

WILLA CATHER

Given the fact that our first two novelists have been women, they stand far apart, Edith Wharton looking eastward across the Atlantic, and Willa Cather looking westward toward the Frontier: as far apart as old New York and the Prairie. Now "prairie" is not an English word; the English did not need it. They didn't have those vast expanses of grassy plain in the British Isles, so that the word was only incorporated into English through the Americans in the late 18th and early 19th century. That was because of the annexation of the Mississippi Territory, the vast central part of the North American continent which was first explored by the Spaniards, then taken over by the French, and purchased from Napoleon by Thomas Jefferson in 1803. Thus one could go for miles and miles—one still can—without seeing a house or even a tree. *My Ántonia* begins on an endless train that takes all day long, and seems to be moving toward the end of the world. Even in the present century, these prairies were regarded as wide open spaces. The flatness of the landscape seems to be the only noticeable feature, when you first take a look at Nebraska. "No one ever found it beautiful," said Willa Cather's companion, Edith Lewis, "until she wrote about it."

Nebraska became a state, with strong agrarian and populist tendencies, in 1875. So far as the past went, it was haunted by the ghosts of the Indians and of the galloping buffalos. In the book you will note that, when a little metal artifact is found, it is identified by a bit of inscription as a relic from the Spaniards, perhaps the *conquistadores*, perhaps Coronado. The settling of the West has played a special role in North American fiction, from the days of Fenimore Cooper, whose *Leatherstocking Tales* culminated with the pioneers' crossing the Mississippi. When Natty Bumppo dies, he is seated on a mountain, looking still farther westward. Hamlin Garland wrote about the middle border, in the days when even Ohio seemed to be a frontier. By the time that Willa Cather was writing, there were many other novels—many of them by women, and notably by Ellen

Glasgow from the same native state, who had remained in Virginia—novels which someone has irreverently characterized as “the childbirth-in-the-blizzard school.” There was a very interesting contribution to American-European literature by Ole Rølvaag, who was a Norwegian immigrant, and wrote his books about the American farmers in Norwegian.

Willa Cather was born in Virginia, but migrated with her family to Nebraska as a girl, to the town of Red Cloud which appears as Black Hawk in *My Antonia*. The settlers in the village were, of course, Yankees; and, like her family, they were business people in a small way. But it was the immigrants who were taking up the homesteads and becoming farmers. This created the pattern of tension that we see from the townsmen’s point of view in *Main Street* by Sinclair Lewis, and this is the testimony of Sherwood Anderson in his autobiography, *A Storyteller’s Story*:

In my own time, I was to see the grip of the old New England, of the Puritanic culture, begin to loosen. The physical incoming of the Kelts, Latins, Slavs, men of the far East, the blood of the dreaming nations of the world gradually growing thicker and thicker in the body of the American, and the shrewd, shopkeeping, money-saving blood of the northern men getting thinner and thinner.

Willa Cather was called Willie, a boy’s nickname, when she was young. She was a tomboy and got her brothers into all sorts of adventures, pretty much the way Caddy does in *The Sound and the Fury*. She became a lesbian, and I think that that not only gave her a special appreciation of womanhood, but helped her to find her way in a man’s world at the university and in a very successful professional career, even before she became a novelist. She had become a journalist and the editor of a national magazine. At college she had immersed herself in the Classics; and these are represented in *My Antonia* by the figure of Gaston Cleric, the favorite teacher of the narrator. The narrator is fascinated by scholarship. He doesn’t want to be a scholar, though. When he sees the image of a plow against the rising sun, he has a sense of his vocation as a writer. Actually, Willa Cather learned her Latin from the one person in her village who could teach it to her,

the local Catholic priest. She moved on from journalism to become a writer, and was encouraged by another woman writer now being rediscovered, Sarah Orne Jewett, who wrote about her native Maine. Her best-known book is a collection of stories, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Miss Jewett advised Miss Cather at an early point in the author's career to "write about your own country, but first you must get the background." Learn about the world, and then return to your parish—that was her formula.

