

Willa Cather and American Identity

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The conflicts of American identity run deep in our history and in our psyches. Polarities of all kinds mark the formation of the American self. Casting off personal or social history and starting from scratch has always been a powerful promise that seems attainable even today. Leaving home and choosing a new identity through one's occupation, location, speech, politics, and religion remain possible, yet one can never escape the disorientation that results from trying to balance the variety of choices we feel we have a right to. Therefore, a number of fundamental tensions stretch through American history and touch us still: country versus city, individual freedom versus civic responsibility, cultural, ethnic, and religious rootedness versus personal, sexual, and ideological mobility, and so on. The American self demands freedom as a birthright, but the way in which one plays out this freedom remains ambiguous.

Take one example: Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* might be a heartwarming Christmas movie, but its hero, George Bailey, is a quintessential American in several contradictory ways. On the one hand, he wants to leave small-town America to travel "to build things" like skyscrapers and airports. On the other hand, he feels forced to stay home and tend the family business. In the end he finds a kind of middle ground by lending money through the family savings and loan company to immigrants and blue collar workers so that they can build new homes and live out the American dream of moving up by moving on. Small-town values are affirmed even as the small town begins its outward expansion into new suburbs (which are built on an old graveyard, no less). By the end of the movie, George Bailey finds religion, economic health, and a rededication to his family even as he aids those economic and social forces that will put tremendous strain on traditional family life.

Capra's 1946 movie reiterates themes common to the American literary canon. Among canonized writers, Willa Cather explores as well as any other the roots and continuities of such American tensions. Commonly labeled a Midwestern writer, Cather has produced several novels that have achieved high visibility by their presence on high school reading lists. One, *O Pioneers!*, has been made into a movie starring Jessica Lange, and it and *My Antonia* have risen to nearly archetypal status as novels about the pioneering of the Great Plains. On a more academic level, Cather's fiction has interested critics writing about how the American landscape has influenced our sense of place in nature and culture, as well as attracting the attention of critics interested in American women writers. Cather built a substantial reputation almost as soon as she began publishing fiction, but her apparent lack of political and social concerns cost her critical attention in the 1960s and '70s. Today, though, readers of widely different dispositions and aims recognize the power of her fiction to express in an elegantly plain style the ambiguities of American experience. Cather's work demands recognition for its artistic quality, but her novels and short stories also sustain attraction because they dramatize so well the tensions inherent in the formation of modern American life.

Cather achieved worldwide recognition as a novelist of several North American frontiers (Midwest plains, Southwest desert, and French Canadian wilderness), yet many of her most admirable characters were European immigrants who carried Old World habits of life and thought with them into New World physical and social environments. Cather also bridges several worlds by writing what she did when she did. At the height of her reputation, such established voices as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald produced dark, brooding novels that probed the anxieties, frustrations, and failures of American life. Though Cather could just as seriously register the effects of social dislocation upon the American middle class, her fiction was more affirming of fairly traditional values. She castigated much in the modern world, especially the growing materialism of mass-produced culture, but she never became part of the moody Lost

Generation. Many of her characters felt alienated by the modern world, as did Cather herself increasingly as she grew older, but never did this alienation define her purposes. Hemingway's damaged war heroes struggled to maintain a minimalist dignity in a world bereft of meaning even to the point of leaving America, for instance. But Cather's people, often women, struggled to maintain dignity in a hostile environment by tapping into customs, religious rituals, and art growing out of specific cultural traditions, many of which were transplanted to North America from Europe.

Cather's life embodies much of the ambivalent American contradictions she writes about. Born in 1873 in Virginia, she grew up in a fairly comfortable post-Civil War Southern environment full of relatives and family history. When she was nearly ten, her father decided to head west, finally settling the Cathers on the plains of Nebraska in 1883. The move devastated young Willa, and it was not until near the end of her life that she could finally bring herself to write a novel set in Virginia (*Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, 1940). In 1884, unable to face the harsh homesteading life, the Cathers moved to the town of Red Cloud. The lush country life in the gentle hills of Virginia contrasted starkly with the isolated life of Nebraska with its blizzards and periodic droughts and locust plagues. Yet ironically it was here that Cather also encountered at first hand European culture among such immigrants as the Swedes, Poles, and Bohemians.

