Individuality & Art: The Search for Fulfillment in Willa Cather's Heroines

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INDIVIDUALITY AND ART: THE SEARCH FOR FULFILLMENT
IN WILLA CATHER'S HEROINES

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Nancy M. Moore
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IN WILLA CATHER'S HEROINES

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Willa Cather believed very firmly in two things: individuality and art. The purpose of this study is to show Cather's intense dedication to the pursuit of individual artistic achievement as depicted by the heroines of seven Cather novels: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Antonia* (1918), *A Lost Lady* (1923), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). Cather was concerned about whether or not woman as artist could succeed or be forever bound by sexual limitation. She devoted her life to the worship of art and the belief that one must pursue that spark within, regardless of its form, whether in either the traditional role or in a professional one. The essence of Cather's belief in the individual is the firm affirmation contained in all her works that the real sin against life and against oneself is the failure to realize one's potentialities. She insists upon complete self-sufficiency and self-reliance in devoting oneself to following the only possible life-course one can follow. All of the women discussed in this paper are deeply individual and independent and all are set against Cather's criteria for the artist. They either succeed because of their "dedicated
spirit, "or they fail because their spirits cannot withstand the adversity set against them. Cather's test of greatness in her heroines was the devotion to a life-course that corresponded to the artist's search for beauty in her work. Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronberg, Antonia Shimerda, and Lucy Gayheart succeed because they seek a worthy channel for their creative vitality and struggle against the mediocrity that threatens the spirit of the individual. Marian Forrester, Myra Henshawe, and Sapphira Colbert fail because their independent spirits thrive, not on the search for beauty in personal fulfillment, but on transient materialism and tarnished images. The differences in the heroines are not in their strength and endurance, but in the goals they set for themselves. Whether she succeeds or fails, each woman still maintains the right to be "herself" in her own inimitable way.
INTRODUCTION

Willa Cather believed very firmly in two things: individuality and art. She blended the two to produce a vivid vision of life which she projected with a certain quiet, elusive display of inner strength into the characters she developed in her fiction, notably in her women. The purpose of this study is to show Willa Cather's intense dedication to the pursuit of individual artistic achievement as depicted by the heroines of seven Cather novels: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Antonia* (1918), *A Lost Lady* (1923), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940).

Criticism of Willa Cather's fiction has most often been relegated to praise of her pioneer novels as opening a new territory--Nebraska and the far West--to American literature, subsequent definition of her as a "Novelist-of-the-Pioneer-turned-Escapist," and to dismissal of her efforts as too simple to make any real intellectual demands on the reader. Writing in 1946, a year before Willa Cather's death, E. K. Brown declared the absence of critical concern with Willa Cather's fiction to be one of the gross abuses of

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much recent American criticism. As late as 1967 Brown’s sentiment was echoed by James Schroeter’s statement that Cather’s works have not attracted much notice of late. He suggested that there was a need for more interest and appreciation of Cather’s work. The study of Cather’s heroines undertaken in this paper is intended to help illuminate many of Cather’s literary virtues and illustrate the desirability of a renewed appreciation of her art and contribution to American literature.

The essence of Cather’s belief in the individual is the firm affirmation contained in all her works that the real sin against life and against oneself is the failure to realize one’s potentialities. Cather emphasizes that one must have respect for self and the desire to fulfill one’s potentialities: her heroines are concerned with striving to achieve a purpose in life relative to the inner yearnings of self. She insists upon complete self-sufficiency and self-reliance in devoting oneself to following the only possible life course one can follow. Willa Cather was herself an immensely creative force. She had a powerful, inflexible oneness of purpose which led her to pursue her creative writing goals oblivious to other aspects of life which may


have been significant to others.\textsuperscript{4} Her life represented a constant pursuit of identity which she believed to be essential to her survival as an artist.\textsuperscript{5} The individuality of her heroines is in accord with her own life and thought. Whether or not her individuals succeed or fail depends upon how close to or how far from her code of values they exist.

Cather believed each individual was an artist in the sense that she had the ability, and obligation, to strive for the beautiful and complete in herself. She must devote herself exclusively to developing whatever talents are manifest within, regardless of their form. To fail to do so is to deny self-completion. Cather's use of the term "art" was somewhat ambiguous. Although she believed in the divine artist, she sympathized with the ordinary man, arguing that art can be of the highest kind or it may include everything that appeals in a human way.

Integrity is the artist's recognition and use of his individual talent; sin is the waste of potential.\textsuperscript{6} Willa Cather viewed everyone as a sort of "spiritual" artist and it is within this concept that the individuality and independence of her women are viewed. The realm of the artist is not limited to tangible arts such as music, painting, and writing. Cather best describes her concept of the "true artist" in reference to the intellectual stimulations she felt around pioneer


\textsuperscript{5}Blanche H. Gelfant, "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in My Antonia," American Literature 43 (March 1971): 76.

\textsuperscript{6}Slote, pp. 55-57.
women at work. She was moved to declare that "'the German housewife who sets before her family on Thanksgiving Day a perfectly roasted goose is an artist.'" 7

There are certain criteria essential to an understanding of what Willa Cather expected from the artist, that is, from everyone who divines an inner spark within herself and pursues it to its fullest. All of the women discussed in this paper are artists in the Cather sense that they searched for "the proper channel for rich and noble vitality." 8 In their book, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy, Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom provide insight into Cather's ideas about the artist. The ideas that pertain most directly to the discussion of the women in the previously mentioned Cather novels are briefly summarized here to illustrate why the heroines are artists in the Cather sense. The successful artist, like the pioneer, undergoes crises of self-discovery, struggle, and ultimate spiritual triumph. She achieves her goals because of her dedicated spirit or she fails because her spirit is turned aside by adversity. The artist has within herself a "creative mystery" which can be brought out only by herself. She owes no debt to either birth or environment, both of which are often depicted by Cather as impediments rather than aids. Cather consistently traced creative genius to inner sources, believing that the


artist feeds upon herself for inspiration and fulfillment. Above all else, one must have desire. Even to merely recognize desire within oneself is to attain joy. Cather had an unquenchable desire not to be forgotten, to obtain immortality by the written word. Desire is the stimulus for every creation and self-revelation. It causes one to be tumultuous and radical, to reject the secure and conventional. The artist early has an awareness of some inner force, a gleam of promise that makes her pursue something she cannot define. As she grows and disciplines herself to the refinement of her abilities, her talent becomes clearer and she realizes she is different and not to be governed by conventional standards. Then her happiness begins as she achieves a certainty of mission. Cather's artists -- pioneers, singers, mothers -- are all seekers who might be called foolhardy or rash for obeying their own instincts for new truths. 9

All of the women discussed in this paper are deeply individual and independent and all are set against Cather's criteria for the artist. They either succeed because of their "dedicated spirit," or they fail because their spirits can not withstand the adversity set against them. In her depiction of these women, Willa Cather exhibited a subtle feminism, not a vengeful or relentless feminism determined to castrate all males. Cather simply assumed, in her fiction, the dominance of

women and thus endeavored to exalt her own sex. Women dominate all seven novels chosen for this study and it is woman's desire for self-sufficiency, not equality or supremacy, that is probed. Cather's heroines epitomize woman's desire to be herself. Cather pictured woman as struggling to be neither man's peer nor his master, but striving to exist as an independent entity. Her heroines are more than emancipated: they are totally disjuncted from masculinity.\(^{10}\) The differences in the several heroines discussed are not in their strength and endurance, but in the goals they set for themselves. Whether she succeeds or fails, each woman still maintains the right to be "herself" in her own inimitable way.

Although Cather explored many of the prevalent types of fictional women, such as the mother, the farmer, the fine artist, she dwells not on general type but on the woman as individual. It is the purpose of this thesis to explore Cather's feminine characterization and illustrate that the quiet, simple honesty of Willa Cather created some beautiful examples of "woman as artist as individual." Each woman is studied individually in chronological order of the publication of the novels, but occasional cross references are made when deemed pertinent. In "Part I, The Pioneer Trilogy," emphasis is on Cather's pioneer heroines and their successful struggles against alien environ-

ments; in "Part II, Frustration and Defeat," emphasis is on Cather heroines who fail in their attempts at artistic individuality; and in "Part III, Life and Death: Affirmation and Acceptance," emphasis is on two Cather heroines who symbolize either Cather's exaltation of life or her dignified acceptance of death and mortality. Biographical information about Cather is used when necessary to a fully-developed subject.
PART I

THE PIONEER TRILOGY

Willa Cather's pioneer trilogy consists of *Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Antonia* (1918). The heroines of these novels are shaped largely by Cather's own pioneer experience and her admiration of pioneer values. Transplanted from Virginia to Red Cloud, Nebraska in 1881 at the age of nine, Willa Cather had early become interested in the plight of the pioneers. Young Cather spent a great deal of time riding her pony from farm to farm, listening to the immigrant women tell tales of the old country as they went about their tasks. Her visits to the sod houses and dugouts on the Divide instilled within her a sense of permanence, a feeling of being at one with the earth.\(^1\) Thus when Cather began writing novels it seemed only natural that she look back at her experiences with the pioneer life of Nebraska and try to capture its authenticity with words.

To Cather, pioneer values were the essential human values. She admired the pioneers' freedom, their generous easy life, and their individualistic approach to living. Cather looked back somewhat

\(^1\) Bennett, p. 139.
longingly to and wrote reverently of the pioneer days, accepting their approach to life, an approach which sanctioned the authority of the self rather than that of man in a mass society. Cather was the last of a generation of writers who saw the frontier pass from an untamed wilderness into "a countryside of tidy farms and cramped, ugly towns . . . and she found in the primitive virtues of the pioneer experiences her own values as an artist." Yet Cather's deep primitivism and sensitivity to the land, and her sympathy with the traditions of the past should not suggest that she was merely an elegist; she did more than celebrate and lament a lost past. She recognized that the value of the past was "as persistent human truth repossessed . . . by the virtue of memory and art." The primitive conditions of the pioneers demanded that one call forth his best efforts just to survive, just to hold his own at the nadir of existence. One became oblivious to graces, refinements, and worldly awarenesses. Cather took these pioneers to heart, extenuating nothing, treating nothing with malice, depicting "a mood of luminous Virgilian sadness. No other American novelist . . .

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4 Dorothy Van Ghent, Willa Cather, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, no. 36 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 5.
has treated this theme with a beauty so grave, so wistful."⁵ Cather's pioneers, especially her women, were dynamic, full of confident energy. Driven by inner force, they surged confidently forward with boundless energy, as if life "had more dawns than sunsets in it."⁶

Cather's pioneer novels introduced the immigrant tide to American literature and initiated the Cather pioneer heroine: attractive, healthy, active, homespun, a worker of tremendous tasks.⁷ They constitute a strong period of affirmation for the author: all are unified by a single-toned philosophy. They are stories of women enroute to their proper destinies, women with roots in the soil who arrive and fulfill themselves in a meaningful life. Everything about them is affirmative: they possess strength and love of life, moving against a lifegiving background.⁸ The land is always the great antagonist. Terrible and beautiful, its sense of space adds epic scope to the human life in the country. It is Cather's women who seem to have the most kinship with the land: "They are simple, primeval, robust with a strain of hardness, heroic. Alexandra is a heroine of the Sagas,


Thea Kronberg . . . has the integrity of a single driving force.

Antonia is elemental motherhood. "9

CHAPTER I

O PIONEERS!

With a pioneer woman's life as its focus, O Pioneers! reaches epic magnitude as it traces the whole epic of pioneering and contrasts the destinies of the pioneers and their children. O Pioneers! is an "epic of the soil, drama of passion, simple recital of human toil crowned by tranquil happiness."¹ In contrast to many pioneer novels wherein the characters declare their merits, O Pioneers! has a heroine whose behavior tells the reader of what she is made.² Alexandra Bergson is Cather's heroine of the soil as she realizes her fullest potentiality by becoming one with the land. In all that she does she adheres to the Cather code of individual realization and achievement, and to the artistic demand for full involvement, sacrifice, and desire.

There are actually two human stories in O Pioneers!: both are of youth and imagination. One is of Alexandra Bergson, "the strong woman of the Proverbs, resolute and energetic, with . . . strength of body and of mind." The other is of Marie Shabata, "the incarnation of

²Karolides, p. 248.
passion, fire and beauty in one lovely figure made to enslave and madden men's hearts. "3 With Alexandra and Marie, Cather creates characters of elemental grandeur, the two archetypal women who helped make possible the winning of the frontier. 4 Of the two women, Alexandra is greater, more original, yet Marie is warmer, more passionate. One often admires the first while he loves the latter. Alexandra's indomitable energy sometimes seems cold beside Marie's tragic intensity. 5 Although Alexandra dominates the action, Marie's story seems to have a two-fold purpose in the novel. The passionate spontaneity of Marie counters the cool, austere nature of Alexandra, and Marie's love affair with Emil, Alexandra's brother, matches the love between Alexandra and the land. 6 Though hers is a secondary plot to the saga of Alexandra, Marie is nevertheless essential to the novel for her own story and for the completeness she lends to Alexandra's story.

Alexandra Bergson views the land naturalistically, almost atavistically, treating it with love and respect. 7 She is the daughter

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3Rapin, p. 25.


5Rapin, p. 22.


of Swedish immigrants set down upon the barren plains of Nebraska in the mid-1800's. John Bergson, Alexandra's father, is a keenly sensitive man who fights the Nebraska prairie for eleven years until his labors kill him. His only consolation upon dying is his belief that his daughter is determined and sharp enough to continue the conquest of the land. The death of her father hits Alexandra hard but she has his sensitivity and pride plus a great deal more. Whereas John Bergson had clung to the Old World tradition and viewed the land as a harsh, untamable enemy, letting his desire for it turn to hatred and rebellion, thus destroying himself, Alexandra loves and understands the soil, toils patiently, and waits for the land to redeem her faith.8 The Swedish girl is not totally free of her European heritage, and she uses it to her advantage in her primitive surroundings. The emotional pattern of Alexandra's story is produced primarily by the impact of her European traditions and sensibilities on a challenging new country. The tensions between Old World and New produce a certain quality and power on the life of one who grows up on the American prairie.9
Alexandra's enchantment with the land and its "great, free spirit," her austerity and strength are in unison with the vigor of the land.10

8 Bloom and Bloom, pp. 31-32.
Cather symbolizes the past and the future with John Bergson and his daughter, and concludes that the future belongs to the ones who strain to achieve originality and newness, not to the ones who try to retrieve what was elsewhere lost. John Bergson had seen in the land a possible refuge back to what he had once had; Alexandra sees it as a new life, a new reason for being. Alexandra is determined and far-seeing, confident in the future because she is "not trying to get back to where she was but to go forward to where she has never been yet knows she will one day be." ¹¹ A beautiful contrast between the visions of the past and those of the future is made by the author in the early pages of the novel. Alexandra and her youngest brother Emil are returning from town with their young neighbor Carl Linstrum on a bleak winter day that threatens to shrivel the initiative of life itself.

Worried about her ailing father, Alexandra sits on the buckboard:

The road led southwest, toward the streak of pale, watery light that glimmered in the leaden sky. The light fell upon the two sad young faces that were turned mutely toward it: upon the eyes of the girl, who seemed to be looking with such anguished perplexity into the future; upon the sombre eyes of the boy, who seemed already to be looking into the past. ¹²

Alexandra’s realization of herself is almost subconscious. As a child she had realized and accepted the faith her father had in her, 


¹²Willa Cather, O Pioneers! (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), p. 14. All future references to O Pioneers! are to this edition and are contained in the text.
not with vanity because her opinions were sought over those of her brothers, but with confidence that she had an inner spirit that they did not. Although she had had little real childhood and no real youth, and although she now has no definable personal life, she recognizes that there is a tangible self contained in her energetic young body. Alexandra is idealistic enough to suppose that determination and self-sacrifice will help her achieve her goals. Her goals are really quite simple. She intends to keep and make prosperous the land her father had left his family, and she conceives of no opposition strong enough to deter her from her purpose. Her most formidable foes are her two older brothers, both hard-working dullards. Neither of them appreciates the richness of the soil, the fullness of the earth, or the life-giving essence it represents. Nor does either of them like Alexandra's endeavors to try new farming techniques, favoring instead to toil and beat and subdue and try to force the land to yield. They accept the good years as rightfully theirs but refuse to accept the hard years as natural. They often plead with Alexandra to sell the land before it is too late to save anything. Their pleas, even demands, that they give up the land are especially fervent when they learn that the Linstrums, their closest neighbors, are selling out and going back East. Alexandra is hardest hit by the Linstrums' move because Carl Linstrum is her only close friend, the only playmate of her childhood and the sole human comfort to her lonely life on the prairie.

Alexandra's independence, self-reliance, and love of the land
are strongly contrasted to the weakness of Lou and Oscar, the brothers who farm with her. They see the land as an enemy to be conquered, yet have little faith in Alexandra's new farm methods. They are content to plow and plant, sow and reap, in the same manner as their father had done, as their skeptical neighbors continue to do. Cather presents Alexandra's endeavors to realize both her own potential as a farmer and the land's as a life-sustainer as the pure quest which one must make to realize his individuality through expression of the artistic spark within. Lou and Oscar have none of the imaginative insight that makes Alexandra a true pioneer. They seek no permanent values, content with drudgery and habit. The brothers instinctively fear financial insecurity and smother in grossness whatever sensitivity they may once have had. They obtain neither solace nor inspiration from their pioneer environment, and welcome plodding, backbreaking ritual. They have none of the creative impulse of Alexandra; instead, they turn work into drudgery, prosperity into avarice. They totally reject the frontier principle of individual endeavor and merit. 13 Oscar and Lou are totally insensitive to the "earth's song." They work methodically, like laboring animals, instinctively and uncaringly. They lack perception and thus become victims to the plow, slaves to the physical comforts made possible by the productivity of the land. 14

13 Bloom and Bloom, p. 55. 14 Giannone, p. 75.
Alexandra's goals are high because she envisions within herself that spark of creativity, of individuality, that sets her apart from the common farm laborer who sees little beyond a day's work or a year's crops. Lou and Oscar Bergson, typifying this latter attitude, badger and scorn Alexandra. They taunt her suggestions that their land will one day be worth far more than it is now; they even suggest as compromise a farm in the lowlands where they could be sure of some crops, some security; and they plead with her to sell out. Only Mrs. Bergson supports her daughter's firm decision to remain on the land, not because she divines her daughter's strength but because she can't stand the thought of another tremendous upheaval in her life. Although Alexandra believes that she will never give up her father's dream, she is also cognizant of the role she performs in others' lives. She has always had a deliberate approach to decisions, sometimes concentrating agonizingly. Thus it is that soon after the Linstrums leave and her brothers renew their entreaties to depart also, she takes little Emil and sets out in the buckboard across the Divide. For five days they travel up and down the valley of the river farms, talking to the men about their crops, to the women about their gardens and poultry. When Alexandra finally turns home, she is more convinced than ever that the uplands is the place to stay. She admits that one could always scrape a living out of the lowlands but could never do anything big: "Down there they have a little certainty, but up with us there is a big chance" (O Pioneers!, p. 64). Alexandra realizes that
she has the potential to have something great with the land and she refuses to settle for less. Her desire equals her determination to do the best she can with her resources, and her artistic instincts are such to bring the soil to its utmost bounty, matching bounty in it to fulfillment in herself.

