TEACHING CATHER

Dedicated to promoting and improving the teaching of the works of Willa Cather

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FROM THE EDITORS

We apologize for the lateness of this issue. We'll try to do better from now on.We hope you agree the issue is worth the wait.

The work of students takes a prominent role in this issue. Every year we take pleasure in presenting the essay by the winner of the Cather Foundation's Norma Ross Walter Scholarship; this year's winner Alicia Dallman is a fine writer. In addition, you will find, in a variety of formats, the combined work of teachers and their students. Several Nebraska high school and college students and teachers came together under the leadership of University of Nebraska at Omaha professor Susan Maher to write about what *My Ántonia* means to them. With a strong interdisciplinary focus, Susan Schiller documents her students' creative responses to Cather's books. Similarly, David Porter and his student Catherine Kelly offer a celebration of creativity as they tell us how they blended sculpture, poetry, original fiction writing, classical writing, and Cather in a unique seminar at Williams College. Continuing the interdisciplinary and creative theme, Jane K. Dressler explains how she combines her research on the Chicago music scene near the turn of the last century to bring Cather to her music students at Kent State University.

A special book-length volume of *Teaching Cather* will be issued late this year in memory of Susan J. Rosowski, who inspired and encouraged us to launch this magazine. The book will contain over twenty essays on teaching Cather's works celebrating the range of scholarship and experience among teachers. It will include essays by long-time, experienced Cather teachers as well as newcomers to the field with their fresh ideas. We are excited about this project and look forward to sharing this book with you. Please keep your subscription current so that you don't miss it.

We welcome Teresa Carter of the Northwest Publications Office. She is a joy to work with and her design and production help is invaluable.

Steve Shively
Virgil Albertini

To view color photographs of the artwork in this issue, go to the University of Nebraska's Willa Cather Archive at http://cather.unl.edu. Follow the link for teachers.

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The editors of **TEACHING CATHER** seek articles, queries, syllabi, lesson plans, reviews, and news items connecting with the teaching of Willa Cather and her works in middle school, high school, college, and university classes. We welcome submissions sharing how you as teachers successfully approach Cather in the classroom. New approaches and interdisciplinary work are especially invited. Please follow current MLA guidelines.

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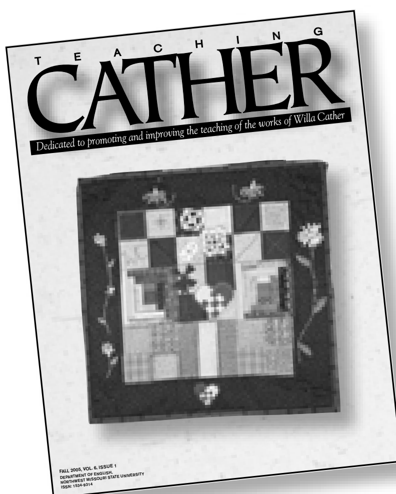

ABOUT THE COVER

The cover features the creative work of Suzanne Peck, one of Susan A. Schiller's students at Central Michigan University. Susan describes her creative approach to teaching Cather and the resultant student projects in her essay "Creating Art to Understand Art: A Holistic Relationship Between Students and Cather," pp. 8-12. Additional work by Susan's students appears throughout this issue.

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Vortex

Noonday and the sheer red metal
Rust-streaked and barren and echoing;
The structure reaching up sheath-like, curving,
Thrust into the sky, bounding the blue;
The dull red bloody under clouds, warm like rock under the sun,
The planes meeting like armadillo scales or the blades of a jet engine;
Elemental, set into the concrete sidewalk,
Its museum resting upon water elegantly misplaced,
A million-dollar stock pond.
Inside its folds, Reverberation,
Sound carried up and into the blue sphere,
Whispering over and over the footsteps,
Beating hands against unyielding metal slamming upwards;
Echo with its irreclaimable loss,
Its magnification of breathed purpose,
Its repetitive futility,
Sounding and sounding,
Within the walls of shadowed surface,
Within the sunbaked red.

Sculpture by Richard Serra. Poem by Catherine M. Kelly after Cather's "Prairie Spring." See pp. 4-7.

Voices from the Vortex: A Willa Cather Seminar

CATHERINE M. KELLY AND DAVID H. PORTER

In the winter of 2005 I offered a Willa Cather seminar under the aegis of Williams College's Winter Study Program, the four-week January session during which students take one intensive course only. While Winter Study courses must be both demanding and rigorous, faculty are asked also to design them so that they encourage students to explore new topics, develop new skills, and take more chances than they normally do in the four or five courses they take in the fall and spring semesters. Toward that end, classes are kept small and grading is descriptive rather than by letter (i.e., high pass, pass, etc.) and does not count toward a student's GPA (though it does show on the transcript).

The Cather seminar asked a lot of its students. For its twelve two-and-a-half hour meetings, students read eight novels—*Alexander's Bridge, O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, The Song of the Lark, A Lost Lady, The Professor's House, My Mortal Enemy,* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*—plus a number of Cather's short stories, several of her essays, and a selection of biographical and critical articles. The six students (two first-year, one sophomore, two juniors, and a senior) took the course seriously. That discussion was our invariable mode, with each student giving a short presentation as catalyst for discussion during each of the first three weeks, helped in this regard: in a class of this size, conducted this way, lack of preparation is immediately apparent! What inspired students to do the reading so well, however, was less fear of exposure than it was Willa Cather herself. The three stories they read for our first meeting, "The Enchanted Bluff," "A Wagner Matinée," and "Paul's Case," gave them an immediate sense of Cather's range, emotional power, and deft creation of character, and by the time they had read *Alexander's Bridge* and *O Pioneers!* to finish out the first week, they were completely hooked. When Merrill Skaggs came to campus the third week to give a public lecture and meet with the class, they were able to discuss both ***The Professor's House,*** which they had just read, and the novels that lead up to it with confidence and penetration.

In keeping with the spirit of Winter Study, I offered students three different options for their final project or paper. They could write a term paper, prepare a presentation that incorporated visual and web-based materials, or write a short story or poem that responded to and built upon their reading of Cather. One student wrote a fine term paper on Cather and Vergil, two worked up lively and provocative power-point presentations, and three took up the challenge of writing something original.

That half of the class chose this last option delighted me, but was no surprise. For years I have used similar assignments in courses I offer in classics—mythology, Greek literature in translation, ancient drama[1]—and I have found that once students get past their certainty that "they are not creative," they enjoy such assignments and through them often discover unsuspected talents in themselves. I always emphasize that the process involved is the most important thing, and that I do not expect all students to produce masterpieces; but I have found, as have the students, that the opportunity to encounter a Greek myth, a Euripides play, a Cather novel, through some form of original, imaginative endeavor is a powerful complement to the more analytical approach we usually adopt, and the results are often remarkable. Such assignments encourage students to get inside their topic, to confront it and live with it on a deeply personal level, and ultimately to produce something that is very much their own. At its best, the process involved approximates what Cesare Pavese describes in *Dialogues with Leucò:* "What is more acutely disturbing than to see familiar stories troubled into new life? The surest, and the quickest, way for us to arouse the sense of wonder is to stare, unafraid, at a single object. Suddenly—miraculously—it will look like something we have never seen before."[2]

I shall not try to describe the splendid short stories that two students, one a first-year classics major, the other a senior English major, wrote except to say that both were skillfully wrought and deeply felt, and that both were highly personal while at the same time deeply imbued with the spirit and tone of Willa Cather. The remainder of this article consists of the third such project, written by a sophomore English major who had never read Cather before this course. That Catherine Kelly's project is entitled "Vortex," for reasons she herself explains below, is appropriate not only to the whirlwind pace of the course but even more to its impact on all of us who participated. For me, the seminar offered occasion to see Cather anew, through the vortex of these bright students' encounter with her, the swirl of the questions they raised, the insights they brought to the surface. "Vortex" is even more appropriate to what I saw happening to the students as they were swept up by Willa Cather, caught in the eddies of her language, and spun forth from the seminar new and fresh and changed by this remarkable author and her works. ◆

NOTES

[1]On my use of this approach to teach Greek myth, see "Troubling the Familiar Into New Life: Some Thoughts on Teaching Mythology" (forthcoming, *Classical World*).

[2]Pavese, Cesare. *Dialogues with Leucò,* Trans. William Arrowsmith and D. S. Carne-Ross. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1965. Foreword.

David H. Porter

To the reader:

The poem, "Vortex," is modeled after Willa Cather's "Prairie Spring" at the beginning of *O Pioneers!* (1913); I attempted to use the general outline of her structure to describe something very different from her Nebraska prairies. "Vortex" is the name of the sculpture by Richard Serra that appears outside the Museum of Modern Art in Fort Worth, Texas. The image below and on page 3 are of Serra's "Vortex."

The two short stories are meant to emulate Willa Cather's writing not necessarily in their style—though there are parallels—but in their content. The two stories recount events that have been teasing at my memory for years, and this is the first time I've put any glimpse of them into writing. I'm sure they will appear again in different forms throughout my life; these representations have elements of fiction themselves.

— Catherine Kelly – 28 January 2005

Vortex

Noonday and the sheer red metal
Rust-streaked and barren and echoing;
The structure reaching up sheath-like, curving,
Thrust into the sky, bounding the blue;
The dull red bloody under clouds, warm like rock under the sun,
The planes meeting like armadillo scales or the blades of a jet engine;
Elemental, set into the concrete sidewalk,
Its museum resting upon water elegantly misplaced,
A million-dollar stock pond.
Inside its folds, Reverberation,
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Whispering over and over the footsteps,
Beating hands against unyielding metal slamming upwards;
Echo with its irreclaimable loss,
Its magnification of breathed purpose,
Its repetitive futility,
Sounding and sounding,
Within the walls of shadowed surface,
Within the sunbaked red.

The Road to Crystal

Dusk had fallen as I had walked to the church—the sun pulled behind the mountains while still shining with its noonday brightness, not yet tinted with the molten orange and pink that I'd see only as a blaze of color flung over the western peaks. There is no real sunset in the mountains, only light drawn upward into the slowly darkening sky, a tantalizing taste of what its colors must be. That tantalizing taste of what its colors must be drawn upward into the slowly darkening sky. This dusk brought relief from the heat of the July day, the heat that suspended the dust of the road to release it in a fine white veil over the aspen shivering at the roadside.