The indigenous manners, languages, folk art, and, in some cases, Roman Catholicism of the various settlers formed a truly international flavor that fascinated young Cather. In addition to these influences, she had access to some elements of high culture through the wealth of a few transplanted Easterners who funded libraries, lecture halls, and even opera houses in Red Cloud. In between immigrant and cultured Easterner, American farmers and shopkeepers added another dimension to Cather's upbringing, and here she faced a tension she never resolved. On the one hand she could appreciate the nearly heroic fortitude of the settlers trying to cultivate a harsh environment, but on the other hand their very success often led them or their children into fairly secure lives of material acquisition, part of the Gilded Age satirized by writers such as Mark Twain. The sodbusters lived out the American ideal of creating a whole new life, yet over time this new life often transmuted into its opposite, the American ideal of bourgeoisie stability and safety. Thus Cather spent her formative years observing up close the closing of the frontier and the burgeoning of American economic energy.

In 1890 Cather went to Lincoln to study literature and Latin at the University of Nebraska. From there she entered the world of journalism and big cities, working first for the *Pittsburgh Home Monthly* in 1896, and then in 1906 moving to New York to work for *McClure's Magazine*, one of the first national women's magazines. During these years Cather perfected her writing skills by producing editorials, opera reviews, and human-interest pieces as well as receiving major editing assignments. Her own writing was often witty and satirical, and she began to discover a voice that would help her explore an America that was increasingly sophisticated technologically but was also to her increasingly commercialized and obsessed with material success. Cather produced short fiction on the side and in 1903 published *A Troll Garden*, a book of short stories. Realizing her talent for writing fiction, Cather set to work on a full-length novel, published in 1911 as *Alexander's Bridge*. Little read today, the novel was at least successful enough to energize Cather. She quit journalism, and in her 40s began a full-time career as artist. From her journey west and then back east, from agrarian to urban environments, she had gained a diverse fund of experiences.

Cather's breakthrough works came first in 1913 with her vision of pioneer life in *O Pioneers!* and then in 1918 with *My Antonia*. In this latter novel Cather expressed the paradoxes that disturb American dreams and aspirations even to this day. Jim Burden, a young Southerner forced to move to the plains of Nebraska, narrates his own experiences, ideas, and failures, but he also tells of another life that contrasts in every way with his. Antonia Shimerda, daughter of a

Bohemian immigrant, must also face the harsh life of the American prairie, and even though the outcome for her is different, it is recognizably American.

Jim's course through adolescence and adulthood charts one common direction of American life: raised by kind yet unimaginative Protestant grandparents, Jim goes to school, to college, to Law school, and to the East where he eventually establishes a fairly comfortable though rather stale life. Antonia's counter-story signals an alternate route to living out the American ideal: initial grinding poverty, roots in Old World music, food and Catholicism, betrayal by a young lover, eventual marriage, and establishment of a huge, happy homestead all produce a satisfied life that clearly overshadows Jim's material success. He recognizes in Antonia something elemental and fecund whereas his own life is merely normal. Like *O Pioneers!* though more complicated, *My Antonia* rather obviously privileges one recognizable icon of the American self out of many, the archetypal homesteader who remains connected to social and natural roots.

Cather wrote several novels after *My Antonia*, but her next major work came in 1925. *The Professor's House* marks a darkening change in Cather's vision of America, and she was to write later that the world broke apart for her in 1922. In that year she became a member of the Episcopal Church, having been an agnostic since her teens. This move seemed to give her a more stable perspective from which to describe a modern world she increasingly disliked. It appeared as if the forces of big business, middle-class materialism, culturally narrow evangelicalism, and the rise of mass-produced popular culture threatened to bury a more genuine American culture. *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* had created attractive pictures of morally steady individuals (chiefly women) who were rooted in enduring forms of family and communal life. *The Professor's House* turns away from nostalgia and places the protagonist, history professor Godfrey St. Peter, in the midst of those changes characterizing the early Twentieth Century, especially in the so-called Roaring Twenties. *The Professor's House* was Cather's darkest novel to that point in her career. It is a beautifully written work, but it is also a powerful documentary that dramatizes a number of American realities uneasily rubbing against one another; an educated man displaying the values of European high culture tutors the American *naïf* who instinctively learned a love for beauty from the remains of Southwestern pueblo ruins, and both men feel distinctively uncomfortable in the fast-paced American reality that values speed, efficiency, and money.

