choose to delete whatever she would rather not remember, such as the Indians who once lived in Nebraska and the railroad companies who abused their power in order to build up their empires.35 As Niel contemplates returning to school in Boston, after the Captain’s death and his uncle’s return to health, he fixates on his remembered past to such an extent that he feels that he was going away forever, and was making the final break with everything that had been dear to him in his boyhood. The people, the very country itself, were changing so fast that there would be nothing to come back to. He had seen the end of an era, the sunset of the pioneer. . . . It was already gone, that age; nothing could bring it back. (144-45)

Because of his giving up personal connection with the people who could have held him accountable to truthfulness, he can then include, delete, or alter whatever he chooses.

The ending of A Lost Lady functions as dialogically as the rest of the novel. This final scene reinforces the novel’s tension between idealizing patriarchy as a tradition which allows women to be cared for properly within the community and castigating patriarchy as a system which requires women to sell themselves to the highest bidder in order to maintain a sense of dignity and the façade of a good life.36 Readers like Hengxum Dong wish “the novel could have ended when the heroine was lost like a
drifting canoe in turbid waters” (18) and others wish it would have ended with a reunion of friends. Cather could have ended the novel with Ed’s memory of Mrs. Forrester’s telling him to remember her to Niel: “Tell him things have turned out well for me. Mr. Collins is the kindest of husbands?” (149). Had she done so, she would have emphasized much more exclusively her romantic idealism. However, by including Ed’s comment that “People said [Henry Collins] was rich, but quarrelsome and rather stingy” and Niel’s statement that he would “almost” have made the trip to see her if she were still alive, Cather emphasizes also the final disconnection. As Mellanee Kvasnicka says of Niel and other Cather males, “Fragmentation by . . . physical isolation has produced adults whose lives are colored by memories of what they have missed” (108). Though isolated from each other, these men cherish their youthful memories, knowing no one will ever call upon them to demonstrate the ties of community and affection which Marian Forrester tried to instill in them in their youth. Cather too died in geographic isolation from childhood memories and friends, demonstrating her continuing love for them only through letters and gifts.37 Cather’s bid for autonomy and career success finally cost her the intimacy with her community which she idealizes in much of her writing. The disparate lives of Marian Forrester, Ed Elliot, and Niel Herbert exemplify both Cather’s own determination to survive modernism’s hard choices and the costs of resolutely maintaining her commitment to romanticism.
CHAPTER 5

THE PAIN OF BETRAYAL FOR WILLA CATHER AND HER PROFESSOR

*The Professor's House*, published in 1925 at the height of Cather's career, showcases Cather's modernism more than her previous novels do in her continuing dialectic between romanticism and modernism. Cather's famous belief in dedication to idealism in art finds explicit expression in her portrait of the Blue Mesa and in her characterizations of Tom Outland and Godfrey St. Peter, while her desire to push the limits in discovering new forms for meaning finds ultimate expression in this stylistically *avant garde*, tripartite novel. Cather's commitment to art as paramount in her life has been well documented (Slote, Faulkner, Curtin, Woodress), as has both her disappointment with the modern world and her determination to break new literary ground (Brown, Edel, Randall, O'Brien, Lee, Stout). What has not been explored is the connection between Cather's determination to dedicate her life to art and the negative consequences she suffered as a result, because of her betrayals of people she loved. In *The Professor's House* Cather's idealization of the Blue Mesa as symbol of her Kingdom of Art most potently embodies her romanticism, while the fragmenting lives and relationships the main characters suffer as the result of betraying others for their idealistic visions reflect Cather's modernism. In this novel both the romantic idealism and the varied responses to the complexities of the changing modern world have roots in Cather's personal responses to the call of art.

146
The most dramatic instances of Cather’s betraying loved ones for her work occurred before she was an established author, the first instance hurting Louise Pound deeply. For the University of Nebraska’s literary magazine *The Hesperian*, of which she was editor, Cather wrote a piece mocking Louise’s brother Roscoe. Though Cather claimed the description did not describe any real person, readers saw the sketch as quite thinly veiled humor at Roscoe’s expense. Woodress describes it as a “lampoon” which “demolished her relationship with the entire Pound family” (29) and suggests she may not have even realized the pain she was causing. This charitable thought neglects the fact, however, that at this time tactless young Cather wrote a ruthless newspaper column about actors and musicians, earning herself the epithet “that meatax young girl of whom all of them had heard” (Woodress 92). She also attempted to publish a group of open letters to various artists, bluntly enumerating their strengths and weaknesses. Although years later she expressed relief that the uncooperative publisher had spared her the embarrassment of this publication, as a young writer she operated according to the belief that her ideas and her right to express them were more important than people’s feelings. The sophisticated Pound family, who had taken Willa into their fold by helping this girl from the country to feel at home in Lincoln society, felt understandably betrayed. Roscoe, whom Cather had characterized as a small mind, later became dean of Harvard Law School, but the breach with the Pound family did not heal. Perhaps Cather was initially blind to the pain her piece could cause, or perhaps she was actually trying to hurt Louise and then became sorry she could not retract her words. Whatever the case, Cather undeniably betrayed her friend and paid a permanent price, for the sake of attracting readers.
This instance of rash, youthful betrayal of a close friend presages young Tom Outland's betrayal of Roddy, his closest friend in the world. In both cases a single, quick action destroys a friendship and causes years of regret. Just as Tom searched for Roddy many years afterward and talked of missing him for even longer, Cather certainly remembered her own incident with Pound when she put these words in Tom's mouth:

But the older I grow, the more I understand what it was I did that night on the mesa. Anyone who requites faith and friendship as I did, will have to pay for it. I'm not very sanguine about good fortune for myself. I'll be called to account when I least expect it (229).

Over ten years later, Cather betrayed Dorothy Canfield twice in her desperate attempt to get her first book of short stories published. While teaching high school in Pittsburgh and writing fiction in her spare hours, Cather spent years putting together the stories to make up a marketable volume: *The Troll Garden*. This slim volume, accepted for publication in 1905, contained a story called “The Profile,” describing in great detail a woman with a facial disfigurement from birth. As was often the case for Cather, her character had a recognizable real-life model, a friend of Canfield’s whom she had introduced to Cather. Fascinated enough by the woman’s life situation to recreate her fictionally, Cather nevertheless feared Canfield's response and did not give her the chance to read the story until Canfield heard of it and asked to see it. When Canfield read the story in disbelief, she begged Cather not to hurt her friend in such a way:

Dear Willa:

I have read the story and just as you thought I do ask that you do not publish it—not for my own sake but so that you will not have done a cruel thing. I take for granted that you don’t realize what this will be if you do print this story for if you did it would be unbelievable that you should do it. And I beg you with all my heart—with all of me, and I have your best intents at heart, not to strike a cruel and overwhelming blow to one who has not deserved it, who has already lost her life’s happiness through her deformity, and who was kind to you. I am quite sure you don’t realize how exact and faithful a portrait you have drawn of
her—her beautiful hair, her pretty hands, her fondness for dress and pathetic lapses of taste in wearing what other girls may, her unconsciousness—oh Willa don’t do this thing. . . . it would be from one woman to another who had tried to be kind to her, who was proud of knowing her, and who thought she had made a friend—and in cold blood. You can’t see how it is—though you did in London when you first spoke of it. You said then “Of course it would be out of the question under the circumstances.” I can hear your voice as you said it, and I have heard it ever since Edith told me. Oh Willa, [“my old, trusted,” is crossed out] this is some dreadful dream—for Heaven’s sake write me you are not going to do it.

Believe me, who have thought with such sick intensity about it that it will injure you in the end—in every way—and I think it would crush Evelyn—I don’t believe she would ever recover from the blow of your description of her affliction—“It drew the left eye, the left corner of the mouth seemed to have shrunk the maxillary bone, made of her smile a grinning distortion like the shameful conception of some despairing medieval imagination.” She doesn’t know—she has always been so sheltered—I have come to be sure that she doesn’t . . . what could be worth her anguish in knowing. I am too wildly agitated about it to write coherently but I can’t wait to send back the tale to you and to beg you—to implore you not to publish it.

Dorothy

Cather’s letter of response first gives the excuse that since the pages are already being set and this story is necessary to make the volume large enough to publish, it is too late to pull it. Next she claims Dorothy only asks this of her because she herself writes so quickly that she doesn’t understand how long it takes Cather to write a story; thus her time invested gives her the right to publish this story. Her third reason is that two friends—Isabelle McClung and Francis Hill—have also invested in the book and would lose money by Cather’s having to pull the story. Oddly, after telling of Isabelle’s investment in the book and the multiple sacrifices she has made for it, Cather uses as her final argument Isabelle’s irreproachable moral sense. Evidently it does not occur to her that Isabelle’s opinion could in any way be influenced by the fact that she had both a financial and an emotional investment in this publication. Saying that she has never prided herself on having a moral sense but that she has recognized it strongly in her years with Isabelle, she cites Isabelle’s approval as giving her absolute conviction. Accusing Dorothy of
exaggerating the situation, Cather charges her with exacting a heavy price and taking away all the fun of publishing this first book of fiction. As she nears the end of this defensive letter, however, she unwittingly reveals that she has long recognized the story as a problem, by bringing up having discussed it with her brother a year and a half ago. Though she recalls his telling her that it would all depend on Dorothy’s reaction, she admits she never asked Dorothy for her reaction. She chose to try to sidestep it, specifically saying in this letter that she had hoped the issue could have been avoided until after the publication of the book, when it would have been too late for discussion.

Cather’s responses depict the call of art as all-consuming. Refusing to accede to Dorothy’s wishes, Isabelle McClung also wrote a letter which shows no hint of the strong moral sense Cather admired and which furthers the idea that Canfield’s request is a betrayal of her friendship with Cather. Admitting that she and Cather talked over the fact that the story never would have occurred to her had she not met Evelyn Osbourne, Isabelle insists that “it is Willa’s scar now, not yours or mine or any ones [sic] but hers. It seems to me that your taking away the pleasure of this first book of hers is far more cruel, more wrong even than any number of stories about any number of people—could be.”

When Canfield and her family could not get Cather to comply, they went to her publisher, threatening a lawsuit. Accepting the evidence of too close a connection between life and art, the publisher pulled the story and waited for Cather to write a replacement, ultimately inconveniencing Cather far less than Isabelle’s posited belief that Cather would lose her sole opportunity to publish a book of short fiction. Ironically, however, this new story only cemented the damage done to Cather-Canfield relations by altercations over the first story. “Flavia and Her Artists,” the replacement, depicts a shallow, self-centered
main character who shares the same unusual name and many characteristics with Dorothy Canfield’s mother. Predictably, this move only reinforced negative relations between Cather and Canfield, which were broken off almost entirely for about fifteen years.  

Cather also subsequently published “The Profile” in McClure’s, heedless of the pain she was causing the Canfields and their friend. An article by Witter Bynner, who also worked at McClure’s at this time, recounts a discussion among the staff over whether or not Cather should publish her short story he recalls as “The Birthmark.” He recalls Cather saying in her own defense: “My art is more important than my friend” (333). Though Bynner misremembers the title because of the story’s similarities to the Hawthorne tale by this name, his memory confirms that in 1907 Cather had not yet learned her lesson from her negative experiences with the story in 1905. In those early years she consistently pursued advantage for her art without attention to the feelings of others, sometimes even reveling in her power to inflict pain.  

By 1921, however, after some years of maturing and achieving stature as an author, Cather demonstrated a new attitude, which later comes through in The Professor’s House. Feeling some desperation about the French section of her One of Ours and thinking back to the friend whose general sophistication and prowess with the French language had given her an inferiority complex years ago, Cather reconnected with Canfield Fisher, begging for her forgiveness and for her help with the novel. Cather’s experience with Canfield Fisher more closely resembles St. Peter’s betrayal of Lillian than it does Tom’s of Roddy. First of all, rather than being a single impetuous action, Cather’s publication history with these two stories demonstrates a much longer-lived determination to do what she felt compelled to do—no matter the cost to her friend—than
the Pound incident. In the same way, St. Peter's betrayal of Lillian for his single-minded pursuits spanned decades. Just as Cather refused to accept Canfield's advice, St. Peter also refused to listen to Lillian's requests for renewed significant involvement in her life. In the same way that Cather was able to muffle her own awareness of the pain she was causing Canfield by listening only to Isabelle's approval, so St. Peter is able to block knowledge of the pain he causes Lillian through his enjoyment of Tom Outland, the "one remarkable mind," he has encountered in "a lifetime of teaching" (50). Blaming the breach in his marriage on Lillian's unreasonableness, just as Cather blamed Canfield for being overly sensitive on the part of her disfigured friend, both St. Peter and Cather refused to recognize their culpability for betraying loved ones. Cather's experience of being first alienated and then forgiven and restored to close relationship with Canfield Fisher in the two years before writing this book appears in her portrayal of St. Peter, who stubbornly refuses to see his error for decades. Though Cather was never sanguine enough to believe all conflicts could be resolved, her recent reconciliation with Canfield Fisher led her to create characters like her younger self in their oblivion to the needs of others around them. It also led her to leave the professor at the end of the novel with the beginning self-knowledge necessary both for positive emotional reconnection between himself and Lillian and for successful reengagement with the modern world.

Many early readers of this novel expressed dissatisfaction as they responded to modernist elements they did not expect from Cather and did not understand. Perplexed by her dramatic tripartite structure, misunderstanding the bare prose of Book II, and unhappy with the professor's final response to his dilemma, many early readers saw the book as a serious misstep. Joseph Krutch says of The Professor's House, "Fragmentary and in-
conclusive, it starts off in several different directions but never quite arrives at any of the proposed destinations. . . . the book is a disappointment to those who know how good her best work can be” (56). James Schroeter’s comment is mixed, saying her “daring” experiment consisted of deliberately risking a disastrous break in the middle of the book by inserting there a long piece of writing with no apparent narrative relationship to parts one and three; and of making this “intrusion,” her most beautifully sustained piece of prose up to that time (23).

Alfred Kazin calls it “the most persistently underrated of her novels,” adding, nevertheless, “The violence with which she broke the book in half to tell the long and discursive narrative of Tom Outland’s boyhood in the Southwest was a technical mistake that has damned the book” (168). Most critics recognize Cather’s courage in doing something dramatically different from what had been done before, but in early years they could articulate only imperfectly what she had achieved.

Nevertheless, as readers over the years have grown to understand this novel in its context of modernism and have understood the beauty of its use of symbolism, juxtaposition, spare writing style, and gaps, many have responded positively to the sculptured depiction of a society above the rest of the world, to the characters of Professor Godfrey St. Peter and Tom Outland, and to what some see as affirmation of life at the close of the novel. Some see it as a beautifully modernist novel, in the tradition of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, and others recognize a haunting romanticism which persists throughout this modernist novel. David Harrell, for example, details the ways in which “Willa Cather’s Blue Mesa is a thoroughly idealized version of Mesa Verde,” placing “‘Tom Outland’s Story’—if not *The Professor’s House* as a whole—directly in the mainstream of American Romantic literature” (131). Susan Rosowski, in
the same vein, writes of it as demonstrating "the disillusionment characteristic of late romanticism" (143). Though many types of idealism powerfully inform the novel, the modernist malaise and questioning of certainties counterbalance the idealism to such an extreme in the professor's life that many readers see the idealism as completely negated. Cather herself called this a nasty, grim little book and was surprised by its overall positive reception. Nevertheless, the novel is replete with stirring examples of idealistic, artistic striving which exist as the source of meaning in life. Despite the novel's grim portrayals of idealists suffering as a result of betraying others, its idealism continues to stir readers. Though this novel demonstrates Cather's realization of the heavy costs of her own commitment to artistic achievement, it demonstrates a dialogical engagement between true repentance for the pain she caused and an enduring fierce commitment to idealism.

In characterizing her two primary idealists, Cather imbued both St. Peter and Tom Outland with many of her own characteristics. Each man resembles Cather at a different point in her life, and both men's lives demonstrate great achievements and the consequences of betraying others for idealism. St. Peter's perfectionism and idealistic commitment to his work result in his prize-winning eight-volume history, as Cather's had resulted in eight novels and a Pulitzer by the time she wrote this novel. St. Peter's idealism leads to his fight for standards and intellectual direction in the university, while Tom's motivates him to try for months to interest the Smithsonian in the cliff dwellers and their civilization. Cather's early idealism led to frequent impassioned statements in print and in letters to friends about the supremacy of art over all else in life, while her disillusioned idealism led to frequent comments in speeches and letters to friends about
the deterioration of literature, the country, and the world. Among other things, this novel depicts St. Peter coming to terms with his own disillusioned idealism, recognizing—as Cather did—its joys and perils.

As the novel opens, St. Peter appears to be a reasonably well-balanced, successful character, because readers see his world primarily through his eyes. Though piqued at being asked to move out of his long-loved study—as Cather was unhappy to lose her study in Isabelle’s house when it was sold—he initially plays the role of a mature intellectual forcing himself to put up with the foolishness of others. Because his consciousness dominates the novel, readers can easily fall into the trap of assuming his judgments of himself, of Lillian, and of others to be the unvarnished truth. Specifically, many critics praise St. Peter’s achievement of balance between time with work and time with family:

Two evenings of the week he spent with his wife and daughters and one evening he and his wife went out to dinner, or to the theatre or a concert. That left him only four. He had Saturdays and Sundays, of course, and on those two days he worked like a miner under a landslide. . . . All the while that he was working so fiercely by night, he was earning his living during the day; carrying full university work and feeding himself out to hundreds of students in lectures and consultations. But that was another life. (18)

St. Peter sees himself as behaving admirably toward his family, dutifully giving them a few slices of his precious time. Just as for years Cather carefully kept Friday afternoons to host friends for tea and went to friends’ homes for dinner exactly once a week, St. Peter doled out his time to others in careful increments. Oblivious to family needs, St. Peter prides himself on his maneuverings:

But he had burned his candle at both ends to some purpose—he had got what he wanted. . . . By eliminations and combinations so many and subtle that it now made his head ache to think of them, he had done full justice to his university lectures, and the same time carried on an engrossing piece of creative work. (19)
Treating his family like his students to whom he has been "feeding himself out," St. Peter betrays his wife and daughters by refusing to include them as central to his life.

In spite of admitting to having been overwhelmingly in love with Lillian, even fearful of eventually being separated from her in his coffin, he absorbs himself too much in his own pursuits—scholarly and recreational—to realize how he is breaking ties with his family and breaking Lillian’s heart. From his perspective, his life sounds admirably organized; but from the perspective of the wife who only sees him three evenings of the week and his young daughters who only see their father two evenings before bedtime and never on the weekends, this life sounds extremely unbalanced. Small wonder little Kathleen sits one entire summer morning outside her father’s study door, waiting for his work to be done before he can tend to her hand swollen from a bee-sting. He sees it as an example of his daughter’s magnificent independence (73). It is. But more importantly, the incident conveys an inarguable sense of how powerfully St. Peter has enforced his rule of solitude. Six-year-old Kathleen knows her father’s work comes before her—though he is her sole caretaker that summer—and she wisely avoids violating his rule.

Willa Cather also put the highest priority on her writing time, sometimes at the expense of those to whom she was close. Though she never married, she too had an intimate relationship with a friend whose preferences and opinions were among the most interesting things in her young adult life. As Lillian originally did for St. Peter, Isabelle McClung brought joy to Cather’s life and gave her the support in her work which first enabled her to do great writing. Though St. Peter never asked Lillian to read his work and give him advice as Cather did with Isabelle McClung, Lillian’s creation of a warm, social environment which included St. Peter in the world of the theatre and opera replicates
Isabelle’s role in Cather’s early adult life in Pittsburgh. Isabelle hospitably obtained permission from her extremely conservative, moneyed parents to allow the unusual situation of having Cather move into their imposing family home. For five years, from 1901-06, Cather had a third-floor bedroom and was also allowed to use the third-floor sewing room as her study.21 Not only was this arrangement a financial boon for Cather, but, more importantly, it also completely freed her time from the duties of cooking and home maintenance while giving her an onsite critic. Isabelle proved to be an intelligent, eager reader of Cather’s work, providing ongoing encouragement.

While teaching high school full time, Cather would hardly have had the time to do any serious writing had Isabelle not provided this controlled environment which gave Cather as much access to the cultured people of Pittsburgh as she wished and a room of her own for as much solitude as she desired. In 1916 Cather received a shock when Isabelle and her brother were no longer able to keep up their large home and needed to sell it after their father’s death, though she herself had moved to New York a decade earlier. Knowing the house was soon to be sold, Cather wrote her Aunt Franc on December 25, 1915, from the house she said had been a home to her for fifteen years. Though she had only lived there for five years, she had paid frequent visits since then and had felt it to be an emotional center for her during this whole time period. As her home in the East, it also served as the only family home in which she could write well. Becoming a bit overly dramatic because of her realization she would never celebrate Christmas there again, Cather wrote her aunt how difficult it was to see familiar things pass out of her life, saying that she feared she would never be able to feel so safe and happy anywhere else. Though many critics blame Cather’s sense of loss on Isabelle’s marriage the
next year, her letters actually mention the marriage as a very good thing for Isabelle and primarily express grief about losing the house.