The road from the house to the church wound through what was left of this small mining town buried in the Colorado Rockies. The blocks of square-cut marble hewn from the mountain attested to the town's boom—and their haphazard jumble in the aspen stands, their edges softened under years of harsh weathering, to its bust. I was awed by these monuments of rock—some filigreed with black granite veins, some the purest white. I would rub small broken pieces of the rock in my childish hands, sweaty in the summer heat and then wonder at my palms that sparkled in the sunlight with that same crystalline glitter.

Some people were still there, hanging on in the town that for decades had been near-deserted. Mr. Orlovski and his wife moved from Missouri to Marble years ago; I don't know their reason any more today than I did then. Walking down that same road, I'd hear the whirr of the drill changing pitch before I saw it cutting into rock; then I'd round the corner and see Mr. Orlovski standing at his newest block of marble, working within a nimbus of shimmering white powder. From the blocks scattered along the quarry route he brought panthers, bears, the occasional Venus, birdbaths, rolling pins. Once finished, his creations stood there in the yard or under

the porch, polished and gleaming, the marble muscles of his many bears rippling with tension, lips pulled back over teeth gripping flopping trout with fatal delicacy.

But the completed menagerie begged the appreciative sterility of a museum. The beginnings of a panther's snarl, the head outlined against the rough block as if flinging itself at the bars of its prison—that was truly powerful—and terrifying. No polished marble perfection could hurt me, but a paw clawing out of inanimate stone revealed its potential for furious life. Mr. Orlovski worked his marble with the precision of Michelangelo under the dappling aspen leaves. The last time I was there, he and his wife were trying to sell their place and move back to Missouri.

Dusk had fallen as I had walked to the church set in one curve of the road. I didn't know many of the other people entering with me; most of them were year-round folks and I was only there for the summer. But people could vanish in mountains like these for long stretches of time, reappearing only every so often, jolting down narrow rocky roads in their battered jeeps to pick up more eggs or milk. These people didn't need the reassurance of neighbors and managed to be fiercely territorial in a country of no trespassing. Sitting in the hard pew, watching the light behind the dulled and clumsy stained glass windows darken, I watched the people trickle in, moving from sheer momentum down the mountain, sitting close enough to touch shoulders, away from the properties that met at barbed wire fences drowned in grasses and columbine. Conversation was minimal: I heard the expected inquiries after family, children studying at the universities in Denver or Chicago. My eyes were focused at the front of the church, where a group of about fifteen people stood, their cheeks and hair young and smooth amidst this crowd of brown faces leathered by the hot wind and sun. One boy in particular caught my eye: he was taller than the rest, with white-blond hair and flushed red cheeks set off by a bright pink shirt, creating a whirl of yellow and pink among the rest. I chose him immediately as my own.

The singers began with American shape-note music and moved into Romanian folksongs, the subtly bittersweet harmonies cascading through the little building. They sang with a joy that I haven't seen since, giving themselves entirely to the music permeating their dry, silent audience, the silver stream of melody filling the spaces so long empty of anything but the same dolorous hymns pounded out on the upright piano. Fiddle, harmonica, tambourine, trumpet, and guitar appeared one by one and were played with the same vital energy, carving the music's shapes into the air dancing with sound. My jaws ached with delight. Then the girls began to move down the aisle, tossing colored scarves into the air, juggling them in circular and crossing patterns. The whirling colors and sounds crowded my eyes and ears, pouring in through every orifice; I tried to use my breath itself to bring the music and its abstract shapes deep into my lungs, pump them out to my fingers and toes with my blood, bright and alive.

I walked out of the church into the night. The singers were grouped about the steps. Their voices were unified now, the complex harmonies resolved into the repetitive unison of a spiritual that washed in waves over the departing people. I've since found myself singing that same song mindlessly while doing my laundry or the dishes; the words and melody require no effort, no climax, just the willingness to let the voice lie upon the music's simple lines, rough and unfinished but worn smooth with use. The voice sluices over the notes that lie along a groove, so natural, inevitable, as if the mind knew them before memory ever did.

***

I rose early the next morning to walk the road to Crystal and back again before lunch. This was the same road I'd followed the night before, though I was walking east now, away from town. The road rises steeply for a couple miles up Daniel's Hill then drops to follow the Crystal River twinkling along its narrow gorge, following miniscule changes in topography amidst towering peaks of bare rock. I was midway up Daniel's Hill when the sun broke from behind the mountains, flooding the blue-grey road with a golden heat that seemed to evaporate the moisture in the air instantaneously. The dust of the road stirred alive. I was thankful for the hat shading my face, the salt-lines already marking the progress of the sweat seeping upwards from its brim. As I neared the crest of the hill, I saw ahead of me a group of people, far larger than any I'd seen before or since walking up Daniel's Hill in July: the singers, the tall blond boy's ears visibly bright red in the sun even from where I was. They were trudging up the hill, slowly making their way to Crystal where they were to sing that night. I had not expected to see them again, thinking they were always to exist in my mind as they had in the church or gathered around its steps. But here they were, and as a similarly young person on the same road, my mind raced through the implications of passing them—which I would, at this rate. What should I say? Should I mention their singing, their juggling, their fiddle-playing, their admirable command of Romanian? What glance could communicate my love and admiration to the boy with the very red ears?

As I recall, I simply passed them; we made friendly comments about the day's heat, and I went on. I made it to Crystal by late morning—a faint track worn in a small clearing and a few cabins clustered together—another mining settlement that had seen its short success long before. Its abandoned mill shows up every now and then on a postcard or in a book of picturesque Colorado scenes: a wooden shed clinging to a cliff above the rushing rapids of the Crystal like a crudely built nest; the ramshackle structure has outlasted the miners' cabins built firmly on flat ground. Tempting fate even as it was built, it has avoided disaster with uncanny endurance.

I must have passed the singers on my way back, but I don't recall this; passing people on the road didn't happen often, but it was usually unremarkable. We were all pushing along the road and sticking to the shade to avoid the sun that had already exhausted the fragile aspen leaves. ◆

Storm

Henry shifted position again on the bus seat. He permitted himself a small sigh of frustration then fell quiet again. He levered himself up, arching his back against the seat to look up and behind him at the rows of sleeping students. They sat in attitudes of true rest, heads back and mouths open, inhaling and exhaling softly, or leaning against one another. In some cases, Henry noticed, the nighttime bus ride had provided excellent opportunity for a girl to

snuggle into the neighboring boy's shoulder, and for that boy's head to fall carelessly upon hers under the safe cover of unknowing sleep. Towards the back of the bus, the duskiness faded into dark, but he knew that was where the snuggling debauchery had happened, if it had happened at all. Not one head was upright and alert. He turned back and sank back into his seat as Sam's head began to drift back down to his shoulder; he nudged it gently in the other direction, regretting his choice of seat partner.

Henry looked out the front windows several rows up, letting his eyes run along the ribbon of road vanishing under the wheels, seemingly an unchanging straight piece of asphalt that cycled under the bus like the conveyor belts at the supermarkets. He knew they must be descending in altitude, returning from Albuquerque through the high plains of the Panhandle and down into those limestoned lands of Central Texas once covered with shallow seas—but any such change was indiscernible. On the other hand, he thought, the drive wasn't really so bad—especially not by day, and definitely not as bad as people made it out to be: "Oh, the drive through West Texas," they'd say, and shake their heads. "Boy, that's when you set cruise control at eighty miles per hour and prop the wheel straight so you can sleep for a couple hours!" Henry would knowingly agree with them—at least with the adults—but when other kids tried that line, he'd defend the drive out west, those hundreds of miles of flat unbroken fields accented only by huge sprinkler apparatuses and grain elevators. There was plenty of excitement in that landscape; it was an excitement different from that of towering peaks or crashing surf, the conventionally spectacular landscapes. It is ultimately more satisfying to find powerful beauty in a place universally denigrated than to recognize the awesomeness of a scene extolled by writers and artists and lawyers pumping their gas and comparing vacations. Perhaps it was because Henry couldn't fall into oblivion on these drives that he had had to discover something in this landscape worth the hours of thought it took to get through it.

But he needed the sun to light the details of the fields, the tassels of the corn or the dark green of the soybeans, the silos with their huge funnels poised over semis or boxcars lined up on railroad tracks appearing from the green jungle of America's horsefeed. Even more than these earthly details, he needed the sun to light the sky, revealing its gradient of pale bleached blue at the horizons to an impossible cerulean overhead, playing over the high buttermilk clouds or casting the shadows of the cumulus stalwarts solidly below. Overhead, the clouds were light and fluffy, their bottoms all planed flat as if they'd come up against a shield beamed from the earth, but the shadows were another matter—the ground beneath them sunless, the darkness transfixing these islands in otherworldly twilight. To see the blackness of a shadow ahead on the road and to drive willingly into the gloom was to face the possibility of never returning into sunlight.

As the bus ate up the road to spit it back out again fifty yards ahead, Henry glanced at his watch: 2:45 a.m. They'd been driving for five hours now and had ten left to go. They'd left the fine arts festival in Albuquerque just as it ended, having sung their cheap Broadway medleys and tired patriotic numbers the day before. Henry had spent the day wandering the campus, listening in slack-jawed awe to one choir and orchestra after another and beaming through every jazz band performance he could find, glancing critically at the photographs mounted on boards in the gym and wiping gleaming eyes at the close of plays about our doomed youth. It had been hard to get on the bus to head back east—and was harder still to sit there, frustratingly alert, straining his eyes to make out any shapes in the dark on the other side of the streaked windowpane. Beyond the faded white line at the side of the road there was nothing—perhaps a faint horizon, the meeting of corn and sky, but it could have been his imagination. Henry resigned himself to ten more hours of wakefulness and let his eyes rest from reaching outside the bus to focus on the reflections on the windowsill he had been struggling past: his own face, most clearly, and Sam's drooping form beside him. Using the reflections to refract his vision into the seat behind him, Henry saw more sleeping bodies, the farther rows blurring.

He wasn't sure at what point he became conscious of some change in the window; his eye registered some difference in the darkness of his peripheral vision noticeably before his did. Henry, turning his head, fought past the reflections on the glass once again—and there, just on the horizon—a change in the light. It was to the west—not some phenomenon of the sunrise. And again, the whole cloud at once electrified with muted brilliance and fell just as quickly back into invisibility. Another cloud, a ways off, flashed into existence and was gone. The bus was silent. Henry stood up, this time with a sort of desperate urgency, but all eyes were closed. He turned back to the window; the lightning was licking at the edges of the darkness, jumping across the horizon. The clouds shook silently with each flash; they were bearing the full force of the lightning, Henry thought, without the crack of thunder to relieve them, martyring their ghostly fragility to the light tearing at their insides.