If Edith Wharton felt the tension between her two worlds, the thinness of the American atmosphere as opposed to the richness of European culture, this disjunction could be even the stronger for one who had started in the Midwest and consequently felt an inner attraction toward the East. T.S. Eliot is an example, moving from Saint Louis to Harvard and then from New England to Britain. There was also a dialectical relationship between the metropolis and the hinterland; you can even feel it when you're back in Black Hawk, between the country town and the local capital of Nebraska, Lincoln, which is also the university town, where characters in the novel will go for a taste of culture to see the Shakespearean actor, Edwin Booth. This polarity sets the theme for a brilliant collection of stories by Willa Cather called *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. The bright medusa of the arts, glamorous and dangerous, lures them Eastward if they're talented. There is a story about an artist who returns home to die, where no one has ever understood him, "The Sculptor's Funeral."

Perhaps the most moving story in that collection, only half a dozen pages long, is titled "A Wagner Matinee". The narrator, as so frequently with Willa Cather, is a young man. He has been brought up on the Nebraska prairie by his uncle and aunt, a farmer and his wife, and has gone eastward to study at Harvard. For some reason, after twenty years, his aunt has to come back East again. She has been a New England girl at the Boston Conservatory of Music, has brought the only culture into the boy's early life on a battered piano; and he thinks the best treat he can give her is to take her to a concert of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The most extraordinary thing that has happened in the musical world since she left is that Wagner has emerged. The impact of Wagner for the first time on a naive musical

intelligence, but one that has had enough training to see how forceful that effect can be, is registered. This is how the story ends:

The concert was over; the people filed out of the hall chattering and laughing, glad to relax and find the living level again, but my kinswoman made no effort to rise. The harpist slipped its green felt cover over his instrument; the flute players shook the water from their mouthpieces; the men of the orchestra went out one by one, leaving the stage to the chairs and music stands, empty as a winter cornfield [note the metaphor].

I spoke to my aunt. She burst into tears and sobbed pleadingly. 'I don't want to go, Clark, I don't want to go!'

I understood. For her, just outside the door of the concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs; the tall, unpainted house, with weather-curved boards; naked as a tower, the crook-backed seedlings where the dishcloths hung to dry; the gaunt, molting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door.

Those two worlds were bridged by Willa Cather in one of her novels, *The Song of the Lark*, which is the story of how a Swedish farmgirl became a prima donna and entered the world of international music. Then she wrote a book about another Swedish farming family, *Oh, Pioneers!* the title an echo of Walt Whitman, but with a feminine emphasis which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1922. Now, it so happened that 1922 was the *annus mirabilis* of Modernism: it was the year of *The Waste Land*, of *Ulysses*, and of the death of Proust halfway through the publication of his great novel. But Willa Cather was not a modernist; she was a classicist. She resolved her dilemma between the arts in the east, on the one hand and the farming community in the west, on the other. In the course of an interview she said, "The German housewife who sits before her family on Thanksgiving Day a perfectly roasted goose, is an artist. The farmer who goes out in the morning to harness his team, and pauses to admire the sunrise, is an artist." And even at that outpost of Black Hawk/Red Cloud, you witnessed the emergence of the blind pianist d'Arnault, a gifted black musician.

As a classicist rather than a modernist, Willa Cather looked backward to the past in her later work, and was less and less at home

in the present. She spent her active career in the East, and her last novels were historical. They too were focussed on the land, but on its early settlers and the explorers: notably the Spanish southwest in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and French Quebec in *Shadows on the Rock*.

If you are interested in her theories about novelistic method, you might look at her essay, "The Novel Demeublé." It was significant that she used the French term, in expressing her adoration for the unfurnished novel, and not for the overfurnished novel of Balzac. Her loyalties were with Flaubert; indeed on one occasion, while travelling with Edith Lewis in the south of France, she met Flaubert's favorite niece, whom he had brought up, and her reminiscence forms the subject of another essay.