Cather's description of Alexandra's return to the Divide after her lowlands trip beautifully depicts the love of the woman for the land:

Her face was so radiant that he [Emil] felt shy about asking her. For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman. (O Pioneers! , p. 65)

Alexandra returns home aglow with renewed vigor and enthusiasm, determined to remain on the Divide, convinced that she must buy the land of those who leave. She has achieved a vigorous awareness of the land's spirit and its relationship to her life. The land tells her something of herself:

For Alexandra the earth's song is a song of herself, a song of self-discovery, love and illumination. Her new consciousness is represented through a unison of the aural movement in nature and the pulse of the heart. Insects chirping come to Alexandra as "the sweetest music," and there "with the quail and the clover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed" was the rhythm of her spirit. 15

15Giannone, p. 73.
Alexandra realizes that the land means more than an extension of her father or an obstacle to be subdued; she has a poetic appreciation of the land which sustains her. For Alexandra, land is the symbol of life: "it sustains life; it builds life; it is life." 16

Cather's portraits of Alexandra and her brothers distinguish between those who challenge and those who cower before the prairie, between the heroic and the unheroic, between the original and the conformist. In her youth Cather had been profoundly influenced by Carlyle's idea that little people and big people differ in their visions of the world. Little people are satisfied because they can't envision anything better; big people can see through things as they are and envision what they could be, thus transforming reality into ideality. For Carlyle, courage plus insight equaled heroism. Cather adopted Carlyle's philosophy, but changed courage and insight to strength and imagination. The pioneer must have both imagination and strength; either alone is insufficient. Alexandra's father had imagination; her brothers have strength; she has both. Her love of the land is a third attribute enabling her to envision her oneness of purpose: her confidence in the soil and in herself is an exhibition of the kind of pioneering imaginative spirit which Cather admired. Alexandra is a member of Cather's natural aristocracy, the big people, and her brothers are not. 17

16 Karolides, p. 76. 17 Randall, pp. 69-71.
By the time Alexandra is forty her vision of the land has been fulfilled. Her farm excels any of those in the surrounding countryside. Both she and Lou and Oscar have much land and wealth. The men glory in their material possessions, but Alexandra still finds her natural place to be the outdoors. Alexandra feels extremely proud of her life as she realizes the satisfaction she obtains from her crops and orchards, and from young Emil, who at twenty is intelligent and sensitive. Emil has retained the sensitivity that his brothers lack or lost. As proud as Alexandra is of her farm, she is even happier that under her guidance Emil is capable of coping with the world, to go beyond the values of the Divide if he so desires. Just as she had years earlier appreciated the sensitivity, uncertainty, and determination for freedom of Carl Linstrum, so she believes in Emil's right to decide for himself where and how his life is to be spent.\textsuperscript{18} Alexandra looks beyond the goals of the earth to the goals of the spirit, recognizing in each individual the potential for self-recognition and discovery, self-pursuit and attainment. She believes that just as she has been able to recognize and achieve her spiritual goal, oneness with the earth, so she must allow Emil to choose.

Alexandra's failure to recognize the existence of special feelings between Emil and little Marie Shabata, a Bohemian neighbor and childhood friend, constitutes a possible deficiency in her character.

\textsuperscript{18}Brown and Edel, p. 178.
Randall declares that this lack of Alexandra's is a definite flaw, severe enough to negate her membership in Cather's natural aristocracy. Actually, Alexandra's blindness is due to a lack of close human relationships, not to a failure to appreciate them. That, plus her simple acceptance of marriage as final, made her see Marie only as Emil's friend, married and thus unavailable for anything beyond friendship. Her moral concepts do not extend to any infidelity in marriage so she is incapable of conceiving of the eventuality. What happens to Alexandra's beliefs as a result of the love triangle makes her a fuller, more nearly complete person, thus justifying the story's inclusion in the novel.

Marie Shabata is as much an independent individual as Alexandra. She gives herself completely to every situation, retaining complete spontaneity and an "all or none" approach to life: "It is the ability to throw herself whole-heartedly into emotional situations that makes Marie so humanly attractive and so successful in dealing with people, just as a similar spontaneity in relation to the soil makes Alexandra successful in dealing with the land." By turning from Alexandra's relationship with the land to the human relationship, especially that between man and woman, Cather arrives at an almost tragic view of life: she admits the validity of spontaneous human relations while pointing out their dangers.

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19 Randall, p. 73.  
20 Ibid., pp. 76-77.
What Marie pursues all her life, her oneness-of-purpose and all-consuming goal, is the instinct for happiness. From the first description of the little Bohemian girl Marie Tovesky, the laughing child with the flashing, coaxing eyes, a delightful and charming love of life is evident in all that Marie does. She ran off and married dapper Frank Shabata, not to be spiteful, but because she loved him and sought the road to happiness. She knows that there is no life, no love, left in the marriage, but clings to remembering her husband as he was, not as he is now, tired and worn down by farming. Frank has become madly possessive of his pretty wife. He fires farm hands whom he imagines to desire her and keeps a glowering eye on her every movement, stifling her desire to live and to be happy.

Marie exhibits Cather's feeling of "emotional dualism," the pain and ecstasy of life. Whereas Alexandra wears the mask of the stoic and maintains the "impervious calm of the fatalists," Marie's heart is at the mercy of emotional storms. Marie equals the "essence of being alive, the very pulse of the blood personified, doomed to be the victim somehow of what we so justly call ill nature." Both Emil and Marie have a talent for living and imagining life, and each recognizes the gift in the other. Although Cather tells


us little about Emil, Marie is fully identified. Marie has the instincts of a happy child and fails to realize that suffering is an essential element of human existence. For her, life equals happiness, and the measure of a person's vitality is the amount of joy he gets from living. She is the symbol of spontaneous existence and is rarely aware of its limitations because her knowledge of the world outside the Divide is too limited. Marie relays her vivacious zest for living onto everyone around her. The deeper meaning of her spontaneity makes her a symbol for man's emotional life. Although she is religious, she can't make her emotions compatible with her religious beliefs. Marie veers in the direction of primitivism by believing in the merit and inevitability of emotions. Yet, as her dilemma seems to illustrate, one cannot have natural virtues without giving up some of the corresponding values of civilization. 23

Although the beauty of their love was far better than Marie's unhappy marriage, the deaths of Emil and Marie make one realize the ambiguity of nature. The only time Marie and Emil make love they are discovered by Frank Shabata and he kills them. Their instinct for life caused their deaths.

Even her love of the land cannot now support Alexandra as she finds life, life which has shown its ugliest face to her, unimportant. She is stunned at the deaths of Emil and Marie; she finds their affair

23 Randall, pp. 78-81.
even more devastating. She immediately turns from life and a chill loathing sets in. Her feelings are to be considered more than those of a grieving sister. It is not only Emil's loss she sustains: she has lost her whole concept of the importance of life. She becomes "cold, heavy, numb, and gripped by the death wish." 24 Alexandra questions the validity of human emotion:

And why, with her happy, affectionate nature, should she have brought destruction and sorrow to all who had loved her, . . . Was there, then, something wrong in being warm-hearted and impulsive like that? Alexandra hated to think so. But there was Emil, in the Norwegian graveyard at home, and here was Frank Shabata. (O Pioneers!, p. 296)

These reflections occur after Alexandra's visit to Frank Shabata in prison, one of the most poignant scenes in the novel. Alexandra cannot blame Frank totally for the murders because of her large nature. She recognizes that it was not evil that prompted Frank to shoot Emil and Marie; he could not have done otherwise, having the nature that he did. 25

Stunned by her anguish and indecision over the irrationality of life, Alexandra is finally overcome with "a disgust of life." She loses feeling and realizes as she does that where there is no feeling and no thought there is no life. Randall calls this "a metaphysical nausea, a disgust at the end results of human emotion so powerful as to cause a turning away from emotion itself. A revulsion from feeling of this

24 Giannone, p. 80.
25 Brown and Edel, p. 179.
sort . . . is self-defeating and has death in it. 26

Slowly Alexandra is shown accepting, "yielding to life," finally concluding that life works out its own answers. 27 She finds consolation when she returns to the Divide. Accompanied by her friend Carl Linstrum, she still questions her acceptance of the tragedy, but slowly begins to realize its part in her life. She can even appreciate the love that Emil and Marie had for each other because she has broadened her concept of the importance of human relationships. Her shock and disbelief of the affair of the two had resulted from her moral awareness, not from any social impropriety. Her moral code did not allow a betrayal of any moral fiber. Though she believes in the fulfillment of the spirit as well as the body, her own strength in each makes her unaware of any weakness that Emil may have had. She has always been satisfied with her relationship with the land, but now begins to conceive of another concept of love and fulfillment. 28

Alexandra, by acceptance of Carl's proposal of marriage, at last acknowledges the need for a close human relationship. By marrying Carl she will once again reach full potential, not because she has not had a full life on her farm, but because she contains the potential for human love that has never been realized. Carl and Alexandra may

26 Randall, p. 87.


28 Karolides, p. 113.
not have the passionate spontaneity of Emil and Marie, but they will succeed because they represent life as it fiercely goes on repeating itself. The story may have been written before but all one can do is write it with the best he has. 29 Alexandra's taking a husband won't fill her life to the exclusion of everything else, but it will mark a sort of metamorphosis of the soul wherein she yields her body to the very fruitfulness she has always sought in the soil yet denied herself. 30

Alexandra Bergson has consistently adhered to the demands of Cather's code of individual realization and achievement. She early divined within herself an inner spark of creativity, an artistic communion with the soil, and in her struggles to fulfill herself she allowed no adversity to deter her from her goals. She concludes by affirming her faith in the land and in herself.

29 Randall, p. 86.

CHAPTER II

THE SONG OF THE LARK

The Song of the Lark, published in 1915, once again explores Willa Cather's favorite subject, a woman with strength and determination who recognizes her abilities and pursues her goals to their limits. Although Thea Kronberg, the heroine of the novel, superbly depicts Cather's beliefs about art and the strivings of the individual, Cather was much dissatisfied with the book and deplored her failure to cut and condense as stringently as was normally her practice.¹ Through nearly five hundred pages the reader follows Thea: through her childhood in Moonstone, Colorado; through her painful attempt to become a concert pianist; and through her long and diligent climb to become a prima donna of the opera. Yet, despite its bulk, its occasional tendency to lag, "the spirit of the book is too strong for the massive structure to crush."²

Thea Kronberg is based somewhat on a singer whom Cather admired very much; consequently, one need know a few biographical facts to augment his concept of the heroine. In December, 1913, Cather wrote an article for McClure's entitled "Three American

¹Brown and Edel, p. 189. ²Ibid., p. 194.
Singers. Of these three singers, it was Olive Fremstad who captured the heart and imagination of Cather. Born in Sweden and brought to America at a very early age, Fremstad had had a severe childhood in Minnesota, yet had become, through her singing, a superior artist. Cather found in Fremstad the qualities which the author hoped to find in a great artist from the frontier. Austere, fiercely original, there was nothing petty about Olive Fremstad: "In her singing were the force and originality of the pioneers, translated into the terms of disciplined art. In Fremstad she saw realized what she was soon to realize in her own art. In The Song of the Lark, it was not difficult for her to combine what she felt about Fremstad with what she felt about herself: in Thea Kronberg both are projected."

Although Thea obviously has her origin in both Fremstad's and Cather's personalities, she is not a duplicate; rather, she personifies numerous artists Cather heard or studied, and she embodies the author's personal belief that art is a "creation and quickening, a living thing of body and passion." Fremstad had ignited Cather's "inner fire" and propelled her toward writing about a great voice and the woman to whom it belonged. Essentially, the story bears out

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3Ibid., pp. 184-186. 4Ibid., p. 187.


6Sergeant, p. 118.
much of Cather's beliefs about "the desire, the passion which takes a woman of exceptional gifts away from the usual instinctive woman's lot of marriage and children to fulfill a directive that is altogether impersonal." 7

Millet's painting of a young girl in an early morning field, "The Song of the Lark," is the inspiration behind the title of the book. The painting expresses the wordless communication between a girl and the unseen singer, the lark, in the sky. Lark is a profound study of the growth into selfhood of a great artist because it is only as an artist that Thea is happy and free, fulfilled. 8 For Cather, the two great things in the world are "the struggle for existence and the art which expands our measured interval with beauty and passion till we forget that we must live and die." 9 Thea reveals these purposes because she depicts "the soul of an artist in her struggle to enter her heritage." 10 Thea Kronberg is of the same breed as Alexandra Bergson: each turns from mediocrity to embrace something with all her soul. 11 For Thea this something is music. Thus, to Cather, Thea represents the eternal

7 Ibid., p. 134.


9 Sherman, pp. 42-43.


11 Giannone, p. 96.
pioneer.\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Lark} is remarkable in the degree that it reveals the fierce concentrations of an artist finding herself. It fully depicts Thea's realization and development of her potentialities while it contrasts people of limited perception and ambitions with people who try to escape such limitations.\textsuperscript{13}

From the beginning of the story, Thea, age eleven, obviously has something, some spark, some spirit generally lacking in Moonstone, Colorado. Moonstone is topographically much like Red Cloud, Nebraska, and like many of Willa Cather's other fictional small towns. Its people are common, often petty, but occasionally it delivers forth a spark of originality. The desert beauty of Moonstone is constantly emphasized by Cather: the symbolism of light, sky, snow, glittering sunlight are all obvious parallels to the brilliance of light that surrounds Thea Kronberg, from the January brilliance at the beginning of the novel to the subdued brightness of a beautiful sunset at the end. Thea's mother, strong and confident as the wife of a minister and mother of seven, recognizes that Thea is somehow different from the rest of the brood. Thea has a calm determination to be Thea, whatever that may turn out to be. For this reason Mrs. Kronberg allows her daughter to take music lessons from old Professor Wunsch, an


\textsuperscript{13}Daiches, pp. 29-30.
excellent pianist who possesses a somewhat dubious reputation because of his addiction to alcohol. A gentle old man who has somehow never been able to combine his appreciation of the beauty of life with actual living, Professor Wunsch early recognizes that Thea has a lot of talent and an inner spark that set her apart from the rest of the young people of the town. He sees that she has a voice, and he makes her aware of herself. At one point he tells young Thea:

‘But it is necessary to know if you know somethings. Somethings cannot be taught. If you not know in the beginning, you not know in the end. For a singer there must be something in the inside from the beginning. . . . You have some voice already, and if in the beginning when you, with things-to-play, you know that what you will not tell me, then you can learn to sing, may-be.’ 14

As Thea wandered home after this particular session she was shaken by a passionate excitement. . . . She knew, of course, that there was something about her that was different. But it was more like a friendly spirit than like anything that was a part of herself. She thought everything to it, and it answered her; happiness consisted of that backward and forward movement of herself. The something came and went, she never knew how. . . . From that day on, she felt there was a secret between her and Wunsch. Together they had lifted a lid, pulled out a drawer, and looked at something. They hid it away and never spoke of what they had seen, but neither of them forgot it. (Lark, p. 79)

This is Thea’s first revelation that she possesses passion. Wunsch’s implication that she is destined for something better than Moonstone awakens in her the will to effort, to overcome difficulties without

14Willa Cather, The Song of the Lark (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), p. 78. All future references to The Song of the Lark are to this edition and are contained in the text.
verbal comprehension of them. Though himself "psychically lame," Wunsch nevertheless influences Thea and teaches her that the emotions of music mean more than discipline. He instills desire in Thea.\textsuperscript{15}

Thea also gains an increasing awareness of herself and her role in life from Dr. Howard Archie, a young physician and friend. He recognizes that Thea is special and encourages her to find herself. He tells her to forget the ugliness and the mediocrity she sees around her and to find the beauty in the world. The important thing is to live and live fully. The failures "don't leave any lasting scar in the world and they don't affect the future. The things that last are the good things. The people who forge ahead and do something, they really count!" (\textit{Lark}, p. 139). Professor Wunsch, Dr. Archie, life itself—all these propel Thea forward now:

She used to drag her mattress beside her low window and lie awake for a long time, vibrating with excitement, . . . Life rushed in upon her through that window—or so it seemed. In reality, of course, life rushes from within, not from without. There is no work of art so big or so beautiful that it was not once all contained in some youthful body, like this one which lay on the floor in the moonlight, pulsing with ardor and anticipation. (\textit{Lark}, p. 140)

Thea feels a drive within, a quickening of desire, and is filled with the impatient urge to be, to do, to live!

Thea's individuality is also recognized by Ray Kennedy, a young railroad cabooseman who sees in Thea a vision of something different and better than common man. It is he who helps her to

\textsuperscript{15}Giannone, p. 88.
realize and appreciate the history of the land and the people, from its most primitive state to its present civilization. He communicates heroic ideals and imparts to her "the meaning of the human story. As a child she instinctively comprehends the timelessness of man's fight for the civilized things which make him man, because she has within herself a yearning to create and because she requires direct contact with the vital source of life Ray speaks of." Kennedy's death comes violently, unexpectedly, a result of a train wreck. And it is Ray who gives Thea her start: $600 in life insurance is bequeathed to her, to take her to Chicago to study music.

Thea is serene and confident as she travels to Chicago. Her eyes fill as the train leaves Moonstone and the desert sands she has always loved, but hers are not tears of sadness, loneliness, or apprehension because it was herself and her adventure that mattered to her. . . . She lacked nothing. She even felt more compact and confident than usual. She was all there, and something else was there, too, --in her heart was it, or under her cheek? Anyhow, it was about her somewhere, that warm sureness, that sturdy little companion with whom she shared a secret. (Lark, p. 157)

For Thea Kronberg, during that first winter in Chicago her battle against ignorance "was almost beyond enduring. She always remembered it as the happiest and wildest and saddest days of her life" (Lark, p. 175). She receives a small salary for singing in the

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16Ibid., p. 87.
choir of the Swedish Reform Church as a soprano soloist. She studies piano with Andor Harsanyi, and from the first lesson she realizes her ignorance, her lack of knowledge of music and musicians. Wunsch had instilled in Thea a deep respect for music and the passion it wrought in an individual and he had helped make her aware of her own individuality, but he had neglected to teach her Beethoven or Chopin or any of the other masters whom she needed to know. She had never heard a symphony orchestra nor did she know the literature of the piano. But what impressed Harsanyi was her unusual power of work, the determination which made her slowly, tediously tackle each foe as a difficulty she must, she would, overcome. Things came at Thea quickly; she had little time to prepare herself for one new obstacle until another hit her. Her battle against her ignorance is constant and stringent: "There were times when she came home from her lesson and lay on her bed hating Wunsch and her family, hating a world that let her grow up so ignorant" (Lark, p. 175). Harsanyi knows the constant discontent that troubles Thea because she is never able to forget "her own poverty in the richness of the world he opened to her" (Lark, p. 178). Harsanyi discovers, from a casual comment dropped by Thea, that his pupil is the soprano soloist at the small Reform Church. He insists that she sing for him. As soon as she does, the talented teacher is struck by his awkward student's voice, although he recognizes that here, too, she is shy, even crude, with no formal development. After the next few lessons, Harsanyi casually has Thea sing
"as a form of relaxation" (Lark, p. 189). But for Harsanyi the singing is not casual; he recognizes his discovery and broods on it. And, while he worries about what to do with his talented pupil, Thea has an experience which deepens her appreciation of music and her determination to make it her life.

