

**A STUDY OF THE ANTIMATERIALISTIC THEMES  
IN WILLA CATHER'S MAJOR NOVELS**

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**A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Department of English  
University of Houston**

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**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts**

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**by  
Alice Johnson  
August, 1954**

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## ABSTRACT

During her lifetime, Willa Cather wrote and had published twelve novels, eight of which critics generally consider her major works. These eight books display the anti-materialistic theme common to all of her novels. In the first chapter of this thesis the critical opinion of Cather's novels is reviewed. Then the way in which she constructed her major novels around an anti-materialistic theme is discussed. The novels, all of which used the virtues of the American pioneers to emphasize the theme, fall into three groups: the novels of the land, the anti-progress novels, and the novels showing reverence for the past.

The two novels of the land, O Pioneers! and My Antonia, are discussed in the second chapter. In these stories the people of true pioneering spirit are successful in overcoming and cultivating the fierce, untamed land. The settlers who had taken land intending to gain wealth only met with failure.

Willa Cather's disillusionment with the modern world as shown in the anti-progress novels, One of Ours and A Lost Lady, is considered in the third chapter. The evil forces of present-day materialism had nearly obscured the pioneer spirit of the past.

Chapter Four points out that Cather turned from the disagreeable modern age to the historical past for material for her last important novels. Man's quest for an ideal is symbolized by the ancient civilization of the Indian Cliff Dwellers in Song of the Lark and The Professor's House. In the last two novels considered, Death Comes for the

Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock, the Rock out of which the French colonies were built becomes the symbol of moral values.

Examples of the strength of nature, the pioneer spirit, a longing for the past, and the evils of a materialistic age are included in all of the major novels. Even though through the years Willa Cather changed the main symbols successively from the power of the land, to the negative forces of materialism, to a nostalgia for the distant past, her general anti-materialistic theme is always evident.

## INTRODUCTION

During her career as an author, Willa Cather wrote and had published poetry, essays, short stories, and novels. It is as a novelist that she received the most acclaim. Until her death in 1947, she had written twelve novels, all of which have been examined for this thesis. Eight of the twelve were selected for discussion: O Pioneers!, My Antonia, One of Ours, A Lost Lady, Song of the Lark, The Professor's House, Death Comes for the Archbishop, and Shadows On the Rock. These novels, which critics usually consider Cather's major works, best display the anti-materialistic theme common to all of her novels. In the eight major novels this theme is consistently illustrated by emphasizing the virtues of the American pioneers.

The novels excluded are Alexander's Bridge, My Mortal Enemy, Lucy Gayheart, and Sapphira and the Slave Girl. Although these books show the anti-materialistic theme in varying degrees, they are not the best examples of Willa Cather's work. Attempting to imitate Henry James in her first novel, Alexander's Bridge, she did not use subject matter dealing with the pioneers as she did so successfully in later novels. My Mortal Enemy is reminiscent of A Lost Lady, but lacks the force of the earlier work. The last two novels written during her declining years likewise lack the conviction and excitement of novels written during the height of her powers. Thus a study of the major novels best shows Willa Cather's deep concern with the fate of heroic ideals in an age of commercial progress.

CHAPTER I  
CRITICAL OPINION

Today there is little dispute among critics regarding Willa Cather's place as one of the major American novelists of the last half century; in fact, there may be an impending revival of interest in her work. She enjoyed great acclaim in the twenties; then with the thirties her reputation as a novelist lost ground. Her social outlook, her style, and her personal eccentricities were condemned by critics of the depression era, as well as by some critics of today. Probably the fault most usually found with her novels was expressed by Clifton Fadiman in 1932, when he said that her "calm pulse did not throb in time with the hurried beat of the rebellious decade."<sup>1</sup> Alexander Kazin and others have said that Cather tended to turn her back on the modern world and to look to the past, thus causing her work to appear increasingly elegiac, narrow, and intolerant.<sup>2</sup>

Willa Cather has also been criticized for her technique and style, even though many critics consider technique and style her strong points. Lionel Trilling, in an article entitled "Willa Cather," published in New Republic, pointed out that she failed to involve her characters in dramatic situations with each other and

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<sup>1</sup>"Willa Cather: The Past Recaptured," Nation, 135:563, December 17, 1932.

<sup>2</sup>Alexander Kazin, On Native Grounds, pp. 247-264; Granville Hicks, Great Traditions, pp. 207-56; Louis Kronenberger, "Willa Cather," Bookman, 74:134-140, October, 1931.

that the pioneer ideal was not enough even in O Pioneers! to make the novel important.<sup>3</sup> Some critics have felt that her novels are too bare of detail; others have said that the framework of her novels is broken from lack of plot.<sup>4</sup> Geismar is more gentle, yet firm in his summary of the weaknesses most generally found in Cather's work.

If only she hadn't needed to go so far afield for her spiritual sanctuary, when a less remote and less ornate mode of salvation might have done! If only the common people of her tales had been allowed to experience a little more of that exquisite torment of life which she portrays so well—or if, in turn, both the promise and the gallantry of life in America had not disappeared quite so completely with the archlight and the hansom!<sup>5</sup>

The number of critics who feel that Willa Cather's talents and accomplishments greatly outweigh her shortcomings far surpass those who look on her as a minor artist. Perhaps the most significant favorable comments are those of the critics who have claimed a largeness of motive and theme for her novels. Elizabeth Monroe has stated that Willa Cather's influence on the novel will be greater than that of Edith Wharton because Cather's themes are more significant and her sympathies more profound and more nearly universal.<sup>6</sup> Arthur Quinn feels that this "universal quality, the

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<sup>3</sup>90:10-13, February 10, 1937.

<sup>4</sup>Maxwell Geismar, The Last of the Provincials, p. 220; Lionel Trilling, "Willa Cather," New Republic, 90:10-13, February 10, 1937.

<sup>5</sup>Geismar, op. cit., p. 220.

<sup>6</sup>The Novel and Society, p. 236.



distinguishing mark of the artist of high rank"<sup>7</sup> is Cather's most distinct claim to consideration. Several other notable critics have expressed similar opinions of her fiction.<sup>8</sup>

According to T. K. Whipple, Willa Cather's chief importance is neither historical nor social, but literary. It is as an artist that she is of interest.<sup>9</sup> Many critics have stated that her style and technique are her main contributions to modern literature.<sup>10</sup>

"I do not suppose," H.S. Canby commented in 1947, "that Willa Cather was the greatest American novelist of the 1910's and 20's; bigness was not her letter—that she left to the Upton Sinclairs who had less art. Certainly she was the most skillful, and one of the best."<sup>11</sup> Michaud commends Cather for the beauty, truth, and simplicity of her presentations, and for her ability to fuse her style so completely with the object being described that the reader

<sup>7</sup>An Historical and Critical Survey, p. 696.

<sup>8</sup>Francis X. Connolly, Fifty Years of the American Novel, edited by Harold C. Gardiner, pp. 69-87. See also E. K. Brown, Willa Cather, A Biography; Henry S. Commager, "Traditionalism in American Literature," Nineteenth Century, 146:311-26, November, 1949. Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, "Willa Cather's Novels of the Frontiers," American Literature, 21:69-93, March, 1949.

<sup>9</sup>Spokesmen, p. 139.

<sup>10</sup>Stephen V. Benet and Rosemary Benet, "Willa Cather: Civilized and very American," New York Herald Tribune Books, 17:6, December 15, 1940. See also Pelham Edgar, The Art of the Novel, p. 255-261; Henry S. Canby, "Willa Cather (1876-1947)," Saturday Review of Literature, 30:22, May 10, 1947.

<sup>11</sup>Canby, loc. cit.

does not suspect the former's existence.<sup>12</sup>

Canby has called Cather a local colorist;<sup>13</sup> H.M. Jones has stated that she definitely was not a local color writer.<sup>14</sup> However, many critics have agreed that she belongs to the succession of writers who have so ably presented the American scene.<sup>15</sup> "She made personal history of Whitman's 'race of races' in its formative centuries."<sup>16</sup> Her depiction of nature and of character, both American and immigrant, are excellent. "No American writer since Crèvecoeur has made so vivid the love of land as a ruling passion."<sup>17</sup> Commager thinks that she wrote of life so realistically "that the characters she created seem to us more authentic than the characters of history."<sup>18</sup>

In reviewing criticism of Willa Cather, it is apparent that although critics through the years cannot agree on the value of her work, they have all realized that her contributions to our literary heritage are significant. A survey made among sixty-five outstanding

<sup>12</sup>The American Novel Today, pp. 233-248.

<sup>13</sup>Canby, loc. cit.