The flashing spread to the clouds directly over the bus; indeed, the bus was traveling through the center of the electric interplay. Henry felt his throat clench with fear at his sudden certainty that the bus and its slumbering occupants would be fried at any moment, instantly consumed like a drop of water spattered into hot oil. Heat lightning, they called it, and Henry was sure it carried a terrible heat—but there was nothing to indicate that in the clouds above; that light was supernatural, and the human concept of heat had no place in its description. Now that the clouds were filled to their utmost, bolts began to fork down in spidery precision. The corn leaves shone purple under the light. Henry resisted his urge to cry out.

***

The bus pulled into the twenty-four-hour truck-stop at 4:30 a.m. Henry's mother used to lay his infant sister on top of their clothes dryer at night when Julie couldn't sleep, and the vibrations of the machine would send her right off. Taken off the dryer, though, after several minutes of sound sleep, Julie would awaken with an indignant cry. This bus, Henry concluded, was nothing but a big clothes dryer, and the students it carried, so full of ready bravado, were no more complicated than children craving the reassuring repetition of rocking. Roused with the bus's stop, the students stumbled into the convenience store and stood about the beef jerky and sunglasses stands making the mindless conversation that one makes at truck-stop convenience stores before sunrise. Henry mentioned the heat-lightning storm to Sam, who expressed momentary interest before heading off in the direction of the illicit magazines. ◆

Creating Art to Understand Art: A Holistic Relationship Between Students and Cather

SUSAN A. SCHILLER

This article features holistic education, creativity studies, and creative projects completed by my Central Michigan University students who studied the works of Willa Cather in English 345: Studies in Authors. When I teach this course I rely heavily on holistic methods and assign a creative project rather than a seminar paper or essay test that typically ends a semester. My students' projects have taught me that creativity opens deep spiritual spaces for understanding art as well as for developing our ability to become artists. They also have convinced me that a holistic approach to teaching provides greater opportunity for students to internalize subject matter as well as to be excited by learning.

First I will present a basic overview of holistic education and then do the same for creativity studies. I'll describe the course I teach in more detail and, to end, I'll focus on the students' artworks for they are quite beautiful and persuasive.

Many of you may be familiar with wholism spelled with a W, but the holism I am referring to is spelled with an H. John P. Miller tells us that wholism with a W "is more material and biological with an emphasis on physical and social interconnections," while holisim with an H "implies spirituality, or sense of the sacred." The inclusion of the spiritual is the distinctive difference. "Holistic" education is concerned with the whole learner, including the learner's spiritual center. Activating the whole person is necessary to initiate deep and permanent learning experiences. The learner's intellect, emotions, physical body, spirit, and social being are developed together rather than independently, because an imbalance occurs in our development if we use one part and not the others. Within the rich context created by wholeness, mind, emotion and body are integrated. One's spirit assumes a central and vital role because it is the source of motivation for growth and learning. Doralice Rocha adds, "Another main belief of the holistic educational movement is that educational processes should cultivate the connections between the learner and what is to be learned" (xii).

Holistic educators use wholeness as a means through which to teach, and they create methods through which wholeness fosters our full awareness. Our inner and outer lives are no longer isolated, but integrated so that we come to a meaningful understanding of our spirit, our soul. All around the world today, explorative educators are turning to holism as a means to evoke and recover the spiritual center in learners—the center that motivates, awakens, enlivens, and instigates creativity, compassion, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect (Lantieri 6). The word "holistic" in this paper refers to this rich interconnected view of learning and being.

The field of creativity studies looks at what creativity is and how it works. Activity in this field has increased over the last 70 years, and is generally dominated by psychology. Social, psychological, emotional, cultural, and biological factors are most often featured. Studies tend to fall into two categories: idiographic research that relies on individual case studies, and nomothetic research that seeks discovery of general or universal laws that can be applied to all (Gardner, "Creators'" 143).[1] Howard Gardner's work in creativity studies attempts to construct a bridge that spans idiographic and nomothetic research. Gardner presents a more holistic perspective, although he never explicitly refers to the spiritual side of knowing. He stresses cognitive and developmental psychological frames that take into account social and motivational aspects of creativity, and he utilizes multiple intelligences he previously identified in *Frames of Mind* (linguistic, logical mathematical, spatial, musical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal). His creativity theory later articulated in *The Creators of the Modern Era)* is "inherently interdisciplinary" ("Creators'" 145)—a feature that leans into holism. About his definition and approach to creativity, Gardner says:

1. I focus equally on problem solving, problem finding, and the creation of products, such as scientific theories, works of art, or the building of institutions.
2. I emphasize that all creative work occurs in one or more domains. Individuals are not creative (or noncreative) in general; they are creative in particular domains of accomplishment and require the achievement of expertise in these domains before they can execute significant creative work.
3. No person, act, or product is creative or noncreative in itself. Judgments of creativity are inherently communal, relying heavily on individuals expert within a domain. ("Creators'" 145)

Gardner's definition requires a broad perspective that lets us see that "creativity emerges in virtue of a dialectical process among *individuals* of talent, *domains* of knowledge and practices, and *fields* of knowledgeable judges" ("Creators'" 146).

Gardner further relies on two general positions: one, that people can develop all seven intelligences he has already identified, and two, that creative people "are characterized particularly by a tension, or lack of fit, between the elements involved in a productive work" ("Creators'" 146). He labels this tension *fruitful asynchrony*, and says that it is "the conquering of these asynchronies that leads to

the establishment of work that comes to be cherished" ("Creators'" 146).[2] In other words, fruitful asynchrony provides the initiating impulse for creativity.

In English 345, I ask students to complete a creative project that synthesizes their reading and understanding of Cather's work. The artistic genre for the project must meet my approval before time is spent developing it. The readings began with Cather's *Collected Stories* followed by *O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, The Song of the Lark, One of Ours, A Lost Lady, Lucy Gayheart,* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Optional titles for extra credit were *The Professor's House* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. At the end, students produced a wide range of "art" such as handmade quilts, oil paintings, water colors, scrapbooks, original poetry, cookbooks, original song lyrics and C.D.'s, a women's magazine, a land surveyor's description of Alexandra's farm in *O Pioneers!*, mini comics, poster art, costumes, sculptures, culinary dishes, antique tool demonstrations, photo albums, and others. Motivated by Satish Kumar's call for holistic education to organize around the trinity of soil, soul, and society, we used this trinity to frame our discussions.

The creative project assignment matches Gardner's description of the creative process in the following ways:

1. The creative assignment asks for a creation of a product or a work of art.
2. The domain is a set of practices associated with an area of knowledge. I ask the students to remain within the subject matter of the course—in this case Willa Cather—but students can self select a domain of creative expression such as poetry, music, art, and so on, that suits their creative goals. Their creative project should attempt to demonstrate expertise of the domains. A synthesis of Cather's work must be central to the project which becomes complete only after its public presentation.
3. The judgment of the product is controlled by the field—that is, by the audience, the teacher, and the institutional standards of excellence.
4. The fruitful asynchrony is created by the tension between reaching a synthesis of Cather's work and manifesting it in a creative form that can be judged by the group as an aesthetically pleasing artifact.

The student projects combine all seven of Gardner's types of intelligences, but may feature one more strongly than another.

Let's take a look at a few of these projects. Bob Bell wrote original music, burning a C.D. titled, "Es flustern und sprechen die Blumen," which means "The flowers whisper and speak." During his presentation, he performed each song and explained ways they synthesized Cather's work. The C.D. contains seven songs: "Song for the Land," "Spanish Johnny," "Eastern Europe," "Tinwhistle," "Lilies that Fester," and "Calm October." Each one responds to various elements in Cather's literature. In this example, Bob created a final project that grew out of his musical, linguistic, and kinesthetic intelligence.

Closely related to Bob's work is Martin Trent's. As an African American student with an urban background, Martin struggled with Cather because he could not identify with many of the characters or with rural settings. However, the creative project let him eventually find a way into her work. He demonstrated linguistic and musical intelligence, and his presentation became social, intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic, physical, and emotional. From the twelve poems he wrote, he read five—"Manuelito," "Love," "Wicked," "Frank," and "To My Brothers"—and concluded by performing one rap verse, "Under the Tree." Despite severe nervousness he performed competently and with great satisfaction, especially when his classmates requested an encore performance of poems they particularly enjoyed. The encore bound Martin to the culture of English 345 in a more holistic and meaningful way—a way that let him learn, succeed, and belong. Martin's art also demonstrated how creating something new led him to a deeper understanding of Cather.

Carrie Jones decided to make a quilted wall hanging depicting various textual scenes. Her project relied on spatial and linguistic intelligence. She included sixteen panels that synthesized ten novels and multiple short stories (see p. 10). She chose scenes that "stuck out in [her] mind/imagination and/or because of their underlying meaning/symbolism, but also those that matched [her] level of [sewing] skill" (this being only the third quilt she had sewn).

Having spent more than thirty hours to complete the quilt, Carrie was very proud of her work and thanked me for an assignment that was fun but also rewarding. As she compared this holistic assignment to a more traditional assignment she said, "I really enjoyed this project! It offered something different! It forced us to use our imagination and to be creative! Just, thank you so much for giving us something F-U-N to work on!"

Carrie then continued to define F-U-N:

> *[W]hat 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 . . . ?*
>
> — Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark*

Quilt by Carrie Jones

(Panel Identification)
16 squares numbered from left to right, moving from top to bottom.