Thea has been in Chicago four months before she finally attends a real symphony, and her first attendance there arouses her emotions to a fervor of excitement. So intense is her stimulation at the sight of the great house and the bubbling excitement of the crowd that she misses the first few musical strains. When the music suddenly reaches her, it stings her soul and she hears for the first time that "which was to flow through so many years of her life" (Lark, p. 200). Thea sits trance-like for the rest of the symphony, and when she leaves the theater she is struck by the ugliness of the city in contrast to the beauty of the music, especially the beauty the music brought out of her soul. Accosted outside the theater by an old man, jostled by careless on-rushers, yelled at by conductors, Thea reacts strongly to the new power within her. Simultaneously she realizes that her knowledge makes her vulnerable because when one cares deeply she can be hurt:

There was some power abroad in the world bent upon taking away from her that feeling with which she had come out of the concert hall. . . . If one had that, the world became one's enemy; . . . rushed at one to crush it under, to make it let go of it. Thea glared round her at the crowds, the ugly, sprawling streets, . . . They might trample her to death, but they should never have it. As long as she lived that ecstasy was going to be hers. She would live for it, work for it, die for it; but she was going to have it, time after time, height after height. (Lark, p. 201)
Just as Thea felt herself to be different when she played for Wunsch and when she lay in her childhood bed surging with desire, so she resolves to triumph over the ugliness of the world in order to obtain that vision of beauty which music can bring her. Her response is one of "passionate self-assertion and defiance of the devil." She resolves to triumph over all things that tend to drag her down and keep her from becoming a great artist. 17

Thea's passion is not abstract but is, as Harsanyi says, emotional and powerful. She is vibrant, yearning, and physically alive with "that old fire of intensity, primitive, physical." 18 Although Harsanyi dreads parting with Thea, his ablest student, he knows that one must take his talent where he finds it, though it may mysteriously obscure itself behind false fronts, and he tells Thea that she should stop her piano lessons with him and begin to train her voice professionally. Harsanyi understands that there are some things that cannot be taught, but he also realizes the value of discipline. This is what he has helped Thea learn, and it is he who reveals to her that her voice is her best instrument: "the instrument through which she can unlock the strong, intimate spirit inside her. The conversion from piano to voice, like the larger artistic and intellectual ripening, is from the artificial to the natural." 19 Harsanyi allows Thea's voice

17 Randall, p. 45.  
18 Cather, The Kingdom of Art, p. 89.  
19 Giannone, p. 90.
to follow its natural strengths, yet he corrects the aimless freedom
of Wunsch, leading her from idea to individual, from intuition to
interpretation. Harsanyi also comprehends that for Thea singing is
deeply personal. Her reluctance to reveal her vocal talents to him is
due to her hesitancy in committing herself. As Harsanyi says:

You can sing for those people [church] because with them
you do not commit yourself. But the reality, one cannot
uncover that until one is sure. One can fail one's self,
but one must not live to see that fail; better never reveal
it. Let me help you to make yourself sure of it... You
know what I mean, the thing in you that has no busi-
ness with what is little, that will have to do only with
beauty and power. (Lark, p. 211)

Just singing is not enough for Thea. The message of music needs
more than just a beautiful voice; it must perceive the idea behind a
melody. The beauty of the voice is always there, but the idea must
be sought out. 20

For Thea to act on the knowledge that voice, not piano, is the
instrument through which she must achieve her artistic self is for her
to achieve a sort of rebirth. Her commitment to voice is deeper
because the voice is an integral part of self; consequently, she
realizes that a failure here would be far more painful than one with
the piano would have been. Once she begins her voice lessons she is
far happier than with the piano although she likes her teacher less
than the sensitive Harsanyi. Thea acknowledges to herself that her
only reason for piano lessons was to train to be a music teacher; she

20 Ibid., p. 91.
never asks herself why she studies voice. Her voice has to do with that confidence, that sense of inner well-being that she has often felt at odd moments. Although she had always felt that there was something waiting within to be vitalized, something which set her apart from common things, she had never spoken of these feelings. She simply "took it for granted that some day, when she was older, she would know a great deal more about it. It was as if she had an appointment to meet the rest of herself sometime, somewhere. It was moving to meet her and she was moving to meet it. That meeting awaited her" (Lark, p. 216). Thea believes that life will yield for her the best which she is capable of producing. Along with her yearning for beauty is a hard kind of determination to get ahead.

Soon after Thea dedicates herself to fulfilling her greatest potential through her voice, she returns to Moonstone where she immediately realizes much that she had only sensed previously. Anna, her older sister, insists on Thea's first day home after nearly a year in Chicago that she must sing the next day at a funeral. The look Thea sees on her sister's face at her initial refusal is distinctly spiteful, even vindictive. Thea suddenly realizes that Anna has always disliked her because she is different.

Thea's awareness of music's relationship to life is intensified by her visit to her friends in the Mexican part of town, especially Spanish Johnny, a backsliding alcoholic who nevertheless brings an amount of fullness to life with his singing and guitar playing. Her
second day home she goes to visit the Mexicans and stays into the night listening to their songs, their gaiety, their life, and returns home exuberant, refreshed, renewed. With Spanish Johnny and his friends "Thea comes closest to the elemental impulse of the earth as it is echoed in man." Thea identifies emotional freedom with the Mexicans through ethnic currents in their music. For them music is a felt reality. In singing with them Thea receives pleasure and affection while she transcends social or racial prejudices. She has an important spiritual transfer with these simple people and learns music's primitive energy. Later, during her operatic activities, she draws from this deep reservoir of basic human yearning.

Thea's appreciation of the simple artistry of the Mexicans is attacked by Anna and both of Thea's older brothers. They despise the Mexicans and are ashamed of having Thea visit them. They taunt her for her claims of the Mexicans' talents and renounce her for singing with them when she would not sing with the church people, their people. What they don't realize is that Thea's spiritual commitment to music is a personal, soulful, joyful thing, not to be played with lightly. What they do is turn her from them totally as she vows to leave after the summer and not return. She feels very deeply the rejection by her own family, those whom she had thought above the others of Moonstone, and recognizes now that they are the same.

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21 Ibid., p. 91.
stifling sort that have always been her natural enemies.

Thea has realized early the mediocrity of the world with which she must contend and vows to fight to keep the ecstasy of her desire above all else. She realizes that she cannot live in "a choking moral atmosphere." She must struggle to escape pettiness and emotional restraint: Thea wants the difficult-to-attain or nothing. Her family's contempt and lack of understanding is the turning point. She is stirred up and restless all summer, and this time when she leaves Moonstone, she cries all night, knowing when her tears cease that she is tougher and will not again live through this sort of pain. She remembers the silly, pitiful ignorance of "that stupid, good-natured child" who had left for Chicago a year ago, and knows herself to be older and harder: "She was going away to fight, and she was going away forever" (Lark, p. 246). Thea's determination to break from mediocrity and hypocrisy awakens in her soul something new, yet old, "that had dreamed something, despairing, something glorious, in the dark before it was born; a soul obsessed by what it did not know, under the cloud of a past it could not recall." Thea may grope in the dark, not always knowing for what she searches, but she has seen a glimmer of the heroic epic that is all humanity as it strives to make itself known.

Thea's struggle is that "of sensitivity to maintain itself in a

22 Bloom and Bloom, p. 150.  23 Giannone, p. 93.
24 Van Ghent, p. 20.
world of routine and convention. "25 She knows the hardness of the world and insists that it is precisely this trait that makes it necessary for one to "justify one's right to live by being every inch alive, by living for the best that is in one."26 This is why Thea despises so many of the "popular" singers for whom she plays accompaniment for Madison Bowers, her voice teacher. These singers have achieved a certain amount of popularity without producing any sort of beauty, range, or focus. They have settled for second-best, refusing to adhere to Thea's kind of desire for best or nothing. They have neither the passion, sensitivity, nor talent that Thea has; so, her scorn for them is obvious each time she plays. Thea recognizes, and rebels against, the "Stupid Faces" of the world, the apt title of this section of the novel.

Much of Thea's warmth and idealism is crusted by the daily hardship in the life of art and she is offered three choices in "Stupid Faces": (1) choose the popular, crass career, (2) abandon art and retain personal integrity, or (3) rise above all the "stupid faces," combat hostility, and rise above careerism. Thea has the spiritual courage for combat and she takes her high ideal to be a hard command and struggles for guidance from the spirit within.27 Thea has discipline, which is an unusual attribute in a society striving to get something for nothing. She chooses disciplined endeavor, not apathetic

25 Daiches, p. 144. 26 Rapin, p. 33. 27 Giannone, p. 94.
indifference, and feels the need to free herself from the pernicious-
ness around her, especially from the evils of inaction. 28 Just as 
Cather deplored caution, vowing timidity incompatible with struggle 
for artistic achievement, so Thea has courage and scorns compromise. 
Her passionate outbursts reveal her yearning for the struggle for the 
new rather than acceptance of the old, tried, and proven. 29 She had 
earlier realized with Harsanyi that it is better to fail at some great 
task than to succeed at mediocrity.

Despite the tension and anxieties that accompany Thea to 
Bowers' studio each day, the place becomes the one fixed thing in her 
life, and it is here that she meets Fred Ottenburg, an individual who 
figures in her life thereafter. Ottenburg is intelligent, sensitive, and 
appreciates Thea's obvious talent and devotion to music. It is he who 
gets Thea her first singing engagement in Chicago, and it is he who 
provides a quiet retreat for her that summer as she tries to recover 
from both physical illness and mental strain brought on by the inten-
sity of her singing. Ottenburg sends her to his father's ranch in 
Arizona and it is here, at Panther Canyon among the Cliff-Dwellings, 
that Thea experiences a moment of perception about her inner desires. 
She has another of those rare glimpses into the initial essential being 
that have occasionally illuminated her selfhood: this time it ties 
irrevocably to the ebb and flow of human life.

28 Bloom and Bloom, p. 133. 29 Ibid., p. 141.
In Panther Canyon Thea awakens to a sense of history, past, elemental passion: passion to create and endure, to realize the hardness of life. Thea immerses herself in the Cliff-Dweller ruins and each new evidence of an earlier civilization affirms her faith in an eternity. She sees the Cliff-Dwellers as a connection between art and life. Art equals order, a pattern imposed upon the chaos of human experience to try to make it meaningful. Thea is able to profit from the lessons of the past. She needs a justification for being, and she finds it in discovering the old Indian culture. For the artist, desire is essential, even the ultimate necessity. Although it may initially be individual, its manifestations may be universal, unlimited by time and place, indestructible. In the ruins Thea sees the desire of the ancients everywhere and absorbs their spirit, fusing their ambition and effort with her own. The Cliff-Dwellers had made houses for themselves and pottery to house their most precious element, water: "The strongest Indian need was expressed in those graceful jars, fashioned slowly by hand, without the aid of a wheel" (Lark, pp. 303-304). This is the sort of disciplined endeavor which is necessary for the perfected expression of art in any form.

Thea often bathes in the stream at the bottom of the canyon, reveling in the knowledge that the stream is the only living thing left

30 Cather, The Kingdom of Art, p. 87.  
31 Randall, p. 49.  
32 Bloom and Bloom, pp. 40-41.  
33 Ibid., p. 130.
of the life the canyon once held. It represents a continuity of life that reached back into the old time. . . . Thea's bath came to have ceremonial gravity. The atmosphere of the canyon was ritualistic. One morning as she was standing upright in the pool, . . . 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, --life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? The Indian women had held it in their jars. In the sculpture she had seen in the Art Institute, it had been caught in a flash of arrested motion. 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. (Lark, p. 304)

Thus for Thea, who has gone back to the elements of life and her earliest sources of gladness--the sun, the sand, the sky, the night--and back to the beginning of civilization for sustenance, music becomes a sensuous form rather than a struggle. The power of thought becomes sustained sensation rather than intellection or communication. She is a receptacle for sound, a metaphor for life. Life comes from within, not without, and the completed act of art is a completed act of truth. 34 Physically immersed in the most precious element of life, Thea gains her greatest knowledge of both life and art. The artistic self must always be nourished by both the senses and the soul. In Panther Canyon Thea experiences one of her sensuous renewals and learns finally that selfhood and art are irrevocably intertwined.

Thea's life in the spacious Southwest canyons brings her into

contact with man's most elemental fight to achieve something beyond himself, and this is the basis of all art. That the Cliff-Dwellers could civilize themselves in the face of tremendous obstacles is crucial for Thea. It helps her to realize that all artistic endeavor is wrought with tension and conflict that must be overcome if one is to achieve whatever it is he is capable of. The realization that all civilizations have come into conflict with sinister forces causes Thea to rededicate herself to the glorious striving for artistic achievement.

Thea leaves Arizona with new resolve to fulfill herself artistically. The money she borrows from Dr. Archie enables her to go to Germany to study voice. Cather does not follow Thea to Germany; the reader learns of her through her friends, especially her benefactor. Thea works, heedless of any personal or social life, to achieve her one goal. She pushes herself fiercely and never wavers in her determination to perfect her gift. Slowly her work begins to bring fulfillment as she sings roles to her own satisfaction and to the praise of admirers and critics. One realizes the depth of Thea's devotion to art when the singer refuses her sick mother's request to come home for a while. Mr. Kronberg has died and Mrs. Kronberg's soul and body diminish with her grief. Neither she nor Cather resent or judge Thea for failing to come. The request has come just as Thea has a chance to open in Dresden. A success there will ensure her career. Thea believes that her mother is not seriously ill, only lonely, and her refusal to return to Colorado is in keeping with her artistic
temperament. The fact that Mrs. Kronberg dies without ever seeing her daughter again is sad, but incidental to Thea's actions as an artist. Cather always condoned selfishness in her artists, believing that the artist does not live by normal standards. She thought that others should try to realize the enormous tax that the true artist had to pay by isolating himself. In order to appreciate and have compassion for the artist, one must understand the personality changes wrought by the artistic process and the artist's acceptance of his destiny. 35

Randall declares that the reader loses sympathy for Thea when she refuses to come home. He denounces her ruthless force of will, her determination to succeed at any cost. He says she is irritatingly aggressive with a sublime, almost inhuman confidence in her own ability and destiny. Aggressive, domineering, self-absorbed--Thea has too many rough qualities for Randall, who argues that she is thus neither great nor dynamic. 36 Obviously, Randall judges Thea by natural emotional standards, not by the standards of artistic living.

When Thea finally returns to New York, it is as an accomplished artist, one who has seen her potential abilities and perfected them. Thea has succeeded in escaping from everything until all she lives for is to fulfill the possibilities of her talent. Even her eventual marriage to Ottenburg is secondary to her real life's mission. All her labors, frustrations, and triumphs are converted into music.

36 Randall, pp. 46-47.
As it must be to any real artist, all else is incidental. Thea does not play with art. Thea's most significant triumph comes several weeks after her arrival in New York. She is thrust into the lead of Sieglinde due to the illness of the original performer. Sieglinde has been her goal for many years but it comes at her suddenly, fiercely. Seven minutes after she receives the call at her hotel, she leaves for the theater, studying the score during the taxi ride. Her performance is superb. Sieglinde is Thea's great hour. Until now her musical self has been an inward protection of the soul's privacy. Now she has reached total communication through her magnificent voice reaching up to the human yearning present in all mankind. Thea is the kind of singer who leaves beautiful memories: "A soul has touched a soul."  

The best way for Thea to express herself is through singing; therefore, art is not vanity but necessity. Though egotistical, she is loved because she devotes herself to a high ideal: she gives the best she has to the greatest ideal she conceives. She believes that there is beauty inside her that must be realized and brought out to share if she is to be worthy of life. Her final acceptance of life is her final perfection of art. When Thea sings Sieglinde, she achieves an identity with humanity which she perceived in the Southwest. She captures a moment in life just as the Indians captured the life essence in their pottery.

37 Sherman, p. 43.
38 Giannone, p. 95.
For Thea, and Cather, art is truth—a very difficult truth to obtain. Yet if one can arrive at this truth then she can solve "the crisis of life by absorbing it." Regardless of all its biographical content, The Song of the Lark achieves its goals. It studies a woman who has something special and reveals what it is, how it develops, and how it affects others. The novel is an excellent study of the mind and heart of a great artist. Thea Kronberg is a Cather heroine supreme: she is an individual with an immense amount of artistic talent who searches out herself until she discovers the source of her abilities. Once she realizes the direction she should take, she devotes herself exclusively to fulfilling her goals. Along with her arrival at artistic selfhood she achieves a spiritual identity with humanity which the average person either fails to comprehend the existence of or fails ever to have for himself even if he knows it is there.

39Ibid., p. 90.
CHAPTER III

MY ANTONIA

My Antonia, the final novel in Willa Cather's pioneer trilogy dedicated to heroic women, once again explores Cather's favorite theme, that of the superior individual in conflict with an unworthy society.¹ The heroine, Antonia Shimerda,

became the symbol of emotional fulfillment in motherhood on a Western farm. The thesis was arresting, appearing as it did in 1918 at the very moment when farm and village life were coming under the critical eyes of the novelists intent upon exposing its pollution. Without satire or bitterness and with only a little sentimentalism, Willa Cather pictured a strong character developing under severe difficulties which would crush a less heroic soul, surviving the most primitive hardships in a sod hut, toiling like an ox in the field with the men, enduring want, cut off from ordinary pleasures, withstanding betrayal and the cheap life as a hired girl in a village, and emerging at last after such desperate conditions to a triumphant serenity as mother to a healthy group of shy, awkward but happy and laughing boys [and girls] who are content with their life on the farm.²

Like both Alexandra Bergson and Thea Kronberg, Antonia Shimerda's individuality and artistic direction are a product of Cather's experiences and imagination. During the summer of 1916, Cather spent

¹Whipple, p. 154.

several weeks in her Midwest home town of Red Cloud, Nebraska. Much of her time was occupied visiting old friends, particularly Annie Pauelka (Sadilek), a Bohemian woman whom Cather had known since childhood. Cather was aroused by Annie's rugged sensitivity to farm life on the Divide:

It seemed to her [Cather] that this woman's story ran very close to the central stream of life in Red Cloud and on the Divide, that she stood for the triumph of what was vigorous, sound and beautiful in a region where these qualities so often seemed to suffer repression or defeat. Before she returned to New York, Willa Cather had begun to write this story in *My Antonia*.  