<sup>14</sup>"The Novels of Willa Cather," Saturday Review of Literature, 13:3-4, August 6, 1935.

<sup>15</sup>Dayton Kohler, "Willa Cather: 1876-1947," College English, 9:8-13, October, 1947; David Daiches, Willa Cather A Critical Study, p. 129; Harlan Hatcher, Creating the Modern American Novel, pp. 56-71.

<sup>16</sup>Canby, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>17</sup>Lucy Hazard, The Frontier in American Literature, p. 269.

<sup>18</sup>Commager, op. cit., p. 319. (Note 8)

critics and reported in the 1929 volume of The English Journal indicates that at that time, Willa Cather and Edith Wharton were judged to be the "very best living American novelists."<sup>19</sup> Since that time her reputation has not remained at that high level, but she and the other "traditionalists" "can be understood better in terms of the nineteenth than of the twentieth century; it is a safe prophecy that they will speak to the twenty-first more directly than most of their more vociferous and sensational contemporaries."<sup>20</sup>

As is evident from a summary of critical opinion, some authorities consider Willa Cather a writer who turned too consistently to the past for her subject matter. While it is true that Willa Cather did not always portray the contemporary American scene as did Dreiser, Norris, Fitzgerald, and others, her central concern was not simply to glorify the pioneers who settled in the western part of the United States many years ago. Since she was an idealist from the beginning of her career as a novelist, she was concerned with the universal problem of the disappearance of heroic ideas in an age of economic and commercial progress. She felt that moral and spiritual values must triumph over material values. This strong conviction formed the general theme for all of her major novels. It will be the purpose of this thesis to show how Willa Cather constructed all of her major novels around this central theme. Her subject matter

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<sup>19</sup> John M. Stalnaker and Fred Egan, "American Novelists Ranked A Psychological Study," The English Journal, 19:295-307, April, 1920.

<sup>20</sup> Henry Steele Commager, The American Mind, p. 142.

changed as she grew older, and her interests also changed with time, but her work definitely had a consistent plan and a purpose.

In looking for a means of presenting her ideas, Willa Cather, as a young writer, turned to her rich childhood memories of the Nebraska frontier and its variety of settlers from both the Old World and the eastern United States. To Willa Cather these pioneers were good, honest, simple people whose spirit and purpose embodied that which she thought to be right. She admired their imagination, their will-power, and endurance. To display those qualities in the pioneers, she described their struggles with the unconquerable force of the untamed prairie land, land which symbolized the powerful, the permanent, and the beautiful. The land was the chief force in two early novels, O Pioneers! and My Antonia.

Then Willa Cather turned from man and his struggle to conquer the land to man and his struggle against all of nature. She held the romantic view that nature was splendid in all of its manifestations, yet nature was a hard conquest for those bent only on material gain. Only when man was closest to nature was he good. When he became involved with modern civilization, he lost his virtue in seeking gain and in abandoning simplicity. Also, Willa Cather had the idea that anything which was old was good. In the later novels, nature which was as old as time was represented as that great spirit for which the land had stood for in the earlier novels. Her third novel, The Song of the Lark, had a pioneer Nebraska setting, but its central theme revolved around the culture of the Cliff Dwellers. She chose

the Cliff Dwellers as the symbol because they were the people who had been the most removed from modern civilization. They were the Indians who lived in the West centuries before the arrival of the white man. The Professor's House was the next important novel in which Willa Cather again presented the idea of the agelessness of nature through the Cliff Dwellers. In her last two major novels, she emphasized the permanence and strength of eighteenth century colonization of the Southwest in Death Comes for the Archbishop and the courage and faith of the French pioneers in Quebec in Shadows on the Rock.

With the passing of the frontier and the development of a more complex culture, Willa Cather began to look more and more to the past. To her, modern man had lost traits which had enabled the pioneers to develop the great western states. The desire for material things had entirely conquered the spirit and ideals of the younger generation. Her interpretation of twentieth century culture distressed Willa Cather, and she withdrew as much as possible from her environment. The frontier with its land and nature no longer existed in the modern world; so far as Willa Cather was concerned, there was nothing left for her art but memories of the past. She developed characters with the qualities she remembered in the pioneers and contrasted them to the selfish, money-grabbing present generation in two novels, One of Ours and The Lost Lady. These novels have been referred to as antiprogress novels because they show that what most people thought of as progress Willa Cather

thought of as destroying the important values in life.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Bloom, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

## CHAPTER II

### NOVELS OF THE LAND

The first novel in which Willa Cather used the land to symbolize the influence of the great indomitable spirit of all moral values on the lives of men was O Pioneers! The title of the opening section of the book, "The Wild Land," well describes this frontier country. "The homesteads were few and far apart: here and there a windmill gaunt against the sky, a sod house crouching in a hollow. But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes."<sup>22</sup> When the novel opens, this is the landscape through which young Alexandra Bergson, her small brother, Emil, and their young neighbor, Carl Linström are making their way back to their families' farms after marketing in the nearest town.

Like so many older settlers, Carl's facial expression already showed signs of bitterness, the result of the many struggles and hardships of the frontier. He, like so many of the others, felt "that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness."<sup>23</sup> Alexandra's father, John Bergson, had met with little success in taming this wilderness to which he had come from his homeland, Sweden. He had brought with

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<sup>22</sup>Willa Cather, O Pioneers!, p. 15.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

him the Old World belief that the ownership of land in itself was desirable. Actually Bergson's land was an enigma to him. His crops had failed year after year, his cattle had perished in the blizzards, and two of his children had died. Now he was going to die. Bergson could not understand what made the land unconquerable. He came to the conclusion, like so many of the other settlers, that this land was naturally unfriendly to man; that mischance hung over it; and that no one understood how to farm it properly.

Realizing that he had only a short time to live, Bergson discussed the problems of caring for the farm and the family with Alexandra rather than with his sons, Lou and Oscar. The boys were industrious, but could never be depended on to give much thought to their work. In Alexandra he could see the strength of will and intelligence that had made his own father a successful shipbuilder in the Old World. He believed that she would be able to develop the possibilities of his hard-won land. Bergson saw in Alexandra that which he himself lacked, the true spirit of the pioneer.

The first few years after Bergson's death Alexandra and her brothers harvested good crops. Then there were years of drought and crop failures—"the last struggle of a wild soil against the encroaching ploughshares."<sup>24</sup> The great force of nature was not going to succumb easily to the desires of man. During these years of hardship, Lou and Oscar Bergson joined the other settlers in their despair and disillusion-

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 47.



sionment. They tried to convince Alexandra that she should sell their land and either move to a city or take up new land farther south,-- land which they believed to be more fertile. After making a trip southward to see the land for herself, she returned to their own place on the Divide with renewed faith in their own soil. She was almost overcome by its largeness, its beauty, and its strength.

For the first time, perhaps, since the land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning....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."<sup>25</sup>

Alexandra felt a new kinship to her soil and went about making plans with new vitality. She could feel the future stirring under the grassy prairie about her. The only member of the Bergson family with the real pioneering qualities, Alexandra could understand and appreciate the almost divine force which presented itself in the form of the land.

Part two of the novel, entitled "Neighboring Fields," deals with Alexandra sixteen years after John Bergson's death. The shaggy coat of the prairie had been replaced by fields of corn and wheat. The rich, strong soil, now cleared and fertile, made cultivation easy for both man and beast. The air and the earth seemed to intermingle. It was a scene of perfect order and success. Alexandra said that the land had only pretended to be poor because no one had understood how to work it. Then suddenly, it awoke and worked itself, making everyone wealthy who had faith and who stayed with it.

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

For the rest of her life, Alexandra's happiest days were those spent close to her own land. After she returned from visiting Frank Shabata, who was in prison for murdering Alexandra's brother, Emil, she thought she would never feel free again. But she did as soon as she returned to her own sunny fields. The confinement of the prison had a stifling effect on Alexandra. Back home again, she found freedom and a feeling of completeness necessary for her life.

Everyone could not find such peace and happiness in the land. John Dargson and his wife could never lay aside their Old World traditions and beliefs long enough to adjust to such an overpowering locale. It was Willa Cather's conviction that anyone who had come to America solely to regain what he had lost in his homeland, as Dargson had, could meet only with failure and destruction. When Carl Linstrom, the young native American who came to the Divide with his homesteader parents, moved back to the city, he felt nothing but hate for the land he had left. Lou and Oscar Dargson constantly wanted to leave. These young men did not mind the hard work, but they lacked the faith to believe that eventually the land would repay them. Alexandra's youngest brother, Emil, who was a small child during the early days and was thus spared many of the hardships, did not know what he wanted to do for a livelihood. "Sometimes I don't want to do anything at all, and sometimes I want to pull the four corners of the Divide together....so, like a tablecloth. I get tired of seeing men and horses going up and down, up and down."<sup>26</sup> Farm life was too much of

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155-156.

the same thing over and over for Emil; he was not stimulated by the challenge of making something great out of the land; he could not feel close to a power much bigger than himself when he was working the soil.

