

T E A C H I N G
C A T H E R

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



Teaching Cather in China.

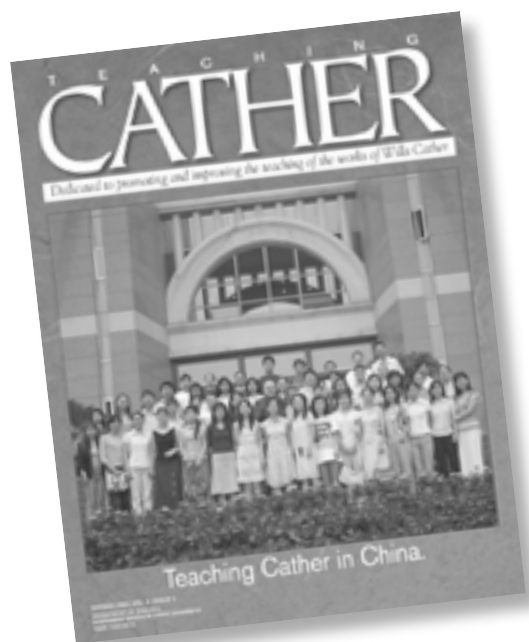
We devote this entire issue of *Teaching Cather* to the work of several outstanding Chinese students, all of whom were taught by University of Nebraska at Kearney Professor of English Charles A. Peek when he served as a Fulbright Senior Lecturer at Northeast Normal University in spring 2005.

Chuck selected essays by seven of his students there: Tian Yuan, Wang Yun, Wang Liying, Xu Gang, Zhou Liang, Long Ruicui and Li Dan. Chuck has written a brief introductory essay to provide a context for understanding the students and his approach to teaching them. We can imagine many ways that creative teachers might make these essays relevant to their own teaching. First of all, the essays are valuable for the sensitive readings they demonstrate, for their insights and interpretations. They certainly suggest various teaching objectives and strategies. American students will likely find these essays useful as comparisons for their own insights and for broadening their intercultural understandings. We believe you will enjoy reading these essays and that you will join us in thanking Chuck for making us aware that Cather's writing touches human beings across the centuries and across the continents.

Photographs were provided by Chuck Peek and the Website of Northeast Normal University.

Steve Shively

Virgil Albertini



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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

Chuck Peek (center) with his entire class on the last day of the term, taken when graduation ceremonies had just been completed. Nancy Peek is at Chuck's left.

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The main gate at Northeast Normal University.

Tradition and Misgivings: The Chinese and the Uses of Literature

CHARLES A. PEEK

During the spring term of 2005, I taught as a Fulbright Senior Lecturer at Northeast Normal University (NENU) in Changchun, Jilin Province, People's Republic of China. On the opening day of classes in China, I told my students (over sixty in the class on modernist American short stories) that to read literature critically meant to see the ways in which the literature was about them and their world and, therefore, to draw on their own experience while engaging the reading.

For this to be true, a story does not need to be set in our time or place; but the reader must have the capacity to see, in other times and places, something relevant to his or her life, the context in which it is lived, the choices and challenges which it presents. Cather's stories took place a half a globe and a century away from them, but they would find those points of contact between her concerns and theirs that would bring the stories to life for them.

Cather studies thrive in China. I never traveled anywhere for lectures that I didn't meet students and faculty who were reading Cather. Zhang Ying, my chair at NENU as well as an excellent teacher and mentor and former Fulbright Scholar herself, is a Cather scholar. Cather has been known in China for some time, and Zhang Ying had the opportunity some years ago to study Cather in a seminar offered by a Fulbright scholar in China. Those I met were most immediately aware of *My Antonia*, so I was pleased that I had chosen for the class the three stories in *Obscure Destinies* with the addition of "The Enchanted Bluff." Their acquaintance with *My Antonia* made it easy for them to relate to other prairie stories and at the same time see some contrasts in Cather's treatment of her material.

Early on, I asked one of my students, who had come to NENU from a nearby Chinese farm, what crops were grown in northeast China. She told me they grew wheat, corn, and soy beans, and then asked what we grew where I am from. I told her: wheat, corn, and soy beans. Most of my students, however, were not rural; rather they came from China's burgeoning cities. Changchun, at several million the largest city in which we had ever lived, is a small city by their standards. The "agricultural" connection would not be enough for most of them.