Cather's next novel is probably her best. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1930) pushes the exploration of the American self farther back in time, relocating the story in the Southwest. This time the explorer isn't the innocent American Adam looking back to ancient Native Americans to find beauty and balance lacking in the modern world, as happened in *The Professor's House*. This time a French Jesuit learns to thrive in the world of mid-19th century New Mexico, which is already at that time a centuries-old mix of Spanish and Indian cultures.

The novel charts a complex constellation of disparate identities and intentions whose pattern typifies the diversity of scripts for the American self. Native American, Spanish conquistador and Mexican influences, French culture (embodied, for instance, in a soup recipe that is hundreds of years old), American mobility (embodied in Kit Carson, an archetype of the American wanderer), and several other cultural forces criss-cross through the novel, yet they all rest easily together in this episodic work. Cather has moved beyond the anxiety manifested in her earlier stories, and one of the most admired qualities of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is its calm, reflective voice that narrates Fr. Latour's patient missionary efforts. This late work becomes one of the most moving and elegant religious novels America has yet produced.

Shadows on the Rock (1931), Cather's final major work, pushes the North American experience even farther back in time. Set in mid-1600s Quebec, *Shadows on the Rock* more or less abandons the exploration of American identity-making. All the characters struggle to live through the months of winter isolation, cut off from contact with France. But even for those born in the settlement high above the St. Lawrence River, the urge to abandon European roots and stake out new psychological territory never approaches the American demand for freedom. The older settlers sometimes yearn to be back in France, and their cultivation of the Canadian

wilderness reduplicates rather than repudiates the homeland. Their children adapt to the new environment, but their transformation into Canadians is easy, displaying none of the ambiguous tensions marking the American separation from Europe. In the end, Cather seemed to turn away from the modern world, constructing stories in which individuals live culturally rich lives because they are culturally rooted. They are possessed by none of the demons of modern anomie, and their rootedness in time and place help to create in them a deeply meaningful sense of life.

Why should we read Cather today if she seems to turn her back on an increasingly barbaric modern world? For one thing, her novels are not escapist in spite of her lifelong artistic journey into older strata of stable civilizations. And she was remarkably open to non-Western images of cultural beauty. The ancient Pueblos of the Southwest spoke as much as Western forms to her of an intergenerational devotion to the true, the good, and the beautiful. Many people today realize that technological sophistication does not guarantee moral progress or psychological health. In her recent best-selling *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, Kathleen Norris also examines “the American experience” as it has been refracted through life on the Plains, and her non-fiction accounts point in the same direction: the Enlightenment script told us that we would easily domesticate the earth and solve all social problems through the universal application of technology, yet here we are at the beginning of the 21st century in a world that is in many ways still as broken as it was for Cather in 1922.

As in the days of young Cather, immigrants still head for America and still struggle with adapting or abandoning their cultural inheritance; now Asians and Africans, for instance, play out the same anxieties, frustrations, and successes that Cather’s Bohemians, Swedes, and Poles once did. At the same time, indigenous Americans yearn for a connection to a forgotten past as is evidenced in such phenomena as the popularity of *The Antiques Road Show* and the decoration of restaurant walls with farm implements that our grandparents once used daily and probably loathed at times. We shouldn’t merely regard Cather as being ahead of us in the nostalgia game by a few decades. Her novels and stories remain potent because they give voice to our own often platitudinous yearnings for tradition, religion, and shared values. She renders with superb artistry what we sometimes feel and express only in clichés.

There is no going back to a simpler time in America when we were all kind and hard working. George Bailey was a decent man who occasionally went to church, but *It’s a Wonderful Life*, charming and harmless though it is, is an exercise in real nostalgia. In contrast, Cather helps us see that life in America could be by turns narrow, money-grubbing, and ugly while it could also incubate individuals, families, and communities that displayed deeply humane patterns of life. Cather told compelling stories that dramatized the difficult countervailing demands American society can make on us. We should read Cather’s many books because she articulates these tensions so well but also because she points to the hope of reconciling them in a grander, more beautiful vision of a good life that does not deny the place of suffering.

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