Alexandra was the only one of the main characters who found real happiness on the frontier. She had a religious faith in the power of the soil, and she looked to the future. She subordinated her own personality to that of the land, and thus became part of the land. Willa Cather undoubtedly considered this submission a virtue. Alexandra's brothers who were restless, unsympathetic to the land, and unimaginative never found contentment.

Willa Cather's idea of a true pioneer, then, was one who had the imagination to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves. Alexandra embodied the true spirit of the pioneers who through courage, faith, patience, and diligence achieved their goal of seeding the wild land blossom into fruitful farms. Alexandra was the symbol of what Willa Cather believed to be truth and good. "Fortunate country that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth."<sup>27</sup>

My Ántonia is the second novel in which Willa Cather uses the land as a symbol of man's struggle to attain an ideal. The book is not so much concerned with the pioneer's fight to conquer and cultivate

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 309.

the land to find happiness as it is with influence of the land on the main character, Antonia. She is not actually responsible for the cultivation of the land as is Alexandra, but it is life on the open Nebraska prairies which brings about her salvation. In spite of the different approach to her central theme, Willa Cather drew My Antonia along the same lines as the earlier novel, O Pioneers!

The two stories have many things in common. Both are about settlers moving to the wild, unconquered frontiers of the Middle West in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The characters in both felt the hardships, the strength, and the beauty of the new land. Many of them are of European background, having only recently emigrated from their homelands. In the final chapters the heroines, Alexandra and Antonia, are repaid for their years of strife and toil by the satisfaction and happiness they find in their prosperous farm lands.

The first description of the frontier in My Antonia comes from the narrator, Jim Burden. As a young boy, Jim journeyed from his home in Virginia to Black Hawk, Nebraska. On seeing no fences, no trees, no hills or fields, Jim said of his new home that "there was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made."<sup>28</sup> He felt that he had gone out over the edge of the world and was outside of man's jurisdiction; he seemed blotted out between the earth and sky. In this way, Willa Cather

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<sup>28</sup> Willa Cather, My Antonia, p. 8.

attempts to convey the vastness of the frontier and its nearness to some divine being.

The homesteaders were confronted not only with endless acres of unbroken sod, covered with tall, waving, red grass, but also with long, bitter winters in their poorly built houses. The severity of these cold winters is emphasized more in *My Ántonia* than in *O Pioneers!*, but all of the elements play a part in the successes and failures of the pioneers in Cather's novels; the stamina of the pioneers is tested not only by the unyielding land, but also by the other forces of nature.

The general tone of *My Ántonia* is lighter than that of its predecessor. There is much more space devoted to the beauty of the land and of nature. The characters, especially Jim and Ántonia, find great happiness in their surroundings.

As far as we could see, the miles of copper-red grass was drenched in sunlight that was stronger and fiercer than at any other time of the day. The blond cornfields were red gold, the haystacks turned rosy and threw long shadows. The whole prairie was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed. That hour always had the exultation of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero's death—heroes who died young and gloriously. It was a sudden transfiguration, a lifting up of day.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of its beauty, nature remained the great force with which man had to comply. In the following passage, Willa Cather again symbolizes nature in heroic proportions as compared to man.

There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid,

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<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disc rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun.... In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disc; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.<sup>30</sup>

Even though Jim and Antonia understood the immense size of this force, they also often felt as if they melted into and became part of the land and sky about them.

The European immigrants in this novel, just as in *O Pioneers!*, were the people who had the greatest difficulty in coming to terms with their new environment. Mr. Shimerda, Antonia's father, like John Bergeson, who had come to America only in hope of finding wealth, languished in the memory of his homeland. Before the first winter was over, his homesickness and poverty became too great for him, and he took his own life, leaving the responsibility of the family on young Antonia and her brother, Ambrosch. The horror and pity of Mr. Shimerda's death is emphasized by the bleakness of the mid-winter landscape. The reasons for Bergeson's and Shimerda's defeats on the frontier are almost identical. Both are sympathetically portrayed, but undoubtedly Willa Cather believed that men who came to Nebraska for the reasons that these men came could never be successful. They did not show a spark of the spirit of the true pioneers who finally succeeded in becoming partners with nature and the land. The next

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 279.

generation, Antonia and her contemporaries, who grew up on the Divide and remembered very little about their birthplace, were the men and women who met the challenge of the wild lands. They instinctively understood what was required of them.

After her father's death, Antonia took her place as one of the field workers on the farm. The subsequent years were fairly prosperous, and Antonia was happy. Even though she was physically able to perform this hard work and did not object to doing it, Mrs. Burden and other neighbors felt that it had caused Antonia to acquire many rough ways. The American farmers and townspeople would not allow their daughters to work as hard as the immigrant girls did. Coming into town to work as a hired girl, Antonia joined the other daughters of immigrants who were helping their families pay off the debt on their land. To the young men of Black Hawk, these foreign-born country girls had much more vitality and spirit than the "refined" but stuffy and dull daughters of the town merchants. The author felt that these immigrant girls were better people both physically and spiritually for having been so closely associated with the great good of nature.

Those girls had grown up in the first bitter-hard times and had got little schooling themselves. But the younger brothers and sisters, for whom they made such sacrifices and who have had 'advantages,' never seem to me, when I meet them now, half as interesting or as well educated. The elder girls, who helped to break up the wild sod, learned so much from life, from poverty, from their mothers and grandmothers; they had all, like Antonia, been early awakened and made observant by coming at a tender age from an old country to a new.... Physically they were almost a race apart, and out-of-door work had given them a vigor which, when they got over their shyness on coming to town, developed into a positive carriage and freedom of movement, and made them conspicuous among the

Black Hawk women.<sup>31</sup>

In this novel, as in others, there is Willa Cather's recurrent theme that it was the resourceful and imaginative immigrant who was responsible for the great country which developed from the frontier and not the conventional American settler.

Like Carl Linstrom, Jim Burden returned to the Divide after living many years in the East. The appearance of the country had changed greatly.

The windy springs and the blazing summers, one after another, had enriched and mellowed the flat tableland; all the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea.<sup>32</sup>

During the intervening twenty years, Antonia had changed too. She had married and moved back to the farm to rear her large family. The years of hard work had taken their toll on the once pretty face of the Bohemian girl. Jim found her "in the full vigor of her personality, battered but not diminished."<sup>33</sup> Antonia had found complete happiness and contentment with her husband and many children and the land.

She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which recognize by instinct as universal and true....but she still had something which fires the imagination, 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 make you feel the goodness of planting and tending

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 225-226.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373.



and harvesting at last....It was no wonder that her son stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life like the founders of early races. <sup>34</sup>

While Alexandra represents all that the pioneers accomplished on the Nebraska frontier, at the end of the novel Antonia emerges as a symbol of progressive human development and adjustment as influenced by the almost divine spirit of the land. Antonia had not tamed the land but had been saved by the land, and she was more devoted than ever to it. The character of Antonia, which was repeatedly discussed but never completely revealed in the novel, was interesting in that it could become a symbol of whatever the reader wanted to make it. To Willa Cather, Antonia was a true pioneer.

## CHAPTER III

### ANTI-PROGRESS NOVELS

In a prefatory note to the collection of essays, Not Under Forty, Willa Cather made the often quoted remark that for her "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabout."<sup>35</sup> Elisabeth Sargent has suggested that the break was caused by "conflict between the brave ideals of our pioneer ancestors and the mounting materialism and the industrialism of the post war world."<sup>36</sup> Willa Cather's increasing pessimism and estrangement from modern American life during this period was brought about by what seemed to her the negative forces of materialism overcoming the positive force of the pioneer spirit. The pioneering age and the days of *Antonia* were being replaced by an increasingly narrow and self-satisfied, materialistic civilization. All of Cather's subsequent work reflected this idea, and her two novels, One of Ours, published in 1922, and A Lost Lady, 1923, are a direct result of her dissatisfaction. These works which can be called anti-progress novels show her increasing nostalgia for the past and her discontent with the society that had evolved from the pioneer foundation.

The main character in One of Ours, Claude Wheeler like Alexandra and *Antonia*, is seeking an ideal, but unlike them he can not find salvation in the land. He had grown up on a large Nebraska farm

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<sup>35</sup>p. 1.