Instead, they would need to reach into those great human connections that

make "world literature" possible. My aim was for the conversation of my class to open us all to those connections, not by ignoring the importance of the historical moment captured in Cather's stories, but by taking it seriously enough to see in the moment its more universal application. Looking back now, I understand the whole of my semester there as the development of this conversation. I can give you a sense of the essence of that conversation in the following:

Not long after beginning my classes in China, one of my students responded to the challenge I had laid down for the class. She told me, "From the time we are very young, we Chinese are taught to work hard and learn lots of things; but we aren't encouraged to think critically or creatively." That, of course, as she well understood, was exactly what I was asking them to do.

Early on, I chanced on a student leaving the classroom nearest my office, and I asked her what she was taking. It was a class in American Literary History. I asked her what works they were reading. She told me, "Oh, we don't read any literature in the class; we have no texts; we simply learn the facts about America's literature and its development." It is a sad fact that, while new universities with massive campuses are springing up everywhere, actual texts (and critical materials) in English are often hard to find.

The earliest papers I received, regardless of what I had asked for,



Chuck and Nancy Peek with Professor Zhang Ying, a Chinese Cather scholar and Chuck's chair at Northeast Normal University.

were the kinds of papers Chinese students do and do well routinely: research papers, heavy on citing the authorities, often without any marks to distinguish the words of the authorities from one's own. The authority and the student become, as it were, one—and the authority, of course, said it better. I could read a dozen papers, each of which read, if not identically like, at least similarly to the others.

I could leave nothing special with them if their work for me was no different from what they were used to. I pushed hard—tactfully and patiently I hope, but hard—for my students to think for themselves. Put aside the authorities, I asked, and start to read critically, applying close reading to whatever interests you have in the texts. Learn to see the subtext (read between the lines) and the context (read out into the historical and social backgrounds). Interact (or as Rosenblatt says, transact) with the texts.

To this task, they brought an abundance of background and interests: China remains a Confucian society, with great respect for wisdom, civility, and beauty; the backdrop of many dynasties left behind a residual tendency to obedience; Marx's imprint is felt in their concern for class and class struggle; Mao, breaking up the old caste system, turned them toward social responsibility; and, in their present prosperity, there is a new interest in the United States and its core values. The sum total of these eclectic influences is often confusing, sometimes contradictory, and a ready field for applying critical and creative thinking.

My students could rattle off descriptions of dynasties and their cultural artifacts (sometimes almost verbatim recitations of school texts on the subject), but they were much less aware of their most recent history and current events. Still, they sensed that somehow, if their future is to be less precarious, they are part of a young Chinese generation that must somehow connect the dots. The new Chinese prosperity, with its enormous gaps between the new haves and the old have nots, has thrown China's celebration of its past into jeopardy without, as yet, providing a stable reality in its place. If not daily, at least regularly, they face economic, social, and political uncertainty. In a time of change, they wondered where they could find a relatively sure foundation for their futures.

Invariably, they showed great respect for their parents and the traditions handed down through their parents to them. They knew something of the weight of tradition, and how that weight can be an anchor or a mill stone. They are proud that women play a large role in Chinese society, yet aware that women have a long way to go and no clear map for going there. All of them were preparing to become teachers (secondary and college), teachers who will play a role in shaping China's future, who must come to some understanding of what will remain as their "usable past" and what they will inevitably "borrow" from other cultures. Daily, now and for the foreseeable future, they will face issues of what is mere change and what is progress, how fast and how far they can go, knowing that it is they who must make a difference. Above all, they want the facility and opportunity to teach differently than they have been taught.

Fine, I said. I have not come to China to tell you what you should think or what you should do. As those among the gifted young who will be moving into responsible positions, you cannot shirk making up your own minds about what you think and what you should do. So, take these interests of yours, take this background that has shaped you, and apply it to the literature we are reading.

I chose Cather as the author with whom to begin the semester, so reading Cather would be the proving ground of whether the students could set aside the critical authorities and begin their own critical thinking. Among the stories we read, only "Two Friends" did not seem to generate for them much critical energy (though they were keenly interested in the relationship of politics and friendship it portrays!); they were, however, drawn to the portraits of "The Enchanted Bluff," "Neighbour Rosicky," and "Old Mrs. Harris."

What follows are seven examples of their work. Unless otherwise noted in the bibliographies, they reference the story as found in *Willa Cather Collected Stories*. The titles are their own. Their essays bear both their Chinese and "English" names. I have attached a brief introduction to each essay. I have chosen at least two essays on each story so that the differences between or among them will allow you to see the emerging individuality of the writer more clearly.