1. Two white butterflies from *O Pioneers!* symbolizes the love between Marie and Emil.
2. The sand hills of Moonstone in *The Song of the Lark* symbolize characters' connectedness to the land/nature.
3. Mrs. Forrester walking, wandering through her grove in *A Lost Lady* symbolizes and foreshadows her loss of poise when Frank marries Constance.
4. The cruciform tree in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* symbolizes Father Latour's being found.
5. The Forrester's home in *A Lost Lady* symbolizes its centrality in the story.
6. Heart in hand in soil and sky epitomizes the "soul, society, soil" frame used during the course.
7. Solitary duck on Ivar's pond in *O Pioneers!* represents the beauty of the moment in the memory shared between Alexandra and Emil as well as their connection to the land.
8. Snowstorm in *One of Ours* depicts beauty and an inherent deep meaning from the following quote: "There was a solemnity about a storm of such magnitude; it gave one a feeling of infinity. The myriads of white particles that crossed the rays of lamplight seemed to have a quiet purpose, to be hurring toward a definite end."
9. Enchanted bluff from "The Enchanted Bluff" represents the focus of the story.
10. Mr. Forrester's sun-dial and garden in *A Lost Lady* represents Mr. Forrester's fragility, final pleasures, and source of peace in his last days.
11. The cliff dwellings in *The Song of the Lark* represents the time Thea spent there and the restoration of her center/self and her drive.
12. Harry Gordon's cutter with sleigh bells in *Lucy Gayheart*. Sleigh bells twice connected Lucy and Harry during the plot.
13. The road lined by sunflowers in *My Ántonia* represents Jim's humble appreciation of the land, its wildness.
14. The white mules from *Death Comes for the Archbishop* symbolize a practical representation for the novel
15. The cat, Blue Boy, in "Old Mrs. Harris." The story referenced calico material frequently; Blue Boy is made out of blue calico.
16. Claude's view of Leonard Dawson's windmill in *One of Ours*. Claude's observation of the windmill at sunset reveals his ties to the land.

> If questioned, consider this: fun = a willingness to participate; fun = the possibility for a greater interest/energy/involvement; therefore, fun (willinginess+interest/energy/involvement) = greater retention of information and connections/syntheses (i.e. as opposed to research papers, and/or essay tests, which immediately following such you seek to dump the information as soon as it's no longer required).

When students are permitted to create their own deep connections to course work, they experience a holistic learning that lasts beyond the last day of class. This was definitely Carrie's experience, as it was for other students in the class.

Susanne Peck also made a quilt, but it is quite different from Carrie's for it seeks to become "a reflection of the concept of art as synthesis" (see cover). Susanne's description of specific details in the quilt points to mathematical, spatial, and linguistic intelligences. She writes

> This project is a small square quilt consisting of nine four-inch blocks and a three inch border. The blocks are arranged by three-by-three. The bottom row is green and yellow and is made of a fence-row block flanked by two four-patch blocks. These are intended to resemble the symmetrical patterns of prairie fields. The middle row is made of a blue four-patch flanked by multicolored traditional log cabin blocks. This mid-ground resembles the human sphere of the prairie with the log cabins, a windmill and a traditional heart pattern from Norway. The top row is of blue four-patches and mimics the sky. The border is decorated with renditions of prairie flowers: blue flax, oxeye daisy and purple coneflower. Additionally it is quilted and embroidered with blanket stitches and back stitches. The top left block is embroidered with Willa Cather's initials.

One can see from her description how much mathematical and spatial thought went into this project—skills that she found weaker than she had previously thought. When reflecting on what she learned from the project, she mentions this and complains about making "a few dysfunctional blocks." She finally agreed to use a ruler if her mother, who was helping her, "would just leave [her] alone." Even after that, she asked her mom to show her how to use a paper-piecing pattern. She said that she "tried to do the feather-stitching that Enid does on her special wedding garments, but [she] could not follow the directions very well and they did not look as they should." Susanne concluded that she would classify "the kind of meditation that one finds in the task of sewing as soulful, [and quotes] from *The Song of the Lark:* "They told about the sweet thoughts that came to them while they were about their work; how amid their households tasks, they were suddenly lifted by the sense of a divine Presence" (407).

This sense of the divine is felt again when Susanne explains the ideas she synthesized

> One of the significant ideas that inspired this project was the idea that in art one is trying to recapture something natural and pure. Something that was possessed once, that has been lost, for instance, when Thea remarked that she was more of an artist as a child, or how the land was Alexandra's inspiration. It was the original spirit that drove her into her adulthood. It was that old story that she realized kept being relived. I believe that it is this realization and desire that drives most art. Only when we have distance from the original purity and beauty can we appreciate it and one can spend their whole life trying to recapture and express it. But it's almost as if the recognition destroys the purity. I think that is what makes art so driving and frustrating. In this way art is merely a synthesis, because we recall parts and not the whole, as in the use of memory in *My Ántonia.* Reality collides with perception. The artist must reconcile the two.

A sense of the spiritual and sacred, a vital element in holistic learning, is strongly evident in Susanne's project. Especially strong is Susanne's conscious effort to use art to create art. Equally strong are Susanne's appreciation and understanding of Cather as well as the way Cather's work guides the creation of her quilt.

Caroline Lake relied primarily on spatial and linguistic ways of knowing when she compiled a twenty page scrapbook. Each page displayed one to three pictures that were accompanied by a quote from Cather's work (see pp. 17, 19, 23). Her creative impulse came while working on her wedding scrapbook. Since she "loves" scrapbooking, she decided to "incorporate Cather's work into something [she] loves." When describing the process she used to complete this work, she said

> [my] first step was to re-read or scan-read all the assigned Cather novels and short stories and highlight passages which I found to be emotionally impacting, interesting, or characterized the theme of soil, soul and society. . . .[T]he next step was to search for pictures and images that integrated the "feeling" of the quote into colors and images. . . . I printed all the pictures onto photo-paper and then cut and cropped them to my liking . . . . When I scrapbook, I do "marathons"—I'll sit for 6-8 hours and work until my eyes hurt. I cannot help it. I get so into "the zone" that the passage of time is irrelevant to me. I did four marathon sessions of scrapbooking and spent an odd hour here and there working on bits and pieces. All in all, from the beginning of actual work to the end, I spent about 38 hours on this project—this doesn't include the acquisition of the quotes; add another 6 hours reading. The time was well spent and enjoyable . . . was well used because I was doing something I enjoyed. It was fun to search for images to match my feelings and even more fun to make those pictures and quotes mine.
>
> The idea of a "creative project" in lieu of formal testing is wonderful. Instead of concentrating on what is going to be on the test, the students are forming personal connec-

tions to the text because their creative project is centered on them and what activities they like to do in connection to the author's work. When students are intent on forming personal connections to the text, they retain the information longer because it is tied to something personal. I believe that if anyone didn't like the creative project idea, they were not true to themselves—the whole idea was to pick a project that was near and dear to them. What makes this idea hard though, is that every project is different; I like the idea of an accompanying "write-up" in order to see what steps the student took in order to reach their end-point and what their thought process was. All in all, I could have done a Willa Cather test, but I enjoyed this so much better.

Although the students did not read Sylvia Ashton-Warner's book *Teacher*, when Caroline writes that "when students are intent on forming personal connections to the text, they retain the information longer because it is tied to something personal," she echoes Ashton-Warner's philosophy for "organic learning"—a philosophy that is well known and accepted by holistic educators. As Ashton-Warner says, learning becomes organic when it is self-selected: "the more it means to [a student] the more value it is to him" (54). Caroline's opinion that if students did not like the creative project assignment they were not being "true to themselves" again underscores the core of organic learning. Holistic learning is organic precisely because it provides learners with a path for permanent learning—permanent because it is intrinsically connected to self and to their inner spirit.

My last example also demonstrates spatial and linguistic intelligence. Sarah Gillam created a women's magazine that might appeal to older farming women in Cather's work. The magazine includes recipes, fashion, a fiction column, a useful foreign word table, a column presenting the pros and cons of women in the workforce, and advertisements of consumer goods. Sarah said that she designed the pages based on what she found to be "aesthetically pleasing, incorporating ideas from Cather's works into a layout and language that were all [Sarah's] own." The recipes are for foods mentioned in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*. The fashion section presents 1902 images that Sarah thought were presented in *Lucy Gayheart*. The advertisements featured a washing machine, cream separator, and electric flatiron—inventions that the Wheeler boys in *One of Ours* tried to persuade Mrs. Wheeler and Mahailey to use. The fiction story draws from Cather's move from Virginia to Nebraska, while the vocabulary list contains foreign words she thought would be useful to pioneer farmers who would encounter various immigrants already in the West. She ends the magazine with the persuasive pro/con column, which Sarah says "synthesizes the characters of Alexandra, Ántonia, Lena, Enid, Lucy, Thea and Mrs. Forrester." Again, we see Sarah's creativity placing her deeper and deeper into the works of Cather. To conclude the written analysis of the project, Sarah writes

I found this project much more rewarding compared to the traditional literary analysis essays and objective tests to assess learning. Even if I would have made the same connections and analysis in an essay paper, I feel the knowledge is much more valuable and will be better retained in a creative format since the decisions, analysis and project were all my own.

To complete a creative project with expertise, students naturally combined analytic thinking, critical thinking, research, creativity, and reflection. They participated physically and socially when choosing collaboration with peers and during the interactive presentations of completed projects. Their spirits and souls were engaged with work they chose, created, and designed, and their intellectual abilities were stretched with the challenge of synthesizing course material into a creative artifact that they judged to be aesthetically pleasing. Most students preferred creative projects over a final essay or test, and they became more deeply engaged. They claimed to embrace and learn Cather more fully, more deeply. They used art to discover art—their own and Cather's—and they grew into a holistic relationship with Cather. ◆

NOTES

[1]For a fuller view of creativity studies than this space allows, see *Dimensions of Creativity*, Margaret A. Boden, Ed. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994.

[2]In this study, Gardner goes on to use seven well known creators—Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Pablo Picasso, Igor Stravinsky, T.S. Eliot, Martha Graham, and Mahatma Ghandi—each exemplifying at least one of the seven intelligences Gardner identifies.

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One Book One State: Nebraska Reads *My Ántonia*

SUSAN NARAMORE MAHER

In October 2004, a group of professionals—teachers, librarians, board members of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation, and book-club leaders—met in Kearney, Nebraska to plan an unprecedented statewide reading of Cather's great novel, *My Ántonia,* for the spring of 2005. The purpose was to turn Nebraska citizens' attention to Red Cloud and the 50th anniversary of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation (WCPM). At the start of this mission, steering committee members for this event wanted to reach as many Nebraskans as possible, using the state's library system, the state's secondary and higher educational institutions, and mass media to interest potential readers and to encourage them to read Jim Burden's narrative and then discuss it. The steering committee, having no model other than successful city-wide or community-wide book readings, wanted to be as inclusive and innovative as possible. Early on, the steering committee put its efforts behind a high school essay writing contest, and by March 15, 2005, over 125 Nebraska high school students from the Panhandle to Omaha submitted essays. Faculty members from the English and Library departments at Hastings College and the University of Nebraska at Omaha vetted the entries. The three student honorees, Malisa Militzer of Central High School in Omaha, Brittany Dietrich of Alliance High School, and Thomas Elliott of Alliance High School, read their award-winning essays in the restored Opera House in Red Cloud, at the 50th Anniversary Celebration of the WCPM. Their memorable essays were published in *The Nebraska English Journal* late in the summer (special Cather issue, Spring/Summer 2005).