Willa Cather saw the independent spirit and the inner creative spark of the pioneer woman, tempered it with imagination, and created Antonia Shimerda, the epitome of womanly strength and motherhood. One of the major indications of Cather's artistic gift was her intense response to the people around her. She responded with curiosity and sensitivity to them, letting their personal traits and individualities cut into her consciousness.  

The people of Red Cloud never saw anything remarkable about the good, trustworthy, industrious hired girl, Annie, who worked for the Miner family, next-door neighbors of the Cathers. But Cather saw more:

3 Brown and Edel, p. 199.

it all, and doing it well, contributes more than all the culture
clubs. Most of the women artists I have known--the prima
donnas, novelists, poets, sculptors--have been women of
this type. The very best cooks I have known have been
prima donnas. . . . Art must spring out of the very stuff
that life is made of.15

No where in her fiction does Cather exhibit stronger feelings about
her belief that everyone can be an artist in her own way if she realizes
her potentialities. Antonia is more than a portrait of Annie; she is a
composite of all the pioneer women like her whom Cather admired,
and of the artistic truths to which Cather adhered. My Antonia is
"the story of a great woman ennobling common things and a common
struggle by elemental passion."6

Even as a child Antonia reveals strength, determination, and
confidence in herself. The novel begins as the Shimerdas ride a
train West to Nebraska. Bohemian immigrants who have been badly
abused by an avaricious, deceitful countryman, the Shimerdas face
the lonely Divide and it is quickly obvious to Jim Burden, the young
narrator of the novel who rides the same train, that the adults are
already beaten down. Mr. Shimerda was "tall and slender, . . . His
eyes were melancholy, and were set back deep under his brows. His
face was ruggedly formal, but it looked like ashes--like something
from which all warmth and light had died out."7 In contrast to him is

5 Bennett, pp. 167-168. 6 Canby, p. 23.
7 Willa Cather, My Antonia (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), pp. 24-25. All future references to My Antonia are to this edition
and are contained in the text.
his fourteen-year-old daughter, Antonia. Quick and impulsive, her eyes blaze with energy and eagerness.

Unlike many people on the Divide, Antonia is confident in herself and has a zest for life that enables her to adapt to her harsh, alien surroundings. Jim and Antonia are friends from the first time he goes with his grandmother to visit the Shimerdas in the sod dugout. He is instantly taken by her zest, her natural ease, and her desire to learn. Mr. Shimerda asks Jim to teach Antonia English. Antonia's enthusiasm and ability are contagious and the two young people become close friends. It is not until the dreadful Midwest winter comes and paralyzes the Shimerda family that Jim realizes the financial difficulties of the immigrant family. They must spend most of their time in the one-room dugout because there is only one overcoat to be shared by the two adults and four children. The few times Jim does see any of the family, he finds Mrs. Shimerda whining, scolding, careless and scornful; she bitterly rejects their life and the circumstances that prevent them from having what others, such as the Burdens, have. Mr. Shimerda maintains his quiet, impressive dignity, but his lost look of defeat deepens. Antonia, like her father, has dignity and honesty even as they live in dirt and come close to starving; but, unlike him, she still maintains some visage of hope, some desire to live and overcome.

Antonia's belief in the inevitable goodness of life is badly shaken when Mr. Shimerda commits suicide that first winter. He
finally frees himself from the despair and senselessness that have gripped him since his arrival in Nebraska. Although his death grieves and discourages the entire family, it is Antonia who suffers most. Mr. Shimerda was a sensitive, understanding man, and he and Antonia had had a kinship of spirit which was impossible for her to establish with her harsh, insensitive mother or her impatient, domineering older brother. Antonia is cheered by the friendly help of the Burdens while her mother and brother remain resentful. By spring, they have a small log house, a windmill, a cow, and a few poultry—enough "to begin their struggle with the soil" (My Antonia, p. 120).

Antonia takes her place in the fields alongside her brothers because she believes that one must do her best at whatever tasks she is fit for, regardless of society's opinion as to male/female roles.

Jim quickly notes the change in her:

How much older she had grown in eight months. She had come to us a child, and now she was a tall, strong young girl although her fifteenth birthday had just slipped by. . . . Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, . . . One sees that draught-horse neck among the peasant women in all old countries. (My Antonia, p. 122)

Jim and his grandmother regret that Antonia is becoming hardened and coarse in her manners, yet they admire her willingness to work, her eagerness to make the land yield and the family prosper. Antonia firmly rejects their pleas that she go to school, but she does so with tears in her eyes, accepting her fate while gently yearning for knowledge. It costs Antonia, always wide awake and quick to learn, a
great deal to turn her back on an education and opt for the backbreaking labor on the farm. She tells Jim: "Sometime you will tell me all those nice things you learn at school" (My Antonia, p. 124). Antonia accepts her responsibilities toward the family. She does not think of herself as sacrificing, only as doing what she must. No one realizes Antonia's sense of real deprivation or her own awareness of it. It is not until the Burdens move into town that Antonia gets a chance to learn something other than hard farm labor.

In "The Hired Girls," Book II of My Antonia, Cather contrasts farm life and town life, very subtly insinuating the false values of the townspeople and the effect these values will have on the free-spirited Antonia. Antonia has come to town as a hired girl to the Harlings, next-door neighbors of the Burdens who have moved to town because they are too old to farm well. Knowing that Antonia hires herself out just like the men, going from one wheat harvest to the next, they help her get the job at the Harlings. She blossoms in her new position, savoring the contact she has with the Harling children as she cooks, sews, and plays with them. Although she had always accepted the harshness of farm life without complaint or self-pity, Antonia nevertheless feels a need to be accepted, especially to have the Burdens' approval. The first day she arrives in town she stops first at the Burdens' and "looked eagerly about the house and admired everything."

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'Maybe I be the kind of girl you like better, now I come to town,' she suggested hopefully" (My Antonia, p. 154). Antonia has always been aware of the hint of disapproval the Burdens have had for her rough ways, but she has kept her knowledge to herself, unresentful simply because she accepts herself and lives always believing that she must be what she is, improve upon her natural abilities, and not try to falsify herself into some mold which she does not fit.

The time that Antonia lives with the Harlings is very important to her development as a whole personality. She learns some of the niceties of life; she learns to be aware of herself as an individual with individual desires and needs; and she learns that people can be evil. Antonia and the Harlings are very compatible. Mrs. Harling is what Willa Cather later once called "her only exact fictional portrait," that of Mrs. Mary Miner, a neighbor friend of young Willa Cather. The Harling children are likewise modeled on the Miners, and My Antonia is dedicated to Carrie and Irene Miner. Mrs. Harling's temperament beautifully complements Antonia's. Sturdy, charged with energy, Mrs. Harling "was quick to anger, quick to laughter, and jolly from the depths of her soul. . . . She could not be negative or perfunctory about anything. Her enthusiasm, and her violent likes and dislikes, asserted themselves in all the everyday occupations of life" (My Antonia, p. 148). Nowhere else in Black Hawk could Antonia
have found a woman so like herself, a woman who had her same traits tempered with experience to help mold the changing Antonia. Cather writes of the communion the two women have and in so doing she writes a sort of creed for the Cather heroine:

There was a basic harmony between Antonia and her mistress. They had strong, independent natures, both of them. They knew what they liked, and were not always trying to imitate other people. They loved children and animals and music, and rough play and digging in the earth. They liked to prepare rich, healthy food and to see people eat it; to make up soft white beds and to see youngsters asleep in them. They ridiculed conceited people and were quick to help unfortunate ones. Deep down in each of them there was a kind of hearty joviality, a relish of life, not over-delicate, but very invigorating. (My Antonia, p. 180)

The creative personality that Cather always admires in women is expressed in these two women, not through music like Thea, or through struggles with the land like Alexandra, but "through a calm acceptance of the natural environment and the shaping of human lives."

Although Antonia and Mrs. Harling are totally compatible, Antonia is made to suffer because of Mr. Harling, a usually fair yet totally dogmatic individual who demands and gets total authority over his family. Conflict arises over Antonia, who is pulled irresistibly to the new dancing pavilion, a cheerful, respectable place where all the young people of Black Hawk gravitate on long, lazy summer evenings. Denied a normal, playful childhood, the freedom of music and dancing captivate Antonia and her blood soars for release. She dances

10Jones, "Willa Cather," p. 4.
as if her very life flowed out of her to stand independently with the music. Always popular because of her skill and enthusiasm, Antonia enjoys the attentions of the town boys, but she wants them innocently only for the music, and is outraged as one young fellow, already engaged to be married, grabs her and kisses her on the Harling's back porch after a Saturday night dance. Mr. Harling hears the commotion, accuses Antonia of ruining her reputation, and forbids her to attend another dance on threat of expulsion from the house. Antonia is too independent, too strong-willed, to give up her only special pleasure because of the stubbornness of Mr. Harling. What hurts her most is Mrs. Harling's upholding her husband's wishes even though she knows how innocent Antonia's behavior is.

Antonia has become almost addicted to the music and the freedom it brings. Music, the metaphor for freedom and vitality, produces signs of emotional growth. Especially significant is the music of Blind d'Arnault, who plays for parties at the Boys' Home. The blind mulatto's music breaks the bleakness of the desolate winter and Antonia is intensely aroused. Just as the beauty Blind d'Arnault can produce with his fingers makes him a whole person, so it brings Antonia into a new awareness of herself. It awakens her passionate inner nature. The blind man's music and Antonia's dancing at the firemen's hall have broadened her life and set her on a new adventure, "a moral adventure for which she is not prepared."

\[11\] Giannone, pp. 116-118.
When Antonia strikes out from the Harlings' to take a job at the Wick Cutters', her independence is premature. Her only experiences off the isolated farm have been from her sheltered position with the Harlings. Thus it is that she is ill equipped to cope with the immoral atmosphere and the threatening tension at the Cutters' house. Wick Cutter is a contemptible money-lender whose avocation is seducing each young girl who hires out to his wife. Mrs. Cutter is quarrelsome and despicable. The only reason that the Cutter marriage survives is to afford the two principals an opportunity to malign each other. Antonia comes to this house caught up in her new-found freedom and desire for fun. With no children to care for, she has more time to sew pretty clothes and dance, and to flit around town with her Scandinavian friends.

Antonia and her girlfriends--Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball, the Bohemian Marys--are "hired girls" in Black Hawk and it is their position in the "curious social system" of the town that Cather describes, via Jim Burden. Jim bitterly observes that the fine young men of the town are attracted to the country girls who have come to town to make their way and help out their families back on the farm. These girls had early learned much about life from their poverty and struggle with the soil. Like Antonia, they are all healthy and robust with a physical attractiveness that glows beside the pale, passive countenances of the town girls who are too "refined" to move with their whole bodies to dance lustily to the music. Jim is contemptuous of the
Black Hawk boys who openly yearn for the robustness of the life the country girls represent yet who will never break out of their social strata to marry one of these girls. Cather believes that the strength of the new frontier depends on girls like Antonia and her friends.

Thus it is an extremely disenchanted Antonia who finds her joy in life and her innocent ways trod upon by such as Wick Cutter. He makes a determined effort to seduce Antonia, going out-of-town with his wife and then sneaking back in the middle of the night to lay hands on the hired girl. Antonia is saved because she has begun to fear him and to suspect his motive in insisting that she stay in the house alone at night; consequently, on the night of Cutter's attack, having revealed her fears to Jim, she is sleeping at the Burdens' and Jim is in her bed at the Cutters'. Jim is badly beaten by the corrupt Cutter, and the sordidness of the affair causes Jim to very nearly reject Antonia. The knowledge that she can be a sexual object disgusts the young man and shames the innocent Antonia.

Antonia's spirit is not crushed by the Cutter incident but Cather reveals little about her except through Jim, who goes off to college, and Lena Lingard, who becomes a sort of anti-heroine beside Antonia. Lena serves as the perfect foil to the home-loving Antonia. Both are intelligent, hardworking girls, but whereas Antonia loves the labors of farming and homemaking, Lena turns her back on marriage and all it entails. Poverty has hardened her. She wants to help her family, but she never wants a husband and children of her own. Lena is
pretty, even seductive, but clearthinking and determined to make a successful career for herself as a seamstress. As such, she happens to be living in Lincoln at the same time that Jim is there for college and she tells him that Antonia, always trusting, has become involved with a railroad conductor in whom Antonia can see nothing but good. Lena recalls: "Some of us could tell her things, but it wouldn't do any good. She'd always believe him. That's Antonia's failing, you know; if she once likes people, she won't hear anything against them" (My Antonia, p. 268). Lena has what Antonia lacks, perception of human failure. Antonia's deficiency is that she can never believe harm of anybody she loves. She creates an over-balance of love. More heroic because she comprehends neither evil nor hate, Antonia should be judged "by her great talent, love, for that is how she judges others. He who lent her sweetness did make her blind."12

Rich in sexual appeal, Lena is the perfect complement to Antonia: slow, fair beauty against nervous dark beauty, contemplation against vivacity. Brown describes Lena as "the most beautiful, the most innocently sensuous of all the women in Willa Cather's works. The portrait of Lena has a merciful softness as if the novelist's critical powers were deliberately withheld except for an occasional touch of humorous realism."13 In Lena and Jim's relationship there is something of friendship, something not quite love, and always the

respect each has for the other. Theirs is an almost idyllic relationship, with the charm of sharing youth rather than a relation between two lovers.¹⁴ Lena declares that she does not worry about never marrying because she likes the sort of loneliness that leaves one free and unencumbered. Lena's answer to her search for self has been to leave the farm and the family because to her they are hindrances. Despite her attractiveness to and attraction for men, Lena never marries: "She retains her inner isolation to the end, unwilling to merge it with the isolation of the land to become, by the paradox lived by Antonia, 'a part of something entire."¹⁵

Antonia's appreciation of life and her love of people make her a strong character, but she is lonely and gets caught up in the artificiality of the town. She allows Larry Donovan, the train conductor, to persuade her to elope, only to return in a few months dejected. She is unmarried and pregnant, having consented to live with Donovan once he got her away from everyone she knew to an even more alien world. His failure to marry Antonia stuns the young girl far more than had Cutter's vicious attack on her virtue because she had expected love in return for her feelings for Donovan. That he turns out to be a gentler, more subtle evil than Cutter is a lesson Antonia feels deeply. Subtle evil has caused Antonia's misfortune. Her self-reliance was

¹⁴Ibid., p. 204.

not grounded in experience, thus making her easy prey for vultures like Cutter and Donovan. She is too innocent and trusting to suspect either man's sly tricks. Her responses to both situations gain her sympathy. The Cutter experience teaches her not to be so vain, and her illegitimate child becomes a great source of love.

Antonia's passion for life vitalizes her erratic behavior and transforms isolation into independence, sorrow into joy. She does not remain an object of pity for long as, humble, she gains a new kind of strength from her experience. Unlike little Marie Shabata who never learned, Antonia "now knows the dangers as well as the delight of unbridled spontaneity." She pays brutally for her sexual involvement, returning to her brother's farm where Ambrosch uses her in the fields as he would a hired man. She accepts her lot, uncomplaining and without bitterness, loving her baby "as dearly as if she'd had a ring on her finger, and was never ashamed of it... no baby was ever better cared-for. Antonia is a natural-born mother" (My Antonia, p. 318). Antonia's realization of herself never really begins until she faces her misfortune and, through her baby, taps the well of love stored inside her.

Antonia does not dwell on the isolation she feels after the birth of her baby just as she refused to dwell on her loneliness and isolation after the death of her father. She simply makes each

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16 Giannone, p. 120. 17 Randall, p. 121.
happening a part of her total life's experience. A new kind of strength comes to her with her renewed association with the land and she commits herself to her working for more than a livelihood. Her physical labor is a means of self-fulfillment, the "means of joining her own being with that of nature and of drawing from each all of which it is capable, making both one total being." Antonia thus transforms defeat into triumph by arriving at knowledge of her full self and her natural abilities through a tragic experience.

Antonia is next seen after twenty years have passed and she has realized the potentialities that her girlhood tragedy had brought into focus. Unlike Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball, who are both materialistically successful but solitary and rootless, Antonia has a sensitive, hard-working husband, and a happy, healthy brood of children. Although Jim Burden has been hesitant to lose the reality of his memories by visiting his old friend after so many years, he does not find her diminished but instead finds a gloriously fulfilled woman, an Antonia who has asserted her individuality and achieved fertility of land and of self. She is "battered but not diminished" (My Antonia, p. 332). Surrounded by her happy, thriving children, her devoted husband, and her fruitful orchards, Antonia is Eve standing in the midst of the garden she has herself created, the garden of

18 Bowden, p. 49.

the world where peace and fertility abound. Antonia has triumphed over adversity and nature, imposing order on her life and on the Nebraska wilderness, turning the latter into a fruitful farm with an orchard in the middle. As creator of her triumphant family and prosperous farm she has become the very symbol of fertility.\(^{20}\)

The pride Antonia and her children take in each other is obvious as they show Jim around the farm. Antonia prizes her orchard which she has planted by hand, watered, and nurtured into fruit-bearing trees. For Jim, as for all of them, "there was the deepest peace in that orchard" (My Antonia, p. 341). The first ten years for Antonia and her husband, Anton Cuzak, had been hard ones, with her husband often getting discouraged. "'We'd never have got through if I hadn't been so strong,'" declares Antonia:

>'No, I never got down-hearted. Anton's a good man, and I loved my children and always believed they would turn out well. I belong on a farm. I'm never lonesome here like I used to be in town. You remember what sad spells I used to have, when I didn't know what was the matter with me? I've never had them out here. And I don't mind work a bit, if I don't have to put up with sadness' (My Antonia, p. 343)

Although Antonia is in the midst of the bare middle-frontier, isolated, she is not lonely or unhappy. She finds self-fulfillment on the Nebraska prairie: "Hers is neither the freedom of irresponsibility nor the romantic love of nature, . . . but rather love for the joining of man and nature into some greater whole than either can provide

\(^{20}\)Randall, p. 142.
separately. "Running is not the answer for Antonia because "isolation, like the frontier itself, is a matter of mind rather than of circumstances. Antonia meets isolation with understanding and acceptance. Like her, man must live with his own isolation and defeat it on its own terms."^22

Antonia's greatest achievement is the founding of a family. Cather affirms human relations here. She emphasizes not so much the taming of the land as life on the plains. The cultivation of the land is not so much achieved by Antonia as it is something in which she submerges herself to obtain salvation. Antonia's power comes from the unison she achieves between her life and all life, a harmony between the universe and her spirit. The measure of her artistry is the harmonious life with which the farm abounds: "All this spiritual growth goes back to a spiritual growth in Antonia. Beauty and youth are gone. Only an 'inner glow' remains. But whatever else was gone, Antonia had not lost the 'fire of life.' That fire within warmed her in the winter of adversity and precipitated her growth as a person."^25

Antonia's confidence in her fulfillment is such that she can even defend her life in Black Hawk when Jim expresses his regrets that she had ever had to go to town to work. Antonia rebuffs him

^21Bowden, p. 48. ^22Ibid., pp. 64-65.