Rather than primarily demonstrating a life-changing unhappiness over Isabelle’s choice to marry, these letters confirm Janis Stout’s observation that Cather’s frequent moves throughout her life left her with a strong insecurity of place which she countered by extreme attachment to specific homes.22 Years later, when she and Edith Lewis were forced to move from their long-term home at Number Five Bank Street because of subway construction, Cather was again greatly disturbed. Eventually settling in the Grosvenor Hotel—where she remained for five years because she was unable to face the challenge of finding a new permanent dwelling place—Cather complained frequently about not being herself without her home. As mentioned before, in 1945 Cather also expressed bitter disappointment to Trixie Florance about not being given the opportunity to purchase the Red Cloud home her family had lived in for decades.23 Cather invested a great deal of emotional energy in the homes in which she lived and parted with them unwillingly, just as St. Peter did.

Like St. Peter, Cather was temperamentally “terribly selfish about personal pleasures, fought for them. If a thing gave h[er] delight, [s]he got it” (17). Ironically, money from this novel, which is so often read as a diatribe against materialism, purchased for Willa Cather what she names as her first valuable possession: a full-length mink coat, which she immediately had insured. Because of her earnings on the book, she was able to comment in a letter that the professor had bought her this lovely coat. Though she and St. Peter both rant against materialism and think of themselves as living primarily in the world of ideas, both also thoroughly enjoy the perquisites of wealth.24 Cather enjoyed
fine wines and food prepared by her French cook, abundant opera and theater tickets, and lengthy trips abroad. Similarly, St. Peter enjoys opera, theater, frequent dinners out, travel, and his “dozen dozens” of sherry during Prohibition. As Cather insists emphatically in a letter to Canfield Fisher, she never sacrificed herself for her “art.” Claiming to be sick of the legend of the pale creature who sacrificed herself, she says she led a life of complete indulgence, doing whatever pleased her most. Then, indulging in a bit of revisionist history, she remembers never keeping herself away from the people she cared for, only shutting out the crowd to be completely there for her friends. Though she does not mention it explicitly in this letter, isolation from others during much of daily life was a primary need in order for her to be able to produce the art she found energizing.

St. Peter’s garden typifies and symbolizes this same purposeful isolation: “His walled-in garden had been the comfort of his life . . . . He started to make it soon after the birth of his first daughter, when his wife began to be unreasonable about his spending so much time at the lake and on the tennis court” (5-6). Refusing to see Lillian’s need for his involvement in caring for a brand-new baby, St. Peter finds ways to escape. When she expresses her unhappiness at his being gone so frequently, he grudgingly stays home, obliging her in form only, while creating a garden from which to wall her and others out. An emblem of his perfectionism, St. Peter’s garden is “a French garden in Hamilton. There was not a blade of grass; it was a tidy half-acre of glistening gravel and glistening shrubs and bright flowers” (6). It gives him the comfort of solitude and reminds him of his beloved France, while annoying his landlord with its unproductiveness. When St. Peter cannot find complete happiness in his work and does not see the accomplishment of his youthful dreams, “when homesickness for other lands and the fret of things unaccom-
plished awoke, he worked off his discontent here” (6). Cheating his family of the opportunity to meet some of his emotional needs, he isolates himself and leaves them to find a way to go on with life without him. In Rosowski’s insightful words, “In the process, however, he has neglected his personal life, until it has become as empty as his abandoned house” (131).

After his son-in-law Louie presents Lillian and St. Peter with tickets to attend the Mignon opera alone together, the music softens St. Peter’s heart with memories of his own youth and momentarily renews a connection between the two former lovers. Because the “overture brought a smile to his lips and a gracious mood to his heart” (76), he momentarily sees his wife differently, thinking her the one changed by the music. As he thinks back to his early love of Lillian and mourns its loss, he tells her they should have been “picturesquely shipwrecked together” when they were still young (78). Relishing his feelings much more in the realm of the romantic ideal rather than in the quotidian, however, he is startled to realize Lillian shares his sense of loss; at this revelation he abruptly abandons the image of them as loving duo, accusing her of facilitating the changes which disrupted their emotional intimacy. When she defends herself by saying “One must go on living, Godfrey. But it wasn’t the children who came between us” (78), he notices for a moment “something that spoke of an old wound, healed and hardened and hopeless” (78).

Refusing to allow the full reconnection which Louie’s gift had temporarily proffered them, St. Peter chooses to close himself off from Lillian again. But for one moment, seeing her lip quivering with long-repressed emotion, he realizes he has misjudged her and shares an intimate glance with her. At this moment, Lillian’s response reminds
readers that one of Augusta's mannequins, which St. Peter calls "my ladies" (12), has a bosom which "resembled a strong wire bird-cage" (10). Working hard to please her husband by seldom inconveniencing him with her emotions, Lillian allows this moment of intimacy to charm her heart out of its cage temporarily. Unfortunately, St. Peter has no desire for anything more than a momentary emotional connection, a romantic experience at the opera. He returns to enjoying the music and later dreams of himself picturesquely shipwrecked without Lillian, alone except for a crew of seamen on the boat which was the site of the inspiration for his history series. By turning away from Lillian and returning to his memories of the birth of his great project, he intentionally isolates himself psychologically from loved ones, attempting to find complete fulfillment in his solitary accomplishments and dreams.

While St. Peter creates spaces for himself which keep others out, Lillian works to create a warm, loving environment to support him in his work and to surround him with people who love and admire him. Having won the point of having her husband spend more time at home, Lillian makes the best of her diminished marriage by running the household in a manner which disturbs him as little as possible. She trains the girls to give their father his privacy, she provides good dinners for him, and she keeps herself and the home attractive. She arranges a pleasant, intellectually stimulating social life for them—concerts, theatre, dinner out with colleagues—and chooses clothes and furnishings much more tastefully than do the wives of his colleagues. Lillian has reason to hope that once the busy years of very young children pass, she and her husband will return to the easy confidences and delighted companionship of their first years together. But although he remembers loving her so intensely that he urgently needed a job to allow him to marry
her, this intensity now remains only a memory. While Lillian mourns the loss of the relationship which allowed her opinions and responses to be invaluable to him for many years, her husband looks back on that relationship as a temporary state of affairs during a time in which “he was [unavoidably] thrown upon his wife for mental companionship” (39).

In his betrayal of Lillian for his work, he creates self-blinding rationalizations for his pulling away. Acknowledging that she still has great physical attractions and a “really radiant charm,” he decides he has misjudged her as having an interesting mind. Since he has lost interest in her mind, he tells himself that “it was quite wrong to call it mind, the connotation was false. What she had was a richly endowed nature that responded strongly to life and art” (38). Admitting that “Before his marriage, and for years afterward, Lillian’s prejudices, her divinations about people and art (always instinctive and unexplained, but nearly always right), were the most interesting things in St. Peter’s life” (38), he, nevertheless, determines that his life of the mind requires superior stimulation to that of his wife’s companionship. In a superb analysis of this marriage Alice Bell documents the allusions St. Peter makes to the infidelity of literary wives, implying that he chooses to perceive Lillian as unfaithful rather than admit his own emotional infidelity to her. Bell points out that St. Peter’s thought that “There was no way out; they would meet at compt” (PH 35) alludes to “Othello’s speech over Desdemona’s body” (119). As Bell incisively notes, “According to Cather’s principles of artistic simplification, the use of the archaic compt is justified only if what has been ‘suppressed and cut away is there to the reader’s consciousness as much as if it were in type on the page’ (“Art” 102)” (118). Through this oblique reference, Cather reinforces the idea that “St. Peter is treating his
wife as though she has been unfaithful, while—like Desdemona—she is actually inno-
cent” (Bell 119).

In spite of her husband’s ongoing mistreatment of her, Lillian continues to care
deeply for him. In a striking scene after St. Peter’s distressing trip to Chicago to help
Rosamond shop for her house, Lillian expresses enormous anxiety and sensitivity for her
husband. Finding herself unable to alleviate any of his pain, Lillian’s “heart ached for
Godfrey” (136). Tellingly, however, when Lillian sees him smile agreeably while looking
into the fire and asks him his thoughts, he informs her he was thinking about Euripides’
retreat to a cave in later years: “I wonder whether it was because he had observed women
so closely all his life” (136). As Bell notes, “St. Peter’s unkind statement about women,
coming just after Lillian’s expression of concern, is probably the most forceful example
of juxtaposition in the novel” (119-20). Cather uses this juxtaposition to jar readers into
realizing how utterly St. Peter betrays his innocent wife and then blames her for the
breach. In his final reminiscences, St. Peter remembers a time years ago when the com-
panionship he had deemed more appropriate—his colleagues and his work—had begun to
pale. He had missed the human intimacy he had experienced with Lillian, vaguely
realizing his solitary pursuit was not fulfilling all his needs, but he had been unable to
name his longing. Before he could return to Lillian and restore their relationship, how-
ever, he had received another chance to retreat into his idealistic scholarly pursuit: “Just
when the morning brightness of the world was wearing off for him, along came Tom and
brought him a kind of second youth” (234).

Allowing St. Peter protection from having to face his mid-life feelings of dissatis-
faction, Tom provides a means of escape and propels him into a deeper betrayal of
Lillian. So long as St. Peter’s work and his colleagues take her place in her husband’s life, Lillian has maintained the hope of a lover who has been neglected but not permanently supplanted. However, once the student she has nurtured as part of the family becomes her husband’s primary confidant, even sharing lengthy vacations with him, the truth is unavoidable. At this juncture, Lillian decides she “must go on living” (78) and invests emotionally more in her daughters and their husbands. As Margaret Doane notes, Lillian “is actually remarkably sensitive and perceptive in her observations of St. Peter,” whereas “the Professor is woefully imperceptive about the feelings and goals of the women around him” (302). Because he refuses to face his own role in the change in Lillian’s situation, St. Peter thinks patronizingly of Lillian’s choice:

Yes, with her sons-in-law she had begun the game of being a woman all over again. She dressed for them, planned for them, schemed in their interests. She had begun to entertain more than for years past—the new house made a plausible pretext—and to use her influence and charm in the little anxious social world of Hamilton. She was intensely interested in the success and happiness of these two young men, lived in their careers as she had once done in his. It was splendid, St. Peter told himself. She wasn’t going to have to face a stretch of boredom between being a young woman and being a young grandmother. She was less intelligent and more sensible than he had thought her. (64-65)

Just as St. Peter blames Lillian for her strong emotional connection to her Jewish son-in-law Louie Marsellus, many critics cite Isabelle’s marriage as a betrayal of Cather. They see Cather’s portrayal of Louie as Cather’s means of fictionalizing her pain over Isabelle’s marriage and her displeasure with the Jewish man she married. That reading forgets two facts. First, Cather does not develop St. Peter as a character who knows himself or others well. Even in his disdain about Lillian’s growing attachment to Louie, St. Peter knows that she is the one whose “divinations about people . . . [were] nearly always right” (38). Readers learn many reasons to doubt St. Peter’s opinions and
rationalizations and many reasons to respect both Lillian’s instincts about people and her choices to make the best of her diminished marriage.\textsuperscript{30} St. Peter’s displeasure with Louie’s materialism is also strongly mitigated by his great respect for Louie’s magnificence in overlooking and forgiving his brother-in-law’s ill will in blackballing him from his literary club. St. Peter marvels at Louie’s goodheartedness in his relationships both with Rosamond and with the McGregor's.

The second important fact to remember is timing. If Cather had still been living in the McClung home and writing in her third-floor sewing room at the time Isabelle sold her parents’ home and married, Isabelle’s marriage to Jan Hambourg would seem more of a betrayal than it does. However, Cather’s change in career and move to New York ten years earlier had already caused a significant geographic separation between the two women and had dramatically reduced the time they could spend together. Though Cather did come back for visits, her move to New York consciously made writing a higher priority than time spent with Isabelle. In looking at Cather’s life, it seems a necessary career choice to sacrifice time with Isabelle to make writing Cather’s top priority while finding a new house mate who was extremely supportive of her and helpful in her work,\textsuperscript{31} just as St. Peter found in Tom Outland a companion who could be an inspiration to him. Nevertheless, her pain at the loss of this Pittsburgh home was real. Her letters suggest that she may have held a naive expectation that she could spend as much or as little time with Isabelle as suited her needs and still be assured that the home and relationship would remain unchanged by her choices. Writing of it to a friend as the breaking up of her home, though she had not lived there for ten years, Cather called it an amazing change and a devastating loss.\textsuperscript{32}
Similarly, St. Peter feels devastated by his daughters' growing up, marrying, and leaving home, though his behavior toward them has consistently betrayed them by objectifying them. His musing to Lillian that perhaps Medea's is the only way to keep one's children little reveals not only a heartless attitude toward Lillian but an attitude of commodifying his own beautiful, young daughters for personal enjoyment. St. Peter's bitter jest in this reference to murdering his children reveals an utter lack of knowledge of his daughters as human beings. His thought that "The heart of another is a dark forest," after seeing Lillian struggling with emotion, reveals not only a disconnection between husband and wife but a way of life for St. Peter. Seeing his family members only as extensions of his own life, he neglects to consider their feelings and their need for connection with him.

His betrayal of daughter Kathleen begins when she is tiny and wishes for the time with her father which he withholds from her, but the pattern progresses as she reaches adulthood. A sporadically gifted artist, Kathleen suggests a preoccupation with her father by being able only to paint St. Peter successfully. Unfortunately, St. Peter not only neglects to affirm his unusual daughter's gifts but does not even get to know her well enough to guess at her deepest emotions. As she leaves his study one afternoon after talking of Tom Outland, he faces for perhaps the first time his uncertainty about her. He searches to realize the extent of an emotional connection he had entirely missed: Kathleen's romantic love for Tom Outland. Acting as a catalyst for both her spontaneous marriage to Scott and her deep bitterness toward Rosamond—as Tom's chosen partner—Kathleen's passion has never occurred to St. Peter before. In his detached manner, he has felt discomfort over the sibling rift and has wondered why Kathleen so quickly chose
as her husband a man he sees lacking in imaginative power, but he has never thought deeply enough about these situations nor listened to Kathleen enough to understand.

St. Peter also fails to invest himself significantly in relationships with his other family members—Rosamond, Louie, and Scott. In each of these relationships, St. Peter’s actions are perfunctory and dutiful at best, attempting to satisfy people around him in ways which show no interest in their true needs. Throughout the novel, “It is as if St. Peter is caught in a maze of mirrors from which there seems no escape, each mirror demanding that he assume a pose—of concerned father, of sympathetic host, of brilliant scholar, of devoted husband” (Rosowski 132). Because he has chosen to live primarily in his romantic life of the mind, he has cut himself off from the ability to deal with the modern world in all of its complexity. He agrees to accompany Scott out to Lake Michigan and listens to his complaints about Louie and Rosamond, but he gives him little more than his physical presence, rather than the emotional connection and guidance Scott clearly yearns for. Similarly, he agrees to help Rosamond with her purchases for her new house, simply because Lillian has said he should. She says he should aid Rosamond with his good taste, and he admits that Lillian’s “instincts about what one owed to people were better than his” (132). In the process he despises Rosamond’s trip, later calling it “an orgy of acquisition” (135). He accompanies Rosamond, because he wants to have done the proper thing as her father, but his heart is not in it. Also with Louie, whose lavish hospitality he enjoys in Chicago and who has been nothing but generous with the entire family, St. Peter holds himself aloof. He decides that Louie represents a lower order of beings than he, because Louie’s talent lies in material pursuits—such as developing Tom Outland’s patent and making it profitable—rather than in cerebral pursuits like his own. Though he
recognizes Louie's forbearing attitudes towards his wife and his brother-in-law as "magnanimous and magnificent" (149), his acceptance of Louie never resonates as complete.

In all of these relationships, St. Peter's pattern of maintaining emotional distance is consistent with the relationship he maintains with Lillian. Having betrayed his family bit by bit first for his work and later for his brilliant student Tom Outland, St. Peter has no desire to go back and pick up the pieces of those relationships. He prefers to retreat even further into his shell and live in his own version of the past. Skaggs observes that Godfrey St. Peter's "fear of intimacy" renders him "a charming performer who is unable to engage intimately with others, at least in the novel's present" (80). Thus, St. Peter finds Tom's "exhilarating solitude at the top of the Blue Mesa" (80) not only understandable but commendable in its achievement of solitary pursuit of the ideal.34

Because most of the novel focuses on the central consciousness of St. Peter, the introductory comment to Tom's story emphasizes the professor's lack of awareness of how idealistic solitary endeavor can betray others.35 "It was nothing very incriminating, nothing very remarkable; a story of youthful defeat, the sort of thing a boy is sensitive about—until he grows older" (155). The only way Tom's story can possibly be read as neither remarkable nor incriminating is to focus purely on his unsuccessful attempt to interest the Smithsonian in his discovery of Cliff City. The discovery itself stands out as one of the most remarkable parts of the novel, and his betrayal of Roddy incriminates Tom not only in his own eyes but in the eyes of anyone who cares deeply about other people: "But the older I grow, the more I understand what it was I did that night on the mesa. Anyone who requites faith and friendship as I did, will have to pay for it. I'm not very sanguine about good fortune for myself. I'll be called to account when I least expect
it” (229, italics added). Although St. Peter prefers to believe Tom’s sensitivity about his betrayal of Roddy is due to his youth, Tom’s final comment makes clear that his realization of the significance of this betrayal grows with his own increasing maturity.

At the time of their quarrel, however, Tom feels dramatically betrayed by Roddy’s sale of their valuable artifacts, just as St. Peter later feels betrayed by his family’s growing materialism and growth away from him. In the same way that the professor fails to realize how he has contributed to and even caused his family’s changes, Tom does not realize till too late how his depressing letters about the Smithsonian and his earlier comments about “realizing” something from their discovery have led Roddy to believe he is doing the right thing. Roddy’s sale of the artifacts for the money to send Tom to college attempts to reach a goal he believes the two share, albeit through a means they had never discussed. Tom’s choice to express so much fury toward Roddy, even after Roddy explains his motivation, reveals his greater passion for his ruins than for their friendship.

Though Tom has spent months investing time and energy into excavating Cliff City, he tells himself he has acted completely nobly. He refuses to recognize that he and Roddy both have a great deal of guilt for digging up and disseminating the ancestral remains of living Indians, whom they never bother to try to locate. Instead Tom prefers to see himself as exhibiting an appropriately worshipful attitude toward the ruins and accuses Roddy of being mercenary. Tom tries to justify his fury and to rationalize his idealism by telling Roddy, “There never was any question of money with me. . . . I’d as soon have sold my own grandmother as Mother Eve—I’d have sold any living woman first” (221). Instead of justifying himself, however, he unwittingly reveals his willingness to betray the living for his belief in the ideal. As Sarah Wilson notes, “Although he calls upon
‘boys like you and me’ to legitimate his claim on the mesa artifacts, he promptly sacrifices the only real community with whom he has shared these artifacts (*PH*, 219), the very ‘boy’ to whom these words are spoken” (584).

Tom, in his righteously indignant anger, forgets his own role in the desecration, idealistically seeing himself as the preserver of the cliff dwellings. Willa Cather herself “rather shamefacedly” told Elsie Sergeant of the potsherds she had taken from the ruins, though it “had seemed a sacrilege to take anything for oneself from those cliff dwellings that hung along Walnut Canyon” (Sergeant 123). Revering the cliff dwellings enough to create a memorably idealized depiction of them in “Tom Outland’s Story,” Cather, nevertheless, desecrated them herself and knew Tom’s guilt. Paula Kot explains, Tom “erases his complicity in the stripping and selling of the mesa by claiming that this was the first night that he was ‘ever really on the mesa’” (42). That moment motivates him to rewrite his history on the mesa in his own mind, even choosing not to go back to get his diary out of fear that he would “unravel things step by step” (227). Similarly, Willa Cather purposely never went back to these cliff dwellings after fictionalizing them, writing friends that she did not want to see them changed, but certainly also not wanting to admit to herself how much she had altered them in the story she claimed to have told substantially as it happened. Cather’s subtle examination with Sergeant of her own “sacrilege” of removing artifacts from the cliff dwellings reveals that she recognizes her own concomitant idealization of and betrayal of this civilization.

Similarly, Tom’s initial response to Roddy’s leaving him alone on the mesa is a purely selfish enjoyment of his spiritual “possession” of the mesa for the first time. In Harrell’s words, “it is ‘possession’—not physical possession of the sort coveted by
Fechtig and the people of Tarpin—but imaginative, even spiritual, possession, an absorption of the ideas that the place conveys, a case of art being based in the physical and ending in the spiritual” (144). It is this seeking of possession which allows Tom to feel his time there as a religious experience. His having to share the mesa with Roddy and Henry earlier had prevented him from feeling fully connected to his personal paradise, but complete solitude frees him from communal obligation, thereby allowing him autonomy and the sensation of being a newly created Adam in his own Garden of Eden. Tom spends countless hours alone with Latin literary heroes and with his invented memories of the people who lived on the mesa before him, in the same way that the professor spends countless hours with his Spanish adventurers—whom he refers to as his sons—rather than with his family.