Her narration is episodic, impressionistic, often lyrical. In *My Ántonia* you follow the story through five episodes, often focussing on vignettes, and using flashbacks to bring you up to date. An introduction brings in the narrator, Jim Burden, the childhood friend of the heroine; it is his Ántonia in a very special way. A good deal of distance has grown up between them since the earlier days. He has gone east to Harvard; like Edith Wharton's heroes, he has studied law; he has apparently been quite successful, and has married not very happily. Now his attention is focussed backward toward the woman who seems to have meant most to him in his life, but as a sibling; it is a sibling, not a sexual, relationship. It's significant that when he dreams of another hired girl from the farm, Lena Lingard, he has erotic fantasies, but can never manage to have such dreams about Ántonia.

Jim belongs, then, to Ántonia's generation, which is contemporary with Willa Cather's. The book starts in the late 80's and ends at about the time of publication, 1919. Jim is ten, and Ántonia is four years older, when they arrive together –as it turns out– on the same train to Bleakhouse; he, an orphan, being sent to relatives, and she met by a group of Czech immigrants in a cart of their own. The two families become nearest neighbors, and their contrasting lifestyles very soon come out. It is not very easy for either of them, exposed as they are to the elements, with all the rigors of nature, and dependent

upon nature for whatever they eat –a hardworking routine with a round of chores.

It is do-it-yourself in every department of life. It's like Robinson Crusoe in that respect but he never had to face those terrible winters, with all that snow that you get in Nebraska. If one of them dies, they must build the coffin, and then face the problem of burying it in the frozen ground. The Yankee Burdens manage to get more or less organized. It is more of a problem for the Czech Shimerdas. The mother is difficult; the father is better as a fiddler than as a farmer; the older brother Ambrosch is industrious but mean, the younger brother is retarded, a family care. Ultimately, the father does not survive; he has to be buried at the crossroads. This is the retrospect:

Years afterward, when the open-grazing days were over, and the red grass had been ploughed under and under until it had almost disappeared from the prairie; when all the fields were under fence, and the roads no longer ran about like wild things, but followed the surveyed section-lines. [You could go, you still can if you drive in Nebraska, miles and miles and miles and miles without a single bend in the road, and not even a crossroad, not even another road branching off.] Mr. Shimerda's grave was still there, with a sagging wire fence around it, and an unpainted wooden cross. As Grandfather had predicted, Mrs. Shimerda never saw the roads going over his head. The road from the north curved a little [that's exceptional] to the east just there, and the road from the west swung out a little to the south; so that the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island; and at twilight, under a new moon or the clear evening star, the dusty roads used to look like soft gray rivers flowing past it. I never came upon the place without emotion, and in all that country it was the spot most dear to me. I loved the dim superstition, the propitiatory intent, that had put the grave there; and still more I loved the spirit that could not carry out the sentence –the error from the surveyed lines, the clemency of the soft earth roads along which the homecoming wagons rattled after sunset. Never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, I am sure, without wishing well to the sleeper.

Antonia manages to organize the Shimerdas, to get things together. But it gets harder and harder for them with the years, even

as it becomes easier for the Burdens. The relation between the two families is rather edgy at times, though their differences are resolved by a Christmas party; even there the hand-kissing or making the sign of the cross seems very strange to austere American Protestants.

There are the other villagers, prominently the jolly Harlings, modelled on Willa Cather's family and their friends. Actually, her family were villagers, not farmers. It was in the Harlings' house that the Bohemian girl who was the original for Cather's *Ántonia*, served as a helper. Then there were the nasty Cutters, skinflints of the town. Sometimes its monotony was relieved by the village dances, a mild recreation as Willa Cather describes it. And she describes the process of acculturation that led to social mobility, the kind of process that Sherwood Anderson was pointing out in the passage I quoted earlier, when she discusses the hired girls. (That is a matter I can look back upon personally, having grown up in a Minnesota town where our cook and our nursemaid were always Swedish girls from the regional farms. One of them came at the age of twenty-one when my sister was born and stayed with my parents for twenty-five years, and went on to stay with my sister for twenty more years after my sister's marriage, and then returned to live out her life with her brother in his farm. That must be an American version of Flaubert's story, *Un Couer Simple*.)