^23Randall, p. 106. ^24Daiches, p. 44.

^25Giannone, p. 123.
gently, declaring that had she not ever gone to stay at the Harlings', she would never have known anything about cooking or housekeeping. The atmosphere she lived in at the Harlings taught her things that helped her rear her children to know more than rough country ways. She tells Jim: "No, I'm glad I had a chance to learn; but I'm thankful none of my daughters will ever have to work out. The trouble was, Jim, I never could believe harm of anybody I loved" (My Antonia, p. 344). Antonia is broad-minded enough to see the good in the bad and realize some of the fault for her troubles lay in her too-trusting nature.

My Antonia, unique for Cather in its presentation of happy family life, presents a woman who is both a rugged individualist and a member of a happy group. Energetic, optimistic, unselfish, sensitive, and aware of her limitations--Antonia is content to devote her life to hard labor on the farm and to loving and building the characters of her children. Lest one be too quick to accuse Cather of presenting Antonia as living a life of drudgery tied to her farm and family, one should realize that whenever anyone does what is necessary to realize her fullest potential and gain what gives her the most fulfillment, then she is not tied to anyone but herself. Antonia is no martyr to husband and family. What she does for them she does for herself because ultimately their pleasure is hers.

Antonia's values shine especially bright in comparison to

26 Randall, p. 130.
those of Jim Burden, her counterpart in life. It is he who has had to
leave the prairie in search of fulfillment and it is he who returns
searching for the lost past. The values of earlier years are embodied
in Antonia, who, aged and battered, has nevertheless preserved the
instinctive values of youth. Her "life is spent in close communion
with the timeless facts of existence--birth, growth, and death--and in
harmony with nature's changeless cycle of the seasons." 27 Antonia's
passion for goodness and her innate nobility have sustained her through
every adversity, and have enabled her to control her fate without ever
losing the "fire of life." 28

Although Antonia Shimerda is drawn closely from Annie
Sadilek, she is not peculiar to either an age or a region--she has the
qualities of the immemorial. 29 A masterpiece at depicting a charac-
ter reflected in nature, My Antonia maintains the eternal in the tem-
poral, the universal in the particular. Antonia suggests all the good
things of life, "the hope, the fullness, the beauty, of all free, growing,
fruitful things of the earth." 30 The novel is satisfying because it
beautifully assimilates the farce, the tragedy, the glory of life: "The

27 Stouck, p. 293.

28 Harry Hartwick, The Foreground of American Fiction

29 Whipple, p. 143.

30 Elizabeth A. Drew, The Modern Novel (New York: Harcourt,
Brace, 1926), p. 150.
explanation is, of course, that this is life. 31 Antonia's artistry is
the artistry of life.

Antonia transcends the isolation of the prairie, of life itself,
and symbolizes the "spirit of the whole man," one who makes of life
something fruitful and satisfying. 32 Antonia is not a great musical
artist like Thea Kronberg, yet she represents the artistic life
through her perfected domesticity and through her striving for self-
hood. She attains happiness because of her self-confidence and
determination to have what makes life worth living.

32 Bowden, p. 50.
PART II

FRUSTRATION AND DEFEAT

Both *A Lost Lady* (1923) and *My Mortal Enemy* (1926) are documents in defeat as they depict women who fail to sustain the Cather code of artistic individuality. Cather's personal life at this time is a key to the disillusionment of which she writes. For Cather, the period between *My Antonia* in 1918 and *My Mortal Enemy* in 1926 was one of "a gathering of darkness."\(^1\) Disillusioned, middle-aged, Cather believed that the world broke in two in 1922 and she felt that she belonged to the first half.\(^2\) She was no longer in harmony with the world, and was deeply preoccupied by "the cheapness and tawdri ness of the twentieth century."\(^3\) The three prairie novels had been in a series of sustaining visions, stories of the struggle for greatness amidst the cheap and the small. Alexandra, Thea, and Antonia were austere heroines and


\(^2\) Brown and Edel, p. xv.

the dark enemy was whatever clutched the individual, and heroism was in dominating it or living through it, enduring at the cost of any personal sacrifice to the point of absolute and untouchable equability. . . . The metaphor of striving varies . . . but the goal is the same. They are in pursuit not of happiness but of success. They are in pursuit not of an ideal . . . but of an integrity, the feel of purity and finality and permanence, beyond all pettiness. 4

By 1922 Cather felt that no such heroism or permanence existed, so in her period of personal mistrust and lethargy, she wrote of women who have no high standards, women who are assaulted by the modernism which Cather so hated. "By substituting a negative for her former positive approach, she tells of frustration which was the direct result of unfulfilled idealistic longings." 5 In A Lost Lady, the enemy is the false value Marian Forrester places on materialism, and in My Mortal Enemy, Myra Henshawe's enemy is human relationship itself. It is in these two novels that Cather reaches a crisis: she realizes and acknowledges the fact that even those who have the potential for greatness, for artistic individuality, sometimes fail.

4Klein, p. vi.

CHAPTER IV

A LOST LADY

*A Lost Lady* is a study in the degeneration of a socially-minded lady condemned to passing her days in the rough community of Sweet Water, Colorado. It illustrates those ambiguities and paradoxes of human character that make it possible for someone like Marian Forrester to be both "the epitome of aristocratic grace, kindness and understanding, and a vulgarian who will do anything . . . to get some excitement out of life."¹ *A Lost Lady* records the passing of a woman and a country from the noble regime of the frontier settlers, the pioneers and railroad men, to that of the new breed, the materialists and the shysters. As the central focus of the novel, Marian Forrester is one of the best-drawn portraits of a *femme fatale* in American literature.² She is artistically charming, but her individuality is based on strengths and values outside herself. Thus, bereft of the inner gleam that sustains a successful Cather heroine, Marian's spirit is crushed by adversity and she becomes a portrait of disillusionment and defeat.

¹Daiches, p. 80. ²Snell, p. 154.
Marian Forrester "is an artist who lived and wrought in terms of personal contacts." Like Cather's three pioneer novels, *A Lost Lady* develops the theme of living out one's potentialities, but Marian's potentialities are more personal, more erotic—even illicit—than any of her predecessors. Her greatest asset is her charm. Her form of artistry is her beauty of manner, her grace and affability; yet she "trades" on her charms in return for adoration. Animated and happy, she is consumed by the desire to give and receive pleasure. Everything about her attempts to establish sweetness: her eyes, her voice, her kindness—all are bewitching and seductive as she tries to refine the manners of all upon whom she bestows her charm. *A Lost Lady* is a study of personality, its values and its powers. When Marian uses her charm to please or instruct, "she is as admirable as Thea. . . . She used the rare talent entrusted to her. . . . She consumed herself adequately in making personal relations charming." It is when she loses sight of the virtue in her charm that Marian fails. She fits the old pattern of yearning for beauty which is impossible to hold.

Marian Forrester's charm and weakness is portrayed by Cather with both "humanness and delicacy of touch." Cather always

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4 Sherman, p. 45.  
5 Ibid., p. 47.

6 Cather, *Kingdom of Art*, p. 102.

admired ambitious, strong characters, especially strong women. She also understood individuals who were her direct opposite, those delicate creatures full of charm but without inner strength or the will to endure: "... these last, the world being what it is, usually come to a bad end. She has nothing but contempt for people who refuse, because of indolence or indifference, to get the best they can out of life."8

Sweet Water's atmosphere of fading hope provides an effective background for Marian Forrester's story. A small Western town, it has had prosperous days, but falters when it loses its hope of becoming a big railroad town. Likewise, Marian is seen throughout the span of her life from her arrival in the Southwest, a captivating young bride to a railroad contractor twenty-five years her senior, to her departure, a lost lady.

Portrayed largely through the eyes of Niel Herbert, a young friend who admires her, Mrs. Forrester is early seen to be something very special. Young Niel, twelve when the story begins, and his friends are allowed the run of the Forrester woods, a sort of sanctuary for animals where no shooting is allowed. The boys habitually enjoy fishing and swimming and, especially, the happy attentions of Mrs. Forrester, who laughs and teases with them, never too busy to

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stop to chat or to bring them a batch of fresh cookies. She, too, is still young, especially in her childlike appreciation of life and the beauty it contains. She is as gracious to these young boys as she always is to her friends and her husband's numerous acquaintances, treating all alike as worthy of her best charming self. There is one particular boy, older than the others, whom she views suspiciously, maintaining a certain amount of coolness toward him because of his crudeness and lack of appreciation for any natural beauty. It is he, Ivy Peters, who interrupts the boys picnicking at the Forresters' one day and badly maims a young woodpecker. Stunning her with a rock, he deftly slits the eyes from the startled bird and releases her to fly blindly in search of her home. The other boys are horrified by his cruelty, a trait which always makes them vaguely afraid of Peters, who they know hunts on this forbidden area. Young Niel climbs up after the bird to try to end her misery, but falls and breaks his arm.

In contrast to the gracious lady and the happy boys, Ivy Peters is a parasite set to suck the beauty from his surroundings. His eyes have the "unblinking hardness of a snake's or a lizard. . . . He was an ugly fellow, Ivy Peters, and he liked being ugly." 9 The significance of the bird maiming is indicative of how Ivy Peters' kind of evil will maim the lady when she is stunned and down. Peters' refusal to recognize the Forrester farm for the sanctuary it is makes him a barbarian

9Willa Cather, A Lost Lady (New York: Random House, 1923), pp. 21-22. All future references to A Lost Lady are to this edition and are contained in the text.
with no respect for aesthetic or moral authority. He is the serpent in the Garden of Eden, the embodiment of evil, the "personification of pure malicious destructive will." The blinded woodpecker symbolizes Marian Forrester as she will come to be, a beautiful free spirit who is hectically fluttering, feeling the sunlight but never seeing the sun. Peters' blinding of the woodpecker presents a parable of what happens when a free, living force collides with crassness and cruelty. The incident, and Marian's subsequent nursing of the ill Niel, also prepares the reader for the future when Niel becomes the lady's defender, even when she is disenchanted and confused, and exploited by the crass Ivy.

After that day when Niel was laid on Mrs. Forrester's clean, white-ruffled bed, while the lady soothed his fears and lessened the pain of his broken arm, Niel worships her. During the coming years he sees little of her, yet "she was an excitement that came and went with summer." (Lady, p. 31). Captain and Mrs. Forrester always spent the winter socializing in Denver and Colorado Springs. When they were in Sweet Water they gave numerous parties themselves and were always welcoming the railroad dignitaries who stopped off the trains to visit them. Marian was their pet because she welcomed them animatedly and made them feel important, and at home. She always

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10 Randall, pp. 181-182.  
11 Ibid., p. 184.  
12 Bloom and Bloom, p. 69.  
13 Sergeant, p. 187.
ran to greet any of these visitors at a moment's notice, laughingly trailing her hairbrush or wiping flour from her hands. The charm, the grace, the very joyousness of life she put into every gesture captured the hearts of these older men, just as it did that of her husband, and just as it did young Niel's heart: "In his eyes, and in the eyes of the admiring middle-aged men who visited there, whatever Mrs. Forrester chose to do was 'lady-like' because she did it" (Lady, p. 13).

Marian Forrester's decline begins slowly with an accident that ends Captain Forrester's railroad career. He is never himself again, preferring to retire to his home and his garden: he never takes another contract for the railroad, the Forresters begin to stay in Sweet Water most of the time, and they give fewer parties. Deprived of city delights and driven into enforced rustication, Marian's spirit begins its real disintegration. ¹⁴

Niel's adoration of Marian Forrester has increased with the years until now, at the age of nineteen, he views her with the eyes of an idealistic, love-stricken youth. He welcomes the semi-seclusion the Forresters now maintain because it affords him the opportunity, along with Judge Pommeroy—his uncle, and legal adviser and friend to the Forresters—to spend many evenings with them, playing cards and talking. Niel is sensitive to the aura of charm that surrounds Mrs. Forrester and her method of insinuating herself into the very core of

¹⁴ Randall, p. 185.
anyone with whom she comes into contact. He describes her thus:

Mrs. Forrester looked at one, and one knew that she was bewitching. It was instantaneous and it pierced the thickest hide. . . . There could be no negative encounter, however slight, with Mrs. Forrester. If she merely bowed to you, merely looked at you, it constituted a personal relation. Something about her took hold of one in a flash; one became acutely conscious of her, of her fragility and grace, of her mouth which could say so much without words; of her eyes, lively, laughing, intimate, nearly always a little mocking. (Lady, p. 35)

Mrs. Forrester's dinner parties are always successful as she is the elegant, attractive, and sophisticated hostess. Niel believes that "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" (Lady, p. 41). And though Niel leaves the Forresters' in high spirits after each visit, there is no way for him to know that Marian is agitated and restless because of her isolation in a rural Nebraska town which is beginning to decline.

Most of Marian Forrester's adult years had been spent as a member of the railroad aristocracy. Her decline from that society to being a member of the Sweet Water village world is devastating. No longer does she have dancing, elegant friends, frenzied activity; instead, she plays cards. As her husband is physically weakened and begins to stiffen, so she feels and resists the "sclerotic effect" of Sweet Water. 15 Her power and image of self-importance have always been grounded in beauty and grace, her charm and social virtuosity. 16

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15Giannone, p. 147. 16Jessup, p. 65.
As she feels them weaken, unused, because of the lack of a proper channel for her vitality, then she begins to believe herself to be diminishing.

Niel is drawn to the lady because she appears to him to fight the sense of defeat, of the town and of her position, with a sense of triumph and an undaunted spirit. He delights in the pleasure she spreads and has no glimmer of her growing discontent. Even her cry of disgust at the winter blizzards escapes him as they walk in the snow:

'Oh, but it is bleak! . . . Suppose we should have to stay here all next winter, too, . . . and the next! What will become of me, Niel? There was fear, unmistakable fright in her voice. 'You see there is nothing for me to do. I get no exercise. . . . I've always danced in the winter, . . . you wouldn't believe how I miss it.' (Lady, p. 77)

Niel fails to comprehend her discontent because he idolizes her too much and because, as he has grown older, he has come to put his faith and confidence in the old order, the solidarity that the railroad-builder and his wife represent.

But as Marian Forrester's discontent grows, so does Niel's awareness of the fragile base upon which her character is based. When Captain Forrester rushes off to Denver to investigate troubles at a bank in which he holds a large interest, Niel feels a sense of foreboding gloom. He "dreaded poverty for her. She was one of the people who ought always to have money; any retrenchment of their generous way of living would be a hardship for her, --would be unfitting. She

\[17\] Giannone, p. 143.
would not be herself in straitened circumstances" (Lady, p. 83).

Determined to shield her and make her gay for as long as possible, Niel impulsively rises early one morning and cuts wild roses for Mrs. Forrester, intending to drop them outside her bedroom window. When he bends to place the flowers on the sill, he hears "from within a woman's soft laughter; impatient, indulgent, teasing, eager. Then another laugh, very different, a man's. And it was fat and lazy, . . ." (Lady, p. 86). Marian and her lover, Frank Ellinger, a coarse dandy, are taking advantage of the Captain's absence to enjoy themselves.

Niel loses one of the most beautiful things in his life when he hears that lazy voice. Marian has violated not only a moral scruple, but an aesthetic ideal. No lady would cavort with the likes of Frank Ellinger, a low-principled-do-nothing whose vanity is only exceeded by his insolence. That Mrs. Forrester has sunk so low to find pleasure sickens Niel as he compares her to beautiful lilies, and "lilies that fester smell worse than weeds" (Lady, p. 87). Had Niel never maintained such high ideals of Mrs. Forrester, then her corruption would be much easier to forgive.

Marian Forrester has become desperate at the thought of being cut off from outside social life and has turned to Frank Ellinger, a dashing bachelor with a dangerous reputation. Through him she expresses her desire to escape to a life of romance and excitement. 18

18Daiches, p. 79.
She has had to turn from the Captain to fulfill her passionate nature and Cather's treatment of the affair with Ellinger is detached, neither maudlin nor indignant. She presumes neither to take sides nor to make judgements. It is Niel who has always seen Marian's moral integrity as her cardinal point, who has likewise been fascinated by the way she lives, her "magic of contradictions," and whose imagination has produced an unrealistic idea of her loyalties. He is too idealistic and adolescent to realize that human life has a sexual basis. 19 Niel's discovery of the lady's infidelity initiates him into manhood as he becomes aware of her limitations: he knows, now, "that what he had supposed to be the tempered steel of Marian Forrester was indeed brass." 20

The lady is grieved even further when Captain Forrester's honesty results in a severe blow to the Forrester finances. Captain Forrester returns from Denver bankrupt, having stood behind the depositors of the bank which failed, giving them their money because he knew they trusted the Forrester name. Marian hears the story with cheeks aflame; nevertheless, she tries to maintain the same type of dignity her husband possesses: "Her eyes glistened with moisture. 'You were quite right, Judge. I wouldn't for the world have had him do otherwise for me. He would never hold up his head again. You see, I know him'" (Lady, pp. 92-93). Her reaction

indicates that she realizes her integrity to be inferior to her husband's. She also realizes that she is caught between generations. She wants the rare graciousness of the old order, the aristocracy that her husband and his kind represent, plus the new generation, the materialism of society's exploiters. A momentary flash of insight reveals to her that the things she wants are incompatible. The old is superior to the new and is doomed to destruction. This tragic realization gives her a brief moment of greatness, but she soon slips back to her old and charming habit of cheerful irresponsibility.²¹

Marian Forrester's life is completely reversed as she is instantly thrown into caring for her husband—who suffers a stroke the day he returns from Denver—cooking, and managing the house and correspondence. Captain Forrester never gets his strength back after this attack: his left foot drags, his speech is thick, and he withdraws from life even more. Mrs. Forrester cares patiently and tenderly for her husband, but her spirit is crushed. Her charm is gone because there is no one to be charming for. She can't fulfill herself in any way because she had based fulfillment on outside stimuli, people and materials, not upon any spark within. Niel, preparing to leave for college, notes the dread with which she faces the coming winter, "but he had never seen her more in command of herself, —or more mistress of her own house than now, when she was preparing to become

²¹Randall, p. 193.
the servant of it. He had the feeling, which he never used to have, that her lightness cost her something (Lady, p. 99).