> *Afterwards, all participants felt that they had been part of something unique and valuable.*

The most innovative event of the statewide reading connected high school and college students from across Nebraska with five renowned Cather scholars via satellite television, hosted by the University of Nebraska at Omaha on April 8, 2005. Dr. Bruce Baker, Emeritus Professor at UNO, Dr. Guy Reynolds, head of the internationally acclaimed Cather Project at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Dr. Andrew Jewell, digital expert and Cather scholar at UN-L, Dr. Steven Shively, co-editor of *Teaching Cather* and associate professor at Northwest Missouri State University, and Dr. Charles Johanningsmeier, associate professor at UNO were the panel members. Jane Sandoz and Jim Mercer, AP English teachers at Millard West High School in Omaha, brought their students to a studio on the UNO campus, where satellite technology connected them with faculty and students at Hastings College, Wayne State College, and Chadron State College. Tim Kaldahl of UNO's media relations office emceed the event, orchestrating the questions and responses, and making sure that every panelist and as many students as possible had a chance to speak about the novel. Each audience member had assigned tasks: to ask questions of the panelists, to read short essays on Cather's novel for the panelists to respond to, and, in the case of two panelists, Andrew Jewell and Steven Shively, to present information on the digital Willa Cather Archive and on the journal *Teaching Cather*. For 90 minutes, these insightful, enthusiastic students kept up a lively, scholarly exchange with the five panelists. Participants were impressed as well by the students' eloquence and by their teachers' skillfully drawn personal essays on the topic of reading Cather's novel as an experienced adult. Afterwards, all participants felt that they had been part of something unique and valuable. The technology was not always perfect, but the conversation was often brilliant, always informative, and of tangible value to the students, who waxed enthusiastically after the event. It gave the Millard West students a chance to see university-level dialogue at its best.

This issue of *Teaching Cather* cannot recreate the intellectual exchange of that April morning, but it can bring to its readers a number of the essays read across the state by teachers and students alike. Willa Cather herself, who always encouraged the best from her own high school students in Pittsburgh, inspired the organizers at UNO, Dr. Susan N. Maher of the English department and Tim Kaldahl, to include a writing component, to challenge student readers of Cather to respond in lucid, concise, artful phrasing. They also felt it would be educational for the students to hear their own teachers' essays; too often students do not understand or appreciate the depth of talents their teachers have. At the end of each teacher's essay, one could sense the students' surprise and respect. Of all the pedagogical strategies used for this teleconference, the shared essays have resonated the longest. Now in print, perhaps they will inspire other institutions to attempt their own kind of high-tech literary event. ◆

Teaching *My Ántonia* in 2005

JANE SANDOZ, Millard West teacher

Simple . . . boring . . . slow . . . nothing happens . . .

These are some of the initial reactions of my students who read *My Ántonia.* Of course, they think it is slow. They are living in the day of instant technology: IPods, TVO, cell phones. Why would they want to wait and watch as Jim Burden and Antonia Shirmerda grow up under the vast Nebraska sky?

I must confess . . . as a teen I felt the same way. Where is the plot? I wondered. Does the story even have a climax? I thought.

But now as a "grown-up" I appreciate the pace of the novel. I realize now that it's not a book about exciting events, but a book about relationships . . . and remembering . . . and relishing. It's not a "simple" book as some students have claimed—because relationships are anything but "simple."

I see now that Cather's characters are as real today as they were then. I encounter them all the time. Lena Lingaard is my friend who has such a strong entrepreneurial spirit that she plans to scrap the corporate world and open her own business. Mrs. Harling is my neighbor, the working mother of seven who still manages to make it to those soccer games and piano recitals. Unfortunately, I know some miserable Mr. Shimerdas and cruel Wick Cutters.

But I also know Otto Fuchs and Jake Marpoles. They help me with computer problems, not livestock. Like Jim, I, too, long for some people of my past who helped define who I am today. I too ache for simpler times when I saw meadows out my window, not strip malls.

Yes, these characters of Cather are fleshed out all around us. But it might take an "aged" perspective to notice them, to see that Cather is writing about relationships and memory and past.

Some day my students will better appreciate the story of Jim Burden's past . . . when they are old enough to have a past. ◆

Looking Back

JIM MERCER, Millard West teacher

My high school journalism teacher was obsessed with Willa Cather and John G. Neihardt, and her greatest life experience had been to meet Cather. There was photography involved somehow, but, as a high school sophomore, I didn't pay too much attention to details which didn't directly affect me. She made us plow through *My Ántonia,* which at the time I considered cruel and unusual punishment. My intellectual response to the novel at the time was, "Why didn't they all just move to town?" Again, not much attention to details which didn't directly affect me.

Twenty years pass, and I find myself neck high in prairie prose, reading for one of my comprehensive exams. *Ántonia* shows up again, but she's different now. As a reader, I understood disappointment and failed dreams. I knew that hardship was more than having to read Henry James. What I read as boring prose at fifteen, I read now as subtlety—a rolling prose that mirrored the landscape from which Cather drew.

Perhaps the most powerful change was the way I saw Ántonia herself. She is quiet dignity incarnate. For contemporary readers from a culture that measures success only in quantifiable, material terms, it may be difficult to identify with a protagonist who measures success in more humanistic terms. It is, perhaps, Ántonia's perspective that speaks so loudly now because we are nostalgic for those ideals we've abandoned and wish we could retrieve. ◆

Ántonia: Independent Heroine

MARK KETCHAM, Millard West student

Ántonia Shimerda has been called heroic by many readers. She travels from her native land of Bohemia to the harsh wilderness of Nebraska and somehow makes ends meet. To me, she is not just a strong woman, but also a representation of the American Dream itself. She accomplishes so much despite the fact that she starts with so little. She is able to achieve what so many other immigrants could only dream of.

Of course, it's incredibly difficult to achieve much success without hard work. Ántonia proves to be no exception. When she turns fifteen, Jim realizes that she is a physically strong girl who always talks of how much she can lift. Due to her father's suicide, she is forced to work in the fields rather than fulfill a traditional female role. Through this, she learns the value of hard work and prepares herself for a future full of hardships. At the end of Book I when Jim asks her why she isn't so nice all the time, she tells him that things will be easy for him, but hard for her and her family. She understands that she is going to have to keep working hard to get by in life.

Not only does she work hard, but Ántonia is also extremely independent. When Mr. Harling asks her not to attend any more dances, she simply goes off to work for Wick Cutter rather than give up something she loves. Also, rather than shun her illegitimate child, she is actually proud of her. Jim points out that while another girl would have kept her baby out of sight, Ántonia wants to have her daughter's picture on exhibition.

Ántonia comes to Nebraska with nothing but a few possessions and her family. By the end of the story, however, she is successfully raising eleven children on a farm with her husband and enjoys her life thoroughly. Twenty years after their previous meeting, Jim can see that she still has that same fire in her eyes that drove her. That's what Ántonia Shimerda means to me. ◆

Finding Dreams in Flat Places

ELINOR LANE, Millard West student

Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* portrays the Bohemian heroine, Ántonia Shimerda, as an individual who shapes the past, present, and future of Jim Burden's world. By the title of the novel, Jim's attachment to Ántonia makes her a prominent figure that he looks to for inspiration in all aspects of his life. Willa Cather's character, Ántonia, represents to me, as well, the successes of one individual in her search for the American dream in the diminishing simplicity of rural life on the Nebraska landscape.

Ántonia exemplifies her greatness in many influential aspects of her life. From the beginning Ántonia expresses her strong spirit and will to succeed. As a child she was the only member of her family who really understood the little English that they heard. From the beginning Ántonia expresses her strong spirit and will to succeed. As a child she was the only member of her family who really understood the little English that they heard. From the first true encounter with the Burden family Ántonia's spirited pursuit of the language and people in her new world was expressed. "She was quick, and very eager" (26), Jim says of her ability to embrace and accept with open optimism her new life in Nebraska. She brings a sense of true human respect as a character in Cather's novel.

The actual success of her dream, along with her ability to remain connected to all of the individuals who shape her life, proves to be an essential characteristic of her being. When Jim returns, he finds himself lost in the past. Ántonia's children remind him of his childhood with her, and the stories of their youth live on in the home and minds of the Cuzak family. Ántonia comes to the Nebraska Territory in search of land, a huge asset in their Old Country. By the end of the novel, she lives comfortably in a world that she planned and created for herself since the day she reached her new home. The strong sense of memory and wholehearted love for the world and people in her life is evident through all aspects of her existence, family included. Ántonia reaches her goal, but, unlike the other characters, does not forget about her past.

To me, Ántonia's portrayal as a heroine is a strong portrayal. While all characters find success in their own way, Ántonia finds a way to live in a world that most felt they had to leave to find true happiness. She makes a life and finds happiness where no one else can. The pursuit of her American dream was one of success from an existence that seemed so unlikely; Ántonia represents the last of a dying breed in the barren Nebraska territory. ◆

Ántonia and Femininity

MEREDITH LINGERFELT, Millard West student

My personal perception of Ántonia embodies all that relates to femininity. Willa Cather's ode to the perseverant spirit of Nebraska's early pioneers is communicated through Jim Burden's glorification of Ántonia. To Jim, and to me, Ántonia is womanhood incarnate. She asserts herself as a leader to ensure the survival of her family after Mr. Shimerda's death, but does so with an optimism and a sense of compassion that identifies her as inherently feminine. Her essentially nurturing, female spirit pervades the novel and is visible in each phase of the plot.

In the first book of *My Ántonia,* "The Shimerdas," Ántonia assumes the leadership role in her friendship with Jim. Her actions reflect an inclination to protect Jim, even though his identity as an American male gives him certain superiority, at least by the standards of Black Hawk. As a child, Jim resents Ántonia's "protecting manner" and "superior tone," but her behavior provides a foundation for the matriarch she will become. Her exertion of control over Jim is also an example of the incredible strength that characterizes Ántonia.