Just as St. Peter later attempts to create his solitary paradise in his old study, spending Christmas Day there daydreaming over his papers among Augusta’s lifeless dressmaking forms, Tom prefers to revel in his solitude on the mesa, believing that he finally has his “happiness unalloyed” (227). He remembers it as “like breathing the sun, breathing the colour of the sky” in this “world above the world” (217). Sarah Wilson’s comment on Tom’s experience on the mesa also speaks for St. Peter’s experience of writing his histories: “The wholeness that Tom conceives severs links to context and community. It falsely regards the object, individual, or mesa as whole only when separate” (585). Tom feels whole only when he has sole experiential possession of the mesa, though his experience there destroys his relationships with Roddy and with the people of the surrounding community. Similarly, because St. Peter’s pursuit of his ideal has severely damaged his relationships and given him a myopic focus, he says he would give
back his prize, the money, and everything his histories have brought his family if by so
doing he could recapture for himself the fun of writing them. St. Peter can fully identify
with Tom’s memory: “Happiness is something one can’t explain . . . that summer, high
and blue, a life in itself” (228). Both men prefer to live in the realm of the ideal, removed
from responsibilities to others.43

Despite the forces of reality which eventually impinge on Tom’s dream of living
the perfect spiritual life on the mesa and on St. Peter’s dream of being able to live entirely
in his solitary, intellectual world, the novel depicts both men as seeing their individual­
istic striving achieve something extraordinary. St. Peter’s histories do finally become
“this dazzling, this beautiful, this utterly impossible thing” he has anticipated (16); Tom’s
discovery of the ruins and his time alone worshiping the idea of the ancient society do
constitute the kind of experience which is only a breathtaking dream to most people.
Cather’s utterly simple telling of Tom’s story creates a sense of “immortal repose” (PH
180) at the center of this novel, which St. Peter seeks to replicate, physically creating his
own “world above the world.”44 Both men are “strong and aspiring people” (182), like
the cliff dwellers they idealize. They exemplify Cather’s belief that “The ideal is more
often directly expressed as an earthly pattern or achievement, but the human which
approaches the divine is enough reason for reverence and passionate excitement. . . . The
greatest artists, then, become as the gods, and the highest arts are holy ground” (Slote
59).45 Cather portrays both Godfrey St. Peter and Tom Outland as approaching the divine
in their passionate reverence for the ideal.

Cather represents Tom’s life on the mesa as an uncomplicated symbol of her
kingdom of art, which she believed required absolute devotion: “In the kingdom of art
there is no God, but one God, and his service is so exacting that there are few men born of women who are strong enough to take the vows” (Kingdom 43). As James Maxfield explains, “The Cliff Dwellers’ city epitomizes an even more perfect form of the ideal society; it symbolizes for Willa Cather much the same thing Byzantium does for Yeats: a moment in human history when ‘religious, aesthetic and practical life were one’” (79). For this reason, once Tom has the mesa to himself he feels that “the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion” (226-27). David Harrell comments, “Outland actually lives the union of art and religion about which St. Peter so forcefully yet vainly lectures” (145). Yet this religion cannot sustain him indefinitely, because of its movement away from communal responsibility. Believing he has “found everything, instead of having lost everything” (227), he postpones thoughts of finding Roddy and enjoys blissful days of studying Spanish and reading The Aeneid. Just as in 1896 Cather writes to Mariel that art is the only true God, and that it not only requires no other gods before it but no other gods at all, here Tom sacrifices the rest of his world to his study and his enjoyment of this idyllic world. Even then when he “didn’t worry much about poor Roddy,” he admits, “I used to be frightened at my own heartlessness” (228). In his solitary dreams of perfect societies, he temporarily finds ultimate happiness.

Tom Outland’s idealistic approach to life does not end when he leaves the mesa; his life continues as a mixture of idealistic commitments and betrayals. Refusing to use the money Roddy has put into an account specifically for his college education, because he sees it as ill-gotten money, he works to pay his own way. Later he works countless hours in Professor Crane’s laboratory to develop a new gas and a valuable new vacuum engine for aircraft. He surprises St. Peter by having the foresight to patent his scientific
invention, not wanting Crane or anyone else to steal it from him, as he feels the cliff dwellers’ artifacts have been.\textsuperscript{47} Ironically, by not including Crane in the patent, Tom replicates almost exactly the unwitting betrayal he has experienced from Roddy. The primary difference is that Roddy makes his decision thinking he is helping Tom, while Tom gives no apparent thought to the needs of the Cranes. Because of Tom’s selfish act of willing the entire patent to Rosamond, Professor Crane and his family suffer painful poverty, while the Marselluses reap enormous rewards. Also unclear are Tom’s motives in joining the Foreign Legion and hurriedly leaving with Father Duchene before the U.S. has even entered the war. Because of his bitterness toward Washington D.C.—believing his country has betrayed him—sacrificial patriotism does not seem likely as the root cause. Tom may be trying to salve his conscience with the pretense that Roddy would end up in the Foreign Legion and that he could find him in France.\textsuperscript{48} He also may believe idealistic national rhetoric of serving in the war as a means of making the world a better place, as Cather did when younger.\textsuperscript{49} In any case, his leaving provides one more instance of his avoiding the obligation of communal involvement. By rushing off to war, leaving Rosamond financially provided for by his will, Tom Outland demonstrates the same type of subtle betrayal St. Peter enacts in providing his wife with a beautiful house she may design and furnish while depriving her of himself.

Despite ways in which their dreams later become sullied, Father Duchene’s words about the cliff dwellers are true of Tom Outland’s and Godfrey St. Peter’s dreams also: “Wherever humanity has made that hardest of all starts and lifted itself out of mere brutality, is a sacred spot” (199). Assuming Cather’s and St. Peter’s definition of religion and art as one, in this novel both Tom Outland and Godfrey St. Peter achieve the sacred
through passionate striving toward an ideal. Indeed, Skaggs' insightful reading reminds us that St. Peter's unusual first name implies "He is God-free, meaning both free as God and free of God" (76).\textsuperscript{50} He serves his aesthetic ideal while attempting to construct for himself a life like Tom's on the mesa, "outside of all personal and cultural determinations" (Hilgart 390). The primary difference between these two idealists is that one must continue to live with the consequences of his choices, while the other escapes in death. When St. Peter thinks how much better it is for Tom that he escaped the certain changes which would have come to him had he lived, married, and worked to develop his patent, he reveals his own futile desire to avoid what he views as entanglements. Indeed, his increasing myopia finally requires a physical crisis to reconnect him to humanity through Augusta and her communal values.

Fortunately, Willa Cather's life shows no evidence of her ever being so removed from others as her professor becomes, though her tendency to isolate herself was also strong. In her \textit{Willa Cather: A Memoir}, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant quotes a \textit{McClure's} article by Cather which emphasizes both this romantic belief in the importance of single-minded devotion to art and the implicit cost of such devotion:

\begin{quote}
The individual possesses this power for only a little while. He is sent into the world charged with it, but he can't keep it a day beyond his allotted time. He has his hour when he can do, live, become. If he devoted these years to caring for an aged parent—God may reward him but Nature will not forgive him (204).
\end{quote}

Cather's years of nursing her mother through her final illness, including paralysis, demonstrate her later understanding of the other side of the coin: her responsibility to loved ones at the expense of her work. Though while caring for her mother she wrote friends that California is such a terrible place that God is not even there, her letters also often mention her \textit{Shadows on the Rock} manuscript as her salvation. Cather, like St.
Peter, found fulfillment through her work to such an extent that it became painful for her to pull herself away from it.

Nevertheless, as St. Peter's last thoughts in the novel imply about him, Cather's life too became much more "outward bound" as she aged. Her letters during most of her life are replete with excuses for not visiting people, occasionally reminding close friends like they know she can never visit anyone, because it prevents her from working. How- ever, as she aged and became increasingly aware of her need for loved ones, she also became increasingly aware of her responsibility to reciprocate in meeting their emotional needs, even when it was inconvenient for her. In her final years she moved beyond seeing people when it was most convenient for her to making time for loved ones even at the cost of her work. Numerous letters from her in later years mention having no time to work, because so many younger family members were in New York needing her time and so many of her friends were having health difficulties.

One cost of her changing priorities was the unfinished state of her final novel at the time of her death. Although Cather was also depressed by the war and struggling with an inflamed tendon in her right thumb, these difficulties were exacerbated by numerous demands on her time by friends and relatives. The combination of growing debilitated by age and feeling concerned about the alarming effects of the war seems to have made Cather determined not to lose potential time with family and friends. Woodress describes her situation:

Cather saw a great deal more of her nephews and nieces during the war than she had before, but their going and coming on military duties taxed her waning strength. She wrote Fisher ... that she was living a sort of communal life, as in her childhood when she lived in the little house in Red Cloud with all her siblings. (497)
In spite of increasing difficulties for Cather in getting her normal morning writing time during these last years of her life, her letters reveal this as a conscious choice. Cather accepted more gracefully her communal obligations than St. Peter finally does, but he too eventually realizes through his affection for Augusta and his gratefulness to her that in human life “meaning comes through context—through outward bindings” (Wilson 591).

Though countless critics have posited ideas as to the meaning of St. Peter’s response to his near-death experience, only one fact seems indisputable: St. Peter has chosen to reengage with life and his family on some level. Whether he intends to accept stoically a life of joylessness, to learn what joy Augusta finds in her religion, or to relearn the joy of communal family life, he does not intend to continue a life in increasing retreat from his family. Coming to consciousness to see Augusta watching over him, “reading a little much-worn religious book she always carried in her handbag” (253), St. Peter feels lonely for the first time:

St. Peter, with half-closed eyes, lay watching her—regarding in her humankind, as if after a definite absence from the world of men and women. If he had thought of Augusta sooner, he would have got up from the couch sooner. Her image would have at once suggested the proper action. (255)

His sensation that he is like a returning traveler, “as if after a definite absence from the world of men and women,” refers far more directly to his self-imposed exile during the previous decades than it does to his short period of unconsciousness.

Though disturbingly ambiguous, St. Peter’s last thoughts in the novel emphasize this change in direction: “He had let something go—and it was gone: something very precious, that he could not consciously have relinquished, probably” (258). Readers can immediately assume that the “something very precious” St. Peter has let go of is delight, because of his maudlin, wandering thoughts. But his resignation to living without delight
“as he supposed he would have to learn to live without sherry” (257, emphasis added) expresses the self-pity of a man who is unused to accommodating himself to other people. Only the barest beginnings of self knowledge accompany his new resolve. His near asphyxiation and subsequent rescue by Augusta give him the jolt he needs to pull him out of total self-absorption, but they have not yet taught him the joy of living in community. Despite the fact that St. Peter sees Augusta as “bloomless,” he notices that she does enjoy intimate involvement in the lives of numerous families. His talk of learning to live “without joy, without passionate griefs” (257) does not reflect a reality of future life without emotion; instead, it simply reflects his self pity over the fact that he needs to leave his ivory tower and reengage with living people. Ironically, he predicts that his family—who have consistently sought connection with him—will be “too happily preoccupied with their own affairs” (258) to notice his new availability to them. Only when he begins to let them back into his life will he be able to believe in renewed emotional connection. Hsiao-ling Ying explains St. Peter’s decision as emulating “Augusta’s relationship with the world”:

This ending represents a reconciliation of the Professor’s (also Cather’s) inner conflict between the idealized spiritual world he has pined for and the . . . [world] around him. . . . St. Peter has renounced the shelter provided by the world of pure art and beauty—the spiritual escape from reality. By letting it go, he is able to walk out of his own ivory tower and his depression. (88)

Knowing personally the enchanting power of the kingdom of art to draw its adherents completely to itself, Cather protects St. Peter from permanent isolation through Augusta, whose wisdom “was like the taste of bitter herbs” (256) to him.55

Of all Cather’s novels, The Professor’s House perhaps most dramatically showcases her dialogical romanticism and modernism, with the novel’s modernist, disjointed
form centrally locating its romantic, idealist story of human striving. The disjointed
nature of this narrative appears already in the first sentence, when Cather introduces us to
St. Peter’s “dismantled” old house, and we begin to sense that more than his house has
been dismantled. His dreams, his career focus, his once-happy family, and his sense of
purpose have all been dismantled, ironically enough through his academic and financial
success. Here, as with her ending of The Song of the Lark, Cather reveals the dark under­
belly of success, the modernist underpinnings of the romantic dream. In describing
Cather’s romanticism, Rosowski contends, “moderns and Romantics hold a common
view . . . of the world as essentially meaningless, and both look to the individual creative
imagination to create a new order” (X). While this aptly describes Godfrey St. Peter’s
central endeavor, it fails to explain the emptiness and loss St. Peter finally experiences.
After spending decades with his Spanish explorers and recreating their lives so success­
fully on the pages of his histories that they live on for his readers indefinitely—having
dedicated his life to imaginatively creating his ideal—he inexplicably finds himself
feeling empty. His final emptiness mirrors the disillusionment of Tom Outland, as both
primary characters experience unparalleled success and opportunity for their imagina­
tions to recreate worlds from the past; nevertheless, neither can sustain an isolated world
of creative imagination, and both betray loved ones in the attempt.

A strikingly autobiographical novel, The Professor’s House reveals not only
Cather’s struggle between idealism and disillusionment but also her insight that such
angst is a crucial element in the life of an artist. This novel demonstrates the negative
consequences of the untempered idealism which often gives birth to the greatest art.
Furthermore, this romantic-modernist novel reveals as ultimately fatal such idealism
lived permanently outside the context of human community. As Cather herself felt an increasing desire for human companionship as her life neared its end, she depicts St. Peter exhibiting the same need. Neither renouncing idealistic striving nor attempting to gloss over its perils, the novel reveals both faces. In the midst of this fragmentation and disillusionment, Cather portrays people making new choices, attempting to live appropriately in this complex modern world. Dialectical in voice, theme, and structure, Cather’s *The Professor’s House* establishes the brilliant power of the human imagination as well as the costs of sacrificing relationships on its altar.
CHAPTER 6

THE MOTHER NARRATIVE IN WILLA CATHER
AND IN SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL

In creating the world of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, her last completed novel, Willa Cather consciously comes full circle to her personal story of origin. She writes Viola Roseboro that not much of it is fiction, since both the comforting and “the Terrible” aspects of the novel arise from her beginnings and from old family and neighborhood stories.¹ In writing this novel, she goes far beyond reminiscing to look at relationships which formed her as a person and at how they gave her a passion for narrative. Explaining what she refers to as the “bad manners” of personally entering the epilogue, she writes Dorothy Canfield Fisher that she found it necessary to insert herself into the scene because her most vivid childhood memory is the meeting between Till and Nancy.² By returning to Virginia—the locale she had all but eschewed in her adult writing—and by depicting many mother-daughter relationships,³ Cather creates a narrative which embodies both familial pain and the power of connection.⁴ Though many scholars originally dismissed this novel as the weak product of a writer’s declining years, most now see it as powerfully complex. John Swift posits that “In a very literal sense, then, Cather seems in this novel to be attempting the recovery of her own origin, reading the ‘mother tongue’ of her own first story” (29). As she does so, Cather’s portrayal of many strong women in a genteel, vanished culture highlights her ongoing romanticism, while her experimental
form and her portrayal of violent, fractured relationships and the way slavery damages lives reveal her ever present, competing modernism.⁵

Not a novel that receives anything like a unanimous response from readers, it presents a provocative picture of Cather and the world which shaped her from her earliest years—in all its ambiguous beauty. The bitter Civil War divisions in Cather's part of Virginia and in her family itself fractured for Cather even the possibility of belief in the world as a simple place. She grew up in an area originally Confederate but less than five miles from the border of West Virginia, which had established itself as a separate state because of anti-slavery sentiment. Living her first nine years among people who risked their lives for opposing principles, Cather knew schism. Her maternal grandmother, Rachel Boak, fought fervently against slavery—including helping the original Nancy Till escape—but also lost two sons in the Confederate army. Cather's mother, from this Confederate family, married a Union supporter who had fled conscription. In 1875, Jennie Cather bravely eased tensions between the bitterly opposed sides of the family by hosting everyone for a huge Christmas party at her home (Woodress 20). Stout summarizes incisively, "Dividedness was [Cather's] birthright" (2).⁶

This dividedness permeates her final novel dramatically. As David Stouck asserts, it shows her "making peace with her life" and "may well represent the fundamental psychological drama of Willa Cather's life—the child indulged by a gentle father and disciplined . . . by a strong-willed and unsympathetic mother" (WCI 228). Toni Morrison also agrees that Cather's relationship with her mother had a formative effect on this novel, saying that Cather's construction of so many "mother-daughter pairings and relationships leads to the inescapable conclusion that Cather was dreaming and redreaming her
problematic relationship with her own mother" (27). Because of the many people whose stories and personalities are interwoven into single characters in this novel, however, critics often disagree as to who represents whom. In actuality, Sapphira, Henry, and Rachel are all composite Cather family portraits. Many clear historical connections exist, such as between the Colberts and Cather's maternal Seibert great-grandparents, who owned a slave girl named Nancy Till, who escaped and returned for a reunion visit. Nevertheless, a larger component of the characterization Cather draws from the family she knew much more intimately: her own parents. Though Cather's maternal grandmother, Rachel Boak, clearly served as prototype for Rachel Blake, much in Rachel's relationship with Sapphira also reflects Cather's relationship with her own mother. In addition, Sapphira has antecedents in Cather's mother, in Cather herself, and in other female relatives. In addition to Cather's advancing age and her disappointment with the onset of World War II, the seemingly unending time she spent with her paralyzed mother in the two and a half years before her mother's death gave her abundant opportunity to appreciate her mother and their myriad shared characteristics. It also gave her time to reconsider some unpleasant realities she had previously tried to ignore. As a letter to Dorothy expresses, those difficult years held her close to herself and her own beginnings, and many of these things were too sad to live with.

Cather's conflicted views of her mother—Mary Virginia Boak Cather (Jennie)—reveal themselves most clearly in her ambivalent depiction of Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert, heiress and Mistress of Back Creek Mill House. As Merrill Skaggs notes incisively, "[T]he portrait of her which emerges in this novel is one of the most daring of Cather's experiments, and Cather dramatizes in this woman a remarkably complex
human mixture. For Sapphira is capable of infamous villainy, but also of extraordinary generosity” (“Experimental” 9). Sapphira’s autocratic style and her self-centered focus in her decision to dispose of her slave girl Nancy also reflect Cather’s view of her mother as strongly confident and not easily swayed by the opinions of others. John Swift agrees: “Virginia Cather’s mothering technique supports the motherhood/slaveholding equation: as James Woodress describes it, ‘she provided the power that drove the household, often producing sparks’” (30). Similarly, Sapphira exhibits exceptional mastery of her Back Creek estate because of the way she has learned management of her father’s estate during his final illness. Had she been a less forceful personality, not only would she never have taken over her father’s place for him, but she also would never have had the forethought and ability to move into and oversee Back Creek. The respect Cather had for her mother’s management of their large family on her father’s modest income reveals itself in Sapphira’s management of myriad details: which horse will be used to send for a doctor, which servants will take on extra work during special situations, what foods will be prepared for Aunt Jezebel’s funeral, what clothing she will be laid out in, and even how the clothing will be prepared. Similarly, Jennie Cather was completely in charge of her home—from the discipline of her children to the manner in which the home was run—and her daughter respected that.

As a young girl, Willa Cather asserted herself as dramatically different from her beautiful, Southern belle mother and resisted maternal efforts to fit her into a similar mold. From the early incident Edith Lewis recounts of young Willa shocking her mother and a visiting judge by announcing, “I’se a dang’ous nigger, I is!” (13) to teenage Willa’s decision to cut her hair as short as a boy’s, she continually established her own identity as
contrary to her mother’s. As the oldest child, Willa experienced decided pressure to be a little lady in her mother’s mode and—having a strong will—resisted this pressure. Sharon O’Brien recounts, “She was the disappointment of her mother’s life, Cather told a college friend, because she had never lived up to her mother’s definition of a lady. Only her little sister Jessica promised to fulfill Virginia Cather’s desire for ‘one lady in the family’” (44). Interestingly, memories of her mother’s lovely dresses in beautiful fabrics carried over into her own adult love of furs and feathers, with the addition of brilliant colors. Despite Willa’s youthful tomboy tendencies and later New Woman behaviors and dress, her mature adult physical presentation was not far removed from her mother’s carefully groomed persona.