The Forresters' depressed situation puts Marian into a role which reveals her to be both compromisable and compassionate.

Because of their financial difficulties, the Forresters are forced to rent out the land that they had always kept as a sort of wildlife sanctuary, and Ivy Peters takes pride in draining the marshes and shooting along the creek. Two years after his departure, Niel returns to Sweet Water and the first person he meets is Peters, now a lawyer, who gloats about his triumph over the Forresters. Peters needs to degrade everything and bring it down to his level; he asserts his power over beauty and over those who love it. Later, at the Forresters', Niel asks Mrs. Forrester if she does not miss the marsh and she replies evasively, indicating their need for the money its rent brings them. To Niel she admonishes: "You must hurry and become a successful man. . . . Money is a very important thing. Realize that in the beginning; face it, and don't be ridiculous in the end, like so many of us" (Lady, p. 114). Mrs. Forrester's sadness, her discontent and fatigue, are obvious to Niel, but equally obvious to him is the care she takes of her husband. She dotes on him, catering to all his needs, defending him against slurs of "childishness" by others. Finally, Niel becomes aware that the Captain knows "all there was to know about Marian Forrester" (Lady, p. 117). Handing Niel a letter of his wife's to mail, Captain Forrester comments on her beautiful handwriting,
gazing at length at the letter addressed to Frank Ellinger. The Captain knows of his wife's physical infidelity, but with a grandeur that marks his kind of pioneer strength, he realizes that there are other ways of loving and of being faithful. Marian is devoted to her husband and he to her in an "old-fashioned, courtly way." She gives him tenderness and understanding and an outwardly uncomplaining air. 22 Mrs. Forrester's acceptance of compromise is obvious when Niel tries to warn her about the shyster Peters. She pleads with Niel not to interfere: "No, no, Niel! Remember, we have to get along with Ivy Peters, we simply have to!" (Lady, p. 123). Niel despises Peters' insolent attitude and resents the freedom that he takes with Mrs. Forrester. Mrs. Forrester has let Peters invest some money for her and she reveals to Niel her desperation at getting out of Sweet Water before she is no longer young. She speaks of being able to last another two or three years there if she can still hope. Always a gracious individual, a charming personality, she was aristocratic without being snobbish. Now her environment is increasingly shabby, and she feels trapped. She falls full scale when she learns of Frank Ellinger's marriage to a young socialite. Mrs. Forrester has lost her money, her position, and the outlet for her charm. She has been forced to associate with a crude shyster and pretend to like him; now, she has been scorned sexually by a man beneath her. This last blow destroys

22 Daiches, p. 80.
her conception of herself. Enraged, she places a call to Ellinger from Niel's office, pretends lightheartedness momentarily, then loses all control and hysterically berates Ellinger until Niel cuts the telephone wire to save his fallen lady this last degradation.

Marian Forrester goes to pieces soon after this incident. Captain Forrester has another stroke which leaves him totally helpless, and his wife simply can't cope with the situation. She is too emotionally distressed and physically beaten. Whereas she had maintained her reserve and independence throughout his illnesses, with his new helplessness she falls prey to the gossipy townswomen who come in to help, to take over. Each of these women is a "female Ivy Peters,"23 who comes in and out of the Forrester place gleefully. Marian, exhausted, "kept herself going on black coffee and brandy. All the bars were down. She had ceased to care about anything" (Lady, p. 139). Finally, Niel decides not to return to school and moves into the house to see the Forresters through. He rids them quickly of the vulturous women and the new tranquility helps both Forresters. Niel comes to appreciate fully the value Captain Forrester puts in his wife, asking mostly just for her nearness. The Captain dies in December and an era ends.

People had thought that old Captain Forrester had held back and dimmed the vivacious young Marian Forrester, but she is actually

23Randall, p. 196.
the unstable, unknown quantity. 24 Flighty and perverse, she loses her faculty of discrimination after her husband's death, and takes her legal affairs away from Judge Pommeroy and gives them to Ivy Peters. By this action, she deserts an old family friend and abandons her moral standards. 25 All along Mrs. Forrester's independent spirit and artistry of charm have been based on power outside herself. When she had the Captain she was possessed by the pioneer spirit: she was gracious, strong, and full of vitality, but she fluctuated between happiness and discontent, as illustrated by her affair with Ellinger. When she loses this spirit because of the Captain's death, her spontaneity persists outwardly, but inwardly she darkens. 26 The Captain had maintained his integrity, but his wife becomes "paralyzed by a residual inertness that simply prevents her from identifying right and wrong and from choosing between them." 27 She falters when her husband dies because she needs society and love. The lady's comedown is equal to the degeneration of an era wherein shysters and speculators are evicting the pioneers. The story is almost an allegory. Marian gets her strength and charm from her husband who represents the old integrities. When he dies, she is lost: some of her beauty and charm remain but they are tarnished (like the Old West) because they are put to shabby use. 28 She may represent gracious living, but her attractiveness

24 Bloom and Bloom, p. 74. 25 Randall, p. 196.

26 Ibid., p. 72. 27 Rapin, p. 70. 28 Geismar, p. 213.
dims compared with the absolute moral probity of her husband. The aesthetic view of life is not nearly so agreeable if it is not rooted in moral virtues.\textsuperscript{29}

Mrs. Forrester diminishes because of her association with Ivy Peters. Peters establishes a sort of proprietary relationship with her after her husband's death, spending evenings at the house, playing cards, talking of his business ventures, and often taking several of his friends with him. Rumors flourish and Niel tries to warn Mrs. Forrester that she is headed for trouble, but she refutes his arguments, insisting that Peters is trying to help her sell the place and get back on her feet. Niel senses her nervousness and feels that she is merely "trying to persuade herself" (\textit{Lady}, p. 154). She rationalizes that she is trying "to do something for the boys in this town, . . . I hate to see them growing like savages, when all they need is a civilized house to come to, . . ." (\textit{Lady}, p. 155). Niel lets her persuade him to attend one of her dinner parties for the young men, and he blanches at the sight of her endeavoring with forced bright wit to stimulate the dullards. He admires her determination and enterprise, though he despises the direction it takes, and feels that she could still be saved by "the right man." Niel has for a long time realized that alone the lady is nothing: she must have attention and care if her charm is to endure. Unlike the Cather heroines--Alexandra, Thea, and Antonia--

\textsuperscript{29}Randall, p. 190.
who have strength within and realize that they can achieve their goals
by their own determination, Mrs. Forrester has no goals unless she
can find someone to charm. Likewise, she can not distinguish
between people who appreciate beauty and people who do not.

The end of Niel’s relationship with Marian Forrester comes
quite abruptly, uneventfully. Going to see her one evening, he happens
to glimpse her through the dining-room window:

The dining-room door was open into the kitchen, and there
Mrs. Forrester stood at the table, making pastry. Ivy Peters
came in at the kitchen door, walked up behind her, and
unconcernedly put both arms around her, his hands meeting
over her breast. She did not move, did not look up, but
went on rolling out pastry. (Lady, pp. 169-170)

Niel feels nothing but contempt for this common woman who has once
again betrayed him. When he leaves town, he does not even say good-
bye, going away with "weary contempt for her in his heart" (Lady, p.169).

The final sight of Ivy Peters with his hands on the lady’s breast
leaves one with the impression of the slow corrosion of Marian For-
rester's nature. All of Peters' actions are fostered by greed. His
desire for power and luxury blinds him to any standards that are not
utilitarian. Cather sees in him "the incarnation of all the detestable
ills of materialism, the violation of all the moral esthetic principles
that brought greatness to the West." When her life becomes difficult,
Marian turns to Peters and what he represents: he becomes her law-
yer, her confidant, and finally her lover. When she becomes Ivy’s

30 Van Ghent, p. 28. 31 Bloom and Bloom, p. 69.
mistress the symbolism of the debauching of the civilization of the West by commercialism is complete. 32 The disintegration of Marian's personality under the influence of Peters equals the suffering inflicted on creative spirits at the hands of petty commercial Philistinism. 33

Niel abhors Marian Forrester's decision to have life at any cost. He would have preferred her to adhere to the moral scruples of her husband and grow old gracefully, faithful to the pioneer society of the past. But Marian refuses to do so and thus descends to unworthiness because she is unable to find a suitable object of devotion in the age of little things. 34 Her moral indifference places her at the heart of a transitional crisis. Receptive to the influence of the new order while subjected to the dying tradition of the frontier, she is incapable of choosing between ideals falling behind her and sham values forming around her. She drifts from "the felicitous spirit" of the pioneer to be immersed in the evil order of Peters. She sins by violating the esthetic idea of the absolute values of beauty and moral good. 35

That the lady's fall is complete the reader notes only through snatches of news Niel receives from his uncle. The news is always bad: that Mrs. Forrester is always with Peters, that her health is failing, and finally that she has gone. Niel never sees her again; indeed, "it was years before Niel could think of her without chagrin.

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32 Randall, p. 197.
33 Ibid., p. 176.
34 Wagenknecht, p. 328.
35 Bloom and Bloom, pp. 72-73.
But eventually, . . . he came to be very glad that he had known her. He has known pretty women and clever ones since then, --but never one like her, as she was in her best days" (Lady, p. 171). The last news of Mrs. Forrester comes to Niel by chance. A friend relates meeting her in South America twelve years after she left Sweet Water. She was "a good deal made up, . . . Her hair . . . looked as if she dyed it" (Lady, p. 173). Married to a "rich, cranky old Englishman . . . quarrelsome and rather stingy" (Lady, p. 173), Marian had regained her foothold on wealth, but the aging lady is pictured with tarnished charm as she tries to cling to vanishing beauty and youth. Niel is pleased that she has risen once again, but the reader perceives the artificiality of her position. She has been dead three years when Niel last hears of her. At least Niel's view of her is now more mature. He sees her as a realistic individual, both good and bad, and is happy to have had her in his life.

Willa Cather's concern in A Lost Lady is, as always, "the pursuit of beauty," not mere description of good and evil. 36 Thus, in her portrait of Marian Forrester she very delicately etches the shadows of an individual's depths of personality. Cather does not hesitate "to deal with the treachery of sex and beauty in womanhood . . . [thus creating] not only a literary masterpiece, . . . [but also] a psychic milestone." 37 Marian is "the eternal courtesan, a woman in

whom passion was an active, not merely a receptive, force."^{38}

Cather never says exactly why Marian Forrester is lost. Although she possesses the capacity for heroism, she is the product of changing times. She loses her standards, betrays her friends, and encourages the mediocrity and grossness that symbolize corruption.^{39} The lost lady is not lost because of her weakness for drink and cheap men: "She is lost because her incomparable gift of charm cannot sustain itself by its own worth, but must feed on the gross sensualities of gross men."^{40} With her husband's death she loses the strength to sustain her brittle charm. Mrs. Forrester's delicacy and charm spring from the moral strength of her pioneer husband. The more she withdraws from him in favor of the sordid new men, the more debased she becomes, reaching ultimate degradation with the vulgar Peters. Personal charm is the lady's only real attribute, and she exerts all its potentialities in circumstances both worthy and unworthy. She embodied the delicacies and refinements of civilization, but she was spotted within by an unworthy passion. Joseph Krutch declares that the lady fails because she cannot refuse that which is not worthy of her. The average person could have sought diversion from the dreary life on the frontier with an aging husband, but Marian is one

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^{38}Quinn, p. 689.


^{40}Canby, p. 24.
who attempts artistry in her personal relations. She is "guilty and lost because she put her own happiness before her art and betrayed her ideal to snatch at the joy of life." Marian affirms, even demands life, but unlike Thea and Antonia, she has no proper mission. She will not accept her painful role in life and deteriorates because of her unworthy attempts at escape.

Yet, with all her marked deficiencies, Marian Forrester is still a Cather artist:

The lady, though she did not write nor paint nor act nor sing, was essentially an artist. She was consciously a lady and she had devoted her vitality to the creation of a person who was The Lady as a type and as a work of art, so that the 'lady' is lost, not upon the plains, but to 'ladyhood.'

Cather believed in devotion to one's course in life and exertion of one's fullest potentialities. The lost lady follows her course until it is altered for her and she falters. Unlike a stronger person with more deeply entrenched moral values, she is then unable to redefine her course to fit her altered situation. She tries to maintain her standards of charm in an alien atmosphere, and ultimately tarnishes her glow. Marian Forrester declines to make the kind of sacrifice to an ideal that Cather felt essential to the true artist.

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41 Joseph W. Krutch, Nation (November 28, 1923), quoted in Schroeter, Willa Cather and Her Critics, p. 54.

42 Ibid., p. 53.
CHAPTER V

MY MORTAL ENEMY

The chilling story of Myra Henshawe is one of a strong, independent-minded woman who fails—fails because her goals are distorted and her artistry is based on that which fades. Like A Lost Lady, My Mortal Enemy describes the decline of a woman as seen through the eyes of a youth. Cather tells with "quiet and brooding sadness" the story of a woman who sacrifices wealth for love and then is unable to maintain the high mood to make such a sacrifice a success.¹

The novel is Cather's starkest: it has all the austerity of her previous novels without being much tempered by compassion. The author's pessimism is unalloyed and thus the novel goes furthest into the "darkness of man's condition" of all her works.² A perfect example of Cather's "novel démeuble," the work is the author's boldest experiment in leaving out, abbreviating, and subordinating secondaries. Cather wants nothing to detract from Myra.³ My Mortal Enemy is an excellent psychological study, an extremely short novel which has the makings of a great book: "A pathetic story, a complex character,

¹Krutch, p. 58. ²Giannone, pp. 169-170.
³Brown and Edel, p. 250.
selfish and generous, ardent and tyrannical, the sufferings of thwarted passions and frustrated hopes."\(^4\)

Myra Henshawe is seen through the eyes of young Nellie Birdseye, niece of the heroine's best friend. Nellie is fifteen when she first meets the glamorous Mrs. Henshawe. Always intrigued by the Henshawe romance, Nellie is much more so once she meets the lady. An orphan, Myra had been raised in a small Illinois town by John Driscoll, a tyrannical great-uncle and wealthy old man who took great pride in his niece's good looks, high spirits, and racy wit. The man bitterly hated Oswald Henshawe's father, a wandering schoolmaster, and gave no credit to young Oswald, a promising young man who had put himself through Harvard. Oswald's proposal to Myra induces Driscoll to make her a cold business proposition: refuse her suitor and inherit two-thirds of his property, or accept and be "cut off without a penny."\(^5\) To her he admonishes what later, ironically, haunts Myra: "'It's better to be a stray dog in this world than a man without money. . . . A poor man stinks, and God hates him'" (\textit{Enemy}, p. 15). Myra's elopement to New York sparkles the conversation of the townpeople for years; Nellie's meeting the Henshawe's (upon their one brief return to their hometown) makes the romance complete for the

\(^4\)Rapin, p. 79.

young girl. Nevertheless, she feels a bit disheartened when Aunt Lydia's reply to a question about the couple's happiness is that they are "as happy as most people." To Nellie this is not enough: "The very point of their story was that they should be much happier than other people" (Enemy, p. 17). She soon realizes that Myra has this same attitude and feels betrayed by the failure of her marriage to give her more than the normal amount of happiness.

Approximately forty-five by the time Nellie meets her for the first time, Myra is yet beautiful and aristocratic with a sensitive, somewhat haughty air about her. Though entirely fascinated by Myra, Nellie is a bit ill at ease and subdued by the brilliance of the older woman. More particularly, she is drawn to, yet repelled by Myra's manner of speaking:

Her charming, fluent voice, her clear light enunciation bewildered me. And I was never sure whether she was making fun of me or of the thing we were talking about. Her sarcasm was so quick, so fine at the point--it was like being touched by a metal so cold that one doesn't know whether one is burned or chilled. (Enemy, p. 7)

Much more at ease with Mr. Henshawe, Nellie observes that he is more friendly, more giving of himself. Yet Nellie feels that the two Henshawes are comfortable with each other, glad to be together. They suggest a personal togetherness to which the young girl is unaccustomed.

Myra Henshawe is the sort of person who must constantly be involved with other people, sometimes to help them, but mostly to exercise her indomitable will. She is constantly "match-making,"
getting a great deal of pleasure from the love affairs of her friends. She is also generous, even overly-so, of the gifts she bestows on them. Myra has two types of friends: artistic people and "moneyed" people. The first group she admires, the second group she "cultivates" to enhance her husband's business prospects. With her artists, actors, musicians, literary men--Mrs. Henshawe is at her charming best because their personalities please her. With the business associates she is more brittle: "Their solemnity was too much for her sense of humour, there was a biting edge to her sarcasm, a curl about the corners of her mouth that was never there when she was with people whose personality charmed her" (Enemy, p. 40). As Nellie sees her, Myra's chief extravagance is that she cares so much for so many people. When Myra cares for someone she speaks to and about them so as to make them seem a bit more attractive. She has within a hidden richness, a compelling, passionate, over-mastering something that brings life into her surroundings. Yet there is about her an air of discontent, of malice towards a world that has not given her what she feels she deserves. Although she and Oswald have a good, almost easy life, they do not have luxury, and Nellie is amazed at Myra's wish for a carriage:

I glimpsed what seemed to me insane ambition. My aunt was always thanking God that the Henshawes got along as well as they did, and worrying because she felt sure Oswald wasn't saving anything. And here Mrs. Myra was wishing for a carriage--with stables and a house and servants, and all that . . . All the way home she kept her scornful expression, holding her head high and sniffing
the purple air from side to side as we drove down Fifth Avenue. When we alighted before her door she paid the driver, and gave him such a large fee that he snatched off his hat and said twice: 'Thank you, thank you, my lady!' She dismissed him with a smile and a nod. 'All the same,' she whispered to me as she fitted her latchkey, 'it's very nasty, being poor!' (Enemy, p. 41)

Myra is not poor by the standards of the average person, but she is by the standards of her uncle, whose wealth she has begun to regret refusing.

Myra's elopement and commitment to love should have yielded her a life happier and more brilliant than others. It has not, and thinking herself bitterly deceived by her own emotions, Myra has always felt the insufficiency of all her actions. Myra is "not merely unpleasant but disproportionate; the intensity of her character is superior to her materials, and so her grand loving has become impulsive." While she has money and some youth left, Myra is sustained. 6 At times when money runs low or Oswald Henshawe falls short of his wife's expectations, Myra becomes "malevolent and rough," dropping her worldly armor and hinting at the ominous future to come. 7 When Nellie overhears Myra and Oswald in a bitter quarrel, the nature of which indicates that Myra suspects her husband of physical infidelities and is aware that he does not fulfill her expectations of physical devotion, then the warmth and light-heartedness the Henshawes have represented is replaced by a coldness, a feeling of evil. Myra leaves

6 Klein, p. xix. 7 Brown and Edel, p. 249.
Oswald and rides the same train as Nellie and her aunt. She is extremely bitter and sarcastic about her husband and their marriage. Sitting opposite Myra, Nellie notices "that when she was in this mood of high scorn, her mouth, which could be so tender-- . . . seemed to curl and twist about like a little snake. Letting herself think harm of anyone she loved seemed to change her nature, even her features" (Enemy, p. 54).