<sup>36</sup>Willa Cather A Memoir, p. 238.

in the post World War I days after man had learned to cultivate the soil and to cope with the wild forces of nature. This environment was more or less hostile to the sensitive nature of a boy like Claude, who hoped to find more in life than satisfied his father and brothers. Not until he had lived in France did he feel as though he had discovered a civilization that had found a meaning in life.

Nat Wheeler and his other two sons, Bayliss and Ralph, typify the new order on the Divide. Bayliss, who had left the farm and gone into business, was interested only in making money. A dull and petty man, he was usually suspicious of any activity which did not have gaining money as its aim. Ralph's chief fault was his interest in machinery. To Willa Cather, this almost evil fascination with machines was a common fault of the modern generation. Claude's wife, Edith, was also a member of this cult. Driving about the country in her automobile spreading leaflets for the cause of prohibition while Claude spent lonely hours at home, she symbolizes the selfishness and bigotry of the age.

In contrast to his family, Claude found friends who represented what he hoped to attain in life. There was the Erlich family who "merely knew how to live; he discovered, and spent their money on themselves, instead of on machines to do the work and machines to entertain people."<sup>37</sup> A person who shared with Claude "the conviction that there was something splendid about life, if he could but find

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<sup>37</sup>Willa Cather, One of Ours, p. 52.

it,"<sup>38</sup> was Gladys Farmer, a young school teacher who loved art and music. Then in France, Claude met David Gerhardt, a young American soldier who had studied music in Europe. Gerhardt introduced Claude to the beauty and strength of France.

Claude was delivered from the stifling Nebraska environment by the war and his enlistment in the army. For the first time he was enjoying himself and finding life tempting. At last as a member of the American army, he had found a real purpose in life. Like many heroes in novels written during the first World War era, Claude was so deeply affected by a spirit of patriotism as to be ludicrous. Also he was completely enchanted by France, a land which because of its age represented permanence and culture. The classic architecture of the old buildings, the beautiful forests and flowers, and the love of the French people for their own civilization led Claude to believe that he had come to the most wonderful place in the world. "No battlefield or shattered country he had seen was as ugly as this world would be if men like his brother Bayliss controlled it altogether. Until the war broke out he had supposed they did control it; his boyhood had been clouded and enervated by that belief."<sup>39</sup> At last he had found a place where many people cared about something else besides making money, and he died believing, "France better than any country can ever be."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 469.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 513.

Although in this novel and in A Lost Lady, Willa Cather used the evils of progress in the modern world as a means of presenting the main theme of her work, she did not completely omit her other two favorite symbols, the land and the past. Claude's study of history at the University stimulated him. By looking into the distant past, the future seemed brighter to him. Undoubtedly, the reason that France was so wonderful to him was that it was tied to the past. "It was like a pillar of eternity."<sup>41</sup>

Claude did not find salvation in the land, but he did feel that oneness with the soil that many of his pioneer ancestor had felt. He was aware of the great power of all of nature. Even though he was unhappy about the way things were going for him, Claude could usually find peace of mind temporarily by working on his land. He was one of the few members of his generation who did appreciate the great beauty and power of nature.

Cather's central theme for her novels can be seen in One of Ours. It was similar to the first group of novels because of its Nebraska background, but it was written after the author's youthful passion for the pioneers and the land had waned. Although the hero had many of the qualities of his ancestors, his powers had been crushed by his modern, materialistic environment. Thus Willa Cather set out on the path she was to follow the rest of her life, condemning present-day civilization, and looking nostalgically to the past.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 356.

One of Ours was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1932, but today critics generally agree that it is not one of Willa Cather's best efforts. Many of the parts are expertly done; however, there is an unevenness throughout the book. The Nebraska chapters are interesting in themselves, as are the sections dealing with the war, but the sections do not fit together too well. The solution of Claude's problem—his finding happiness in France and then his death—is not completely satisfactory. It would have been all right for Claude to find himself in France, but then he should have come home to face the life that had always made him miserable and to find a way to live happily. The war could have been the motivating force for Claude's character development instead of a way out of his problem. Willa Cather did not successfully use the war to develop her theme.

A Lost Lady, 1923, presents the same antiprogress theme and sketches the same disillusioned picture of modern America, this time after World War I. A Lost Lady is short and more restricted in scope than any of the earlier novels had been. It is also skillfully and artfully constructed and is one of the books for which the author will, perhaps, be best remembered in years to come.

This novel completed a cycle in Willa Cather's scheme for novel writing. Starting with O Pioneers! and continuing in My Ántonia, she described the rise and successful end of the struggle of the pioneers to attain their ideal. One of Ours and A Lost Lady are set against a background of declining vigor and growing conventionalism. Where Alexandra and Ántonia found a true meaning to life in their

fight to tame the Nebraska land, in the vulgar materialistic era that followed Claude had to leave this land to find happiness, and Marian Forrester completely destroyed herself when she no longer had the pioneer strength of her husband on which to rely.

A Lost Lady, a story based on fact, is the portrait of the degeneration of a gay and beautiful young woman of the old western frontier.<sup>42</sup> Her fall is brought about by the degrading influences of the new materialism. In truth, the decline of Mrs. Forrester is symbolic of the decline of Sweet Water, the little Colorado town in which the story takes place, and of the entire pioneering West.

Captain Forrester had been a well-known railroad builder in the West. He had been as much a pioneer as the farmers because he had tamed the wilderness by building great railway systems throughout the frontier country. He was a genuine pioneer both in spirit and in deed.

His clumsy dignity covered a deep nature, and a conscience that had never been juggled with. His repose was like that of a mountain. When he laid his fleshy, thick-fingered hand upon a frantic horse, or an hysterical woman, an Irish workman out for blood, he brought them peace; something they could not resist....His sanity asked nothing, claimed nothing, it was, so simple that it brought a hush over distracted creatures.<sup>43</sup>

These distracted creatures that he influenced so strongly included his wife.

Marian Forrester was a popular member of the set who wintered

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<sup>42</sup>Edith Lewis, Willa Cather, p. 124.

<sup>43</sup>Willa Cather, A Lost Lady, pp. 48-49.

in California, as well as a charming and gracious hostess at her home, a favorite stopping place for the railroad magnates, their families, and many other distinguished guests. Her aristocratic but never snobbish presence was felt and respected by most of the citizens of Clear Water. She "was a very special kind of a person,"<sup>44</sup> or at least she was until her husband was injured and soon thereafter suffered financial reverses. Then they were forced to retire permanently to their home in this small, impoverished Colorado town. From that time on Mrs. Forrester was a desperate woman, struggling to escape from the monotony of her daily life. Discontented with her restricted social life, she became involved with a dashing bachelor of not too good reputation, Frank Ellinger. Young Neil Herbert, from whose point of view much of the story is related, wondered, "What did she do with all of her exquisiteness when she was with a man like Ellinger? Where did she put it away?"<sup>45</sup> After Captain Forrester suffered a second stroke, Mrs. Forrester went completely to pieces, and after his death, she seemed to change into a different person. An old friend of hers, Mr. Ogden, no longer came to visit her, probably because he had the fear of "losing a pleasant memory, of finding her changed and marred, a dread of something that would throw a disenchanting light upon the past."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 152.



The change in Mrs. Forrester was matched by the change in the town. Many of the best citizens had left Sweet Water, and the new order was symbolized by Ivy Peters, a sensual and ruthless young man intent only on gaining wealth. He had leased some of the Forrester's land before the Captain's death. Oblivious to the beauties of nature, Peters drained the marsh land which Captain Forrester had always kept "because it looked beautiful to him, and he happened to like the way the creek wound through his pasture, with mint and joint-grass and twinkling willows along the bank."<sup>47</sup> By draining the land, Peters had shown his power over the people who had admired it for its beauty, and his hate for a way of life that was rapidly disappearing. Turning against her old friends, Mrs. Forrester came completely under the influence of Peters, taking him as her confidant, her lawyer, and, it is implied, her lover. Since she no longer had the pioneer strength of her husband to guide her, she succumbed to the evils of the modern world, represented by Ivy Peters.

Willa Cather lets Neil Herbert reflect her own feelings when he said that "He had seen the end of an era, the sunset of the pioneer."<sup>48</sup> Captain Forrester had been one of the early pioneers who believed that whatever one planned for day by day would come true. He had said that the great West had been developed from such dreams of the homesteaders, the prospectors, and the railroad builders. Willa

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<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 168.