The central episode, then, tells about the case history of Lena Lingard, Swedish girl from the farm who would have none of it. "Take my prairie," she says, and goes to town. The town is merely Lincoln, but there she achieves an independent career as a dressmaker. Tiny Söderball has a more spectacular career, though she is slightly maimed in the process. She finds herself in Alaska during the Gold Rush, and emerges rich.

The tragic phase of *Ántonia's* career is not treated directly, but relayed to us in a later episode by the widow who now lives in a house formerly occupied by Jim Burden's family. She tells him all about it on his visit: how *Ántonia* threw herself away on the cheapest sort of fellow, a railroad conductor. That is significant, because the railroad juts thematically throughout the whole story. This railroad conductor, however, was not to be relied upon. He left her without

marrying her with an illegitimate baby; and, when Jim finds her again, she is again herding cattle, hoping that the little girl will have a better chance in life. She will.

Ántonia is a grandmother when we happily meet them again at a reunion twenty years afterward. Jim, returning this time, is now about forty, which makes Ántonia 44, and very much of a matriarch among her large family of boys. She is happy with her husband, a mild character, the Czech Anton Cuzak, essentially a city man who has managed to adapt himself and be happy. Ántonia emerges from this reunion as a statuesque symbol of feminine strength.

As often as the pioneer had been treated in literature, it was Willa Cather's major contribution to call attention to the equally important endeavours of the pioneer's wife and daughters. Here is a series of Jim's impressions over the years:

Ántonia kicking her bare legs against the sides of my pony when we came home in triumph with our snake; Ántonia in her black shawl and fur cap, as she stood by her father's grave in a snowstorm; Ántonia coming in with her work-team along the evening skyline.... She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something that fires the imagination, and could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last.

Ántonia is, in a sense, more germane to her world, to the fertility of the earth, than a masculine figure would have been. "It was no wonder that her son stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races."

"A noble type of good, heroic womanhood," as Longfellow wrote of Florence Nightingale. And with that view, somewhat nostalgically, the story tends to recede into the past. There has always been a tone of pastness about it, beginning with the Latin epigraph: *optimum deis...prime fiest*. The episode that pinpoints those early days best, also looks back to a favorite poet: not to the aggressive, masculine

Aeneid, but the epic of the soil. That passage in the novel is a colloquy between Jim and his Latin teacher Cleric, where Cleric points to Virgil's claim that "I first celebrated in literature the land, this particular part of the Italian land." Everybody thinks about the old times, as *Ántonia* says to Jim when they meet again, "even the happiest people." She is happy, but he is not, so that the story ends with a backward look, completing the cycle that began at the end of the railroad.

This was the road over which *Ántonia* and I came on that night when we got off the train at Black Hawk and were bedded down in the straw, wondering children being taken we knew not whither. I had only to close my eyes to hear the rumbling of the wagons in the dark, and to be again overcome by that obliterating strangeness. The feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand. I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is. For *Ántonia* and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together in the precious, the incommunicable past.

This is the closure, then, and the last word is "past".

H.L. Mencken, one of America's toughest critics, praised the genuinely heroic spirit that he found in the figure of Willa Cather's heroine. "This," he said, "is not only a story of poor peasants flung by fortune into lonely and inhospitable worlds. It is the eternal tragedy of man." One of Willa Cather's most brilliant contemporaries, Virginia Woolf, was declaring at about that time, in a quite different connection: "the heroic universe is much the same in Greece and England." After *My Ántonia*, one could add: "and also in Nebraska."