Myra Henshawe does not live from within. Like Marian Forrester, she draws all her vitality from without, from people and materials. Her whole life is worldliness. Brilliance, charm, elegance, material beauty and accomplishments--to Myra these signify the dignity and happiness without which life becomes shabby and meaningless. She demands a high material life style to complement the grandeur of life itself. Materialism suggests a permanence to Myra that she finds in no other form. 8 She presents a sordid figure when contrasted to the grandeur, the permanence, that Alexandra found in the soil, Thea in singing, and Antonia in her children.

In the first half of the novel Myra is not completely happy, but at least she enjoys a sense of power over her acquaintances, especially her husband. When she is seen again after ten years, her circumstances are hideously altered. The Henshawes live in poverty on the West coast. Oswald has lost his position and Myra has lost her

8 Giannone, p. 175.
health, becoming "an embittered, helpless invalid, unresigned to her fate, torturing her husband and herself with constant, fruitless imagination of the might-have-beens, mercilessly desecrating her happy past." Nellie is now older at twenty-five, is more perceptive, and is relieved upon her first visit to Myra to find that the older woman still has strength: "She looked strong and broken, generous and tyrannical, a witty and rather wicked old woman, who hated life for its defeats, and loved it for its absurdities" (Enemy, p. 65). Yet, it is equally obvious to Nellie that Myra hates bitterly much that she can't control. She vehemently denounces the noisy and slovenly ways of the people who live above the Henshawe apartment. She is even more bitter that her own situation is such that she must put up with that which she detests. All of Myra's resentment and regret are apparent to the young girl who once romanticized over the elopement of the two lovers when Myra shouts: "Oh, that's the cruelty of being poor; it leaves you at the mercy of such pigs! Money is a protection, a cloak; it can buy one quiet, and some sort of dignity" (Enemy, p. 68).

Myra fails totally to comprehend the care and love her husband bestows on her. He has a poorly-paid position with the city traction company, for which he rises at five each morning, feeds and bathes his wife, cleans the apartment, dresses himself quite neatly with remnants of his old wardrobe, and works until noon when he returns.

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9 Rapin, pp. 78-79.
to prepare lunch. Returning in the evening he again resumes his care of the invalid. Myra is sometimes content when she can have a respite from the noisy people overhead, but she especially desires silence. Tortured by the trampings overhead she often beseeches Oswald to get her out of the wretched place and bemoans her marriage:

'Oh, if youth but knew!' . . . 'It's been the ruin of us both. We've destroyed each other. I should have stayed with my uncle. It was money I needed. We've thrown our lives away.' . . . 'We were never really happy. I am a greedy, selfish, worldly woman; I wanted success and a place in the world. Now I'm old and ill and a fright, but among my own kind I'd still have my circle; I'd have courtesy from people of gentle manners, and not have my brains beaten out by hoodlums' (Enemy, p. 75)

Myra rejects Oswald's love and her memories of happier times, turning often to thoughts of her tyrannical old uncle whom she resembles explicitly. She admires the "violent prejudices" he entertained, and revels in his passionate loves and hates. His overbearing strength and ability to command contrast strongly with Oswald's timidity. John Driscoll made his wealth and kept it because of his hatred for those weaker than himself and because of his "fist-power" to back up his prejudices. Myra's admiration for the man her uncle was deepens as her bitterness increases:

'We were very proud of each other, and if he'd lived till now, I'd go back to him and ask his pardon; because I know what it is to be old and lonely and disappointed. Yes, and because as we grow old we become more and more the stuff our forebears put into us. I can feel his savagery strengthen in me.' (Enemy, p. 82)

Myra Henshawe turns to Catholicism in her attempts to achieve
some sort of immortality. Rejecting all her previous values, rejecting even life itself, she welcomes the dark and silence that is to come with death. She uncovers for Nellie a pitiful cache of gold pieces she has saved to have masses said for a dead artist friend and, later, for herself. Neither Nellie nor Oswald can understand Myra as much as she understands herself, though she fails to understand life. Nellie rebuffs her for being so harsh to her attentive husband and Myra exclaims "I was always a grasping, worldly woman; I was never satisfied. . . . People can be lovers and enemies at the same time, you know" (Enemy, p. 88). As Myra's health worsens, her distrust and hatred of Oswald deepen. She shuts herself up with her crucifix and her priest, returning to the religion of her youth and rejecting him who took her from it. She blames her husband for their failure, for her poverty, and even for her years without religion. Her final denunciation numbs Nellie: "I could bear to suffer . . . But why must it be like this? . . . Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?" (Enemy, p. 95). Oswald is her mortal enemy because he took her from the life she should have led. Estranged from her husband, aggressive, vicious, Myra seeks relief in the sanctuary of religion since she has no money with which to buy a material sanctuary. She is looking for escape. Since she can't solve her problems, she refuses to accept the consequences of her actions. She blames her husband for the way life has turned out. Myra does not realize that money can only soften fate's blows: it can not relieve her of the misery caused
by her own emotional inadequacies. 10

Critics differ in interpretation of the religious overtones of My Mortal Enemy. Giannone declares that Myra abandons the secularism of her earlier life and embraces the Catholicism of her youth because she is absorbed by the ideas of immortality and can't find in her husband any resemblance of a lasting spirit. Myra's spiritual desire and search for something beyond the grave console her and enable her to escape her poverty and infirmity. She severs her ties to the physical, mortal world which has become her mortal enemy, and seeks a deeper reality which realizes the destructibility of material things. Sanctity and yearning for immortality serve as Myra's only realities, and in her mind she achieves immortality. 11 A flaw, perhaps, in Giannone's contention is his assertion that Myra has simply returned to her religion after an absence caused by her marriage to a man who little shared her spiritual preoccupation. She, Giannone believes, showed only public fidelity to Oswald while privately clinging to the beliefs he took from her. 12

Randall's position is less sympathetic to Myra. He believes, and I concur, that Myra rejects not only the present, but that she turns against life itself. 13 According to Randall, the book has no religious overtones, but is a "brute glorification of the power of money." 14

10 Randall, p. 235. 11 Giannone, p. 179.
Oswald's real crime to Myra was daring to become poor. Myra rejects Oswald when he no longer has anything material to offer her, and returns to her childhood values. All her life she had had a tyrannical streak, but now it is more marked, more bitter. She turns against Oswald just as John Driscoll disowned her. Even Nellie's horror at Myra's calling Oswald her mortal enemy is lessened as the young woman realizes that Myra has turned even against herself. Myra hates even her love for Oswald: she distrusts passions of the heart. She shows no real understanding of religious ritual, turning to it only when nothing else is available. She has no concern for hurting others, only for being hurt.¹⁵

Oswald's presence is a more painful affliction to Myra than is her incurable illness. He is indeed her mortal enemy because she believes he took her from all happiness. She dies alone, as she desired, leaving only a curt note: "Dear Oswald: my hour has come. Don't follow me. I wish to be alone. Nellie knows where there is money for masses. That was all. There was no signature" (Enemy, p. 98). Summoning all the strength she had left, Myra had taken a cab to the cliff by the sea that she loved so well and died leaning against a tree, alone, her crucifix in her hands. Obviously, "in dying she is as self-centered and selfish as she was in living; she leaves life without having begun to understand it."¹⁶ Myra would have been

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 238-239.  
¹⁶Ibid., p. 239.
unhappy under any circumstances because she had no real vision of life.

Myra Henshawe is independent and she is determined; yet, she does not fulfill herself because her goals are grounded in false values. The materialism she prizes fades and her love for her husband becomes tarnished as she yields to adversity. Even her final efforts in turning to religion are unsatisfactory because she does so selfishly, not out of a love for God but out of a selfish need to reject all mortal contact, to sever herself from one who loves her. Cather's portrait of Myra is her bitterest depiction of a woman incapable of sustaining a strong moral fiber. A victim of a physical and spiritual upheaval, Myra's only realization is that one can kill what he loves, and that, finally, "each human being is his own worst enemy." The only merit she earns is her acceptance of her inadequacies, yet even here she stops short of total realization and rationalizes her feelings in an overt attempt at establishing religion for herself. "The shortest and most cryptic novel she ever wrote," My Mortal Enemy is unsurpassable in its presentation of Cather's belief in the wretchedness that can engulf one when he fails to apprehend the complexity of life and adhere to a code that demands the fulfillment of creative ability.

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17 Hartwick, p. 395. 18 Wagenknecht, p. 329.
PART III

LIFE AND DEATH: AFFIRMATION AND ACCEPTANCE

Willa Cather's last two novels, _Lucy Gayheart_ (1935) and _Sapphira and the Slave Girl_ (1940), have received little criticism because they pale so visibly when compared with the author's triumphant pioneer novels or her bitter-sweet short novels of frustration. Yet, there is in each of these novels a heroine who, whether right or wrong, conceives of her particular role in life and attempts to gain fulfillment. Lucy Gayheart symbolizes Cather's belief in the supremacy of life, and Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert symbolizes the author's gracious acceptance of death. Lucy succeeds when measured by the standards of artistic individuality because she sustains an inner desire for living life; Sapphira fails artistically because her inner strength is sustained by belief in an immoral social system.
CHAPTER VI

LUCY GAYHEART

Lucy Gayheart, as heroine of *Lucy Gayheart*, symbolizes Cather's belief in both the pleasure and the pain of life. Through Lucy, Cather reaffirms the optimism of her pioneer novels and unites the opposite poles of existence.¹ As an aspiring pianist, Lucy suffers in comparison to Thea, the amazingly accomplished singer, but it is not as a fine artist that Lucy should be studied. Although her presentation is far simpler and more sentimental than any of Cather's previous heroines, it is fitting to the real meaning that Cather meant to convey. Lucy meets life eagerly, falters in the face of adversity, and then rises to a renewed challenge of life. Thus, in her old age, Cather affirmed life through her sentimental young heroine, and *Lucy Gayheart* is a love story: a love story between a young girl and life.

Lucy Gayheart has spontaneity, that trait which Cather felt essential to a great nature and which she gave to all her heroines. Spontaneity itself was the virtue, regardless of its direction, and it always involved extremes, total reactions, good and bad.² Lucy's

¹Geismar, p. 209. ²Randall, p. 78.
spontaneity, her passion, and her glorification of life are obvious from the beginning of the novel: "There was something in her nature that was like her movements, something direct and unhesitating and joyous, . . ." For friends, "it was her gaiety and grace they loved. Life seemed to lie very near the surface in her" (Lucy, p. 5). There are depths of emotion within Lucy which occasionally well up, catching her off balance and pitching her into a realm of universal awareness that leaves her shaken and convinced that life holds meaning. Returning late one afternoon from a vigorous, exhilarating afternoon of ice-skating, Lucy momentarily experiences the inner gleam which is to guide her life:

In the darkening sky she had seen the first star come out; it brought her heart into her throat. That point of silver light spoke to her like a signal, released another kind of life and feeling which did not belong here. It overpowered her. With a mere thought she had reached that star and it had answered, recognition had flashed between them. Something knew, then, in the unknowing waste: something had always known, forever! That joy of saluting what is far above one was an eternal thing, not merely something that had happened to her ignorance and her foolish heart. The flash of understanding lasted but a moment. Then everything was confused again. Lucy shut her eyes . . . to escape from what she had gone so far to snatch. It was too bright and too sharp. It hurt and made one feel small and lost. (Lucy, pp. 11-12)

This, then, is the Lucy one follows throughout the novel. Pretty, eager, delighted by everything, Lucy possesses a quaint innocence. 4

3 Willa Cather, Lucy Gayheart (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1935), p. 4. All future references to Lucy Gayheart are to this edition and are contained in the text.

4Geismar, p. 209.
With all her life before her, she has seen the morning star in the evening sky and felt a recognition between it and herself. Lucy becomes Cather's instrument of true perception by combining acute inner satisfaction with sensuous pleasure.

There is an obvious resemblance between Lucy Gayheart and Thea Kronberg because each had ambitions to be a great musician. But here the resemblance stops. Music is not the driving force in Lucy's life as it is in Thea's, yet critics often place too much emphasis on the similarities in the two novels, thus faulting Lucy Gayheart as the weaker because it lacks the "richness and passion" of music found in The Song of the Lark. Music is secondary to Lucy, life is first. As E. K. Brown says, "Thea Kronberg's story is that of a talent and a career, Lucy's that of a personality and a love." Lucy's distinction is not a strength of talent, but a fineness of nature, an intense response to people, and to life in people. What Lucy likes about her hometown boyfriend Harry Gordon--his life, his quickness: "he wasn't tame at the core"--is precisely the same feature that enhances Lucy and makes her story worthwhile. Her "quick quick flow of life," especially the image she presents as she rushes past on daily walks in both winter and summer, makes Lucy one who leaves an

5 Brown and Edel, p. 323.
6 Bloom and Bloom, p. 168.
7 Daiches, p. 130.
8 Brown and Edel, p. 296.
impression on all who know her. 9

Although Lucy studies piano in Chicago, it is not her musical
talent which ripens and undergoes an overwhelming change. It is her
emotional life, her sensitivity to people. Like Thea, Lucy has a
musical experience which awakens her inner self, but, unlike Thea,
Lucy's new awareness of life and music also leads her to a knowledge
of the passion within her. When Lucy returns to Chicago after a
Christmas vacation in her small hometown, Haverford, she hears the
noted baritone Clement Sebastian sing Schubert's Die Winterreise
straight through, with feeling, a sort of "religious observance in the
classical spirit" (Lucy, p. 29) and she responds intensely, passion-
ately. Throughout Sebastian's concert of Schubert melodies, Lucy is
restless and flushed:

Sometimes she listened intently, and the next moment her
mind was far away. She was struggling with something she
had never felt before. A new conception of art? It came
closer than that. A new kind of personality? But it was
much more. It was a discovery about life, a revelation
of love as a tragic force, not a melting mood, of passion
that drowns like black water. (Lucy, p. 31)

For weeks afterward Lucy is stirred by remembering the music of
Sebastian. She feels that something new has happened to her, and it is
not altogether pleasant. Just as the morning star brought her pangs of
recognition, so the music of this man awakens her to the tragic mean-
ing of life. Cather states of Lucy: "Some people's lives are affected

9Ibid.
by what happens to their property; but for others fate is what happens
to their feelings and thoughts--that and nothing more" (Lucy, p. 32).
The failure now on Lucy's part is that Sebastian, instead of life in
general, becomes the object of her heightened awareness. She is soon
employed to be his practice accompanist and the more she hears him
sing the more she succumbs to an unknown sense. His music influ-
ences her heart and her fate, leads her to reflect on her emotions,
and voices a darkness she feels within. As she begins to grapple with
this darkness, the vivacity which usually rules her life yields to her
emotional, melancholy sense. Through Sebastian Lucy learns how art
can dominate and engulf the personal life of the artist. Sebastian is
aloof, withdrawn, even in the cold marriage he endures with an
estranged wife. Lucy idolizes Sebastian's isolation, believing the
great artist's integrity must be unassailable and his personal life
inaccessible to others. Lucy knows her place with Sebastian. She is
artistically inexperienced and accepts her secondary, patronized
position. Her flattering adoration of Sebastian may be false and one-
sided, but her feelings about his music and elegant life are genuine.10

Lucy's infatuation with Sebastian reflects poorly on her. Sebas-
tian is one of Cather's rather weak males. He is prone to saying trite,
sentimental things, all of which reinforce Lucy's idolization of him. He
has clung to his already vanished youth and seems to use Lucy to feed

10 Giannone, pp. 222-223.
his ego and to recapture his youth. At this point in the novel, Lucy, with her misplaced values, is the typical lovestruck provincial girl seeking an artistic career, enamored with the sophisticated city-man who represents all the glamour of artistic success. Lucy's involvement in the love messages of the music she plays for the baritone invites a fatal transference of art to life. She expects Sebastian's life to have the romantic intensity of his songs; thus, she is unable to separate the message in music from the demands of life. Sebastian gets youth from Lucy. They have an unacknowledged reciprocal agreement: she lives through his singing, he through her vigor. And so they have a sort of love. With all his maturity Sebastian is caught up in romantic needs almost as sharp as Lucy's. Their love is tacit and intuitive, their motives inexpressible. Yet, there is no physical man/woman relationship between the two, thus making the whole affair a bit incredible. And it is incredible when one is looking for a typical physical love affair. What must be realized is that Sebastian was in love with youth, Lucy; and Lucy was in love with life, Sebastian.

After Sebastian leaves for a concert tour, Lucy receives Harry Gordon for his annual visit and their seasonal tour of concerts; Lucy now becomes a spectator to music rather than a participant and

she makes a distinction between life with Sebastian and a future with Gordon. Gordon's visit makes her confront the contrasts of life and Haverford now seems mundane. For once Lucy fails to enjoy the concerts and Gordon begins to irritate her. She finds fault with his voice, which is too bland, and his manners, which are too calculating and condescending, especially to Lucy's feelings about art and artists. Gordon's narrowness threatens Lucy. His sensibilities are too confined. He loves the opera, yet he feels the music only in terms of Lucy: music does not liberate or transform him as it does Lucy. He is therefore too limited to realize life and love as Lucy desires it.  

Without even realizing it, Lucy looks for flaws in Gordon because she is devastated at the thought of losing the happiness she has found and of being stifled in the small-town sterility of Haverford. On his last night in Chicago, Harry proposes, sincerely, poignantly, declaring that he honestly can imagine no life without Lucy. Stricken, Lucy tells him she loves Sebastian. Harry good-humoredly laughs it off with "every girl falls in love with her singing teacher, but I thought you, for one, had escaped!" (Lucy, p. 110). Humiliation spurs Lucy to be harsher, even dishonest, as she tells Harry the lie that will get him out of her life: she has been intimate with Sebastian and there is no turning back. Harry, with his Midwest moral code intact, abruptly departs from the restaurant where they are dining.

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14Giannone, p. 226.
and Lucy finds her way home alone. Lucy is ashamed for having lied but she feels justified because Harry had refused to understand her feelings, had in fact trampled on them: "It was as if he had brought all his physical force, his big well-kept body, to ridicule something that had no body, that was a faith, an ardour" (Lucy, p. 112).

Feeling bitterness toward Harry Gordon and a sort of heartbreak that the little town never could return her love, Lucy spends her summer in Chicago instead of returning to Haverford, where Gordon has hastily married. As she works in Sebastian's studio during his absence she searches to understand herself and begins to accept her attachment to Sebastian as too idealistic, too groundless to be fruitful. Sebastian, she comes to realize, is "broken, incapable of sharing his life with another" (Lucy, p. 136). Nevertheless, Lucy's knowledge does not control her emotions and she is crushed when Sebastian accidentally drowns in September.