Cather stated that these pioneers were great adventurers, "strong in attack but weak in defence, who could conquer but could not hold."<sup>49</sup> All of the fruits of their labors were being taken over and destroyed by such people as Ivy Peters, who had never dared or risked anything. She could see only unpleasantness of the world around her, none of the wonderful things, and could never be reconciled to the change.

Although A Lost Lady ends on a note of disillusionment, critics consider it one of her best novels. Mrs. Forrester is at once one of the most colorful and the most interesting heroines in American fiction. This novel completed the series of Nebraska novels. Now the only way Willa Cather could turn was to the distant past for more material since she had used up the stock of stories and characters from her childhood.

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

## CHAPTER IV

### NOVELS SHOWING REVERENCE FOR THE PAST

Willa Cather could not continue indefinitely to write about the Nebraska pioneers. In selecting new material for her novels, she also chose different symbols to represent her central theme. Other forces of nature took the place of the land in her attempt to show man in search for spiritual good. In The Song of the Lark and The Professor's House she used the symbol of the Cliff Dwellers. Just as the land could inspire the pioneers, so could the ruins of these ancient civilizations inspire individuals capable of understanding their significance. The Indians who built the stone villages had been relatively skilled craftsmen. They were seeking peace—spiritual peace and freedom from wars. By building their town on the sides of the mesa, they were afforded protection from their enemies. Willa Cather seemed to feel that these great rocks on which the Indians lived contained almost a divine power to protect the inhabitants. The ruins of this civilization still existed while no trace of their oppressors were to be found. This fact in itself was an example of the triumph of spiritual values over materialism.

In Willa Cather's last two major novels, Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock, the symbol from which the characters drew their inspiration was a great rock projecting out of the land. Cather took the idea of the mesa on which the Cliff Dwellers lived and magnified its power to almost that of a Biblical conception of God. In her later years Willa Cather not only turned from the modern world, but

she seemed to be concerned more with religion.

Song of the Lark, published one year after O Pioneers!, was the first novel in which Cather used the civilization of the Cliff Dwellers as a symbol. Josephine Jessup, in her book, Faith of Our Forefathers, said that this early novel "contains large blocks of unassimilated material on Mexican folkways and cliff dweller anthropology."<sup>50</sup> For such a detailed study of the development of Thea Klonberg as a singer, Song of the Lark is a closely knit story. The numerous incidents are not actually as dissociated as those in some of Cather's other novels. The West, a generation after the original homesteader, was the setting of the novel. Some of the characters possessed all of the virtues of their pioneer ancestors, others were typical of the materialistic modern generation. Some were Americans, and others were from the old World and from Mexico. The time Thea spent in the cliff dweller ruins was the turning point in her life. All these things were integral parts in the study of the processes by which an artist, in this case Thea Klonberg, found herself.

The Cliff Dwellers came to mean to Thea what the land had meant to Alexandra. She was first introduced to the remains of the ancient civilization near her home in Moonstone, Colorado, by Ray Kennedy. Ray was the young railroad man who had always admired Thea. Exploring the ruins, Ray began to feel "what the human race has been up against from the very beginning. There's something mighty elevating

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<sup>50</sup>p. 64.

about those old habitations. You feel like it's up to you to do your best, on account of those fellows having it so hard. You feel like you owed them something."<sup>51</sup> Ray was one of the sensitive people capable of appreciating the importance of the ruins. Years later when Thea went to Panther Canyon and roamed about the dwellings, she seemed to hear a voice out of the past with its note of sadness telling of human struggles and sufferings from the beginning of time. These Indians had been persecuted by the wild forces of nature, as well as by human enemies. In spite of their hardships, they continued to build a high degree of culture, seeking their ideal of an untroubled peace. They, like the pioneers, seemed to sense that what they were working for was the beginning of the great things which were to come to their part of the world. So in this environment Thea felt happy and uplifted and inspired to strive to fulfill the obligation she felt to the builders of these dwellings. For the first time, the music which kept running through her mind was a pleasant sensation. Before, studying had always been a struggle for her; now it brought contentment to Thea.

The way in which Willa Cather relates Thea's musical talent to the cliff dweller culture is important to understanding the symbolism. Finding many pieces of pottery in the crumbling rooms, Thea began to admire the craftsmanship of the artists who had made them. She realized that this pottery was made to contain water—water which

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<sup>51</sup> Willa Cather, *Song of the Lark*, p. 149.

was the ruling force in the Indians' lives. They had created the most beautiful vessels that they were capable of making to hold this precious element. Suddenly it occurred to Thea that

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 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.<sup>52</sup>

Thea knew that her singing, the ruling passion of her life, was as necessary for her existence as the pottery and the water had been for the Cliff Dwellers.

In a vague mystical experience, Thea was carried back to the time when the Indians were living in the cliff dwellings, and she saw youths struggling with eagles which they had caught in a net. To her the eagle symbolized the continuous, undying desire for achievement of these ancient people.

O eagle of eagles! Endeavour, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art....It had come all the way; when men lived in caves, it was there. A vanished race; but along the trails, in the stream, under the spreading cactus, there still glittered in the sun the bits of their frail clay vessels, fragments of their desire.<sup>53</sup>

Thea vowed to dedicate herself, regardless of the odds against her, to the ideal of conquering the difficult and hostile world of art. She felt that she had a higher obligation to the past.

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 378.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 399.

Even though in Song of the Lark Willa Cather changed the manner in which she represented man's spiritual quest, she emphasized the main theme by frequent mention of the land and also by giving examples of modern materialism. Like Alexandra and Antonia, Thea's strength was rooted in the soil. As a child, she had found peace out in the country among the beauties of nature, and as a young girl in Chicago, entirely captivated by her first symphony concert, she was reminded of the grandeur of the landscape back in Colorado. After a discouraging year in Chicago, Thea was eager to return to her own land,

The flat lands where the larks sang—one's heart sang there, too....She had the sense of going back to a friendly soil, whose friendship was somehow going to strengthen her; a naive, generous country that gave one its joyous force, its large-hearted, childlike power to love, just as it gave one its coarse, brilliant flowers.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout her life, although she did not care to live in her hometown, she knew that she could find renewed strength in a visit to the prairie land of the Southwest.

Thea was truly a pioneer in spirit. She had the will and the stamina to set her goal and not stop until she had achieved it. She and others like her were contrasted in Song of the Lark to those individuals interested only in material things. Thea's mother, Mrs. Klonberg, a happy, cheerful, and capable woman, was the direct opposite of the selfish, colorless Mrs. Archie. Mr. Wunsch and Spanish Johnny had mellowness of the Old World and also a distrust of mere material

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., pp. 276-277.

progress. Mr. Wuneech was the first person to have ambitions for Thea, but he had lived so long among people who wanted something for nothing, that he was surprised to find anyone with seriousness of purpose. Thea's life was made unhappy throughout her career by those singers who were successful with audiences in spite of the fact that they had no genuine talent or artistic integrity. The rush of modern life in a large city was never pleasing to her. It was the thought of old things like her favorite gardens in Moonstone that she went back to. Thea's pioneer heritage could never be erased by her life in a materialistic age.

To Willa Cather, Thea was a great artist. Not only was she blessed with a superior talent, but also she had the strength of character not to be satisfied until she attained great stature as an artist. For all of her admirable qualities, to modern readers Thea might be lacking in the warmth and color of *Alexandra* and *Antonia*. Nevertheless, Willa Cather set out to create a character who had one great desire in life and who accomplished it. Thea's strength and singleness of purpose came from her pioneer background and from the inspirations of the cliff dweller ruins. Ten years later Willa Cather again used the symbol of the cliff dweller civilization to develop the central theme of a novel.

In 1925, she published The Professor's House. This book chronologically followed A Lost Lady, but the symbolism in it is closer to that in Song of the Lark, Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock. Cather skillfully combined the stories of



how modern civilization caused "the disenchantment of a distinguished spirit"<sup>55</sup> and of the wonderful life many centuries ago of the Cliff Dwellers on a New Mexico mesa. Using a rather complicated set of symbols, she related the history of Professor St. Peter and his young student, Tom Outland.

The first part of The Professor's House is concerned with Godfrey St. Peter's unhappiness over having to leave his old house and move into a new one. He and his family had lived in the old place for many years while he was writing the eight volumes of a history of Spanish explorers in the Southwest. It was in that house that he had grown to know Tom Outland, who had so strongly influenced his writing and his life. In contrast to the old home is the new house with which Mrs. Godfrey is so pleased, but which symbolizes to the Professor the unpleasant changes of the modern age. Leaving the old house seemed to cut him off from the happy years of his past. This symbol of the two houses is rather obvious and without real depth.