The conclusion of *My Ántonia*, Jim's visit to Ántonia's home twenty years after he promised to return, makes concrete the perception of Ántonia that Cather emphasizes, and the one that stays with me. Although time, childbirth, and years of physical labor rob Ántonia of her girlish beauty, she retains a feminine luminosity. "It always is [a shock]," Jim says, "to meet people after long years, especially if they have lived as much and as hard as this woman had…. As I confronted her, the changes grew less apparent to me, her identity stronger. She was there, in the full vigor of her personality . . ." (214). Ántonia's innate sense of femininity compels Jim Burden, and myself, beyond her aesthetic qualities. Settled permanently in the country, the head of her own large family, Ántonia embraces her personal destiny. Her sense of security in who she is inspires—empowers—the reader, and haunts me as it did Jim, and Cather herself. ◆

Past and Present

SAM PADILLA, Millard West student

In reading *My Ántonia,* the character of this Ántonia came to represent—at least to me—a sort of respect for the old ways, the traditions that were beginning to fade away even at the end of the nineteenth century. Ántonia is a hard worker and a determined mother, who relies more on the strength of her hands than on new machines or things like that. She is a hardy woman, resonating with the way the world used to work.

I think we've lost something of that in the transition to more contemporary times— certainly in America. I remember moving to Nebraska at a young age, and instead of doing any kind of farm work, I mostly just played Nintendo. Of course it was different—I moved to a big city instead of a little town on the last American frontier—but the point is I didn't have to work for anything. Everything came—and still comes—comparatively easily.

Ántonia, then, is a sort of symbol for the ingenuity and dogged resolve that characterized the pioneers coming to this part of the

country. They're the people who turned the Great American Desert into what is now one of the most productive agrarian regions in the entire world. But now the economy doesn't depend as much on acumen as it does on mass production—we are an industrialized country, and the way of the farmer is fading.

That's what I took from Ántonia's character, anyway—the end of an epoch, as it were. And I guess that's how Willa Cather saw the agriculturists of her time; they were on the brink of obsolescence, but at least that way of life could go with grace and dignity.

As for my own generation . . . well, it's a different story. I don't think we display many of those same traits that helped our forerunners shape the land; in any event, we haven't had to make the same sacrifices they did. We probably wouldn't do too well working the earth with our hands, but, by the same token, our ancestors from that bygone era would find only bewilderment in this age of machines. It's a testament to our mutual exclusivity; they were then, we are now. ◆

Impressions of *Ántonia*

SHAYLA REFFERT, Millard West student

"More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood" (2). This quote, taken from the introduction of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia,* depicts the speaker's perspective of Ántonia's importance. To him, as well as other characters in the novel, Ántonia represents the past and one's connection with childhood memories. More importantly, she symbolizes strength and enduring love.

Ántonia encounters many setbacks and obstacles in her life. As a young child, she is forced to leave her native land to move to a new environment. She becomes crucial to the Shimerda's survival as she is the translator and main connection with the new society and culture. After her father's suicide, Ántonia takes it upon herself to complete his duties and tasks. Ántonia informs Jim of the difficulties faced by her family: "Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us" (93). In this way, her sacrifices are essential for the well-being of her loved ones.

As her warm and inviting nature entices others, Ántonia becomes a symbol of love. Her determination and generosity captivate Jim's heart. He finds great comfort in her personality as she is "a rich mine of life" (229). Even after twenty years apart, Jim finds that Ántonia possesses the same vivaciousness and good heart as in her youth. She seems to represent the ability for one to remain compassionate despite all of the difficulties in life.

Ántonia endures many obstacles in her youth, but she in capable of handling such tasks without compromising her character. Her inner strength and loving nature remain strong regardless of outside influence. Ántonia is a perfect representation of persistence and enduring love. ◆

Trashing Tradition: Gender Fluidity in *My Ántonia*

KATHARINE DOWLING, Wayne State College student

My Antonia is a novel about a man, a woman, and an author bravely defying tradition and flowing freely between genders.

Cather begins the introduction from an ambiguous, first-person point of view, but quickly switches to Jim Burden retelling his memories of Ántonia Shimerda. By assuming the role of a male narrator, Cather immediately blurs her gender and continues to flow freely between the male and female gender roles throughout the novel.

Jim's traditional gender identity is blurred throughout the novel when Cather, a female writer, scripts his male perspective of Ántonia for him. Cather also blurs his gender in the spaces he occupies. When young boys are outside helping with chores and working the land (a strong male archetypal symbol: the man conquering the virgin, woman land), Jim occupies the kitchen and women's spaces and is content occupying these spaces with his grandmother and other women. He is intrigued when Otto and Jake tell him stories about the "Wild West" because Jim has never truly experienced the "Wild West" as a masculine character. Jim may have more of an understanding about the open range on his grandmother's wood stove than the open range the men talk about conquering out in the "Wild West."

Ántonia, however, is by far the most fluid in her gender identity. While pregnant with her child, she continues to plow the field like a man, and therefore simultaneously embodies the masculine and feminine gender roles. The final chapter of the novel reveals her once again in the midst of both the feminine and masculine gender. The feminine Ántonia, who is now the mother of numerous children, looks over all of her hard, masculine farm work and realizes that her efforts are what made the family's farm successful.

Ántonia, Jim, and Cather all face the same obstacle in life: each wants happiness, and happiness requires breaking tradition and flowing freely between genders. ◆

Coming Home

MATTHEW EVERTSON,
Chadron State College professor

I grew up in the tiny panhandle town of Kimball, Nebraska—and Jim's frustrations with small town life, narrow minds, and the call of culture and ideas beyond the insular confines of Black Hawk reflect my own feelings of those days—of wanting to escape. When we read Cather in high school (or Mari Sandoz, for that matter), it was about the *least* appealing subject matter I could imagine. Images of *Little House on the Prairie* came to mind. I was interested in bigger and "more serious" things that didn't focus on crops, cattle, or country.

Early on I decided to attend school at UNL—to put some distance between me and my small Nebraska town. Most of my friends chose colleges in Laramie, or Chadron, or Kearney—but I thought Lincoln offered the best distance. I carried my prejudice against this "prairie school" of writers with me to Andrews Hall on the UNL campus, where there happens to be a plaque dedicated to Cather as "One of Ours." When I began my Masters program there, however, my very first graduate class was in research methods with noted Cather scholar Dr. Susan Rosowski. Far from pushing Cather on me, she helped me to find my calling in American Realism, specializing in Stephen Crane. When I decided to pursue a Ph.D., I left Lincoln, passed up an opportunity to study at the University of Kansas, and chose instead the Desert Southwest over the Great Plains.

But even at Arizona State I couldn't avoid Cather. The moment people found out I was from Nebraska, they immediately wanted to know what I thought of Cather, and they would proclaim how much they loved this or that book of hers. In my own teaching and scholarship, I began to take notice of her presence more and more in journals, anthologies, and conference panels. From this exterior perspective, I began to respect her more and take a fresh look at her work. Then one day I was working on a project with my closest mentor at ASU, and the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Bert Bender. I respected his scholarship and his literary tastes a great deal and as I was helping him index his book project on Darwinian influences in American literature, I came upon this chapter: "Sex and Evolution in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark.*" Suddenly, Cather was way cool with me.

And now, I'm BACK in Nebraska, not that far from where I grew up. Full circle—I feel like Jim tracing those paths back to some foundation and meaning in the soil he sprang from. For me, it is more of a literary return than a geographical return—the Pine Ridge area up here is quite a contrast to Kimball County. But when I came to Chadron to teach, I felt conflicted—because I had been pushed like so many of the characters in *My Ántonia,* including Jim, to think of escaping the small town, the rural—to find success in those other terms: big cities, full pockets, and the upper crust. But now that I have had a chance to reconnect, I feel as if I have opened up a fruit cellar of sorts—and an abundance of life has come pouring out in these books that I had not given much notice before. This land and this literature speaks to me in some new way now, and I really appreciate the opportunities to explore and learn—with my students, my colleagues, and my neighbors—from these writers, whose ideas and sensibilities were formed from this very earth, and the vast history written in this landscape. Like Jim, I have a "sense of coming home to myself," and of "having found out what a little circle man's experience is." ◆

Scrapbook art by Caroline Lake. See p. 11.

The Impressive Character Qualities of Ántonia

ALICIA DALLMAN

In My Ántonia, Willa Cather concentrates on the character qualities of Ántonia Shimerda, a young, spirited Bohemian immigrant. Ántonia displays stubbornness by making demands, bluntly expressing her opinions, and working arduously. Likewise, she demonstrates immense power through her physical appearance, emotional stability, and constant labor. She is also tender-hearted in matters concerning the Burden family, nature, and her father. Therefore, in My Ántonia Cather depicts Ántonia as a strong-willed, dominant, and compassionate individual.

Initially, Ántonia is an energetic child who makes commands, speaks her mind, and travails. She constantly pressures Jim Burden, her neighbor, to teach her English terms. When he cannot understand her, she makes aggressive gestures until he realizes what she wants. Ántonia refuses to yield to Jim's misinterpretations and always forces him to listen to her repeat the words he taught her before asking additional questions. Despite her constant queries, she occasionally uses a "superior tone" (39) while conversing with Jim. She is poor and destitute. However, she is still obstinately proud of her worldly exposure. She resists the idea that males are the superior sex and attempts to serve as Jim's safeguard until he proves his manhood by slaughtering a rattlesnake. Similarly, Ántonia mulishly states her beliefs and rudely argues with anyone who disapproves. She tells Otto Fuchs, a hired man on the Burden farm, that she will not accept his philosophy that prairie dog holes are almost two hundred feet deep in order to reach water. Voicing her opinions as usual, she states that the prairie dogs probably drink the morning dew to refresh themselves.

Ántonia also rebuffs the suggestions or wishes of others whenever she is opposed to their views. With a vast knowledge and many years of experience, Emmaline Burden, Jim's grandmother, tells Ántonia to wear a sunbonnet while working outside. Ántonia ignores Mrs. Burden and throws the hat off her head as soon as she is out of Mrs. Burden's sight. Flexing her biceps, she declares that she has no intention of following Emmaline's orders and wants to look like a man. Defying all authority, she does not care that Jim's grandmother says farm duties make her "like a man" (111). Ántonia loves her muscular frame and will not allow a man to accomplish more than she. After plowing a field, she tells Jim that Jake, the Burden's farmhand, cannot "get more done in one day than [she]" (99). She will never stop toiling in the corn rows for more than a few seconds and drudges on endlessly. Every day the sun scorches her skin as her aching arms fall loosely by her side.