Willa Cather’s metamorphosis in how she presented herself physically occurred much earlier in her life than the change in her view of her mother. Midway through college already, through the influence of Mrs. Gere, mother of her good friend Mariel, Willa decided to wear her hair long again and chose clothing styles which were feminine but still reflected her intention of being taken seriously as a career woman. The few available letters involving her mother, however, reveal conflictedness in this relationship for most of her life—from youth through mid-adulthood—with evidence of greater closeness arriving only very late. In 1903, after living away from home as a college-educated career woman for almost seven years, she writes of extreme difficulties in her relationship with her mother and thanks Dorothy Canfield Fisher profusely for a helpful letter she has recently written Jennie Cather. Evidently, Dorothy’s letter brought about such an extreme change in attitude from mother toward daughter that Willa says she has just received the first letter from her mother in two years that she can bring herself to read all
the way through. She finds it almost completely devoid of anger and resentment and says it makes her hopeful that things will work out between them yet at some point. The fact that Dorothy knew the issues between the women and was concerned enough to write Jennie Cather on her friend’s behalf evidences both the severity of the rift and the depth of Willa’s concern about it. Despite Willa’s expressed hope that their issues can be resolved, difficulties plagued the pair for decades to come. The earliest extant letter from Willa to her mother, dated November 26, 1921, ends with an apology for being hard to get along with during her summer visit to Red Cloud. Three and a half years later a long letter questions her mother about what she can possibly have done to upset her so. Cather apologizes for causing disagreement between her parents about the publication of a newspaper article on Margie Anderson, a woman who lived with them and worked for them most of her adult life. She also assures her mother that she has not been angry with her since they quarreled some time earlier about Mrs. Garber, prototype for Marian Forrester. Ironically, their similar strong wills caused them as many difficulties over the years as their differences did.

Jennie Cather was an extremely strong woman, as was her eldest daughter, and their choices throughout their lives often were diametrically opposed. For example, Jennie always wore her long hair beautifully coifed. When her daughter cut her hair off and wore it as short as a boy’s, it may have shocked Jennie. If, however, Willa had worn it in this shingled style for only a month, it might be safely assumed that her mother had put an immediate stop to a behavior which horrified her. The fact that she wore it in this short style for several years indicates the likelihood that Jennie chose not to quell her daughter’s manner of self-expression. In early adulthood Willa expresses appreciation to
Mariel Gere for Mariel’s mother’s having encouraging her to give up that aspect of her rebellion by reclaiming her feminine hairstyle, but she never mentions her own mother’s objections to her unusually short hair. Whether Jennie Cather had more important things to worry about than the length of Willa’s hair or whether she secretly applauded Willa for strong individuality, as Janis Stout posits, she appears not to have fought her on this issue. Stout calls attention to the fact that the photograph which “Woodress labels ‘Cather with boy’s haircut, about age 13’ is clearly a studio photograph, indicating . . . that her parents liked her appearance well enough to pay to have it recorded” (16). Stout reinforces this possibility by noting the interesting fact that Cather’s “admired Aunt Franc also had her hair shingled” and that it was a New Woman style (17). Sharon O’Brien suggests another valid reason that this New Woman behavior may have appealed to Cather, especially at this time: her mother was temporarily incapacitated due to childbearing (102). The fact that Cather’s earliest act of rebellion occurred during her mother’s time of female weakness certainly suggests that her daughter made this change as a way to appropriate her world’s image of power. Her mother’s tacit support during this time also demonstrates strength of a different sort, much like Sapphira’s non-interference when Rachel interacted with the mountain people in ways she found highly inappropriate for a woman of her position.

Despite the aspects of Sapphira’s portrayal which suggest Cather’s admiration of her mother’s strength, however, readers perceive Sapphira as overwhelmingly cold, controlling, and harsh. Her negative characterization suggests authorial resentment of a mother who was so powerful that only subterfuge could counter her effectively. Sapphira’s autocratic rule and “shallow” eyes also suggest Cather’s early experience of
her mother as selfish and uninterested in matters her daughter considered important. Though Cather’s father and grandmother read to the children, no evidence exists of her mother taking time to do so. Furthermore, her allowing them significant freedom leaves room for the possibility that she was too interested in her own concerns to pay great attention to theirs. Even in the sympathetic late rendering of her mother in the picture of Victoria Templeton in “Old Mrs. Harris,” readers see a woman whose love and interest in her children is secondary to her concern for her figure, her clothing, and her ability to go out and have a good time. She allows her children great freedom, so long as they don’t impinge on hers.

In the same vein, Mildred Bennett’s description of Jennie Cather could have been written about Sapphira: “Always meticulous in appearance, never stepping out of her bedroom without first being perfectly groomed, Virginia Boak Cather allowed no one to see her until her lovely hair had been pinned up” (29). Similarly, Sapphira, “though often generous, was entirely self-centered and thought of other people only in their relation to herself. She was born that way, and had been brought up that way” (220). Cather does not give evidence of having received from her mother the assurance of unconditional love and support she received from her father. The gentle Charles Cather, like Henry Colbert, was not strong enough to make a great name or fortune for himself; nevertheless, he gave her his complete support, even taking out a loan for her college education, as Henry Colbert provided money for Rachel when she needed it. However, Jennie Cather was much more like her daughter than her husband Charles was and also gave her daughter an enormous gift: the legacy of strength and confidence in herself.
Late memories Cather shared with her friends about her mother reveal great respect for a powerful woman. Edith Lewis summarizes:

Willa Cather’s mother, Mary Virginia Boak, was a handsome, imperious woman, with a strong will and a strong nature. She was always the dominating figure in the family, and her personality made a deep impress, not only on her children, but on her grandchildren as well. In both she seems to have inspired great devotion and great deference—her will was law, to show her disrespect was an unthinkable offense, and her displeasure was more dreaded than any other catastrophe that could happen. She ruled her children with a firm hand—when she punished them, it was no spanking or putting them in a corner; she whipped them with a rawhide whip. None of them ever seem to have borne any grudge for these whippings—always declared they were beneficial. In spite of her occasional severity—even tyranny—she had a most unusual sympathy and understanding of her children’s individuality—gave them almost complete freedom, except where the rules of the household were concerned—let them carry out, without interference, all those queer schemes and passionately cherished undertakings that children get into their heads. She had her own absorbing life, and she let her children have theirs. She had a great capacity for caring about things—everything—whether the coffee was hot, whether a neighbour’s child was ill, whether it was a good day for the picnic—caring about living, in fact. Willa Cather always said she was more like her mother than like any other member of the family. (6-7)

Reading Cather’s correspondence suggests that this realization came to her late in life. Directly after graduating from college Cather writes Mariel that no one in her family understands her anymore, not even her parents. She herself also demonstrated little understanding of them in those years.

By four decades later, however, Cather’s appreciative view of her mother’s inherent personality emerges clearly, particularly in the sketched-in portrait of Mary, Sapphira’s surviving granddaughter, who shares Cather’s mother’s birth name. As the pretty granddaughter, the one with the curls, Mary earns the fond nickname “Molly” from her grandmother. Sapphira’s granddaughter Mary is not only the pretty one but also the one with enough survival instinct to propel herself downstairs to find hot chicken broth to drink, in spite of receiving stern injunctions against eating or drinking anything during
her treatment for diphtheria. As Sapphira and Henry lament the death of her sister Betty, they reveal a bit more about Mary: "It’s beyond us." [Sapphira] was silent for a moment. Suddenly she gripped his cold fingers and broke out with something of her old masterfulness: ‘And, Henry, Mary will get so much more out of life!’ (265-66). Though the epilogue tells us little about Mary as an adult, it does reveal that she runs Sapphira’s house competently and rears a daughter who also becomes a strong woman.

Not only did Jennie Cather get much more out of life than she would have had she not possessed such a strong will, but she also passed on these characteristics to her oldest daughter. As Cather moved from the years of differentiating herself from her mother and her mother’s expectations of her into her own years of great accomplishment, she demonstrated an increasing respect for her mother as a strong woman in her own right. Cather reveals an understanding of her mother when in “Old Mrs. Harris” she has the grandmother say of Victoria—Cather’s closest fictional portrayal of her mother—that she knew she had spoiled this daughter because she was the prettiest. Spoiling her had caused her to be more self-centered, but it had only added to a nature already strong. Following Southern tradition, Cather’s Grandma Boak also moved with the family to Nebraska and did much of the housekeeping work just as the fictional grandmother did in the story. She and Margie Anderson, a simple-minded mountain girl whose mother had asked them to take her with them and provide a place for her, did the primary cooking and cleaning.21 The presence of these women in the life of Jennie Cather enabled her to carry her Southern lifestyle with her to Nebraska to a significant extent and allowed her children to grow up with a positive attitude toward Southern traditions.
Sapphira and the Slave Girl not only recreates the South with its traditions, but it does so in a manner which reveals them as part of Cather’s fond memories and includes romanticization of the culture. A letter to Roseboro claims that writing the novel has eased the bitterness of her present sorrows in allowing her to retreat to her memories of Southern civilization, which she quotes Roseboro as calling “pleasantly surfaced.” She was initially chastised for writing a novel demonstrating what Granville Hicks referred to as “supine romanticism” (Woodress 469), partly because during a time period in which most of the nation was carefully watching the growing conflict overseas this novel nostalgically looks far backward to a lush setting. The spring and summer Virginia countryside and the general orderliness of the society Cather presents lend a false sense of romantic wholeness to a scene rife with conflict and rotten at the core. The abundant flowers—jonquils, bleeding hearts, violets, Virginia creeper, trumpet vine, “Dutchman’s pipe,” morning glories, yellow gourd flowers, honeysuckle, pennyroyal, laurel, and the “un-earthly” star-shaped dogwood—convey an Edenic aura to the scenes described.22

Her calling up the beauties of the landscape is an undoubted tribute to the natural beauty of her earliest home, but it also conveys a genuine love for the place of her earliest memories. Reading this novel helps readers understand the physical shock Willa Cather underwent in her forced transplantation from this verdant country to a land of open sky and grassy field. It also explains Cather’s continued emotional attachment to it, in spite of everything she knows and believes about this world. The epilogue reinforces this floral abundance with a description of epicurean luxury:

We had three kitchen tables: one for kneading bread, another for making cakes and pastry, and a third with a zinc top, for dismembering fowls and rabbits and stuffing turkeys. The tall cupboards stored sugar and spices and groceries; our farm wagons brought supplies out from Winchester in large quantities. Behind the
doors of a very special corner cupboard stood all the jars of brandied fruit, and glass jars of ginger and orange peel soaking in whisky. Canned vegetables, and the preserved fruits not put down in alcohol, were kept in a very cold cellar: a stream ran through it, actually! (287)

What the epilogue’s young narrator describes as “the spell” (288) of the female conversations in the kitchen during Nancy’s return visit, with the quilting and the sewing in the background, can also describe the effect of this vanished civilization on one who sees it through the eyes of an enraptured child.

This group of women—three generations of both black and white mothers and daughters—gathering for conversation and hand work, symbolizes the powerful network of female connections that empower the novel and reveal the source of Cather’s narrative gift. She recounts that she learned the story of Sapphira and Nancy from repeated times of listening to Till, which adds another personal relational layer specific to this late-nineteenth-century Southern setting. As children commonly hear stories from their grandparents, young Willa hears family stories from her elderly “Aunt Till.” Added in are stories she heard from Mrs. Anderson—the Mrs. Ringer of the novel—who was “born interested” and, though she “couldn’t read or write, as she was frank to tell you, she could read most everything important” (119). In 1941 Cather writes Rose Ackroyd, granddaughter of Mary Ann Anderson, that she is sending her a picture of the old house she lived in with her grandparents, with a circle around the window out of which she used to watch the mountain path for Mrs. Anderson’s arrival at their home.23 The importance of the circled window in the photograph highlights the significance of Mrs. Anderson as bearer of oral tradition, conveyer of narrative. Story holds the meaning of life, and these women create it for each other. As together they stitch their garments and quilts, their relationships are the source of enduring patchworks, both fabric and narrative: “The
stories she heard, remembered for a lifetime, became the stuff of Cather's last novel, and quilting and storytelling were intertwined in the child's memory” (Romines, WCSC ix).\(^{24}\)

Rachel's plan for Nancy's escape emphasizes both the necessity of female networking and its power for success. When Nancy needs protection from the young Martin Colbert, set upon her by her jealous mistress, she appeals not to Henry Colbert, who cares for her like a father and has the ultimate legal power on the estate. She turns, instead, to Rachel Blake, daughter of her owners, knowing she can trust Rachel's feminine instincts and networking ability. Rachel works with men, when necessary, because of their legal and financial importance, but she and her postmistress friend are the clear masterminds behind the escape plot. Henry carefully arranges for Rachel to be able to "steal" the money she needs out of his coat, so that he will not have to worry about any moral implications of breaking the law, and Mr. Fairhead and Mr. Whitford gladly help Rachel in contacting necessary underground railroad people and conveying the two women to the ferry. It is Rachel Blake, nevertheless, who envisions the possibility for Nancy, while Mrs. Bywaters helps her bring the plan to fruition. Not only does she facilitate its success by providing Rachel with a safe meeting place with Mr. Fairhead and Mr. Whitford and by caring for her daughters while she is away with Nancy, but her act of integrity years earlier stands as the original catalyst of Rachel's abolitionist spirit. At twelve years old, Rachel's overhearing Mrs. Bywater's polite refusal of her father's offer of a slave to help her in her new widowhood causes Rachel to realize what she had never put into words before:

It was the owning that was wrong, the relation itself, no matter how convenient or agreeable it might be for master or servant. She had always known it was wrong. It was the thing that made her unhappy at home, and came between her and her mother. How she hated her mother's voice in sarcastic reprimand to the servants! And she hated it in contemptuous indulgence. (137)
In the same way that Mrs. Bywater's story influences Rachel as an adolescent, her sharing abolitionist newspapers with her later strengthens her convictions as an adult. Though Nancy also greatly depends on men in her escape, Cather's narrative primarily highlights women's networking as crucial for Nancy's psychological and physical safety.

Nancy's romantic, triumphal return visit twenty-five years later completes this pattern by exclusively including women of all ages in the final narrative and eliding the presence of even significant males. Nancy's husband and the narrator's father are mentioned peripherally, but the only people who appear are women. That Nancy's escape was successful has been known for years through the letters and fifty-dollar presents she sends to her mother each Christmas, but Nancy in person—dressed from head to toe in silk and furs—makes an indelible impression. Through the emphasis on fine clothes, plentiful food, and inter-generational oral narrative which only covers safe topics, the epilogue falsely romanticizes the entire previous narrative. Whether Nancy is wearing her employer's cast-off finery and young Willa does not notice or whether she has paid a hugely disproportionate amount of her housekeeper's earnings for her finery, the description of her clothing does not fit the plausible reality of the life of a housekeeper married to a gardener. Nevertheless, the impression of Nancy's rich, successful new life is essential to the presentation of "God's in His Heaven, all's right with the world." The evils of slavery are scuttled under a happy ending.

Because the intensely ambivalent nature of Cather's memories conflicted powerfully with these crucial issues, she could not even begin this novel of the South until many years after her parents had died, even though she had promised her father she would someday write it. She loved the romantic pictures of her early years but hated the
knowledge that her gracious lifestyle was predicated on a system of inequity; she loved
the sweet Southern boy’s spirit of her father who never hurt a soul but hated what she
saw as the drooping nature of the South. Lewis tells of Cather’s last visit to her former
home in the South, preparatory to writing the novel: “I remember how she spoke of the
limp, drooping acacia trees in bloom along all the roadsides—how they had the shiftless
look that characterized so many Southern things, but how their wood was the toughest of
all, and was in great demand” (182). Although Cather writes Roseboro that the story of
Nancy’s return was the greatest experience of her early childhood, she also writes about
the evil at the core of everyday life and how hard it is to write about. She refers to it as
“the Terrible.” Writing to Roseboro, another expatriated Southerner, Cather cannot bring
herself to name slavery as the main evil the novel confronts or even as a significant
evidence of the evil at the core of this society. Her thoughts about slavery become “the
inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not
heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed” in
this letter (WCOW 41-42). Cather writes Roseboro that this evil continues to elude
explanation for her, because it has become a domesticated part of life.27 Explicating this
situation, as she discusses what she sees as the novel’s failings in presenting believable
characters and situations, Toni Morrison observes,

I suspect that the “problem” of Sapphira and the Slave Girl is not that it has a
weaker vision or is the work of a weaker mind. The problem is trying to come to
terms critically and artistically with the novel’s concerns: the power and license of
a white slave mistress over her female slaves. (18)

Whether or not readers find the characters’ unusual behavior believable as a result of the
unusual circumstances they have been forced to survive, the novel displays a clear
attempt to come to terms with these difficult concerns.
As Cather looked back at this society into which she was born and of which her parents remained lifelong representatives, she saw it not only through the eyes of her adult self and her childhood self but also through the eyes of her mother and father. For this reason she presents Henry Colbert as an extremely honorable man struggling with his moral values and with the terrible social code in such a way that readers respect his efforts to maintain integrity. Cather also presents Sapphira as an exemplary Mistress, who instills extreme loyalty in her slaves and who generally treats them well. The novel’s attempts at glorifying slaveholding society, however, ultimately fail, as modernist uncertainties Cather could not expel from herself or from the pages of the novel completely overpower any residual romanticism. Sapphira determines through civility and gentility to mask a nature so intent on preserving her own pride that she will intentionally cause great damage to a young girl rather than risk losing her battle; in doing so, she exemplifies the moral rottenness at the core of her culture. As Marilyn Arnold observes,

Cather sees the institution of slavery to be symbolic of a whole culture in bondage to its own artificial code of conduct, a code based on degrees of privilege that shackle everyone regardless of color or station. This code, this artificial construct, is what gives order to domestic life and undergirds community notions of justice, honor, and pride. Order, then, becomes the primary value in such a society and must be maintained at whatever cost. Order is substituted for rightness, fairness, humaneness; and when that order is founded upon privilege and accident of birth rather than merit, it is contaminated, a system of vain, empty gestures that dictate behavior but have no innate value. (325)

Sapphira serves as a personification of this South in her gracious beauty, her quiet control, and her debilitating, fatal illness.

Sapphira’s autocratic need to maintain mastery of her estate includes mastery of her husband, Henry Colbert, and her actions are as corrosive to the Mill House community as her disease is to her body. The novel’s initial scene reveals that she is concerned
about the relationship between her husband and a beautiful slave girl and that the law
thwarts Sapphira by giving her husband legal control of her property. Henry generally
considers Sapphira the master, because her hurried marriage to him was such "a long step
down" for her socially (23). Nevertheless, he refuses to allow her to sell her slave Nancy,
both because of his fierce belief that slavery is wrong and because of his paternal love for
Nancy. Sapphira’s knowledge that her culture commonly accepts sexual relations be-
tween master and slave, as Lavon Mattes Jobes observes, easily explains Sapphira’s
assumption of her husband’s infidelity (78). Given the facts that she has lost much physi-
cal function and attractiveness and that she and her husband have been sleeping sepa-
rately for some time, she cannot understand that her husband abstains from extramarital
sex. Even so, Sapphira’s original plan does not anticipate violence toward Nancy; she
plans to sell her back to Winchester to work for the wealthy people Nancy’s mother Till
has always regretted being torn away from. Nevertheless, Sapphira does later seek to
bring harm on Nancy, rather than trusting her husband who has never given her reason
for doubt. More importantly, her actions demonstrate the fatal flaw of the slave-holding
South: failure to see Nancy as a human being. She has the power to rid herself of the
problem in whatever way is most convenient, simply because she sees Nancy as a pos-
session who threatens her own sense of well being.

Cather’s multiple fractured and flawed mother-daughter relationships in this novel
function brilliantly on many levels as part of the modernist discourse. Sapphira and
Rachel most obviously embody a flawed and fractured relationship, having never under-
stood each other in the best of times, and being completely cut off from each other for a
time after Nancy’s escape. Harder to understand are the two older daughters whom
Sapphira "had married very well" (132), who never reappear either by visit or letter. Sapphira, who lost her own mother by her teen years and her father before her marriage, obviously has experienced no adult contact with parents and has thus been unable to model it for her daughters. In addition, the number of other broken maternal relationships—Jezebel and her daughter, Till and her mother, Till and Mrs. Matchett, Rachel and Betty—heighten the novel's sense of the impossibility of experiencing wholeness through a natural maternal relationship. Indeed, the only extended close relationship mentioned multiple times is the one between Fat Lizzie and lazy Bluebell, with the clear indication that the mother's indulgent love has spoiled the girl. These many relationships, either slightly developed or barely alluded to, add to the novel's evocation of a wholeness in life which exists only as an imagined possibility.

Besides being a primary exemplification of isolation and brokenness, these relationships reveal the difficulty of living in this world with the moral quandaries life engenders. Often criticized as unrealistic, the relationship between Till and Nancy reveals not only these moral quandaries but also the psychological trauma which can thwart an appropriate relationship. Till's violent separation from her birth mother by seeing her engulfed in flames not only renders her mute for months but also cauterizes the maternal connection within her. Till's transfer of love and allegiance to white housekeeper Mrs. Matchett, who becomes a type of surrogate mother to her, enables her to survive and thrive as a successful house slave, but it does not heal her scarred ability to trust mothers. Nor does it teach her to be a mother to whom Nancy can bring confidences. In the words of Angela Salas, Cather portrays Till "as a mother from whom the power to protect her
child has been stolen” and “whose maternal claims and obligations are denied by a slavery system which sees her as property” (101, 104).