Rather than repeat it several times, I will say now that I am grateful to all these students for what they taught me, for their patience with us as strangers in their country, for their good hearts and fine minds.

You can consider these papers their opening words in this semester long conversation. You can judge how perceptively they were beginning to read, how their reading involved bringing texts to bear on vital concerns, how far "out of the box" they were beginning to be able to think. You can also note how the details of their explanations might almost serve as protocols for the kinds of details good teaching will make sure are attended to in classes where students are asked for close reading.

One further note: All of these students were, of course, doing their study and reading in their second or third language; there were, naturally, fairly persistent and even predictable "lapses" in their renditions of American idiom. Dictionaries don't always suggest the best of several synonymous words. There is some stilted phrasing. Their preferred method of citation is different from that of MLA (but fairly easy to grasp). As much as possible, I have tried to leave the essays alone. They are edited only occasionally as clarity demanded and to simplify the citations. Thus, they retain the flavor of their way of using the language. ♦

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The Flowing Images in “The Enchanted Bluff”

TIAN YUAN (EVELYN)

Tian Yuan was a quiet student. Her paper was the first expression of herself I had encountered. In it I found a profound engagement with the role of memory in the midst of changing realities. Clearly, here, the setting of “The Enchanted Bluff” comes alive for her through Cather’s subtle art.

In “The Enchanted Bluff,” Cather sets her story on a sandbar along a western river, one very like the actual Republican River. At the beginning, the narrator is recalling the natural scenes of that summer. The turbulently flowing river the narrator describes represents evolving nature, continuously building yet changing the sandbars. Cather writes:

The channel was never the same for two successive seasons. Every spring the swollen stream undermined a bluff to the east, or bit out a few acres of cornfield to the west and whirled the soil away, to deposit it in spumy mud banks somewhere else. When the water fell low in midsummer, new sand bars were thus exposed to dry and whiten in the August sun (411).

The boys built their “watch fire; not in the thicket of dancing willow wands, but on the level terrace of fine sand which had been added that spring” (412). It is in this constantly renewed “bit of world” (412) that their idle talk begins. One notes, “I can see the North Star. . . . Anyone might get lost and need to know that” (414), a comment suggesting that the North Star itself never moves. However, as the ensuing disagreement suggests, nothing seems so steady that it may never change: “there was another North Star once, and . . . maybe this one won’t last always” (414). Certainly, the North Star in the sky will not change in our relatively short life; yet, to the adolescent boys living beside the flowing river on the earth, this may not be quite so. All of the story’s imagery suggests to us that we see life flowing. It may flow forward to other parts, or even flow away.

The ending of the story is a sad one: early death in the case of Arthur, for Otto the accident in which he loses his foot. Even while the boys are growing up, starting their own families, and building their “new bit of world” (412), the dream they share is also flowing, flowing out of their real life, evaporating in the air. They suffer from forgetting (Percy’s addiction to motor cars), vain hope (Tip’s deflection of the dream to his son, Bert), and disillusionment (the narrator

who comes to call “the Project” only “the romance of the lone red rock”) (420).

The sadness is so intense that it forces readers to meditate, realizing the dark implication of the boy’s talk is a profound sense of instability. The river speaks with two voices, “had always these two moods: the one of sunny complaisance, the other of inconsolable passionate regret” (414). Every existence may undergo the transience; not only are river and people subject to change, but even the bluff itself was brought by a glacier, its base worn by wind and sand. It was first mentioned by a wanderer. Only the “enchantment” survives. The dream flows into the human imagination where it is perpetuated merely by story, from Uncle Bill to Tip to Bert.

While the themes of the story may be Romantic, the story tells a rather different Romance. While young Wordsworth absorbed serenity and assurance from nature along the Wye River in his “Tintern Abbey,” Cather takes a kind of Bergsonian view of the world in process. The life force (the *élan vital*, as Henri Bergson phrased it) surges through the river, the sandbars, the bluff, and even through human generations. Despite dreams unfulfilled, the physical evolution keeps on: most of the boys have settled down, set up families, and got offspring.

Somewhat in parallel, however, spiritual evolution keeps on through the story as well.