Tom Outland's story is more significant to the novel. Tom had come from New Mexico to the midwestern university at which St. Peter was professor of history. Professor St. Peter found this young man to possess an outstanding mind and personality. Tom was most helpful in supplying information and inspiration for the Professor's life work, the history volumes—the work which brought fame, fortune, and the new house to St. Peter. He was linked to Tom by a common

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<sup>55</sup>Brown, op. cit., p. 245.

sensitivity to history and to the past.

The events in Tom's life which had brought about his strong personal growth are included in the novel in the form of a separate episode. While working as a cowboy in southwestern Colorado, Tom had found the ruins of an ancient civilization. The former inhabitants had been Cliff Dwellers who were probably destroyed by a less cultured Indian tribe for their food, weapons, and hides. Tom was impressed by the careful construction and beauty of the numerous buildings which had been undisturbed for centuries. "Such silence and stillness and repose—immortal repose. That village sat looking down into the canyon with the calmness of eternity."<sup>56</sup> Exploring these ruins gave Tom a feeling of closeness to the past and also an understanding of the high ideals of the people who had made the village of stone houses.

After doing much excavating work on the ruins, Tom went to Washington, D.C., to try to interest people at the Smithsonian Institute in making further archeological studies of these cliff dwellings. When he returned to Colorado, he found that the man who had been working with him in excavating the dwellings had sold many of the pieces of pottery and other artifacts they had found. Having developed an unexplainable attachment for the Cliff City, Tom was completely distraught by this turn of events. He felt that his partner had no right to sell artifacts that did not belong to them, but to the country and the

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<sup>56</sup>Willa Cather, *The Professor's House*, p. 201.

people. The value of the objects was far greater than any amount of money to Tom.

One evening as Tom was watching the sun set on Cliff City, he began to understand why this ancient civilization was so important to him. Like Thea Klomberg in Song of the Lark, he had a mystical experience which helped him to find a meaning in life.

Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was possession....For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion. I had read of filial piety in the Latin poets, and I knew that was what I felt for the place. It had formerly been mixed up with other motives; but now that they were gone, I had my happiness unalloyed.<sup>57</sup>

This experience left Tom feeling as though he was a part of the past, and thus nearer to the Great Power of the universe. It was the same emotion that Alexandra and Antonia had experienced about their land.

The unity between the first two parts of the novel was revealed in a short third part. The Professor realized he could no longer live in his old house, and he was very disturbed by this fact. He began to lose interest in life, and mentally sank into the past. In his mind, he was a boy again, caring only about the earth and woods and water. In his simple love of nature his attitude was much like that of the Cliff Dwellers. "He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. He seemed to know among other things, that he was solitary and must

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 251.

always be so....He was earth, and would return to earth."<sup>58</sup> All of the hanging back from the future and concern for the past—the old house, the Cliff Dwellers—was an unconscious preparation for death. Until this time St. Peter had not been able to accept the fact that he was passing from middle to old age. Now he saw that his own life, like that of the Cliff Dwellers, could end only in death. However, since he could no longer find happiness in the modern world, he thought of that "eternal solitude with gratefulness; as a release from every obligation, from every form of effort. It was the truth,"<sup>59</sup> Being unlikely to die for many years, the Professor would have to learn to live without joy or grief. The modern age had destroyed his spirit and his desire to live.

The Professor's House marks Willa Cather's greatest withdrawal from the world about her. It reflects her disillusionment over the decline of the values she cherished. The Professor blamed the first World War not only for Tom Outland's death, but also for the changes in American senses of value. The regents at the university had made it a trade school by abolishing the cultural studies; few faculty members made any serious stand for scholarship; the students were a common lot. All of the houses described in the novel, except the Professor's old home and the cliff dweller ruins, are signs of the growing commercialism. The Norwegian manor house of the Professor's

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 265.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 272.

daughter, built with money Tom Outland left her, was an example of the modern homes St. Peter hated. Willa Cather contrasted the mediocrity of the civil servants Tom met on his trip to Washington with the life of the Cliff Dwellers to show the effects of civilization and materialism.

As in her other novels, Willa Cather created a hero in The Professor's House who possessed the virtues of the pioneers. By hard work, St. Peter had given his best efforts to his teaching duties as well as to contributing an important piece of creative work. "A man can do anything, St. Peter believed. Desire is creation, is the magical element in that process. If there were an instrument by which to measure desire, one could foretell achievement."<sup>60</sup> This great understanding and desire had come to both the Professor and Tom Outland because of their interest in and relationship to the past. As a result of Tom's experiences on the Mesa, which gave new purpose to his life, he made an important contribution to the world of science. St. Peter was glad that Tom escaped all of the demands that would have been put upon him by society.

In spite of his apparent short-comings, Mr. Crane, the physics professor, was as much a pioneer as Captain Forrester or Alexandra Erigson. He was one of the few professors doing original research, and with St. Peter he resisted the commercialism which was threatening the moral purpose of the university. The other characters in the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

novel showed in varying degrees the evil influences of materialism on modern life.

By contrasting the stifling effects of the modern world with the almost divine inspiration of the cliff dweller civilization, Willa Cather again cried out against materialism. In her other novels, only the individuals with the highest spiritual goals could hope to find complete happiness. However, for all of his ideals, St. Peter could not find permanent peace in the world in which he had to live. The author had reached a period of intense dissatisfaction. Engulfed by such a mood, Willa Cather could no longer use childhood memories or contemporary events for subject matter. Since she had removed herself as far as possible from her environment, she had to turn to history and to her imagination for her last novels.

The vacation which Willa Cather spent in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in the summer of 1925 was to provide the matter for her novel, Death Comes for the Archbishop. She felt that the greatness of the Southwest was due not so much to the ancient Indian civilizations or the Spanish explorers, but to the efforts of the French missionaries who worked there in the nineteenth century. Death Comes for the Archbishop is a chronicle of two such priests in the New World, the primitive civilization they found there, and their response to this land and its people. In developing the novel around the same general theme as her earlier novels, Willa Cather did not write a simple story of two priests, their qualities and their traditions.

Here Indian villages, the exploits of the Spanish adventurers

as well as the missionaries, the coming of a new layer of high civilization with the French priests, and the small but true contribution of the best of the great-hearted Anglo-Saxon adventurers—men like Kit Carson—are set before us as on a frieze. The composition of this frieze, in the grouping of its figures and their portrayal against a living background, is the most beautiful achievement of Willa Cather's imagination."<sup>61</sup>

The setting, the natives, and the temperaments of Bishop Latour and Father Vaillant made it possible for Willa Cather to use the same system of symbols in presenting her theme as in her previous novels. The pioneer spirit was a part of the French missionaries who left their homes in the Old World to come to New Mexico, as well as of the natives they found there. The power and beauty of nature and the effects of the past are important parts of the book. Examples of the evils of materialism are also given. The significance of these conflicting forces is summed up in the Rock, the main symbol of the novel.

In Song of the Lark and The Professor's House, Willa Cather used the civilization of the Cliff Dwellers as a means of portraying her theme of idealism. The great rock mesas on which these dwellings were built came to have the same meaning in Death Comes for the Archbishop. These great mounds of rock meant safety and sanctuary to the Indians, preyed on by other hostile tribes or by Spanish conquerors. They could live on their own Rock with a feeling of permanence, without change. This answered a yearning common to all people.

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<sup>61</sup>Brown, op. cit., p. 254-255.

The rock, when one comes to think of it, was the utmost expression of human need; even mere feeling yearned for it; it was the highest comparison of loyalty in love and friendship. Christ himself had used that comparison for the disciple to whom He gave the keys to His Church. And the Hebrews of the Old Testament, always being carried captive into foreign lands,—their rock was an idea of God, the only thing their conquerers could not take from them.<sup>62</sup>

Willa Cather was trying to show how man, in becoming as hard and steadfast as a rock, could gain command of that which seemed uncontrollable, as the farmers had with the land of Nebraska.

Bishop Latour chose some of the rock which he thought especially beautiful to be used in building the cathedral he had long wanted to build. Even though it was to be built amid the unsightly adobe huts, the Bishop's cathedral had to be designed by the most capable French architect and constructed of the finest material. It was to reflect the spirit of the great Southwest as well as the culture of France. Bishop Latour was building for the future. He felt that by combining the best of the Old World civilization with the strength and beauty of the New World he could help the Southwest to realize its great potentialities. In his last years, Bishop Latour found peace in admiring his beautiful cathedral, his sanctuary of rock. He had accomplished his life's desire.