Till’s psychological need to identify completely with Mrs. Matchett for rescuing her from her traumatic social isolation translates into utter allegiance to Sapphira, her next mistress, and makes her first a Dodderidge, second a mother. As Rachel ponders Nancy’s inability to go to her own mother for help, Rachel thinks: “Till had been a Dodderidge before ever she was Nancy’s mother. In Till’s mind, her first duty was to her mistress. . . . Anything that made trouble between her and the Mistress would wreck the order of the household” (219). As Marilyn Arnold explains, “Till has become more than a slave to Sapphira, a servant who dutifully responds to her mistress’s every whim; Till has become a committed slave to the system, consecrated to the very structure that threatens her humanity” (333).

Thus, Till carefully reveals no sign of protest to Sapphira when she must marry old Jeff, incapable of fathering children, so that Saphhira will not be inconvenienced by having a maid busy with mothering responsibilities. Well aware of Sapphira’s reasons, Till makes a careful effort always to put her mistress first, even when she does later give birth to Nancy. She has no desire to jeopardize her position for her child. Not only does she give Sapphira unconditional loyalty, but she also finds her identity in being the slave of a woman of high social class. Just as present-day clerks in high-priced stores often see themselves as far outclassing certain customers, Till considers herself in the position to look down on most of the Back Creek community because of the identity she has assimilated from her mistress. Because of her intrinsic identification with Sapphira and determination to remain in her favor, she does not even allow herself to think about the possi-
bility that Sapphira could be an instrument of evil for her daughter. Her psychological need to trust Sapphira and her placement within the brutally hierarchical system of slavery prevent her and Nancy from experiencing the natural mother-daughter bond they should have had. Even when she sees the difficulties Nancy experiences at the hands of Sapphira, Till only suggests tricks for Nancy to try to win favor back, such as suggesting she make Sapphira “a nice eggnog.” She does not allow herself to open up communication about what could have caused the breach, needing to protect her position by forcing herself only to see the situation through her mistress’s eyes. 

Nancy, because of her mother’s blind allegiance to Sapphira, must find a mother substitute. For the compassion she desperately seeks, she turns to Rachel, the Colbert least liked by the slaves in general: “Till’s good manners were barely sufficient to conceal her disappointment in Miss Sapphy’s youngest daughter” (137-38). Ironically, Rachel is least liked by the slaves, because she refuses to put on the airs they admire, but Nancy sees in her care for the poor people of the neighborhood the empathetic nature for which she yearns. Nancy does not go to Rachel for help escaping but for a witness to her suffering, so that people will not misunderstand her if she drowns herself. Nancy seeks out Rachel for the comfort and advice she cannot find in her mother:

“Oh, I’m most drove out-a my mind, I cain’t bear it no longer, ‘deed I cain’t! I gets no rest night nor day. I’m goin’ to throw myself into the millpawnd, I am!” She bowed her head on her arms and broke into sobs. “... Stop your crying, and tell me about it.” [Rachel] stood over the girl, stroking her quivering shoulders until the sobs grew more throaty and, as it were, dried up. (216)

Because Rachel realizes that any comfort she gives will be short lived unless she can rescue Nancy from her life situation, the idea of escape is hers, born both of hatred of slavery and knowledge of her mother’s controlling power. Without bothering to think
until later of how her action betrays her own mother, Rachel acts as a true mother to Nancy, concocting and carrying out the plan and building up the distraught, sleep-deprived girl’s confidence when it fails at the crucial moment. Years later, when she returns for her visit, Nancy’s first words after embracing her mother are to Rachel: “I never forget who it was took me across the river that night, Mrs. Blake” (283).

The most troubling mother-daughter relationship, that of Sapphira and Rachel, pits old strength against new strength. Sapphira’s wealth, her beauty, and her complete confidence in her own decisions make her a difficult mother for a daughter determined to think for herself. Rachel’s decision to maintain freedom of thought—including respect for Mrs. Bywater’s anti-slavery views—pits her against her mother in ways which damage their relationship long before Nancy’s flight. During the time of her utter happiness with Michael Blake in Washington, after marrying him at sixteen, she seems to forget her mother completely. Not only does she never come back to Back Creek for a visit in those thirteen years, but—worst of all—“Rachel had not once invited her mother, then not an invalid but a very active woman, to come to Washington to visit her. Among Virginians such a slight could never be forgiven” (144). Rachel’s fame as a Washington dinner party hostess makes the insult even worse, requiring genuine magnanimity on Sapphira’s part when Rachel returns to Back Creek, widowed and poor after the death of her husband and her son and needing her parents’ help in resettling.

Cather’s portrait of Sapphira as a heartless, controlling slave owner can make readers initially sympathetic to Rachel in her position as daughter. However, Cather’s depiction of Rachel as anything but the perfect daughter conveys clearly the realization that good mother-daughter relationships can be effected and thwarted from both direc-
tions. Rachel embodies Cather’s own headstrong independence and the belief that her life completely outshines her mother’s choices. She also gives her the same type of gentle, supportive father she had. Charles Cather, who also made “yellow leather shoes for the front paws of his favorite shepherd dog” (281), appears both in the father of the young narrator in the epilogue and in the characterization of gentle Henry Colbert, who supports his daughter completely.

In both Cather’s and Rachel’s situations, moreover, the support of a sensitive father makes it easier for the daughters to be insensitive to their mothers’ desire for connection. Working with a cooperative father makes it easy for Rachel to focus initially on Nancy and forget Sapphira’s feelings of betrayal caused by Rachel’s masterminding the escape. Days later, after reading Sapphira’s missive of dismissal, Rachel “was sorriest for the hurt this would be to her mother’s pride. . . . Mrs. Blake knew how her mother hated to be overreached or outwitted, and she was sorry to have brought another humiliation to one who had already lost so much” (246). Until this point in her life Rachel has been the one to cut Sapphira out of her life, through geographic independence during her marriage and social independence after her return to Back Creek. At this juncture, reading her mother’s note cutting her off from the Mill House, Rachel looks at her mother—perhaps for the first time—as a human being with individual needs. She surprises readers by identifying to such an extent with her mother that she even questions the decision to rescue Nancy:

“It’s hard for a body to know what to do, sometimes,” she murmured to herself. “I hate to mortify her. Maybe I ought to a-thought about how much she suffers, and her poor feet, like Nancy said to me that night in the dark cabin by that roaring river. Maybe I ought to have thought and waited.” (247)
While this initially seems like spineless vacillation, when she is faced with losing the connection to her mother, the truth is much more complicated. Rachel experiences no true repentance for having helped Nancy; what she experiences is remorse for having waited until her late thirties to begin to see life through the eyes of her suffering mother. Though Sapphira’s suffering does not vindicate her for the suffering she forces on others, it does cause Rachel to realize that she who has been so active in working to alleviate suffering in the lives of the poor and downtrodden in her community has completely neglected the suffering and desire for family community in the life of her rich, masterful mother.

Similarly, after the death of her father, Cather finally realized her own culpability in the difficulties she had experienced relating to her mother. Christmas of 1928, the last family celebration with both parents alive, Cather describes as splendid but reminiscent of War and Peace in what it took out of her. Three months later, her rushing back to Red Cloud to spend pre-dawn hours saying goodbye to her father—who had just died and was laid out on his bedroom couch—changed Cather’s perspective on her mother. She writes Dorothy that her father kept his sweet Southern boyishness to the very end and that she is extremely grateful to have had three happy months with her parents the previous winter while they were both doing well. Though she does not say that she also sees for the first time the weakness of her perennially strong mother, Cather’s staying behind to repair and fix up the house for her conveys a clear realization that her mother’s strength is limited. While her distraught mother went to California to grieve with her son Douglass, Cather remained in Red Cloud doing all in her power to ease her mother’s expected return. Ironically, her mother never saw the months’ worth of repairs Cather did to the
house, because she experienced an extremely debilitating stroke while visiting Douglass and was unable to return.

These next years of caring for her mother in California, as well as negotiating her own work and living places around those needs, awakened Cather to much she had never recognized in her mother earlier and revealed to her more than ever before their many shared characteristics. A letter to Dorothy, written several months after her mother’s stroke, describes Jennie Cather as paralyzed on one side and completely speechless. Most importantly, however, it notes that her mind, her strong will, and her personality remain unchanged behind what Cather refers to as the “wrecked machinery.” Clearly Cather’s mother and her incapacitated situation provided the genesis of Sapphira’s character and situation, as Cather mourned the utter helplessness caused by this strong, tall woman’s paralysis. While mourning her mother’s plight, she also experienced despair which forced her to confront her own mortality. Having reached an age where she was experiencing a great deal of illness and incapacitation herself, she experienced profoundly her own inability to remedy the situation for her mother. She felt lost. Her letter says that California is such a desolate place that even God is not there. This same spiritual emptiness finds an outlet in Henry Colbert’s fruitless searching through the Bible for an answer to his aversion to “the peculiar institution” of slavery. Reading carefully and placing large S’s next to every applicable passage, he searches painfully for an answer from his God and finds none.

As Cather advanced in years, she forced herself to think about the dark oppositional elements of life: the co-existence of suffering and joy and the co-existence of great evil and goodness in the same society. Seeing such contradictory elements in her own
mother in full force and recognizing them in herself helped her to train her sights on the
great evil present in the society of which she continued to hold pleasant memories: "As
such, the aristocratic Sapphira serves as a logical heroine. Sapphira has greatness com-
combined with a tragic flaw—failure to recognize human values" (Jobes 79). Not only does
Sapphira fail to recognize "human values," but she also fails to recognize the human
value in the black people with whom she surrounds herself. Nevertheless, Cather steers
far clear of stereotyping and presents complicated human beings, as Jobes incisively
notes in her discussion of the complexity of Cather's portrayals of her characters:

From the standpoint of historical perception, the novel approaches the level of a master­
piece. . . . The novel tells a story of Old Virginia. . . . [and] has an atmos­
phere of peace and serenity. Beneath the calm way of life, however, [lie] the
author's themes of death and the passage of time—now presented with
acceptance. (79)

Through the many examples of dying—notably Jezebel, Sapphira, little Betty, and the
pre-Civil War Old South—the final reconciliation and joyful reunion remind readers that
death is also a part of life which needs to be accepted with dignity. As Cather was forced
to deal with the deaths of so many loved ones in the decade prior to writing this novel,
she learned to face not only loss but the idea of her own mortality. Having learned from
her mother's suffering acceptance of approaching death, she gave Sapphira the same
dignified approach:

[S]he would make her death easy for everyone, because she would meet it with
that composure which [Henry] had sometimes called heartlessness, but which
now seemed to him strength. As long as she was conscious, she would be mistress
of the situation and of herself. (268)

Though she never claimed to have found solutions to life's moral dilemmas, Cather seems
to have emulated the same dignified manner of death she gave her hard-to-love character.

Edith Lewis describes her last interaction with Cather in adulatory terms: "She was never
more herself than on the last morning of her life—the morning of April 24th, 1947. Her spirit was as high, her grasp of reality as firm as always” (197). Whether Lewis’s perceptions are accurate or not, Cather evidently did not give Lewis reason to stay home with her for the day, dying peacefully with only her secretary in the apartment with her.

*Sapphira and the Slave Girl* exists not as a polemic against slavery but as an honest and vexed reappraisal of pre-Civil War culture by a white woman born into it and troubled by it. As such, it cannot possibly be the novel Toni Morrison and Minrose Gwin would want it to be. As Merrill Maguire Skaggs notes, “Initially, Sapphira stands alone in dramatizing from a clearly Southern woman’s point of view the evils of slavery” (*After* 171). Though Cather includes the thoughts and feelings of a few black characters, she necessarily writes from the white perspective because—as she writes in a letter to Violet Roseboro about the epilogue—it happened to her exactly as she wrote it. Morrison and Gwin understandably object to a white author telling a slave narrative of any sort from the perspective of a white observer, because the novel does not portray the depths of suffering slavery caused and only begins to depict the minds and feelings of a few slaves. Nonetheless, the perspective is genuine. Anger at the novel’s dialogical treatment of a vexed issue can blind readers to the angst expressed on the parts of white participants and cause them to miss its “valiant effort at honest engagement” (Morrison 19).

Even Henry Colbert’s and Rachel Blake’s occasional comments which seem to designate acquiescence to the institution of slavery cannot erase the fact that all the primary characters in this novel—white and black—are harmed by it and experience sorrow over it. Rachel’s questioning thoughts arise not as a defense of slavery but as a realization that she has greatly hurt one person she cares about while helping another. Henry’s dis-
turbining comments near the end also are motivated not by a new revelation that slavery is acceptable after all but by his fear of Sapphira’s death and his hope of being reunited with Rachel. Sapphira’s mention of the possibility of her approaching death strikes “terror to his heart” (267) and causes him to relive a great many memories of his wife. As he thinks back over his reasons for being proud of her, he says faltering, “Yes, dear wife, do let us have Rachel here. You are a kind woman to think of it. You are good to a great many folks, Sapphy” (268).

Sapphira’s response reveals an internal struggle that she has previously been too proud to share with anyone else: “‘Not so good as Rachel, with her basket!’ She turned it off lightly, tweaking his ear” (268). For years, she has denigrated as a waste of resources Rachel’s choice to nurse the mountain people and share her belongings with them, saying that it is worthless for her to try to give anything to Rachel, since she will just give it away anyway. Here Sapphira finally demonstrates genuine respect for her daughter’s way of life, acknowledging that Rachel has chosen the ethical course. Henry, overcome by her magnanimous forgiveness of Rachel’s betrayal and by his fervent hope of family reunion, convinces himself that Sapphira’s way has also been ethical: “‘There are different ways of being good to folks,’ the miller held out stubbornly, as if this idea had just come to him and he was not to be teased into letting go of it. ‘Sometimes keeping people in their place is being good to them.’” (268)

Uncomfortable as this statement makes readers, it is balanced by Sapphira’s response: “Perhaps. We would all do better if we had our lives to live over again” (269). She knows Henry’s comment is his way of apologizing to her for his own stubborn opposition to her throughout so much of their married life. Grateful for his response, she also
recognizes that their trouble was caused by her own selfishness and her unwillingness to question the morality of a way of life she had unthinkingly accepted from her parents.

Though readers angry about slavery can easily read words like this as exonerating slaveholding, the novel actually does nothing of the sort. Instead, it expresses the extreme complexity of life situations and the human need for forgiveness. In Gwin’s words, this novel “is both simple and complex: actually its complexity is rendered through a deceptive surface of simplicity and calm” (132). Both Sapphira and Henry finally recognize the errors of their ways, at a time far too late to alter their life choices. At the end of their lives, they choose to recognize their own limitations and seek to build community in their remaining time left with family, without elaborating on exactly how they should have lived their lives differently. David Stouck summarizes:

I have called Sapphira and the Slave Girl a winter’s tale because, like the Shakespearean play of that title, it is a story of injustice and separation brought about through unfounded jealousy; more importantly, the novel is also a romance of forgiveness—the plot moves all the characters to a final point of reconciliation. . . . The spirit of harmony and forgiveness which prevails in this scene carries over into the epilogue. (WCI 230, 232).

This forgiveness is not easy, carrying with it a knowledge of great sin and evil. Hatred of evil causes a desire for the justice of punishment, yet the imperfection of human beings in broken relationships creates a craving for forgiveness and reconciliation. Ironically, by romantically ending in the mode of forgiveness and reconciliation, Cather heightens readers’ struggle with the world not being an easy place to understand. Thanking Roseboro for her affirming response to the novel, Cather writes that she worked hard to be humble and truthful and not to overcolor her material. Richard Giannone expresses this difficulty well:
Paradox aptly represents deliverance in a novel which locates freedom at the vortex between God’s unfathomable ways and the response of human obligation. . . . In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* the heart’s ultimate need is honored through a capacious gesture of forgiveness among all the characters. Forgiveness for Cather brings the joy of a new reality (34, 44).

Cather’s conflicted treatment of Virginia and its influence on her clarifies the reasons she could not write this book before the deaths of her parents in 1928 and 1931. Ironically, however, their deaths and the mourning process for Cather helped her appreciate not just her parents but also the culture which was such an integral part of them.

The novel’s epilogue disturbs some readers by its romantic final reunion scene and disturbs others by its intrusive modernist memoir form. This final chapter continues the novel’s sense that the world’s beauty and orderliness is constantly undercut by the knowledge of the evil which keeps its wheels turning. In Gwin’s words, “Cather seems to be suggesting, particularly by her sudden change to the autobiographical mode, that we can never really know the past, yet at the same time we cannot escape it” (135). What Cather refers to as “the Terrible” in her letter to Viola Roseboro cannot be equated simply with slavery. This inexplicable evil which has become a part of everyday life is true of slavery but also aptly describes life itself. The novel’s ending highlights both the positive connections which continue to draw people together and give meaning to their lives, while it leaves readers with a strong sense of rebellion against a world which seems to whitewash evil in an attempt to maintain relationships. As Jane Lilienfeld comments, “That is the nature of fiction: to make visible the pain of love’s complexity and to plumb readers’ souls because an author was courageous enough to transform loss and rage and hurt into an artifact” (51). Cather’s recent losses in the deaths of her parents, her brothers, and her close friends Isabelle McClung and May Willard caused the pain which she
needed to write through to create a document which deals honestly with the inexplicable nature of life’s joys, sorrows, and guilt. As Toni Morrison notes insightfully,

In returning to her childhood, at the end of her writing career, Cather returns to a very personal, indeed private experience. In her last novel she works out and toward the meaning of female betrayal as it faces the void of racism. She may not have arrived safely, like Nancy, but to her credit she did undertake the journey. (28)

Cather’s final novel, not as easy to love as many of her others, reveals her brutal honesty in her conflicted view of the world. Susan Rosowski observes that “this novel, which seems to offer a retreat into the past, contains the distinctly modern search for meaning in an estranged world” (239). Cather clearly did not know this would be her last novel, since she was working on another one at the time of her death, but it functions as a revealing capstone, nevertheless. In David Stouck’s words, “Sapphira and the Slave Girl, despite the control and detachment of its execution, is a genuine work of compassion and understanding—a subtle novel of human relationships and intimations of mortality” (“Last” 51). From the uneasy breakfast conversation which opens the novel to her memoir-style epilogue, Cather demonstrates a positive determination to look life’s realities and uncertainties squarely in the face. The novel does not answer life’s greatest questions; it does, however, present a strikingly memorable picture of people struggling with them.
NOTES

Introduction

1. Multiple letters in the Baenicke collection at Yale chronicle the search process and different scholars’ conclusions, querying many who knew Cather, before letters were uncovered which were exchanged between baby Willa’s relatives in early 1874. So strong was Cather’s instinct for privacy and for establishing the legend she wanted to survive her that her friends became complicit in her deceptions. Many web sites and books still list her brother Roscoe as the oldest of the family, rather than as second to Willa, because of the elaborate charade she began. Some evidence indicates that S. S. McClure originally suggested she shave a couple of years off; some have suggested that she wanted to associate herself with the birth of her country. Whatever the primary cause, Cather changed the record in mid-life, before she had become world famous and at a time when she may have begun to believe that she was behind in her accomplishment of life goals.

2. Glen Love’s 1990 prize-winning article on Hemingway and Cather quotes similar passages from each, noting that “three years before Hemingway claimed to have discovered his theory of omission, Cather had stated its essence. Twelve years later, when Hemingway was to first publish his version of the theory in Death in the Afternoon (1932), it was to closely resemble Cather’s” (297).
3. After writing her final novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather bragged to friends that the sections she had cut out weighed six pounds on the bathroom scale.

4. Although Cather claimed not to have any respect for Freud, her fiction gives evidence, nevertheless, of his theories which were current in her day.

5. These words come from a passage which will be quoted at length later, from an 1896 Cather essay (Slote 417).

6. This letter, dated December 17, 1906, was discussing a poem the author had submitted to McClure’s for publication. It is part of the University of Virginia collection.

Chapter 1

1. Although McClure brought her to New York as his editor with the promise of helping her publish everything she wrote, he soon lost that vision. He realized how wonderful her work was for his magazine and told her that he saw as her true calling journalism, rather than fiction writing.

2. A gregarious, often mesmerizing employer, McClure had excessive enthusiasm and great ideas, but he was not the best at running an office. According to Cather’s correspondence, she found him extremely motivating, but many people found him difficult to work for long term. Cather herself was given her prominent position on the staff because several key people had just left, unhappy with how McClure was running the operation.

3. In many letters, including one to Dorothy Canfield Fisher on March 15, 1916, Cather writes of how she had so much fun racing through writing the book that she didn’t take as many pains as she should have; but when she later revised it and cut it down signifi-
cantly, even then she could not eliminate these contextualizing voices. O’Brien’s introduction quotes Cather’s later comments about the novel.

4. Fortunately, in this novel art does do a great deal to redeem the world’s brokenness. As Judith Fetterley says, “I still love the final section, both for the courage Cather displays in risking a description of Thea’s success and for her success in making that description convincing” (231-32).