Lucy returns to Haverford, completely useless, totally rejecting life. Whereas she had previously run to meet life, it now seemed that she ran from it, as if she could not bear it. Without Sebastian and the artistic life he represented, Lucy lives in darkness; she seeks isolation, trying to escape facing herself and the knowledge that she has abandoned her interests in music and life. Her friendliness becomes misanthropy and bitterness. Hers is a life without direction. She has no desire for human contact. Her whole frigid winter is one of solitude and denunciation as she wallows in self-pity. The tone of
the novel is discouraging as it becomes "a mournful dirge for the passing of youth and hope."\textsuperscript{15}

But, just as Lucy was awakened by Sebastian's song, so she is saved by a song when her spirits are at their lowest. After several months of isolation, two weeks before Christmas Lucy relents and goes with her father and sister to see The Bohemian Girl performed by a touring opera company. Lucy is attracted to the leading soprano, a graceful singer who is no longer young. She sings so well and her pursuit of high standards is so obvious that Lucy is inspired by her fire, integrity, and devotion. Though the singer has lost her youth, good looks, and the truly high notes of her voice, she still strives to be great. Slowly enlightenment comes to Lucy as she keeps the example before her of the aging singer who refuses to compromise, electing instead to strive for high ideals. Once again Lucy throbs with excitement and she comes to realize that she must live as much as she can. Life is eternal and one has an allegiance to herself to get the best. Lucy comes to re-grasp "the long forgotten restlessness. How often she had run . . . in pursuit of something she could not see but knew!"\textsuperscript{15}(Lucy, p. 183).

At last Lucy matures: the heaviness of the first book of the novel becomes calmness, and ignorance becomes perspective.\textsuperscript{16} The overriding passion in life finally becomes clear to Lucy:

\textsuperscript{15}Randall, p. 354. \quad \textsuperscript{16}Brown and Edel, p. 302.
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 . . . drawing her, enticing her, weaving a spell over her . . . Oh, now she knew! She must have it, she couldn't run away from it. She must go back into the world and get all she could of everything . . . Let it come! Let it all come back to her again! Let it betray her and mock her and break her heart, she must have it. (Lucy, pp. 184-185)

Echoes of Thea Kronberg and her dedication to music ring in this passage as Lucy makes a dedication no less sincere or determined.

Lucy finally comes to grips with her oneness of purpose in life: "friendship, youth, home, and all the material success Gordon represents are delusions; romance, enchantment, the city, art, and all that Sebastian meant to Lucy are equally false. Her true love and real sun is Life; Gordon and Sebastian are phantom suns. "17 Lucy decides to go back to Chicago and her work, to life itself. One gets a sense of final catharsis, of human rebirth. It is now that Lucy achieves a true resurrection of the spirit, "a celebration of life in the midst of death, rather than a glorification of life without end."18

Lucy never gets a chance to carry through on her new resolve to live life fully. A bitter quarrel with her sister causes Lucy to rush out of the house one snowy day, skates under her arm, into the bitter wind that drives against her as she plods toward her old skating pond. Harry passes by in his horse-drawn sleigh and turns down Lucy's request for a lift. Throughout her stay in Haverford, Lucy had tried

17 Giannone, p. 229.  
18 Geismar, p. 106.
to break through Harry's shell of bitterness and pride. He consistently refuses to bend, and this final rudeness of his is almost too much for Lucy to bear: "She couldn't have imagined such rudeness, such an insult! She was young, she was strong, she would show them they couldn't crush her" (Lucy, p. 198). Ironically, just as Lucy is more determined than ever to live a full life, fate denies her. Striking out for the center of the old pond which is now, unknown to Lucy, the center of the river, she quickly breaks through the ice and is waist high in freezing water. Lucy's desire to live remains with her: she "was more stimulated than frightened; she had got herself into a predicament, and she must keep her wits about her" (Lucy, p. 199). Lucy's skate is caught in a submerged tree and the young girl is soon drawn beneath the ice. She dies full of the desire to live. Willa Cather honored desire, so perhaps in a world where one is as often thwarted as promoted, desire must stand for fulfillment. 19

The brief conclusion to Lucy Gayheart comes twenty-five years after Lucy's death and it is here that Cather reveals a deeper purpose to Lucy's tragic little life. Harry Gordon, a sensitive, beautifully touching portrait of a man, still remembers and grieves for Lucy. Her sister and father are dead and all that is left of Lucy are her footprints in the concrete outside the old house, and the memories Harry has. He accepts that for him "it's a life sentence,"

19 Giannone, p. 229.
whereas Lucy only had to suffer a few hours. Only he understood why Lucy had not noticed the change in the river: "He knew what pain and anger did to her. It was that very fire and blindness, that way of flashing with her whole self into one impulse, without foresight or sight at all, that had made her seem wonderful to him" (Lucy, p. 221). Yet Harry accepts that for all his misery, all his unrequited love, "Lucy was the best thing he had to remember" (Lucy, p. 223). So, he does not wallow in his grief; he accepts that Lucy is gone beyond the realm of tangibility and that their lives were minutes compared to eternity. Harry Gordon's sensitivity to life has almost increased to the level that was Lucy's, thus making him fit to remember and mourn her. His is one of the finest portraits of a man that Cather ever drew, and only through Lucy was he able to achieve the dignity and compassion that sustains him throughout the rest of his life.

**Lucy Gayheart** deserves better than to be called a "mawkishly sentimental," minor work not worthy of Cather's craft and style. The novel is a moving bit of life presented by almost flawless art: "That so many people should have to ask what it 'meant' . . . was a lamentable commentary on how far our criticism had descended." Cather novels are consistently built on the themes of artist versus people, heart versus success, spirit versus materialism. The stories

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20 Randall, p. 353.  
22 Auchincloss, p. 119.  
23 Wagenknecht, p. 332.
are organized around the life of a good person, good meaning "a human being intensely, often rapturously devoted to the experiences of deep living itself." Luc
y may have momentarily misplaced her priorities, but she emerges triumphant and fit to deserve rank among Cather's strong, independent heroines. The sentimentality of the novel does not negate the beauty and wistfulness of a young woman imbued with an inner spark and the determination to savor life.

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Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert, aristocratic snob and slave-owning heroine of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, is an excellent study in contrasts and is the most difficult to analyze of Cather's heroines. Viewed as an independent individual who has confidence in self and an unswerving devotion to a life-course in which she believes, Sapphira is successful. Yet, when measured by Cather's code of artistic individuality, Sapphira is lacking because her struggle, her quest for survival, stems not from a lofty goal illuminated by a divine inner spark, but from a perverted and unquestioning acceptance of an immoral social system. She lives and dies believing in slavery, and her only redeeming feature is that she faces death with dignity and acceptance. Thus, for Cather, Sapphira symbolizes the dignity and inevitability of death, and represents a final purging of the author's refusal to accept her own mortality.

For the only time during her literary career, Cather returns to her native Virginia for the setting of *Sapphira* and the character of Sapphira, an overbearing member of Virginia aristocracy who married beneath herself yet is still determined to maintain her regal
position in the alien Back Creek country where her husband is a miller. The novel begins in 1856, and the aging Sapphira has been a semi-invalid for more than five years, a victim of dropsy. Despite her affliction, Sapphira keeps firm control over her house and her slaves, whom she treats "often with kindness, often with caprice, sometimes with cruelty, always as slaves." The action of the novel revolves around Sapphira's belief that her husband has a sexual interest in Nancy, a young mulatto slave girl who takes care of Colbert's room at the mill, with an obvious enjoyment of her tasks. Sapphira falls prey to some jealous kitchen gossip which insinuates that Colbert and the girl are fooling the Mistress. Henry Colbert vehemently refuses Sapphira's suggestion that they sell Nancy to some friends as a town house-maid. Sapphira incorrectly assumes the worst; she does not know that Henry's conscience constantly bothers him as he worries about the morality of slavery.

What Sapphira does next easily puts her among Cather's meanest women. Determined to ruin Nancy, she invites for a visit her husband's nephew, Martin Colbert, a cad whose sexual exploits are common knowledge. This action reveals the real evil of which Sapphira is capable. But more than that, it illustrates the depth of her feelings about slavery. Slaves are objects and one can't commit a moral wrong against an object. Sapphira's coldness is evident as

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1 Brown and Edel, p. 313.
she plots her revenge on Nancy. To her, Nancy is not an innocent young girl fending off the advances of a repulsive, determined young man. She is an object of mistrust to be dealt with quickly and severely.

Although Sapphira deals with pre-Civil War slavery, it is not in any actual sense a historical novel. Except for Sapphira's cruelty to Nancy, the entire picture of slavery is framed in leisure, grace, peace, and happiness. Only rarely does the sordidness of the system expose itself; consequently, the most significant result of slavery is what it does to the minds of the slaves themselves. Till, Nancy's mother and Sapphira's efficient housekeeper, accepts slavery as the institution it is and refuses to risk Sapphira's displeasure by helping her daughter escape the advances of the lecherous Martin. Till is unswervingly devoted to her mistress and entertains no thoughts of freedom of will: "Till had been a Dodderidge before ever she was Nancy's mother. In Till's mind her first duty was to her Mistress. . . . Till's position in the house was all-important; and position was dear to her. Long ago Matchem had taught her to 'value her place,' and that became her rule of life." 3

Sapphira's delight in the masquerade presented as Nancy silently suffers Martin's advances is indicative of her aloof air and

2Ibid., p. 316.

3Willa Cather, Sapphira and the Slave Girl (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), p. 219. All future references to Sapphira and the Slave Girl are to this edition and are contained in the text.
impersonal feelings toward all the slaves. The young man pursues Nancy everywhere. Sapphira sends her to pick berries--Martin follows. Sapphira makes her sleep in the hall at night--Martin's footsteps are heard on the stairs. Each new onslaught by Martin intensifies the coldness that Sapphira maintains in her determination for revenge on one whom she thinks has wronged her.

Sapphira's tragic flaw is her failure to recognize human values. 4 She has something of both Marian Forrester and Myra Henshawe. 5 She is masterful and proud, "but she is rather coolly observed, not created out of poignant love and admiration; one might sense that her creator was fascinated, rather than emotionally involved." 6 Cather does not analyze her heroine; instead, she puts the reader into position to sense Sapphira's individuality. Sapphira is impervious, clear-minded, orderly, shrewd, and usually just (jealousy blinds her in Nancy's case). She stoically accepts her illness and remains the Mistress, but the cancer that destroys her is her misshapen view of slavery. 7

Nancy, as the recipient of Sapphira's unjust attentions, is another Cather protagonist struggling against a hostile environment. Yet even Nancy has far less strength of conviction than does her


5Daiches, p. 133. 6Sergeant, p. 267.

7Auchincloss, p. 120.
enslaver. Although Nancy is rescued from her persecution by Rachel, Sapphira's daughter—a young widow who abhors slavery and takes the young girl to the Underground Railroad and thence to freedom—she loses her courage and begs to be taken back to the farm. Her fear of the unknown world is so great that she prefers certain degradation to freedom. Only Rachel's gentle persistence gets the girl away from the cold, calculating Sapphira.

By putting Nancy in the middle between Sapphira and Rachel, Cather very effectively depicts two contradictory views of human nature. To Rachel, equality is a moral requirement and each person is due, as a human being, dignity and respect. For Sapphira, equality consists of treating equals as equals and unequals as unequals. 8

Rachel's life of quiet charity lends itself to a sort of grandeur, not because Rachel is meek and unassuming, but because she has had the strength to endure losing her husband and son and her position in Washington as the charming wife of a promising young politician. Her retirement to the rustic backwoods is done with quiet courage and faith in herself and her own abilities. Sapphira, too, has always had faith in herself, but her faith is that she can dominate those near her and always prevail in any test of strength.

The subject of the novel—one woman's base, groundless jealousy—may seem a bit pale and undeveloped by comparison with other

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8 Randall, pp. 365-366.
Cather novels, but this seemingly simple topic encompasses more than the reader may first realize. Sapphira has always used her social position and her indomitable will to control, and she hates and fears what she can't control—her husband's feelings. She may be able to direct his actions by sheer will power, and she may be able to control the lives of her slaves, but she can't control the feeling that it is obvious Henry has for Nancy. Consequently, mistaking his paternal-like affection for sexual interest, Sapphira is for once defeated. As Rachel had often observed, "Mrs. Colbert, 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" (Sapphira, p. 220). Sapphira's dismissal of her daughter because of the latter's part in Nancy's disappearance is formal and curt: "'Mistress Blake is kindly requested to make no further visits at the Mill House.' Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert" (Sapphira, p. 245).

Rachel understands how her mother feels and knows she will not set slave-catchers onto Nancy:

She was sorriest for the hurt this would be to her mother's pride. . . . Mrs. Blake knew how her mother hated to be over-reached or outwitted, and she was sorry to have brought another humiliation to one who had already lost so much: her activity on horse and foot, her fine figure and rosy complexion. (Sapphira, p. 246)

Even Rachel in her goodness has doubts about her own actions. She

Wagenknecht, p. 332.
knows that her mother is hurt deeply because her daughter turned against her, not because she loses money that the sale of Nancy could have brought. Sapphira can be partially understood when one accepts that it is not always possible to change a person's actions by telling her that something in which she has believed all her life is wrong. Sapphira has always believed in slavery and she tries to recreate the world of her aristocratic upbringing in Winchester County in the roughness of the back country. Her oneness of purpose does not stem from within but from without and is grounded in immorality.

Sapphira loses even more than a slave that fall when diptheria strikes both of Rachel's daughters, killing one of them. Forgetting her pride and anger, Sapphira promptly sends her physician to the children and rushes Till over to the house with clean bedding and advice to "look around sharp for what's needed" (Sapphira, p. 256). The bedridden Sapphira realizes her own self-imposed alienation when she answers Till's question as to who must wait on her, Sapphira, while Till is away: "Mrs. Colbert gave a dry, sad little laugh: 'Well, there isn't anybody but you, now, Till'" (Sapphira, p. 256).

Henry Colbert is broken at the death of his little granddaughter, but Sapphira accepts it with something of her old firmness. Calmly she thinks the situation over and decides what will be best for them all. She very nearly redeems herself by forgetting her hurt pride and asking Rachel and her surviving daughter to come live at the Mill House, declaring that she needs her daughter. Colbert feels a
chill as he listens to his wife quietly explain that she might die soon:

He seemed in a moment to feel sharply so many things he had grown used to and taken for granted: her long illness, with all its discomforts, and the intrepid courage with which she had faced the inevitable. . . . He had seen strong men quail and whimper at the approach of death. He, himself, dreaded it. . . . he knew how it would be with her; she would make her death easy for everyone, because she would meet it with that composure which he 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. (Sapphira, p. 268)

Sapphira's life journey ends in her readiness for death in Cather's "ripeness is all" novel. Those who dismiss Sapphira as a vicious old woman accustomed to having her own way miss just what she meant to Cather. Willa Cather dreaded old age and the inevitable slipping away of life. Constantly in her fiction she had glorified youth as a temporary remedy to the decay which comes with age. Yet in Sapphira she has it all: youth--hope, old age--death. At the age of sixty-seven, seven years before her death, Cather wrote the one novel of all her works that depicts an older woman, cranky and demanding in her awareness of a diminished life, but independent and self-assured in the courage and dignity with which she finally meets death.

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10 Giannone, p. 232.

11 Bloom and Bloom, p. 110.
CONCLUSION

Willa Cather's generation of women was the first to escape from the kitchen and the bedroom to the world of professional endeavor. At the time when Cather was writing, few women had careers and the traditional role of wife and mother still came first. Cather was concerned about whether or not woman as artist could succeed or be forever bound by sexual limitation. She devoted her life to the worship of art and the belief that one must pursue that spark within, regardless of its form, whether in either the traditional role or in a professional one. Cather enjoyed the isolation of her own type of art and felt she could accept failure as long as she had done her best: "There were fates and fates but one could not live them all. Some would call hers servitude but she called it liberation." Daiches declares: "There are few writers of her distinction whose achievement is so difficult to sum up. She belongs to no school. . . . from the moment she discovered herself with O Pioneers! she went her own way with remarkably little notice of her contemporaries."

Cather very firmly established woman as a force, through

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1Hatcher, p. 61.  
2Cather, Kingdom of Art, pp. 69-70.  
3Sergeant, p. 116.  
4Daiches, p. 186.
her own example and through her characterization of her heroines. By finding her own way in art, "she points out some of the means with which others, if they wish, can find theirs." All of Cather's successful artists have an inner need to seek and find direction to their lives, to guide themselves by their art. All of the Cather women who have been discussed in this paper are independent individuals who possess the desire to be self-sufficient and the determination to pursue their own life-courses, but not all of them measure up to Cather's standards of artistic individuality.

Cather's test of greatness in her heroines was the devotion to a life-course that corresponded to the artist's search for beauty in her work. Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronberg, Antonia Shimerda, and Lucy Gayheart succeed because they seek a worthy channel for their creative vitality and struggle against the mediocrity that threatens the spirit of the individual. Marian Forrester, Myra Henshawe, and Sapphira Colbert fail because their independent spirits thrive, not on the search for beauty in personal fulfillment, but on transient materialism and tarnished images. The triumphant pioneer women early detected a special spark within and set out to fulfill themselves, allowing no adversities to deter them more than momentarily. Their world was that of

the individual discovery, the joy of fulfilling oneself in

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5Geismar, p. 208. 6Bloom and Bloom, p. 117.
the satisfaction of an appointed destiny. . . . It was always the same material and always the same creative greatness impressed upon it. Antonia was a peasant and Thea a singer, but both felt the same need of a great positive achievement; Alexandra was a farmer, but her feeling for the land was like Thea's for music. . . . [it was] the very poetry of her character. 7

Marian and Myra also make discoveries about their own personal goals but each woman's realization is that she lacks sufficiently high standards to make the sacrifice that is necessary to achieve artistic perfection. Marian could have remained a lady until her death had she been willing to maintain the pioneer spirit of achievement and integrity as exemplified by her husband, instead of choosing the vulgar luxuries of gross materialism. Likewise, Myra's commitment to love could have ennobled her if she could have sustained the high standards necessary to fulfilling such a role rather than succumbing to bitterness and hatred when all her wealth was gone and love was all she had. Lucy and Sapphira complement each other beautifully and make an appropriate end to the career of an artist who searched for the truth and finally concluded that life is glorious, death is inevitable, and each must be confronted head-on. Whether Cather's heroine succeeds or fails in her search for artistic individuality, her right to be herself is defended by the author as she affirms her belief in the necessity of fulfilling one's potentialities.

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