Willa Cather gives to the Bishop and Father Vaillant the same ideals, courage, and singleness of purpose that the Nebraska pioneers had. The priests' lives had been devoted to overcoming the

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<sup>62</sup> Willa Cather, Death Comes for the Archbishop, pp. 97-98.



wilderness of the New Mexico frontier and to bringing its people closer to God. Father Vaillant, looking back on their years as missionaries said, "We have done the things we used to plan to do, long ago, when we were Seminarists,—at least some of them. To fulfill the dreams of one's youth; that is the best that can happen to a man. No worldly success can take the place of that."<sup>63</sup> The Indians too were pioneers not only on their land, but in the ways of Christianity. Living in a world scarcely touched by civilization, they needed courage and resourcefulness to survive. Their primitive ceremonies and superstitions revealed to the Catholic priests the abounding faith of the Indians. The priests felt it was their duty to enlighten them in the ways of using their faith for their souls' salvation. Willa Cather wrote of a region that was truly a frontier.

In this novel as in all of Cather's pioneer stories, there is the presence of a beneficent but powerful nature. Nature, like the Rock, ties man to the past. The mesa country with its appearance of great antiquity, is described as looking as if the Creator had assembled all of the pieces necessary to produce a landscape and then had stopped, leaving the scene incomplete. The great force of nature is evident in the passage describing the underground river flowing through the cavern.

The water was far, far below, perhaps as deep as the foot of the mountain, a flood moving in utter blackness under the ribs of antediluvian rocks. It was not a rushing noise.

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

but the sound of a great flood moving with majesty and power.<sup>64</sup>

As the Bishop was riding across the desert to Santa Fe, he was overcome by the largeness of the sky, "Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world; but here the earth was the floor of the sky."<sup>65</sup> In no other place on the earth did one seem so small but so young as in this New Mexico landscape. Father Latour never felt old or tired in this atmosphere.

Latour was impressed by the beauty of the country as well as by its size. He thought that the mountains containing the stone he used in building his cathedral were beautiful. They were the color of the sun. He loved the mountains, the pine forests, and the colorful sunsets of his adopted land. He and the other priests added to its beauty by cultivating fine orchards and gardens. During the years after his retirement as Archbishop, Father Latour domesticated the native wild flowers in his garden. The passage describing the verbena in his garden is an excellent example of the light, colorful style of this novel.

It was like a great violet velvet mantle thrown down in the sun; all the shades that the dyers and weavers of Italy and France strove for through centuries, the violet that is full of rose color and is yet not lavender; the blue becomes al-pink and then retreats again into sea-dark purple—the true Episcopal colour and countless variations of it.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 268.

Death Comes for the Archbishop is permeated from the beginning to end with a sense of the past. Visiting an ancient village of Acoma Indians, Father Latour felt tied to the past by the very rocks on which their village was built. While his European civilisation was changing and developing, this race of people had increased "neither in number nor in desire"<sup>67</sup> through the centuries. The way he saw them living was the way they had always lived from the beginning of their existence. The Bishop could actually see the past when he looked at these Indians. He liked the Indians' regard for old customs, and said that it played a part in his own religion. His last days were spent in the New Mexico air which "released the imprisoned spirit of man into the wind,"<sup>68</sup> thinking of the past. He looked back on a lifetime which had seen the dreams of his youth fulfilled. He felt that the future would take care of itself.

For the most part, Death Comes for the Archbishop is written in a light, happy mood full of benevolence for all mankind. The only bitter notes appear in Willa Cather's direct reference to materialism. There was the miserly old priest who could not die peacefully for worrying about being robbed of the gold hidden under the floor of his room. Here was supposedly a man of God concerned only with worldly goods. He died in a convulsion as if God were punishing him. After Father Vaillant went to Colorado to start a church, he had to come

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

to New Mexico and beg from the Mexicans for money to carry on his work. The gold hungry Americans would give nothing to the church, while the simple Mexicans, living in adobe huts, would always make some contribution. For years Father Latour wondered if the Indian war would ever end, since many American traders became wealthy from the warfare. At this point of her life, Willa Cather seemed to feel that, with few exceptions, Americans were interested only in material wealth.

Death Comes for the Archbishop is one of Willa Cather's most successful and most widely read novels. It and My Antonia are probably the two works for which she will be best remembered. In his biography entitled Willa Cather, David Daiches's "only quarrel with Death Comes for the Archbishop is that the success the Bishop had in the Southwest, although it was real enough, seemed to come too easily."<sup>69</sup> Daiches thinks that the moral pattern of the story is weakened by the author's warm sympathy for all of the characters. She is just as kind to the corrupt native clergymen and landowners as she is to the devoted French missionaries. The Bishop had found happiness, but what had he accomplished? The natives were no more religious when he died than when he came years earlier. E. K. Brown takes a different viewpoint. To him the real appeal of the novel is the absence of inner conflict. In the Archbishop, he sees a man of culture and fine personality finding conditions in the New World suitable for living a full life.

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<sup>69</sup>Daiches, op. cit., p. 113.

To illustrate how Father Latour felt about the religion of the natives, Brown cites the story of Padre Martinez. This old Mexican priest lived in a scene of worldliness and carnality. He contended no priest could experience forgiveness of sins unless he had sinned. Yet he was well versed in the Church literature and the classics, and he presided at impressive masses. Father Latour decided it would be better not to punish Martinez than to lose his whole congregation. He knew that "the Church must recognize realities and mold them patiently to ultimate ends."<sup>70</sup> Changes in the habits of these primitive people had to be brought about slowly with complete success coming only in the future.

After the inner conflict of The Professor's House and the bitter struggles for survival in the pioneer novels, the air of happiness and good humor is a pleasant relief in Death Comes for the Archbishop. Willa Cather did an excellent job of portraying the priests as men of high ideals, but they are also depicted as sympathetic, understanding men who appreciated the beauties of nature. The manner in which she presents her general theme is more subtle than in some of the earlier novels, and therefore, many critics judge the novel as more artistic.

Willa Cather's last important novel is Shadows on the Rock, published in 1931. She again uses the symbol of the Rock to signify man's search for an ideal. This time the setting is the seventeenth

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<sup>70</sup>Brown, op. cit., p. 264.

century town of Quebec, built on the Rock. The people who came from France were pioneers intending to create a new civilization in the New World wilderness. These were civilized people who hoped to maintain the graces of life in a pioneer environment. "When an adventurer carries his gods with him into a remote and savage land, the colony he founds will, from the beginning have graces, traditions, riches of mind and spirit."<sup>71</sup> In Willa Cather's pioneer novels the Nebraska settlers came to the Divide and struggled to establish prosperous farms; in *Shadows on the Rock*, the French colonists were attempting to transplant a culture in the Canadian wilderness. Their desire to establish a civilization with all of the good qualities but free from the undesirable traits of France was just as steadfast as the gray Rock on which they built Quebec. Thus the Rock came to symbolize their desire. Once again Willa Cather developed her theme of high moral purpose through the story of pioneers and their experiences in a new land.

Through a group of incidents, Cather attempted to portray the of life that existed in this isolated community. She wanted to describe "a kind of feeling about life and human fate....a series of pictures remembered rather than experienced; a kind of thinking, a mental complexion, left over from the past lacking in robustness and full of pious resignation."<sup>72</sup> The main characters in the novel, the

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<sup>71</sup>Willa Cather, *Shadows on the Rock*, p. 98.

<sup>72</sup>Willa Cather, *On Writing*, p. 14.

Auclair family, worked very hard at preserving the way of life they had enjoyed in France. Before her death, Mrs. Auclair taught her young daughter, Cecile, to take care of the house and to prepare tasty meals just as she had always done. Their cherished pieces of furniture and silver symbolized the fine moral qualities of the Auclairs.

Another phase of civilization which was brought to Canada by the French settlers was their religion. Church activities made up a great part of their lives. Reports on the clergy and legends of saints, martyrs, and miracles comprise an important part of Shadows on the Rock. "The people have loved miracles...because they are actual flowering of desire."<sup>73</sup> Willa Cather gives a detailed account of the Catholic Church as it existed in this young colony. As in Death Comes for the Archbishop, she enjoys writing about the world of Catholic feeling.

Some of the Canadian colonists had the true pioneering spirit; others could never be happy in the new land. Cecile Auclair, like the young heroines in O Pioneers! and My Antonia and like Willa Cather herself, moved with her parents from the established society of her homeland to the frontier. Cecile grew to love the town of Quebec, the cold winters, and the Rock, and to think of this as her real home. She worked hard at learning the nice, cultured customs of her French forefathers, but she never wanted to leave Canada. When she grew up

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<sup>73</sup> Willa Cather, Shadows on the Rock, p. 137

she married Pierre Charron, another pioneer, and had four sons——  
 "the Canadians of the future."<sup>74</sup>

Pierre Charron was typical of the kind of people responsible for the greatness of the American continent. He was the son of a French soldier of fortune who had done well in the Canadian fur trade. Young Pierre seemed to be a combination of the Old and the New World. He was one of the second generation pioneers who possessed the finest qualities of the first generation plus the added vigor of the new land. To the Auclairs, Pierre was the type of free Frenchman they had dreamed of finding in Canada.