5. Bernice Slote gave Cather’s term currency by titling her edited collection of Cather’s 1893-96 writings The Kingdom of Art. Her book is both a compilation of much of Cather’s published work from 1893-96 and an insightful commentary on the work and on the developing artist who was writing these columns.

6. Cather reports in many letters her extreme nervousness both about her depiction of the musical world and her depiction of a character so close to Fremstad. Multiple letters to friends talk about her feelings of enormous relief when Fremstad loved the book and when the music critic whom Cather had given the galley proofs for technical corrections responded with compliments about the musical insights revealed in the novel.

7. Slote notes that Cather’s younger sister Elsie told her that their father also made it a habit to read novels aloud to the children (41).

8. Christened “Willella” after an aunt who died in childhood of diphtheria, Willa was called “Willie” by the family from the beginning and was given a silver baby mug with the engraved nickname. She hated her given name so much that she changed it in the family Bible to “Willa” and experimented with “William” in her teen years, when she told people she was named after her uncle William who was killed in the Civil War. Throughout her adulthood she still signed herself as Willie to family members.
9. This letter is part of the Baenick collection at Yale University.

10. There may well have also been expectations that the investment would pay off and she would be able to help the family financially afterward. If such expectations did exist, they were certainly fulfilled. Already at the time that she was doing newspaper work in Pittsburgh, Cather was sending home money to the family. Without her money, the family never would have been able to purchase their large house in the center of town and move out of the cramped rental home they had lived in for so many years.


13. This April 25, 1897 letter to Mariel Gere is part of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial collection. In a characteristic display of ambivalence, however, over a year later in a letter to Mariel’s sister Frances, Cather implores Frances to be a matchmaker for her and find a widower or someone else suitable by the time she arrives in Nebraska that summer. She asks that she please manage it. The June 23, 1898 letter to Frances Gere is also at WCPM.

14. Cather portrays Louise Homer, Geraldine Farrar, and Olive Fremstad, all in an extremely admiring manner. Cather compliments Homer on being able to be a wonderful mother and a prolific artist, Farrar on being a free-spirited, versatile artist who appeals both to the masses and the sophisticated, and Fremstad for being an artist of the very top rank. This article honors the varying choices all three have made to be successful career women on their own terms.

15. Slote discusses the consistent use of moon imagery in the novel: Moonstone, moon flowers, Thea’s falling asleep in the moonlight, and her singing an important scene as
Sieglinde in the moonlight. All of these uses highlight Thea’s connection to Diana the moon goddess: “The moon is generally seen as some high, illimitable beauty; the sign of yearning and desire; the radiant or mysterious illumination of darkness; and the sign also of the voyage perilous” (97-98). On the other hand, Thea’s strong positive response to the sun in the cliff dwellings demonstrates that she is not limited by her identification with the female goddess but can be empowered by Apollo the sun god as well.

16. Sergeant’s letters are part of the University of Virginia collection.

17. See also Christopher Schedler’s “Writing Culture,” Caroline M. Woidat’s “The Indian-Detour in Willa Cather’s Southwestern Novels,” Janis Stout’s “Willa Cather and Oliver LaFarge’s Laughing Boy,” and Audrey Goodman’s “The Immeasurable Possession of Air: Willa Cather and Southwestern Romance.”

18. For excellent explication of the cultural views and misconceptions of earlier generations, see Brian Dippie’s *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* and Robert E. Bieder’s *Science Encounters the Indian, 1820-1880*.

19. In discussing the novel’s mythic allusions, Slote notes, “Wunsch is the god Wish or Desire, defined . . . in Grimm as ‘god of bliss and love, who wishes, wills and brings good to men’” (86).

20. One slight problem with Woodress’ commentary, however, is that he changes Cather’s “sie” into “Sie.” He is correct that “Sie” means “you,” but it is the formal “you,” which a man would never use toward his wife. Rather than meaning “you,” the uncapitalized form of “sie” means either “her” or the feminine form of “it,” thus referring either to the loss of his wife, as Orfeus sings it, or to the loss of his music (“die Musik”), as Wunsch often sings it.
21. Cather tells Ferris Greenslet in a March 28, 1915 letter that much of the story is drawn from her early years, including the death of a railroad man who died when she was about thirteen, compared to Thea’s fifteen at the time of Kennedy’s death. This letter is in the Houghton Mifflin collection at Harvard.

22. See the reviews in Catholic World, New York Times Book Review, New Republic as well as Randall’s commentary in his Landscape (42-51). By 1995, however, Sharon Hoover names this androcentrism for what it is:

A female who aspires to achievement . . . is also seen as unsuccessful, and often as abnormally aggressive, for the male paradigm requires that a female be a docile companion for the achieving man, maintaining most of his social relationships for him until he has time to pick them up after he has established himself in his business and career (258).

23. Harsanyi also muses much earlier in the book, while Thea is still his student, “he had never got so much back for himself from any pupil as he did from Miss Kronborg” (189).

24. In the same November 23, 1895 Courier article, Cather writes “I have not much faith in women in fiction. . . . When a woman writes a story of adventure, a stout sea tale, a manly battle yarn, anything without wine, women and love, then I will begin to hope for something great from them, not before” (409). Even then she was not unequivocal, however, as her positive comments about George Sand and George Eliot reveal.

25. This letter is part of Pierpont Morgan’s collection.

26. In fact, in a speech she gave in 1921 Cather sounds quite fanatical on the subject of standardization. She finds particularly infuriating the Nebraska law prohibiting school instruction in a foreign language before eighth grade, which contributes to the loss of fluency for second-generation immigrants (Bohlke 149).
27. Cather says her home town of Red Cloud, the model for Moonstone, especially loves the voice. She says Thea had to be a singer for them, because a great voice fills them with so much pleasure that they will travel far to hear one. Cather says she herself experienced great satisfaction by being in Red Cloud when the book came out and hearing how much they appreciated it. March 15, 1916.

28. Cather did not make a conscious choice to miss her mother's funeral but did not receive notification until the funeral was already past, because of being on Grand Manan Island at the time. Her decision not to join her grieving family directly afterward, however, was a conscious choice.


30. This letter to Elsie Sergeant is dated April 22, 1913 and is part of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln's collection.

Chapter 2

1. Cather also liked to astonish her friends. Janis Stout's biography gives a full description of the behaviors Cather engaged in to assert herself as a modern young woman—including smoking, cutting her hair extremely short, and riding a "wheel" (bicycle). As a girl she shocked Red Cloud residents by her interest in vivisection, dissection, and other medical procedures which her community either disapproved or thought appropriate only for men. In her first years of college her attempts to stand out included not only superficial behaviors but also taking roles usually assigned to men, such as editing a college paper and studying subjects dominated by men. See particularly her second chapter, ""Avid of the World, Always Wondering"" 29-48.
2. See chapter 4 for a similar belief on the part of Niel toward Marian Forrester after the
Captain's death.

3. This letter to Akins on December 6, 1922 is part of the University of Virginia collection.

4. This May 19, 1936 letter is part of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial collection in
Red Cloud, which contains a large number of letters from Cather and about her—including letters to and from Annie Pavelka—which refer to her generosity to these Nebraska people. Similar letters are scattered throughout other collections. This letter seems to be a response to a thank-you letter telling her they have named the machine “Willa’s Washer,” as it requests that Annie please call the machine “Willie’s Washer,” since she always liked that name better than “Willa.”

5. Gilbert and Gubar treat extensively the informing power of gender wars and concomitant anxieties in their *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*. Their study reveals widespread misogyny and ambivalence about women writers in the works of male modernist writers as well as a plethora of responses to this antagonism and anxiety on the parts of their female counterparts. What Gilbert and Gubar make clear is that coming to terms with gender and its various manifestations is primary for modernists.

6. A Feb. 15, 1926 letter to Ferris Greenslet, her publisher, agrees to shorten the introduction to *My Antonia* as he has requested for the 1926 edition. The letter is part of the Houghton Library, Harvard University collection, as are the rest of Greenslet’s papers. Readers from Leon Edel to Hermione Lee have referred to the shorter introduction as a great improvement on the original, failing to appreciate the added depth the original gives to the portrait of the narrator as well as to the entire dialectic of the novel.
7. This May 29, 1928 letter discusses the process of writing at length. All Canby papers are part of the Baenicke collection at Yale University.

8. This expression comes from the same letter.

9. A January 27, 1934 letter to Carrie Miner Sherwood (WCPM) expresses concern that people in Red Cloud will spitefully compare Annie Pavelka to the fictionalized version. Even though Cather occasionally mentioned to friends that she had “seen Antonia again” after a visit to Red Cloud, she expresses irritation here that people will never believe that fiction is not a direct portrayal of real people. Cather says that her fiction always precisely represents her feelings, but many of her readers choose to see this portrayal as an attempt at realism rather than as Jim’s romantic feelings about Antonia.

10. This letter is dated February 1, 1918.

11. Jean Schwind asserts the significance of the original: “Of critical importance to a proper understanding of My Antonia, this introduction serves the same purpose as ‘The Custom House’ preface to The Scarlet Letter: presenting the narrative that follows as an independent artifact, the authorial ‘I’ speaks as the editor and publisher of another writer’s manuscript” (51).

12. This letter is dated Feb. 16, 1933 by Fisher and is housed at University of Vermont with the rest of Fisher’s papers.

13. Critics generally refer to the unnamed friend as the Cather figure, both because she transmits the manuscript to us and because the description of this writer who grew up in Nebraska fits Cather.

14. The fact that Cather would even consider drawing her own illustrations shows their importance to her conception of the novel. She allowed no one else to work with Benda...
in her stead, serving as artistic director and reserving the right to reject whatever did not please her. No other existing correspondence that I have seen demonstrates such interest in illustrating any other of her works.

15. These Greenslet and Cather letters are part of the Houghton Library collection, at Harvard University. The most pertinent letters are from the years 1917, 1918, 1926, and 1938.

16. A letter dated May 7, 1903, to Will Owen Jones, describes her feelings after meeting with Samuel McClure. McClure expressed so much interest in Cather’s work and potential as a writer that she relates walking to his office not feeling that she was worth much but getting onto the streetcar afterwards with care, feeling that she had just become a much more valuable commodity to herself and to others. The letter is at University of Virginia.

17. This May 20, 1919 letter is part of University of Virginia’s collection.

18. Because of Cather’s human tendency to remember the negative more than the positive, she carried throughout her life a memory that *My Antonia* was much less positively received originally than it was. In spite of some negative comments, the records of reviews published and comments made to her at the time are more often appreciative than not.

19. Cather’s tombstone includes a quote from this passage: “... that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.”

20. In this area, as in her treatment of African Americans, it must be remembered that she was a woman of her time and was actually in advance of others in her respect for people from greatly differing backgrounds. Had she been writing in the twenty-first century, her novels would have reflected a different mindset. Even by 1925, when she had developed
a friendship with a Taos Indian named Tony Luhan through his wife Mabel Dodge Luhan, she had a much more developed picture of Indians. In fact, Edith Lewis recounts that "Willa Cather was very much impressed by Tony Luhan, and felt an instant liking and admiration for him" (142). She says the character of Eusabio in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* "was essentially drawn from Tony Luhan" (143).

21. Though this letter is undated, textual evidence indicates that it was probably written in 1931. It is part of the Baenicke collection at Yale University.

22. James E. Miller, Jr. posits that "It is Jim Burden's sensibility which imposes form on *My Antonia* and, by that form, shapes in the reader a sharpened awareness of cyclic fate that is the human destiny" (Bloom *MA* 23). David Stouck argues that the "dramatic shape of the book is determined, not by cyclical patterns of time, but by the sequential and changing aspects of both time and place; these are the elements used to dramatize the narrator's dilemma, and they are ultimately the means of its resolution" (286). Shelley Saposnik-Noire points instead to the structural importance of setting in her "The Silent Protagonist: The Unifying Presence of Landscape in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*.”

23. Critics also overwhelmingly accept suicide as the obvious answer without even discussing the homicide Cather sets out as an option to be considered.

24. This January 27, 1934 letter is part of the WCPM collection.

25. Mr. Shimerda is refused a burial plot by those in charge of the Norwegian cemetery. Ironically, these same people unwittingly admit Pavel, the man who "fed the bride to the wolves" in his younger days.

26. Though in Cather's early years we have no evidence of her considering marriage on the basis of any strong attraction like that to Julio in her late thirties, she too sometimes
thought of marriage and rejected it as too dangerous. See chapter 1 for a fuller discussion of Cather's attitude toward marriage. Nevertheless, she does not seem to have exhibited fear of intimacy, so much as a fierce protection of her productiveness as an artist. To her friends Cather expressed excessive affection. Countless letters express intense longing to see people as diverse as Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Elizabeth Sergeant, Trixie Florance, Zoe Akins, Carrie Miner Sherwood, Mariel Gere, May Willard, and Irene Miner Weisz.

27. This sentiment also reflects Cather's strength of feeling for her home town, as is reflected in her saying that she wrote *The Song of the Lark* all from the Moonstone perspective and for the Moonstone people. For Cather and for Jim, Antonia embodies the spirit of their beloved small towns.

28. This September 2, 1916 letter from Red Cloud to Canfield Fisher is at University of Vermont.

29. This letter is dated June 26, 1931 and is part of the WCPM collection. Though Cather's descriptions of this Christmas visit of 1931 are of a wonderful time with family, the sadness of having both parents gone probably caused her to postpone indefinitely the next trip until she could no longer manage it.

30. Jean Schwind makes the insightful comment that both Virgil and Jim's favorite Jesse James novel idealize youth: "The natural antagonist of Arcadia's 'first, best days' is the unnamed villain of the James boys' West: the responsibility and maturity of adult life" (60). After reading the Jesse James books available during this time period, Schwind concludes, "Jim's favorite book informs *My Antonia* like a palimpsest" (66).

31. Blanche Gelfant challenges readers "to reexamine Jim's testimony, to discover him a more disingenuous and self-deluded narrator than we supposed" (79).
Chapter 3

1. As mentioned in chapter 1, in 1895 Cather expressed little confidence in women writers until they could write “a story of adventure, a stout sea tale, [or] a manly battle yarn” (Slote 409). This novel marks her attempt to enter that arena.


3. A 1922 letter, probably May 8, from Cather to Dorothy Canfield Fisher expresses this intention. Canfield Fisher’s papers are part of the Bailey Library collection, at The University of Vermont. Steven Trout’s 2002 *Memorial Fictions* also sees Cather’s as a truer picture of the war, suggesting that the novel’s success derives *not* from “the sentimental consolation it supposedly offered to Gold Star Mothers and former soldiers” but to its “greater realism than its detractors in 1922 were willing to perceive” (111).

4. Edith Lewis quotes one soldier as writing, “‘I was in France for over three years, first with the French Foreign Legion, and later with the Americans. And I think that the last part of *One of Ours* is the most perfect picture of the war that I have ever read’” (123). Cather wrote many of her friends that in the huge controversy the novel’s publication provoked, the letters she always loved to read were the ones from soldiers. They consistently cheered her by their affirmation that her book understood their feelings. Unfortunately, Lewis honored Cather’s wishes in destroying these letters after her death.

5. For Dorothy Canfield to act as reviewer when she helped Cather edit the novel complicates the issue of reception history at the very least.

6. Sharon O’Brien notes that Sergeant’s war memoir *Shadow-Shapes* focuses on “the horrors of war” (359). The fact that *One of Ours* conveys much besides these horrors
undoubtedly made it extremely difficult for Sergeant to accept the novel and to realize that Cather saw the war as much more than a story (163).

7. Sergeant’s concern seems to have been to convince Cather how evil the war was, whereas Cather’s concern seems to have been to discover how it affected various participants. The women apparently talked past each other, as Sergeant acknowledges later in a comment her sister made about Cather’s and Sergeant’s tea conversation: “my sister with light irony has recalled that afternoon as one in which two writers insisted on talking of their own books” (156).

8. Cather also writes multiple people during the fierce controversy after the book’s publication that her letters from ex-soldiers cheer her enormously, as they express gratitude for her expression of how the war was for them.

9. Stout contends that Canfield Fisher’s *Home Fires in France* and *The Day of Glory* not only predate *One of Ours* but also set the tone for its final section, even providing some of the novel’s realistic details about France. Though the case for influence is strong, the details Stout cites as lifted from Canfield Fisher’s books—private gardens, specialized food shops, quiet narrow streets lined with walls—are memorable to most Americans who have traveled in rural France. These details likely entered Cather’s active memory through her travels in France rather than through her reading; and since Cather and Canfield Fisher traveled in France together as young women, what they incorporated into their writings were likely to be similar. The strengthening of Cather’s friendship with Canfield Fisher during the writing of this novel, however, as Cather modeled the Claude-Gerhardt friendship after her own with Canfield Fisher, crucially impacts the novel in its ability to convey the power of a cultured friend to influence a rural, provincial one.
Stout’s point that Cather cared a great deal about Canfield Fisher’s good opinion during her writing of this novel is indisputable.


11. This September 19, 1922 letter is part of Pierpont Morgan’s collection.

12. A large collection of letters between Cather’s Aunt Franc and her daughter-in-law, G. P.’s wife, bears this out. One letter from G. P.’s wife before he left for war reveals her fastidiousness and attention to detail, in the fact that her letter takes two pages simply to recount the number of socks and pieces of various types of underwear she had washed and hung on the line that day. Enid writes her mother-in-law that she cannot believe how much clothing men make dirty. These letters are at University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

13. Probably the most famous immediate criticism of the novel is Hemingway’s raging to Edmund Wilson in a letter that the battle scene in the end of *One of Ours* is simply “Catherized” from *Birth of a Nation* (qtd. Wilson 118). Perhaps one reason for Hemingway’s fury is that he, like his hero in *A Farewell to Arms*, is embarrassed by words like “glorious,” which Claude uses. As Jane Marcus points out, “The corruption of language is war’s first casualty,” demonstrated by Hemingway’s speaking of his postwar sensibilities: “There were many words you could not stand to hear” (qtd. Marcus 137). For Hemingway and many others the world was changed forever by personal, harrowing war experience, making it impossible for them to appreciate literature which dealt with it dialogically.

14. Approaching this sensitivity quite differently is Josephine Donovan, who responds to the feminist voice of the novel, attributing Claude’s sensitive, feeling characteristics to “the daughter’s spirit in him” (117). She also comments on the strong women and female
traditions within the novel, claiming that *One of Ours* preserves “the feminine-maternal artistic tradition” by Mahailey’s refusal to turn over her mother’s art to Claude’s brother, the resident “patriarchal authority” (116). Her clincher is that old Mahailey has the very last line of the book: “she observes that God is ‘directly overhead, not so very far above the kitchen stove.’”

15. Bakhtin defines “authoritarian discourse” as that imposed on the individual through societal institutions and “internally persuasive discourse” as discourse intrinsically meaningful to the individual.

16. Cather’s Aunt Frances, called Aunt Franc, was G. P.’s mother and the aunt to whom Cather was closest.

17. March 8, 1922 letter to Canfield Fisher.

18. This September 9, 1917 letter is at University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

19. Canfield Fisher dated this lengthy, undated letter April 7, 1922.

20. Ironically, after the publication of her novel, Cather had even a better knowledge of the myriad voices in America, as the war-focused populace read the novel as a war book and wrote her vociferous letters expressing various opinions about it. As Cather relates to Dorothy Canfield Fisher in an October 10, 1922 letter, she received equally opinionated letters on both sides of the war controversy. She gives an example of one angry letter saying she will go to hell for writing the novel and another saying she has made a permanent contribution to the world of literature with it. She tells Dorothy that William Allen White, who was over for tea with her, told her never to back down. She repeats resolutely that she has nothing to back down from, since she knew the boy. She wishes her readers could see that the book is about the boy rather than about the war.
21. This November 17, 1914 letter is at University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

22. Though Cather habitually gave generous presents to a large number of Nebraska friends and relatives, she tells Aunt Franc in this letter that all her available Christmas funds will go to the relief fund this year instead.

23. This December 29, 1916 letter is part of Harvard’s collection. Cather met Mary through her aunt, Sarah Orne Jewett, and reserved a special place for this friendship. At one point in Cather’s life Mary Rice Jewett was the only person with whom she would stay overnight on visits. Perhaps this was because Jewett lived in a remote area; nevertheless, for Jewett Cather definitely broke her personal injunction against “visiting.”

24. This letter is written July 4, 1920.

25. This June 5, 1920 letter is part of the University of Virginia collection.

26. Cather also admitted that though she originally wrote it simply to get it out of her system and move on with her life, she also recognized the advantage that a small number of people would read the book for its topic. The pertinent letters to Canfield Fisher which discuss this novel are all from 1922: February 6 and 11; April 17, no date, 26 and 28; May 8, 16, and 22; June 1, 8, 17, and 21; no date; September 22; October 10, 23, and 26; and November 28.

27. Intending to write a story of one unique individual, Cather was gratified to realize that she had written about a universal truth through her depiction of the particular. In spite of the great number of soldiers who shared Claude’s emotions and general experience, Cather always insisted that the story was primarily about the way the war affected the soldier rather than about war itself. Her intent was always to portray human beings and their experiences rather than to write anything polemical.
28. This September 19, 1922 letter is part of Pierpont Morgan’s collection.