Besides flaunting her intractable character, Ántonia exhibits her physical, emotional, and occupational strength. As a small girl, Ántonia is gorgeous. Her eyes are large, congenial, and luminescent. Shining brightly, her deep dark pupils instantly touched others. She has tan skin and a "glow of rich, dark color" (24). Fluttering in the breeze, her frizzing hair symbolizes her untamed heart. Her spontaneous demeanor attracts Jim and she is instantly able to persuade him to hold her hand and run into the wilderness. Ántonia is alive and draws the attention of everyone with her impressive features. She later displays strength through bulging triceps and a solid neck. Using her thick figure and brawny ligaments, she can easily keep pace with any male.

Comparatively, Ántonia is emotionally secure in spite of the grudging life she leads. She does not fall apart when the Burdens come to offer food to her starving siblings. Unlike her mother, she smiles and graciously thanks them. Hardships can not stop her from washing dishes, cooking meals, or gardening. Following her father's death, she only works more hours and does not waste time. If her brother Ambrosch tries to tell her that she is slacking, she triples her efforts. She supports Ambrosch when he quarrels with Jake and even temporarily sacrifices her friendship with Jim. She taunts the Burdens and socializes only with her immediate family, isolating herself as a slave in the Shimerda dungeon. Ántonia simply sleeps, eats, and works. Her tremendous work ethic and hours amaze

> *Whenever I saw her come up the furrow, shouting to her beasts, sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust-plastered, I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr. Shimerda, who could say so little, managed to say so much when he exclaimed "My Ántonia!"*
>
> — Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*

men throughout the region. Performing household duties, plowing sod, milking cows, and maintaining a garden are only a few of her obligations. She drudges on seven days a week from dawn to dusk. Covered in dirt, she relentlessly pushes her plow or discusses the price of crops. Ántonia brags about "how much she could lift and endure" (102). Brimming with self-confidence, she never fails her desperate family.

In addition to her superior personality, Ántonia is benevolent to her neighbors, nature, and her father. Without any reservations, Ántonia takes Jim's hand and welcomes him into her world. She immediately displays her caring, soft side by fervently grasping his palm. Expressing her gratitude to the Burden family, her new neighbors, she tries to give Jim one of her treasured rings. She always thanks them for offering their food or equipment. When Mrs. Shimerda arrogantly insults Mrs. Burden, Ántonia sincerely apologizes for her mother's actions. She cries in front of Jim, and only discusses her education with him. With tear-filled eyes, she tells Jim that she desperately yearns for knowledge, a secret she could never reveal to her family without facing punishment. Jim comforts her, and in return, she dubs him her true companion and never misses an opportunity to be with him.

Moreover, Ántonia pities any creature that is wounded or neglected. After discovering an emaciated grasshopper that can barely move his legs, she places him gently in her palm. Comforting him, she speaks sweetly in Bohemian and holds him close to her ear. His hopeless situation causes her to weep. She loves all of God's creatures and "carefully put the green insect in her hair" (37). She also gives her heart to farming by planting her blood, sweat, and energy with the crops. Additionally, Ántonia conveys her tenderness by respecting her father before and after his death. When greeting Mr. Shimerda, she kisses his hand and devotes all of her attention to his words. She worries about him when he becomes depressed and explains to Jim how upset Mr. Shimerda is about leaving his homeland. She explains that he surrendered his childhood friends, music, and his entire profession to become an immigrant. With a melancholy tone, she expresses the sadness she feels because her favorite person in the entire world is discontent. Ántonia sobs when her father committs suicide and Jim can "feel her heart breaking" (93) as she clings to him. Her father's memory remains in the depths of her tender soul.

Ántonia, to be sure, is an obstinate, young woman. Furthermore, she displays immense force, and her ultimate trait of kindheartedness thrives in her desolate situation. In a period when males were considered to be the supreme sex, Ántonia, obdurate, potent, and sympathetic, rises above every stereotype to serve as a positive inspiration for womankind.

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Scrapbook art by Caroline Lake. See p. 11.

Cather's World of Music: Chicago, Fremstad, and Kronborg

JANE K. DRESSLER

Willa Cather's world of music is made up of operas and classical music concerts presented in Lincoln, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York during her life. My work with original materials related to that world has taken place in Chicago, a city fabled for performance facilities, demand for classical music, and performances by internationally recognized singers and conductors. I was led to Chicago concert programs and reviews through the scholarship of Anthony M. Millspaugh, whose article "*The Song of the Lark* Through Geography, History and Literature," was published in the Fall 2001 issue of this journal. My research follows Millspaugh's model and has included reading volumes of original materials related to musical events that took place in the Chicago Auditorium and the Fine Arts Building. These two buildings, still used today for music performances and instruction, take up most of a city block bordered by Congress Street, Michigan Avenue, Van Buren Street, and Wabash Avenue. Both buildings serve as locations for scenes in *The Song of the Lark* and *Lucy Gayheart*.

The rewards of my work with original materials have been complete and surprising. Cather's fictional world of classical music in Chicago is based on factual information about venues, concert repertory, performers and conductors, and even includes correct details about times of day and the days of the week when music was heard in the city. Cather readers recall that Cather spent a week in Chicago during March 1895, as a senior in college, enjoying operas (Woodress 102) performed in the Auditorium by the Italian Grand Opera Company, a touring arm of the company now known as the New York Metropolitan Opera Company (Eaton 206-7). This was Cather's first experience of hearing internationally famous opera singers. It is not surprising that Cather draws upon her own first hearing of professional opera and chooses Chicago as one of the settings in *The Song of the Lark,* her novel based on the life and career of American opera singer Olive Fremstad.

Chicago and its music

Cather demonstrates her knowledge of classical music in Chicago in Parts II and III of the novel, the sections that describe Thea Kronborg's experiences in the city. Born and raised in Moonstone, Colorado, Thea comes to Chicago to study piano and discovers that her true vocation in music is singing. Cather's character arrives in the city sometime after 1893, for Cather mentions both the Chicago Auditorium (173) and the Art Institute (171). The Chicago Auditorium was completed in 1891; the Art Institute moved to its present location in 1893 (Lowe 154). Even the "incurious" Thea (169) knows "the lions" that guard the Art Institute on Michigan Avenue. We watch Thea as she adjusts to city life and as she learns about life as a professional musician, supporting herself by singing in church choirs (161) and accompanying students of Madison Bowers on Michigan Avenue (217). Original materials from that era support Cather's choices for the premise and the setting of this part of her novel. Downtown Chicago was the center of music instruction in the Midwest. One set of statistics from 1901 reported that some ninety music teachers rented space in the Fine Arts Building or in nearby buildings on Michigan Avenue, with more that nine thousand students receiving instruction during the year (Duis 70). Recital programs presented by students who studied music in the Fine Arts Building list names and hometowns of the musicians-in training, including young women from towns throughout the Midwest (Krueger Scrapbooks). These indicators show that Cather's premise of a young girl from a small town making a journey to study music in Chicago is entirely appropriate.

In *The Song of the Lark,* Thea's world of music is redefined one early April afternoon when she hears the Chicago Orchestra perform at the Chicago Auditorium, the same space where Cather saw operas in March 1895. Thea hears her first performances of Dvorak's E Minor Symphony, "From the New World," along with excerpts of Wagner's opera *Das Rheingold* (173-5). According to Frank Villella, the Chicago Orchestra performed Dvorak's Symphony November 2-3, 1894, and December 7-8, 1894 (excerpts only), February 7-8, 1896, and in January 1899. The Wagner *Rheingold* excerpts were performed March 8-9, 1895, one week before Cather arrived to hear opera, and again in April 1897 (Villella). Copies of Chicago Orchestra programs from the March 1895 performances contain advertisements for the week of opera performances, March 11-16, 1895, that Cather attended (Thomas v. 223). All of these Orchestra performances were conducted in the Auditorium by Theodore Thomas (Villella), a true-to-life character in Cather's *Lark* (177-181). As a final detail, in those years the Chicago Orchestra played subscription concerts on Friday afternoon at 2:30 p.m. and on Saturday evenings at 8:15 p.m.; Cather is careful to tell her readers that Thea slips into her seat by "ten minutes after two" and that she "was surprised to see so many men in the audience, and wondered how they could leave their business in the afternoon" (173). In a few paragraphs, Cather has created a likely musical experience for her character Thea, by writing fiction based on appropriate concert venue, orchestral repertory, and performers along with performance times and days, each based on her own experience of the musical life in Chicago.

Fremstad and Kronborg

Cather's mix of accurate Fremstad biography and engaging fiction is at its best when readers examine differences between the life and career of the true-life opera singer and Thea. While the Fremstad biographical sources are not uniform, some agree that the singer known as Olive Fremstad was born Olivia Rundquist, an illegitimate child, in Stockholm, Sweden, on March 14, 1871. She was adopted by a couple of Scandinavian origin, who raised her in Minnesota

(Shawe-Taylor). Ewen says that her family came to the United States in 1881 after Olive had already performed in Sweden as a piano prodigy. Olive studied voice in New York beginning in 1890 with F. E. Bristol while she supported herself as a choir soloist (251).

According to the PBS Masterpiece Theatre American Collection web information about Cather's novel ("Opera"), Fremstad traveled in 1893 to Berlin to study with Lilli Lehmann. The dramatic mezzo soprano was able to get work singing in the major European houses and eventually became one of the first great American performers of Wagnerian roles. She sang in Europe for about ten years and then sang with New York City's Metropolitan Opera Company, making her debut in November 25, 1903, in the role of Sieglinde in Wagner's *Die Walküre*. One of New York's greatest musical events took place when Fremstad sang the role of Isolde, in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* on January 1, 1908, in Gustav Mahler's conducting debut at the Met (Ewen 251). Fremstad performed with the Met for eleven years. According to Cantabile-subito, she sang 351 performances in her years at the Met. She retired from the stage of the Metropolitan on April 23, 1914, in a performance of the role of Elsa in Wagner's *Lohengrin* (Shawe-Taylor). Fremstad performed opera performances with the Boston and Chicago Opera companies until 1915 and presented song recitals until 1920 (Ewen 251). Her voice is described as "transcendent" and her temperament as "vivid" (Shawe-Taylor). Cantabile-subito also reports that Fremstad married twice, but that both marriages were short in duration. She died in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, on April 21, 1951 (Shawe-Taylor).