He had the good manners of the Old World, the dash and daring of the New. He was proud, he was vain, he was relentless when he hated, and quickly prejudiced; but he had the old ideals of clan-loyalty, and in friendship he never counted cost. His goods and his life were at the disposal of the man he loved or the leader he admired. Though his figure was still boyish, his face was full of experience and sagacity; a fine bold nose, a restless, rather mischievous mouth, white teeth, very strong and even, sparkling hazel eyes with a kind of living flash in them, like the sunbeams on the bright rapids upon which he was so skillful.<sup>75</sup>

There are other characters in Shadows on the Rock who possessed these same virtues. Count Frontenac, the governor of Quebec, was a great and wise man who successfully guided his people in building their colony. It was his presence that gave Auclair the strength to make a life in the New World. When the Count died, Auclair felt that all security had gone from the world. Count Frontenac holds the same position

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 172.



in this novel that Captain Forrester held in A Lost Lady. Frichotte, the woodsman, was another character typical of the pioneering spirit. He, like the noble savage, could find happiness only by living close to nature. City life would cause his spirit to die.

Apothecary Auclair, who had come to Canada as an agent of the Governor, was not made of the proper stuff to be a colonist, and he knew it. He was concerned about his way of life and wanted everything to be just as it had been in France. Even though, he was a devoted father and conscientious physician, he had no great love for the untamed frontier. In fact, he wondered "whether there had not been a good deal of misplaced heroism in the Canadian missions—a waste of rare qualities which did nobody any good."<sup>76</sup> Like Antonia's father, Mr. Shimerda, the New World was too much for him. The Count's protection saved Auclair from Shimerda's fate, and after the Count's death, the thought of going back to a greatly changed France kept him in Canada permanently.

Auclair's desire to live in an unchanged world reflects Willa Cather's constant longing for the past. This nostalgic looking back is present in Shadows on the Rock as in all of her other novels. Auclair felt that in medicine as in life, change was not always progress. He had never liked the new Bishop, Saint-Vallier, who "liked to reorganize and change things for the sake of change, to make a fine gesture. He destroyed the old before he clearly thought out the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-155.

now."<sup>77</sup> Count Frontenac felt that he had outlived his time and wanted to die when men like Saint-Vallier and the regent in France came into power. The good days had passed with their beloved king. Anclair was then content to remain in Quebec, where life would be free from change.

Willa Cather believed that these changes were caused by materialism. The new bishop, Saint-Vallier, was more interested in fine food, his ornate castle, and personal acclaim, than in establishing a strong church in Canada. His direct opposite was the old Bishop of Quebec, Monseigneur de Laval, who thought only of "founding and fixing his Church upon the rock, in training a native priesthood and safeguarding their future."<sup>78</sup> Finally the wilful, arrogant Saint-Vallier, after constantly working against Laval, was sobered by nine years spent as a political prisoner in England. He returned to Quebec a more humble man looking forward to the great times ahead for Canada.

Like Nebraska and the Middle West, much of Canada's potential greatness came from powerful forces of nature. In Nebraska the early settlers had to overcome the land; in Canada the dense forests challenged the people.

On the opposite shore of the river, just across the proud Rock of Quebec, the black pine forest came down to the water's edge; and on the west, behind the town, the forest stretched no living man knew how far. That was the dead,

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

sealed world of the vegetable kingdom, an uncharted continent choked with interlocking trees, living, dead, half-dead, their roots in bogs and swamps, strangling each other in slow agony that had lasted for centuries. The forest was suffocation, annihilation; there European man was quickly swallowed up in silence, distance, mould, black mud, and the stinging swarm of insect life that bred in it.<sup>79</sup>

This forest was just as much of a mystery and was just as much of an enigma to the French settlers as the land in Nebraska had been to the pioneers. The land influenced Canadian lives also. Beyond the Rock as beyond Red Cloud, lay lonely farms where life was a constant struggle. The weather also was an important factor, especially the icy winters which isolated Quebec from the world. Not all of nature was cruel, however. To the real pioneers, Canada was a beautiful country. The gorgeous colors in the sunset, the fragrance of spruce and pine that blew across the landscape, and the winding rivers seemed like paradise to young Cecile. She loved the sight of the snow covered town in the wintertime as well as the colorful fields of summer flowers. The Canadian landscape was as important to Cecile as the Divide had been to Antonia.

Shadows on the Rock is not one of Willa Cather's most famous novels, but it is an interesting one. It contains all of the elements of her earlier works, and it reinforces the same general theme. Although the setting is completely different from that of the other novels, the characters are developed along the pattern of those in the earlier books. The historical detail and accuracy and the beautiful

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid., pp. 6-7.

prose added to the artistry of the novel. The plot is subordinate to the general feeling for a way of life. W.F. Taylor has called Shadows on the Rock a nearly perfect work of fiction which can be "excluded from the company of Moby Dick and The Scarlet Letter only on the grounds that exquisite modulation is not a substitute for power."<sup>80</sup> E.K. Brown has said that Willa Cather has deliberately made her characters "living shadows of little vitality and drama in order to create a picture in prose of Quebec."<sup>81</sup>

To a reader of less artistic bent, Shadows on the Rock does seem to be lacking in vitality. Cecile is an almost perfect child who does not seem to be real. Her father is likewise a rather colorless man. The most interesting characters are Pierre Charron and the other woodmen. The tales of their adventures provide the only action in the story. For the lay reader, the religious episodes are too numerous to maintain interest. Perhaps the novel should be judged by what Willa Cather said she was trying to create. She has successfully conveyed a feeling about a way of life and about religious resignation. Shadows on the Rock should not have lessened Willa Cather's reputation as an artist in prose.

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<sup>80</sup>W. F. Taylor, A History of American Letters, p. 362.

<sup>81</sup>E. K. Brown, "Homage to Willa Cather," Yale Review, 36:92, September, 1946.

## CONCLUSION

Even though most critics have agreed that Willa Cather's name deserves to be included among the major American novelists, many of them have failed to recognize the overall pattern of her works. The purpose of this thesis has been to point out the way in which Willa Cather constructed her most important novels around one general theme, the triumph of high moral and spiritual values over materialism.

The American frontiers provided the subject matter for the novels considered. The pioneers who settled these frontiers and the problems they faced represent issues which best illustrate Cather's theme of idealism. The midwestern United States where the Cather family homesteaded is the scene for the first pioneers novels, O Pioneers! and My Ántonia. In these stories it is the people of true pioneering spirit who are successful in overcoming and cultivating the fierce, untamed land. The settlers who had taken land intending to gain wealth only met with failure.

With the passing of the frontier, Willa Cather became disillusioned with the modern world. In the next two novels, One of Ours and A Lost Lady, the evil forces of materialism had nearly obscured the pioneer spirit. The young hero in One of Ours could find no happiness in the Nebraska of his day. The "lost lady" became completely lost after the death of her pioneer husband.

After Willa Cather had used all of her material on the frontier and after the modern age became disagreeable to her, the only way she

could turn was to the past. By referring to the ancient civilization of the Indian Cliff Dwellers in Song of the Lark and The Professor's House, she symbolized man's quest for his ideal. Of the last two novels considered, Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock, one is set during the time of the French missionaries in the southwestern United States and the other is a story of the seventeenth century French colonization of Quebec. In these novels the symbol of moral values changes from the cliff dweller ruins to the Rock out of or on which the French colonies were built.

All of the novels, regardless of which group they fall into, contain examples of the strength of the forces of nature, the pioneer spirit, a longing for the past, and the evils of materialistic age. Even though through the years Willa Cather changed her main symbols successively from the power of the land to the negative forces of materialism to a nostalgia for the distant past, her general theme is always evident.

It is true that Willa Cather was unyielding in her refusal to accept change. This regard for maintaining the status quo came to be the very core of her work and of her life after the pioneer age had passed. Overlooking this petulance, her readers can have only the greatest regard for the high moral purpose around which she so skillfully developed her novels. Also her craftsmanship and artistry have had a most significant effect on the form of the American novel. Willa Cather's literary works are very likely to be as important in the twenty-first century as they have been in the twentieth.

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