29. March 13, 1922.

30. See chapter 5 for further discussion of Cather’s friendship with Canfield Fisher and its impact on her writing.

31. Not specifically mentioning glorifying the war, Donovan contends that “it is the feminine-maternal goddess who has arisen and is in her place, triumphant” at the end of Cather’s novel (118). While Donovan responds insightfully to the powerful “feminine-maternal” voice in One of Ours, she oversimplifies by missing the other voices which are just as significant.


33. Claude’s correlating first name is undoubtedly Cather’s way of referring readers to the man for whom the Claude glass was named, Claude Lorrain, the seventeenth-century “master of landscape whose . . . sketches set the standard of picturesque ideals” (Gombrich 86, 186). Interestingly, Claude Lorrain is one artist Gombrich refers to almost solely by his first name, even indexing him under “Claude” rather than under “Lorrain,” whereas the other artists he discusses he mentions by last name or by both names. The name “Claude” alone was sufficiently evocative of the romantic idealistic painter.

34. Years later, Hermione Lee makes the same mistake. Earlier she realizes “It is Claude, not Cather, who is the naive idealist” and “There is a gap between the idealistic hero and the deflating, realist narrative” (170); yet in this passage she fails to understand the narrative irony, claiming “No irony is intended” (172). Because Cather weaves her dialogical ideas together so deftly, they can appear deceptively simplistic.
35. Urgo’s *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* does treat the dialectic of migration and settlement within Cather’s fiction but misses other forms of dialogism, such as that between authoritarian war rhetoric and internally persuasive skepticism. He, like Cooper, attributes to Cather sentiments she shows as originating with the deluded, romantic Claude.

36. Cather’s *Not Under Forty* opens with the prefatory comment that “The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts” (v).


Chapter 4

1. The Florance letters are part of the Drew University Caspersen collection. These letters, as is true of all Cather letters, are specifically prohibited by Cather’s will from being published or directly quoted; however, they may be read and studied by scholars. My thanks to Merrill Maguire Skaggs for inviting me to study this collection, for alerting me to its importance for my work, and for encouraging me to pursue reading Cather letters around the country. My thanks to Linda Connors for her guidance, as I worked through the several Cather collections at Drew. Cather’s letters are scattered around the country in 68 collections, in addition to the one in Oslo, Norway. Janis Stout’s *A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather* provides summaries and gives locations of the letters available in 2002 and is an excellent resource.

2. Bergmann notes that feminist literature on gossip views it as “a specifically female, conspiratorial form of solidarity that presents a potential offsetting power to the domina-
tion of men” (64), but he also cites studies which measure men doing almost as much gossiping as women, often in locales such as barber shops or locker rooms.

3. Even today in Red Cloud many people know little of Cather except bits and pieces of third- and fourth-hand gossip. A waitress in the town’s main street little restaurant commented to me in December of 2003, “Not everyone likes her. She brought a lot of bad publicity to this town.” She had never read anything of Cather’s, but she could still articulate vague rejection on the basis of gossip.

4. Letters to Mariel Gere—Aug. 10, 1896 and Sept. 19, 1897[?]—WCPM.

5. The letter to Mariel is dated August 4, 1896. It is a Dec. 31, 1943 letter to Irene Miner Weisz, in which Cather mentions her own sister Elsie and Helen Mac, among those who would be difficult to face. She also fears that she has permanently lost the friendship of Irene’s sister Carrie—Newberry collection.

6. Stout explores in depth the degree to which Cather’s changing world and the difficulties of becoming an accomplished New Woman affected her attitudes and her choices. It would have been impossible for these decisions not to have affected her emotional response to intermittent community disapproval. Stout persuasively defends Cather’s profound modernism as essential to an understanding of the woman and her work.

7. Cather wrote Mariel Gere in July 1896 that these people were so serious they didn’t even know how to have fun. She believed they had even sent their daughter away to protect her from Cather’s negative influence.

8. An August 10, 1896 letter describes her first club meeting, at which Cather spontaneously stood up and recited her published Carlyle essay, almost certainly knowing she was giving her listeners the impression they were hearing extemporaneous brilliance. The
result was a predictable overflow of enthusiasm from these women who loved literature and were eager to enfold this phenomenal new member. Cather thought it was a huge joke and crowed over her success with these women to Mariel Gere, a friend from her University of Lincoln days. She later tells in a January 10, 1897 letter of enjoying immensely the irony of being able to introduce Flavia Canfield—a sophisticated literary clubwoman from Lincoln and mother of her close friend Dorothy—to the women of the best groups in Pittsburgh.

9. The letter is dated Jan. 5, 1910 and is part of the University of Nebraska Lincoln collection.

10. Sometimes her letters blame her inability to visit on legitimate physical causes, such as illnesses, injuries, or hospitalizations, and sometimes they give lame excuses like her need to clean the house. Her emotional inability to go back home to Red Cloud becomes clear, when she finally writes of her doctor’s not allowing her to handle the stress of such a trip because of the havoc it would play with her emotions (May 1, 1945 letter to Mariel Gere).

11. A letter from Elsie Cather to E. K. Brown (in the Baenicke collection) laments both the fact that Cather told her family of her desire to be buried there far in advance and also the fact that after her death some people blamed it on the unwillingness of the family to welcome her. Elsie speaks of the double pain of knowing her sister no longer wanted to be with the family and then having their honoring of her wishes misinterpreted as hard-heartedness.

12. In spite of her longings for wholeness with her most significant community, Cather continually referred in letters from the last decade of her life to her usually unnamed
enemies in Red Cloud and to unpleasant things which had happened there. Clearly she feared a funeral for herself which would too closely resemble “A Sculptor’s Funeral,” an early story infused with community hatred and jealousy for the successful artist who had moved away.

13. One letter to Elizabeth Sergeant chides her that she will never get any work done if she doesn’t give up “visiting.” Another to Elizabeth Vermorcken, whom she often wrote about wanting to see, kindly refuses an invitation, saying the only person she ever visits is Mary Jewett—niece of Cather’s beloved mentor Sarah Orne Jewett—in Maine. The letter explains that she has needed to make that choice to allow herself the time and energy to work.

14. Stout’s Willa Cather: The Woman in Her World discusses the complexities of Cather’s responses to her multiple worlds in ways which take account of geography, time period, and individual response. She illuminates Cather’s relationship with her family in chapter 1, “East/West, Home’s Best,” 1-28.

15. As noted by Stout, Middleton, and others, Cather follows a distinctly modern tradition in her mode of leaving gaps in her tales and juxtaposing disparate events and information, thereby inviting readers to create their own meaning.

16. “The Namesake,” an early poem, speaks of her desire to achieve enough fame for herself and her uncle who died in the Civil War. Though she relinquished his first name, William, which she had borrowed in early years, she kept his surname, Siebert, altering it to “Sibert” in making it her own middle name.

17. Though she greatly enjoyed George Eliot, George Sand, and others, she saw them as exceptions, generally preferring to excoriate women authors.
18. Ironically, though Cather’s closest bonds were with women throughout her adult life, she consistently disparaged women. Most famously belittling women writers and women’s clubs, Cather’s attitude toward women’s accomplishments has earned her the troubling label of “female misogynist.” Careful readers like Stout, however, see in Cather’s comments both a deep connection to women and a fear of being confined by their sphere of achievement (Stout 39).

19. Early Cather letters to Mariel Gere are full of self-chastisement for the times she acted heedlessly during college years. Unfortunately, her heedlessness did not end with her teens, as demonstrated not only by her mockery of Roscoe Pound in print but also by her later stories which hurt Dorothy Canfield.

20. Bergmann comments on such haste: “Only when the information is repeated can its possessor turn the fact that he knows something into something socially valuable . . . . The gossip producer assumes that some of the ‘fame’ of the subject of gossip, as whose ‘friend’ he presents himself, will rub off on him” (150).

21. The Menuhins—particularly Yehudi and his sister Helpzibah—were child prodigy musicians whom Cather met in their early years, developing extremely close, familial relationships with them which lasted for decades.

22. This April 25, 1897 letter is part of the WCPM collection.

23. Knopf’s memoir begins the prefatory material of University of Virginia’s Alderman Library keepsake booklet Miracles of Perception: The Art of Willa Cather, published in 1980 and available in Drew University’s special collections. The more widely available The Art of Willa Cather, edited by Bernice Slote and Virginia Faulkner, includes instead a different piece entitled “Miss Cather.”
24. Readers who believe Cather would never set up a romantic relationship between Niel and this significantly older woman would likely think differently after reading Cather's own accounts, in letters to Elizabeth Sergeant, of her passionate relationship with the much younger, handsome Julio of New Mexico. In the end, after discussing the impossibility of getting him to come to New York with her, Cather writes of finally tearing herself away from Julio, deciding that he wasn't worth giving up all of civilization for.

25. Joseph Urgo explains it as Niel's failure "to see Marian Forrester in her own historical and biographical context and insist[ence] upon seeing her as a 'lost' ideal" ("How Context" 183).

26. This letter uses as examples arguments over whether Thea slept with Fred before marriage or not. Evidently, Canfield Fisher's readers were shocked by Thea's behavior and drove Cather's readers to implore her to vindicate Thea.

27. After Cather published a piece mocking Roscoe Pound, brother of her good friend Louise, this prominent family publicly rejected Cather.

28. Susan J. Rosowski comments on this modernist feature in her "Willa Cather and the Fatality of Place: O Pioneers!, My Antonia, and A Lost Lady":

The characters who once lived in Sweetwater have become part of a modern environment, in which people meet by chance in hotels, able to speak only briefly before passing on to somewhere else, or leaving behind messages too late to answer. The Nebraska land appears only as a grave upon which flowers are placed each year (91-92).

29. Cather's letters give many accounts of hospitalizations and home bedrest for diverse illnesses and infections, from influenza to an infection in her scalp which required shaving off some of her hair. The scalp infection affected her health for months, as did her frequent attacks of neuritis in her hand. Toward the end of her life, however, emo-
tional instability played as important a role in limiting her activities as anything physical.

She wrote Mariel that her doctor didn’t allow her nerves any excitement and that even the happy excitement of a visit to Red Cloud would be deleterious to her health (May 1, 1945—WCPM).

30. Mary Katherine Waller’s “‘Life on Any Terms’: Willa Cather’s *A Lost Lady*” agrees that Niel creates his own disappointment:

Niel’s disappointment in Mrs. Forrester stems less from affection for her than from a sense of betrayal. In discovering her alone with Ellinger, Niel loses “one of the most beautiful things in his life” (p. 86); Mrs. Forrester outrages an “aesthetic ideal” (p. 87). But the “ideal” Mrs. Forrester, Cather makes clear, is an illusion created by Niel himself. Finally, he chooses to remember her as he first knew her, “Daniel Forrester’s wife” (p. 171), a “bright, impersonal memory” (p. 171) whose eyes “seemed to promise a wild delight that he has not found in life” (p. 171). The “lost lady,” Cather shows, is lost to Niel because she existed only in his imagination. (44)

31. Brent Bohlke’s comment reveals a bit of this tension: “Willa Cather courted and enjoyed public notice, yet she loved anonymity and seclusion” (xxi). Her love for anonymity and seclusion stemmed both from a need to work and a desire to protect herself from the pain of invasive talk. In Red Cloud she could never become anonymous or secluded, thus she never knew when she was going to be assaulted by invasive talk. Alfred Knopf comments in his “Miss Cather,” “Sometimes I think that perhaps the greatest service I rendered her—apart from publishing her books and promoting them in a way that pleased her—was my zealous regard for her desire for privacy” (215). Of course, in this area Knopf’s best interests and those of Cather’s readers were in alignment with her preferences, as privacy also enabled her to do more writing.
32. A couple of earlier letters in a different collection are of a business nature, dealing with donations and similar matters. This series of letters in the Caspersen collection at Drew University appears to be the first time the two women interacted as intimates.

33. Though she commonly over dramatized her feelings of the moment—from teenage feelings of wanting to die of embarrassment to adult need for a friend's presence—the deep emotional connection broken through death always unnerved her in an especially powerful manner, preventing her from working for significant lengths of time. When her father died in 1928, she wrote Elizabeth Moorhead Vermorcken that her life was so scattered that she felt certain of nothing. When her mother died in 1931 after a long, debilitating illness, Cather wrote Dorothy Canfield Fisher that she felt like a ghost, purposeless and unanchored now that both her parents were gone. When both Isabelle and her brother Douglass died in 1938, she didn’t know how she could go on. She wrote Dorothy in March of 1938 that they were the two people with whom and for whom she had primarily lived, though out of her total of sixty-five years she had actually lived in the same house with Douglass for only ten years and with Isabelle for only five. Then when brother Roscoe died in 1945, all Cather’s letters to friends conveyed that she didn’t see how she could go on living after his death, since he was the brother closest to her during her entire life.

34. Actually, a May 26, 1939 letter to her sister Elsie officially grants her blessing to Elsie in selling the house and moving to Lincoln. The letter admits that Cather had been pushing her sister to keep the house for sentimental reasons but says she has changed her mind. She explains that after thinking the matter over during some time by herself in the Catskills she has come to realize that Elsie should not be tied to Red Cloud and the family home just because she and Douglass have such a strong attachment to it. Evidently by
1946 Cather’s emotions centering on her current losses have erased memory of this interchange, reigniting her pain over the loss of the house. My thanks to Charlene Hoshouer for sharing with me her copy of this letter. Charlene and her husband Doug purchased the former Cather family home in Red Cloud, restoring it substantially to the way it had been during the Cathers’ ownership, and operating it for a number of years as Cather Second Home Bed and Breakfast. Their research for this enormous renovation process brought them into contact with many friends and relatives of the Cather family.

35. Cather’s 1923 essay on Nebraska shows an in-depth knowledge of the Native people who had lived in her part of the country only a short time before the time periods of her novels. Yet in her novels, besides naming Antonia’s town Black Hawk, just as her own home town was named after the famous Chief Red Cloud, she gives American Indians no more respect than if they had been migrating birds who were there for a time and moved on. Neither the Captain nor the narrator in A Lost Lady mentions what happens to the Indians whose land the Captain chose for his house while they were still living there.

36. If Cather had not been such a product of her time as to espouse imperialist, racist philosophy, the novel would undoubtedly also have demonstrated a much more profound tension between this mistreatment of people seen as Other and an identification with them. As it stands, the novel’s only hint of the mistreatment of indigenous people is Marian Forrester’s comment that Ivy Peters earns his money by cheating the Indians of their land.

37. Cather’s last trip to Red Cloud was in 1931 for a family reunion the Christmas after her mother’s death. Though she raved about what a wonderful time it was, she never
repeated the experience. During the last sixteen years of her life, she never made one of the trips home she so often wrote friends she was planning to make.

Chapter 5

1. Bernice Slote gave Cather's term currency by titling her edited collection of Cather's 1893-96 writings *The Kingdom of Art*. Her book is both a compilation of much of Cather's published work from those years and an insightful commentary on the work and on the developing artist who was writing these columns. David Harrell also makes the explicit connection between Cather's philosophy and her creation of the Blue Mesa in his *From Mesa Verde to The Professor's House*, particularly in "A Glittering Idea," 131-62.

2. Her editor, Will Owen Jones, with whom she maintained a lifelong friendship, described her early work as honest, hard hitting, and popular with readers: "Many an actor of national reputation wondered on coming on to Lincoln what would appear next morning from the pen of that meatax young girl of whom all of them had heard. Miss Cather did not stand in awe of the greatest actors, but set each one in his place with all the authority of a veteran metropolitan critic" (qtd. Woodress 92).

3. As a famous writer, Cather often fought to keep early stories from being reprinted. She was also afraid that these letters to actors, "Player Letters," would be resurrected and strove to have them destroyed. In February 1922, when Dorothy Canfield Fisher had asked what she should do with the old letters which she had been asked to look at long ago, Cather asked her to burn them, please, saying they would be an awful weapon for blackmail. All Canfield Fisher papers are held by the Bailey Howe Library, at University of Vermont.
4. Woodress reports, “By 1929 Cather was more circumspect about making fictional characters out of her friends and wrote Dr. Tyndale before ‘Double Birthday’ came out hoping he would not be displeased by the story” (419). Instead, Tyndale was flattered. Cather had learned her lesson through hard experiences with Pound and Canfield, both in writing more generous depictions of the living and in thinking to ask their permission.

5. Though several impetuous letters written to and about Louise Pound reveal Cather’s crush on this young woman widely admired by young men and women, the letters also reproach Pound for not valuing the relationship as much as Cather does. Perhaps she struck this blow at the family partly out of annoyance with Louise. Whatever the reason, the publication produced a much greater furor than she intended and caused a quite public, permanent breach between herself and the whole Pound family. Cather says in a letter to Mariel Gere that she never would have survived “that Pound scrape” without her support. Pound letters are held by Duke University; Gere letters are held by Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Society.

6. After Cather’s death, Mildred Bennett noted in a brief piece called “Friends of Willa Cather” that Louise Pound was still furious about the publication many decades later. She even brought out the clipping to have Bennett look at it and told her that upon initially reading it her mother had pronounced, “That girl is never to darken our door again.” After she read the piece, Bennett told Pound she would have agreed with her mother.

7. Canfield sent a telegram Dec. 18, 1904, as soon as she heard of the story: “Am suspending judgment till I can hear from you. Please write tonight. I cannot endure the suspense.” To this Cather immediately responded that the woman in the story had nothing in common with Dorothy’s friend but a scar and that Dorothy should not be annoyed.
without seeing the story. Dorothy then wrote a short letter asking to see the story, and it reached her Saturday, Dec. 30. This letter of response is dated Monday, Jan. 1, 1905.

8. Cather stipulated in her will that her letters, which are available for study in 68 collections in the United States and one in Norway, are specifically prohibited from being published or directly quoted. For this reason they will only be paraphrased here.

9. This letter, dated Jan. 9, 1905, is also at the University of Vermont.

10. Of 102 surviving letters from Cather to Canfield Fisher, only three are from the years 1905 to 1921. One in 1909 expresses condolences to Dorothy on the recent death of her father, and two in 1916 directly respond to letters Dorothy had written her about the publication of *The Song of the Lark* and a speech she had given on one of Dorothy’s novels, respectively.

11. His reading of the Bynner article caused David Harrell to speculate about this Cather comment: “The statement is a neat summary of the attitude that Tom Outland comes to regret. One wonders, then, if *The Professor’s House* may be Willa Cather’s effort at atonement” (200-01).

12. Two other stories included in *The Troll Garden* also hurt many people when they were originally published. “A Wagner Matinee” too closely and negatively portrayed Cather’s favorite Aunt Franc, stirring up anger in Nebraska, causing Cather to say she had been pelted with irate letters. Two telling letters from March 1904, however, reveal her true attitude. A reply to columnist Will Owen Jones, her former editor, asserts that she had no intention of vilifying Nebraska or anyone living there, while a gleeful letter written directly afterward to Dorothy talks of writing another story to make them even angrier: “A Sculptor’s Funeral.”
13. Oddly, writing in 1933, Granville Hicks goes so far as to berate her for “supine romanticism because of a refusal to examine life as it is” (147), in spite of his seeing the novel as a “comprehensive record of the phenomena of decay” (143). Lionel Trilling, in 1937, calls it a “lame” book.

14. Jo Ann Middleton’s *Willa Cather’s Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique* discusses at length the use of multiple modernist characteristics, including her coinage of the term “vacuole,” which many critics call a “gap.” See Introduction.

15. In 1951 already, David Daiches finds “the glory and the freshness of a dream’ about much” of the novel and claims that Cather is able to “make these two stories one with no sense of strain or artificiality” (70, 66). In 1963 T.K. Whipple writes that “in *The Professor’s House* [Cather] has carved a set of Chinese filigree boxes, one within another, out of a substance as firm as ivory” (42). Audrey Goodman suggests in 1999 that

Cather does not belong among regionalist writers of the late nineteenth century . . . nor among canonized modernists, though her narrative experiments and “belief in the authenticity of private vision” (Urgo 183) could place her among them. Cather’s work in fact lies at the intersection of these two long-standing categories of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century fiction (72).


17. When Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote her about enjoying the book but teased her about her pessimism, Cather responded that Canfield was correct—both *The Professor’s House* and Fisher’s book of that year reflected similar mid-life crisis moods. She supposed everyone experienced such a mood at some point.

18. Bernice Slote’s *The Kingdom of Art* catalogues Cather’s statements about art through her early years, revealing her vision of art as her religious sustaining force.
19. Lionel Trilling describes this novel as having "Three stories of betrayal interwoven" (152) within it—St. Peter's betrayal by his success, Outland's betrayal by the sale of the artifacts, and the "betrayal" of Outland's discovery by its commercialisation—but he makes no mention of all the other interpersonal betrayals in the novel. A very early comment by Cather to Ferris Greenslet in a letter of August 22, 1916—when the novel was still a cluster of ideas in her mind—says that the novel might be called "The Blue Mesa," and it will be full of love and hate (Harvard collection).