Cather interviewed Fremstad in March 1913, at the height of the singer's career (Gerber 39). This interview was published as part of Cather's article, "Three American Singers," featuring international opera stars Lillian Nordica, Louise Homer, and Fremstad, that appeared in *McClure's* magazine (Woodress 252). Sherrill Harbison discusses the powerful impact of Fremstad's performances and beliefs about art on Cather (xi-xiv). Similarly, authorities have examined the mix of Cather autobiography with Fremstad biography in the novel. (Woodress 266-68, 271)

Thea's life and career share much with Fremstad. We meet Thea as the daughter of a Swedish evangelical minister, whose father Peter Kronborg came from a Minnesota Scandinavian settlement (14, 17). The studies piano with Herr Wunsch and becomes the piano teacher for the community of Moonstone, Colorado (92), but quickly finds out during her study in Chicago that raw talent is not enough to carry her through the rigors of professional piano training (152-153). Thea studies piano in Chicago in the mid-1890s (152-176,181-186), about the time that Fremstad studied voice with Bristol in New York; Thea must accompany and sing to support herself (217, 161) as did Fremstad.

After preliminary training in the United States, Cather's character makes the pilgrimage to Berlin to study Wagner with the great singer and teacher, Lilli Lehmann (322). Thea returns to New York for triumphant singing appearances in Wagnerian roles (348-50, 356, 397-99). Like Fremstad, Thea sings with Mahler in European venues (337, 357). Fremstad's two unhappy marriages are called to mind when Thea speaks with Dr. Archie about her unhappy personal experiences with Ottenburg and Nordquist (380-1).

When we last see Thea, she is planning on more successful seasons at The Met, for she tells Fred that "The next five or six years are going to be my best" (386), meaning Thea's years at the Metropolitan Opera House last from 1909-1914 or 1909-1915, overlapping with some of the Fremstad years at the house. Finally, in the last section of the novel, "some twenty years later" (400), we read through the narrator's musings that Thea lives in a room at the Plaza Hotel and has enjoyed recent successful performances at Covent Garden and Buckingham Palace (401,403).

The comparison of the events and timeline of Fremstad's career to the fictional career of Kronborg shows readers that Cather is again peculiarly correct. Cather has substituted Chicago for New York as the launching point for her character toward the world of European opera. This substitution works, since Chicago has a colorful history of touring and residential opera company performances that goes back to 1850 (Dizikes 247). The conversation between Harsanyi and Theodore Thomas, Part II of *The Song of the Lark,* in which the founder of the Chicago Orchestra, considered to be America's "leading conductor and musical organizer" (Schabas 1), recommends a voice teacher for Thea adds an extra element of believability to Cather's use of Chicago as one of the settings in the novel. Further, until very recently, Europe was considered to be the final proving ground for singers to polish their vocal technique and to gain stage experience in the Continental opera houses.

As far as foreign study with a significant teacher, in the 1880's Lilli Lehmann (1848-1929) enjoyed the reputation of "the world's leading Wagnerian soprano," and her approach to the singing of Wagnerian roles (the same roles sung by Fremstad and Thea) remained a standard into the twentieth century (Scott 176). Cather's mention of the conductor Mahler is appropriate, for the Viennese conductor and composer, described as "the greatest creative musician ever associated directly with the performance of opera in America" came to New York in 1908, at a time when the Metropolitan Opera was in the process of revitalizing its German wing of the house (Dizikes 349-350). For each of these authentic touches, Cather has unerringly made the best available choice for her fiction. Not only are these choices appropriate for the premise and setting of the novel, but the sophistication of the choices reflects Cather's sense of true artistic integrity in the opera profession .

Cather's world of music in the classroom

I see Cather's novel as a way to teach students about the business of opera and the profession of classical singing in America during the years 1890-1920. In an opera literature course, after a review of the tradition of music-making in the United States, including the popularity of small-town opera houses and the lives of touring performers (part of Theodore Thomas's reminiscences in *The Song of the Lark*, 180-1), it is easy to find a common ground with my students, many of whom are from small towns in the Midwest. After that link is established, I am able to introduce Cather's story of Thea Kronborg, small-town girl gone to the city to become an artist. Students are able to relate to Cather's descriptions of the drudgery, expense, loneliness, and excitement of music study. Very little has changed in the physical process of learning to sing since 1890. Each person still has to find her own best way to produce sound, and this is done by the student alone, through many hours of practice. Practice time is combined with regular voice lessons, with a teacher (who may or may not be able to nurture every voice under her care) and the process continues, with the student learning how to achieve

beautiful tone combined with musical accuracy, elegant phrasing, and authentic pronunciation. Students understand the pressure that Thea faces, the need to do well for her family, for the people back in Moonstone, but especially for herself.

Each choice that Cather made for *The Song of the Lark*—the premise of the novel, the Chicago setting, the performance and teaching venues, performers, conductors, orchestral repertory, concert scheduling, and even voice study outside of the United States with a legendary teacher culminating in a glorious return of the student to sing for American audiences—is a valid reflection of the profession of music in the United States then and now. The tradition of opera performance and music instruction in Chicago is second only to the same traditions of New York City. Young singers continue to sacrifice all to study in these major metropolitan centers, soaking up opportunities afforded to them through significant cultural entities such as major symphony orchestras, opera companies, and art collections. Cather's use of the Chicago Auditorium, home of Roosevelt University since 1967 (Dizikes 491), and the Fine Arts Building remains apt, since both locations are a vital part of the cultural and educational process in the city.

Further, the German operas performed by Fremstad at the Metropolitan Opera in New York are being presented in both cities. Since 2001, performances of Wagner and Strauss operas at the Met include *Parsifal* in 2003 (Mingo 2002), *Tristan und Isolde* in 2003, *Salome* in 2004, and the complete Wagner ***Ring*** cycle of *Das Rheingold, Die Walkürie, Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung* in 2004 (Mingo 2003). Similarly, Wagner productions presented by the Chicago Lyric Opera, housed in the Chicago Civic Opera House on Wacker Drive since 1929, have included *Parsifal* in 2002 (Mingo 2001), *Die Walküre* in 2002 (Mingo 2002), *Siegfried* in 2003 (Mingo 2003), and a complete *Ring* cycle in 2005 (Mingo and Cerrone 2004).

Because *The Song of the Lark* begins with a familiar premise, the cultural institutions and practices that Cather chose to frame her novel continue, and the process of learning to sing has changed very little from Cather's day, Cather's novel is a valuable teaching tool for current students of opera and classical singing. Cather's story of Thea Kronborg, a work described as "the finest American novel about art and artist" (Dizikes 277), is a brilliant and musically accurate reconstruction of Cather's experiences with opera and classical music in Chicago. Through her seamless combination of beautiful language and exact detail, Cather has created a world of music that resounds today. ◆

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Contributors

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KATHARINE DOWLING, an English major, studied *My Ántoni*a in her literature class at Wayne State College, Wayne, Nebraska.

JANE DRESSLER, lyric soprano and professor of music at Kent State, has distinguished herself as a performer of song, chamber music repertory, and oratorio literature. She has presented Cather-related papers at two international seminars and at a National Council of Teachers of English Convention. She has sung the song cycle, *My Ántonia,* which premiered at the 2000 Cather International Seminar in Nebraska City, sixteen times in the greater Midwest.

MATTHEW EVERTSON, assistant professor of Language, Literature and Communication Arts, teaches at Chadron State College, Chadron, Nebraska.

CATHERINE KELLY, an English major at Williams College, is a native of Forth Worth. She studied Cather and Cather's writings during a cold Massachusetts January and found something wonderfully compelling in Cather's stories of the West, many written while Cather lived in the East. Currently, she is spending her junior year studying at Oxford University.

MARK KETCHAM, ELINOR LANE, MEREDITH LINGERFELT, SAM PADILLA, AND SHAYLA REFFERT studied *My Ántonia* in their Advanced Placement English class at Millard West High School, Millard, Nebraska. **JIM MERCER** and **JANE SANDOZ** taught the class.

SUSAN NARAMORE MAHER, professor and chair of the Department of English at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, recently served as the director of the eminently successful "One Book-One State" event. She directed the 2001 Western Literature Association Conference and is a member of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Board of Governors.

DAVID PORTER, formerly a professor of classics and music at Carleton and president of Carleton and Skidmore Colleges, currently teaches at Williams College. He has authored books and monographs on Horace, Greek tragedy, and Virginia Woolf and has published articles on Cather plus presentations at Cather conferences. He serves on the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Board of Governors.

SUSAN SCHILLER, professor of English at Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, teaches composition, American literature, film, and English education. She has published in *JAEPL, Innovative Higher Education,* and *Transformations.*

Scrapbook art by Caroline Lake. See p. 11.

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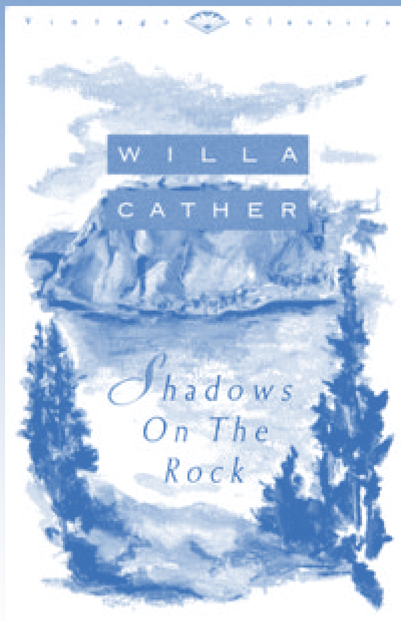
2006 Willa Cather Spring Conference



The annual Cather Spring Conference will be held **June 2-3, 2006**, in Red Cloud, Nebraska.

Please note the change from the usual early May date.

The featured text will be *Shadows on the Rock*, and participants will enjoy several interesting activities related to the novel. The program will also include activities on the Cather Prairie as well as talks and tours about the influence of French culture on Cather. For more information contact The Cather Foundation (www.willacather.org or 402.746.2653).