20. Interestingly, for Cather and these two characters, significant investment of time in young people act as an antidote to their disappointed idealism. For Cather, it was a family of musicians whose prodigy children she grew to love immensely. Cather generally loved the company of young people, enjoying hosting her nieces throughout her life. But with the Menuhins Cather developed an unusual relationship in her later years, engaging in activities ranging from reading Shakespeare together aloud for hours at a time to going sledding together in Central Park. Similarly, St. Peter finds new energy and focus in his interactions with Tom Outland, while St. Peter's young daughters rejuvenate Tom's jaded spirits.

21. Though many critics like to assume that Cather and McClung shared a bedroom, Cather's correspondence indicates that each young woman had her own bedroom and that the sewing room was also allotted to Cather as a writing space. Beginning in her girlhood when her mother had a portion of the attic partitioned off as Cather's private bedroom, evidence indicates that she always had a private room. Extremely jealous of her own privacy, Cather enjoyed people but needed significant distance from them as well. John B. Gleason's "The 'Case' of Willa Cather" does an excellent job of revealing the false
assumptions of Leon Edel and others who categorize Cather as lesbian and assume her to have been resentful of Isabelle’s husband, Jan Hambourg. Gleason also details Hambourg’s positive impact on Cather’s life through influencing her to change to Knopf as publisher and through introducing her to the musical Menuhin family who became her extremely dear friends. Her correspondence after their marriage corroborates Gleason’s thesis, as it shows a clear growth in friendly relations between Cather and Hambourg.

Also refuting common assumptions is Helen Cather Southwick’s “Willa Cather’s Early Career: Origin of a Legend,” which carefully details how the lesbian legend began. Southwick shows its origin in a memoir written by Elizabeth Moorhead. Moorhead had originally written up seven Pittsburgh acquaintances, but five of these accounts were not published because of obvious falsehoods and over sentimentalizations. Southwick points out many errors in Moorhead’s account but notes that since the publishers had no way of knowing that Moorhead’s details—including the shared bedroom, the evenings spent alone together, and Isabelle’s father’s disapproval of Cather—were patently false, they thought this account safe to publish. Countless people since then, including Woodress and Brown, have simply accepted Moorhead’s fabricated details as facts and perpetuated these errors.

22. In The Writer and Her World Stout writes,

That homing urge, I believe, is an extension of her sense of loss of the original home, the home in Back Creek, Virginia . . . In this, as in virtually every other respect, she was a writer of dual and conflicting urges—an urge toward migration, in the largest and most figurative of senses, but also an urge toward enclosure, homing, and return. . . But that expansive vision coexists with an impulse of withdrawal to enclosed spaces, an impulse that becomes insistent in her later work. Mediating between the two urges is the open window, a thematically laden image that recurs throughout her fiction (26).
23. Though a letter written to her younger sister Elsie in 1941 (held by University of Nebraska) explains that after long consideration she finally completely understands Elsie's desire to sell the family home and move from Red Cloud to Lincoln, in her last years she must have blocked out this exchange. Clearly her emotional attachment to the house was lifelong.

24. Though St. Peter prefers his former, less comfortable house and Cather built her Grand Manan home without electricity and running water, neither can claim to be abstemious. In both cases, pride in the simple life results in a simpler dwelling but not in absence of luxury. For both, time to work in private constituted the greatest luxury.

25. Cather is probably especially emphatic here, in this letter of Feb. or March of 1933, in an attempt to have Canfield Fisher clear the record in the "Daughter of the Frontier" article she is working on about Cather at this time.

26. The name of old "Appelhoff," his landlord, means "apple garden," mirroring his belief that gardens were meant to be fruitful.

27. In a similar manner, even though she had initiated the change, perhaps Cather could fool herself that their relationship was largely unaffected by her move to New York until Isabelle married. Then the truth of the distance between them was impossible to ignore. When time not spent together had been Cather's choice, it would have been logically much easier for her. However, once Isabelle also moved on, not only were the geographic separations greater than before but the reality of the change from the closeness of the 1901-06 years to the greater distance of later years was inescapable.

28. Joseph Urgo makes a good point: "To Lillian, Tom's significance is largely an emblem of the fact that her husband's intellectual pursuits have always taken precedence over his
familial and conjugal obligations” (30). This is partly true, yet here St. Peter also betrays her for close companionship with Tom. A live person is a much more difficult rival to tolerate than a commitment “to an intellectual ideal” (Urgo 30). As Jean Tsien notes,

She was willing to give him up to his research but naturally unwilling to be replaced by someone else in her husband’s affections. Her jealousy arose from the fear that she might never again regain her husband’s confidence and companionship, and that she might be left entirely alone. Her fears were not groundless as we know, for Lillian’s divinations about people were “nearly always right” (3).

29. Leon Edel and Judith Fetterley are critics to whom many others refer when they make this point.

30. See Jean Schwind’s “This Is a Frame-Up: Mother Eve in The Professor’s House” for an insightful discussion of this novel as Cather’s “maps of male misreadings that clearly explore frame-ups of women” (88).

31. Edith Lewis had been a proofreader at McClure’s before moving to a career in advertising.


33. This incident also emphasizes Lillian’s adeptness at judging character, which is a great contrast to her husband’s. St. Peter blames Lillian for saying of Tom near the end that he was not always altogether straightforward, never realizing what Lillian doubtless saw clearly: Tom’s behavior with their daughters encouraged both of them to be in love with him. Tom’s rushing off to war before marrying Rosamond has prevented St. Peter from ever recognizing his behavior as a different kind of betrayal of both him and of his daughters.
34. Ironically, Tom’s pursuit of the ideal includes venerating two societies he sees as ideal: that of *The Aeneid* and that of the cliff dwellers. Both societies were communities, but his idealization of them occurs in solitude.

35. This comment also proves the deceptiveness of an earlier narratorial statement in Book One and causes readers to question St. Peter’s truthfulness: “Tom never took up the story of his own life again, either with the Professor or Mrs. St. Peter, though he was often encouraged to do so” (106). “It was on one of those rainy nights, before the fire in the dining-room, that Tom at last told the story he had always kept back” (155) directly contradicts the early statement and reinforces the surprise of the story which slices the general narrative in two.

36. Essentially, as Lisa Marie Lucenti points out, “the search for absolute values causes Tom to lose his friendship with Rodney and leaves the professor feeling ‘beaten’ by time and life” (245).

37. As Paula Kote comments, it is actually “the self-deception of Tom’s position [which] drives a wedge between the two men. Like the Wetherills, Tom may be high-minded, but Rodney accurately perceives that Tom’s language and actions cannot easily be distinguished from his own” (410-11). Woidat takes the culpability a step further, “With his romantic attachment to the ancient people, Tom is representative of white Americans who lament the loss of Native American cultural treasures without fully recognizing their own role in the process” (43).

38. In recent years much work has been done with the attitudes toward the Southwest and ancient habitations expressed by the novel and by its various characters. See, for example, Rosowski’s and Slote’s “Willa Cather’s 1916 Mesa Verde Essay,” Michaels’ “The

39. In writing these words, Cather may well have thought of the similarity to her own betrayal of a casual friend by her depiction in "The Profile" and the subsequent accusation of Dorothy Canfield as betrayer when Dorothy defended Evelyn against Cather. Just as Cather saw herself as pursuing the noble ideal of art in fiction, no matter what the cost, Tom saw himself as pursuing the noble goal of a worshipful attitude toward the mesa and its artifacts. Also in her worshipful pursuit of art as God, Cather chose to minimize her own culpability in causing harm. Pretending Evelyn would never recognize herself in the story if she even saw it, Cather's argument elides recognition of the pain she could be causing.

40. Patrick W. Shaw insightfully comments that Tom's "later inventing a 'vacuum' which enriches others suggests the emptiness of his idealism and is the key symbol in the . . . artistic-materialistic polarity of the narrative structure" (114).

41. David Harrell's chapter "A Glittering Idea" details many changes Cather introduces in creating Tom Outland's "enchanted world full of superlatives" (131-62). Susan Rosowski's and Bernice Slote's essay on Willa Cather's 1916 Mesa Verde essay also clarifies much of what happened in the composition of the novel. Though Cather claimed to be telling the Tom Outland story as it occurred to Richard Wetherill, these scholars make evident that much of Tom's experience actually derives from Cather's own visit to the area and her initial emotional response. She conflates the two experiences in her fictional retelling.
42. Sarah Wilson states, “Tom’s most significant trespass on the mesa is not his physical presence but his attempt at possession—the symbolic trespass central to the colonial and nation-building gaze” (579).

43. At times both men practice what John Hilgart calls “selective amnesia” (395). After the success of Tom’s invention, St. Peter pretends his student was never interested in money, forgetting that Tom had remarked earlier that there might be a fortune in his invention before registering it for a patent. On the mesa Tom vents sanctimonious fury at Roddy in an attempt “to obscure his own complicity in the commodification of Cliff City” (Kot 420).

44. Because St. Peter fixates on his vision of Tom’s experience as exemplifying this ideal and of Tom as a “glittering idea,” he bars himself from experiencing the joys of his quotidian life.

45. As Richard Giannone notes, “Miss Cather offers firm testimony of a life inspired by an ideal . . . [which] persists in the immutable human spirit, where all ideals arise and to which they return” (58).

46. The ironic “paradox is that Tom’s filial piety only becomes pure at the point when he can stop worrying about his duty to the past inhabitants and simultaneously take ‘possession’ of and be possessed by the mesa itself” (Hilgart 391).

47. Harrell suggests that he may also have been fearful of the potential problems of his invention’s development: “Perhaps it was a premonition of history repeating itself in another legacy begetting discord that made Outland bolt to the front and leave his invention to take care of itself” (158).
48. In her wistful conversation with her father about Tom Outland, Kathleen remembers that “He used to say that Rodney Blake might turn up in the Foreign Legion” (111).

49. Very early in World War I, letters from Cather to her Aunt Franc about her cousin reveal similar thinking on her part.

50. Klaus P. Stich reminds readers of the name’s historical referent:

Godfroi deserves more than an aside here. As the leader of the First Crusade and the subsequent King of Jerusalem, he came to represent “the ideals of high chivalric enterprise and fervent piety” (Baigent et al., 268), and these ideals needed revisioning by the end of the Third Crusade, as St. Peter’s tableau suggests (211).

51. Though she begged people to write her frequent letters and meet her while she was in Paris or elsewhere, she rarely committed herself to large blocks of primarily social time. She even caused Dorothy Canfield a bitter disappointment in 1903 by canceling only one day in advance a long-planned extended visit to her, because she decided she needed to work on revising her stories. Ironically, a number of letters from 1901 to 1903 express a desperate need to see Dorothy again, yet this March 29, 1903 letter cancels her visit at the last minute, acknowledging and apologizing for the pain she knows her cancellation will cause.

52. Throughout her life she made it a habit to help large numbers of friends and relatives with monetary gifts, helping multiple Nebraskan friends avoid foreclosure on their land during the Depression. But not till late in life did she give of her time so extensively.

53. In 1941 she began Hard Punishments, set in medieval Avignon, and she worked on it when she could, completing many chapters in those six years. Edith Lewis, however, took seriously her charge to burn all of Cather’s letters and papers after her death. The four pages which somehow survived (“miraculously” says Woodress) Edith Lewis’
burning of the manuscript reveal undiminished power, reminding many of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

54. Elizabeth Vermorcken quotes from a letter Cather wrote to her during this time period: “Surely we are singularly unfortunate, since we lose not only our dearest friends, but see the world we loved brutally smashed to pieces—absolutely wiped out” (61).

55. In the traditional celebration of Passover, with which Cather was well acquainted through her Jewish friends, “the taste of bitter herbs” reminds worshipers what God has done for them in leading them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land; in so doing, it leads them to renewed appreciation of God and fellowship with him. Augusta functions the same way in enhancing St. Peter’s appreciation of what his family has done for him and meant to him over the years.

Chapter 6

1. The pertinent letters to Roseboro, which discuss this novel at length, are dated November 9 and 28, 1940 and are housed at University of Virginia. These letters are referenced multiple times throughout this chapter.

2. This letter is dated October 14, 1940. All Canfield Fisher papers are at the Bailey Library at the University of Vermont. Though Cather apologizes here to Canfield Fisher and elsewhere to other friends, she made the choice deliberately. This memoir-style ending continues her modernist pattern of experimenting in new ways in each novel.

3. Jane Lilienfeld reminds readers that “Recent discussion of female modernism has centered on the origin of art for women writers, specifically the right of the female author to celebrate and to acknowledge that her body and voice are connected to her mother’s
sexuality and the processes of mother-daughter intermingling that Joan Lidoff, among others, has termed ‘fluid boundaries’” (50). These interminglings are myriad in Cather’s novel.

4. Richard Giannone reminds us that “For Cather memory is the mother of story... Remembrance also transforms the remembering storyteller. The novel’s movement toward mercy is an act of the mind growing in compassion and wisdom” (38).

5. Swift lucidly discusses the “Lost communication and severed mother-daughter relationships” which structure this novel and heighten the sense of alienation in his “Narration and the Maternal ‘Real’ in Sapphira and the Slave Girl.”

6. Woodress, O’Brien, Lee, and Stout all examine in detail these bitter Civil War divisions.

7. Cather writes Canfield Fisher in April 7, 1922 that Claude from One of Ours is a composite family portrait. The same principle is true of these characters in Sapphira.

8. Mrs. Bywaters also has an historical prototype: Cather’s great-aunt Sidney Cather Gore. She was Back Creek’s postmistress, “a ‘preeminently successful’ businesswoman and the town’s first citizen” (O’Brien 19), for whom the town was later renamed “Gore.”


10. As a fourth-generation Virginian married to a fourth-generation Virginian, Mary Virginia Boak Cather was accustomed to being accorded respect wherever she went, for her family position as well as her striking physical presence, and evidence suggests she carried these expectations of deferential treatment with her to Nebraska.

11. Edith Lewis remembers, “[Cather] wore her hair cut short, in a period when this in itself was the mark of a rebel” (27).
12. Charlene Hoshouer tells the story of working on renovating the Cather family’s second Red Cloud home and trying to return it to the form in which it existed in the days of their residence, before its subsequent use as boarding house, hospital, nursing home, and apartment house. Cather’s elderly niece, Helen Cather Southwick, helped Hoshouer tremendously with her memories of the Cather house, though one room’s original use eluded her for a long time. Finally remembering that it had been a huge walk-in closet for Mrs. Cather, she recalled going into it as a small child, furtively feeling her way among all her grandmother’s beautiful dresses. See Doug and Charlene Hoschouer’s *The House According to Helen* for other details of the house and its famous family.

13. Mildred Bennett writes, “Mrs. Cather, who prided herself on her knowledge of high fashion, frequently objected to Willa’s way of dressing and particularly her violent color combinations” (30).

14. Mildred Bennett comments, “There was a conflict between Willa and her mother, but always proud of her daughter, Mrs. Cather’s favorite gift to friends, in later years, was an autographed copy of one of Willa’s books” (31).

15. Fisher dated this undated letter May 15-20, 1903.

16. This March 2, 1925 letter at Texas Women’s University first mentions various family members whom Cather understands her mother believes she has upset, assuring her she has not done anything which should have upset anyone. Next she tries to justify her response to a newspaper story about their servant girl Margie, because she knows it caused pain to her mother and a rift between her mother and father.

17. Mildred Bennett explains that when Cather’s “brother Jim was born, her mother was too ill to comb Willa’s long curly hair, and the girl went to the barber shop and had it cut
short. At the same time she was planning to become a surgeon and she wished to dress
the part. She affected the character of a boy, wearing a jacket, a derby hat or a cap and a
white shirt; and she carried a cane” (178-79).

18. Stout asserts convincingly that Cather sought primarily to assert herself as a New
Woman in the male-dominated Victorian era in which she grew up:

Many of the adolescent gestures Cather made as she groped her way toward a
comfortable expression of selfhood have been interpreted as idiosyncratic. But if
we see these gestures against the larger backdrop of the changes in gender roles
occurring in the late nineteenth century we can see that they were ways of casting
herself as a New Woman. In a sense, she may be said to have become a New
Woman before she became a woman. (30)

19. Like the novel’s Mrs. Ringer, Mrs. Cather was “born interested” (119).

20. This May 2, 1896 letter is at Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial in Red Cloud, Nebraska.

21. Charlene Hoshouer says Helen Cather Southwick told her that her grandmother
“never cooked a meal” after Margie died. Southwick claimed that after Margie was no
longer able to cook for them, the family ate at the Royal Hotel.

22. In spite the Edenic setting, Palleau-Papin’s “The Subversive Language of Flowers in
Sapphira and the Slave Girl” makes a strong case for the political function of flowers in
this novel. He agrees with Susan Rosowski that this novel “may well be the most directly
political of all her writing” (244):

[F]lowers build up a coded discourse on ‘dangerous’ sexual innuendoes ques­tion­ing interracial relationships; demonstrate how, through a discourse on
slavery, flowers become a means for a slave woman to express herself; and,
finally, how the narrator includes the voices of free slave and women in her own
speech through the use of flowers” (42).

23. In this May 16, 1941 letter to Mrs. Ackroyd, Cather recounts loving the stories she
heard from Mrs. Anderson as a child and those she heard from her during an adult visit
back to Virginia. This letter is part of University of Virginia’s collection.
24. In Willa Cather's Southern Connections, Ann Romines comments on a well-preserved quilt from the Cather family: “The names that remain legible on the Robinson-Cather quilt sketch a portrait of a tightly woven local community” (ix).

25. Edith Lewis confirms:

She had often been urged to write a Virginia novel, but for a long time some sort of inhibition—a reluctance, perhaps, to break through to those old memories that seemed to belong to another life—had deterred her; though she sometimes spoke of incidents, stories of the Virginia years, which she might write about some day. I think it was the death of her father and mother, and the long train of associations and memories their death set in motion that led her to write Sapphira. Virginia, which she had not given much thought to during all the Bank Street period, had come to occupy her mind more and more. When she did finally begin the writing of Sapphira, it was with her whole power and concentration. (182)

26. This letter discussing her father at the time of his death was written to Dorothy Canfield Fisher on April 3, 1928.

27. Loretta Wasserman suggests, “My thesis, then, is that this ‘Terrible’ Cather had tried to portray is sexual exploitation and debasement under slavery—exploitation the institution not only made possible but expected, even acceptable—one of the arrangements of domestic life, as it were” (3).

28. Ann Romines reveals that Till represents an actual “Aunt Till,” who “stayed on to work in the household of her former owner, Ruhamah Seibert—who lived into her eighties, dying only six weeks before Willa Cather’s own birth” (“Admiring” 283).

29. Both Sapphira’s cold, controlling nature and her recent bloating from dropsy make it easy for readers to look past her impressive physical presence as part of her persona. When described visiting Winchester just prior to the events of the main story, “She was a comely figure in the congregation, clad in black silk and white fichu. . . . No Dodderidge who ever sat in that pew showed her blood to better advantage” (28-29).
30. This Canfield Fisher letter is dated January 18.

31. This Canfield Fisher letter is dated April 3, 1928.

32. This undated letter Canfield Fisher estimates was written May or June of 1929.

33. Her letter tells Dorothy that a letter arrived from her while she was rubbing her mother yesterday, probably the only thing she can think to do to try to stimulate circulation again. This reference is reminiscent of Till rubbing Sapphira’s legs and Mandy rubbing Old Mrs. Harris’s feet. In her fifties Cather learned to take on a humbler, more submissive role with her mother than what she had previously established.

34. Merrill Maguire Skaggs observes insightfully,

   The beautiful double S in the road to Timber Ridge—the lovely spot surrounded by dogwood, laurel, and wild honeysuckle in which the road seems to continue without getting anywhere—symbolizes the pace of this story . . . the contrary directions in which the story seems to run, the confusions of debates over slavery, and the twists in each human character depicted here” (After 179).

35. As Arnold suggests, “One of Cather’s gifts . . . is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in her mind at the same time” (328).

36. It is this novel that elicits the often-quoted compliment from Wallace Stevens written to a friend: “‘You may not like the book,’ he wrote, ‘moreover, you may think she is more or less formless. Nevertheless, we have nothing better than she is. She takes so much pains to conceal her sophistication that it is easy to miss her quality’” (Woodress 487).

37. As Jenny Hale Pulsipher notes, “Though some critics have viewed Sapphira’s change of heart as too sudden and therefore unrealistic, incidents throughout the story prepare the reader for a change” (95). She has consistently shown affection and kindness to others in ways which Rachel termed “whimsical,” because she did not understand how they fit her mother’s personality.
38. Jo Ann Middleton summarizes that the novel is another Cather “bold departure from literary convention” and that the epilogue which follows a vacuole of compressed time “is related by Till and sends us back in time; we are forced to cross the gap both coming and going. Even in this late book, Cather remains in charge of her material, her technique, and her reader” (43, 65).

39. Eugénie Lambert Hamner concludes, “*Sapphira* is therefore an illuminating study of the interrelationships of a group of strong women, including a little girl who was fascinated by their real life models, whose mind was teased by them, and who grew up to recreate and create in fiction” (356).
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