There are six boys in the campfire group, one of whose memory, that of the never named narrator, Cather uses to tell the story. The memory flows adverse the current. The boys discuss the source of the river, but what is the source of the narrator’s memory? Bergson said, “Memory is intuition.” Intuition contrasts with intellect. Intuition perceives the unconscious and it is unconsciously passed down. It cannot, therefore, be traced to an origin, just as the river “was an old and a favorite mystery which the map did not clearly explain” (416), or just like “the gold hid away in the old river” (415) before the Pilgrim Fathers, the Mormons, the Spaniards, or like the bluff drifting with the glacier, never found. But the memory is reinforced by the story, as is the dream, as is the profound loss of the dream and the awareness of a world whose nature is change.

This intuition follows “the watercourses” (415), flowing along. In its flow it gives intimation of the *élan vital* to human beings who grasp it in mediation—in writing, as Cather did, or in reading, as we do. And this insight, though not sunny, may indeed mitigate the continuous note of regret voiced so passionately by the river. ♦

The life force surges through the river, the sandbars, the bluff, and even through human generations.

Nature and Human Nature in Cather's "The Enchanted Bluff"

WANG YUN (CATHERINE)

Wang Yun, a student of Vice Dean Li Zeng's, is also a member of the junior faculty at NENU and will be one of the first to receive her PhD there. As a person who had to raise herself from unpromising beginnings (as had Li Zeng himself), she shows here both her awareness of the vagaries of human existence and the power of vision.

Whatever she writes, Willa Cather is an expert at embodying human nature in skillfully described natural sceneries. Her stories and novels are full of descriptions of places and scenes—prairies, corn-fields, houses, etc.—which, on the one hand, function as the background against which the stories take place and, on the other hand, serve as metaphors or symbols that enlighten and enrich readers' imagination and perception of human nature. Hence, the two things—nature and human nature—converge.

Take Cather's "The Enchanted Bluff" as an example. The story is fairly short compared with other stories; nevertheless, it embodies this feature of Cather's writing. The beginning of the story gives a vivid, impressionistic description of the natural scenery of the typical Nebraska corn-field where, "the oblique rays of light made a dazzling glare on the white sand" and "The river was brown and sluggish" (411). Here, light and color are applied by Cather to portray nature for her readers. However, Cather's readers can perceive human reality through her description since it presents how something appears at a particular moment, how it appears to particular people, and how those particular characters react to it. That is, sense impressions always suggest an emotional reality, giving readers hints concerning characters' moods and feelings. In this opening scene, Cather succeeds in using words to create a lazy, sleepy and enchanted atmosphere in which the six friends, in their natural state, talk frankly about their dreams and illusions.

In the middle of the story, when the children look at the "enormous, barbaric . . . red" moon that is "as big as a cart wheel" and appears as "an angry heathen God," they, too, notice that "there was a long, silvery streak on the water, and where the current fretted over a big log it boiled up like gold pieces" (415). Here, the moon and its colors become fluid and impermanent under the light, reflecting the characters' feelings and wishes and foreshadowing the unreality of what they think about and plan on. The simile of "a cart wheel" Cather employs seems to indicate something real, but the figure of the heathen god seems unreal and strange. This moon-in-the-river is deliberately described by Cather with words like "silvery streaks" and "golden pieces" because such words connect it to the image of the enchanted bluff. Again, we have a revelation of human nature. Almost everyone bears something brilliant or wonderful, or has his ideals, dreams, or illusions when he is young. However, just as when daybreak comes, something beautiful "at the dark cover of the world" (414) turns out to be illusion. Reality interrupts human



Chuck Peek with his student Wang Yun (Catherine).

beings' pursuit of their dreams; and though the dreams may stay in hearts and souls forever, they stay unfulfilled.

The same perception can also be applied to the river image. Cather writes that "our water had always these two moods: the one of sunny complaisance, the other of inconsolable, passionate regret" which is sensed from her description that the river has "a mutinous, complaining note in it at night, quite different from its cheerful daytime chuckle" (414). This is certainly the reflection of human feelings, born out of human nature.

From descriptions of the river and fields, the friends move to talking about stars, leaving a crucial clue for readers in their understanding of the relationship of nature and human nature. The sky is like a world and stars are like the map: "Anyone might get lost and need to know [the North Star]." Cather is clever when she has Arthur continue, "I guess the stars don't keep any close tally on Sandtown folks." And Otto adds, "They always look at it if they meant something," and "I wonder what would happen to us down here if anything went wrong with it?" and "everybody's fortune is all written out in the stars" (414). What they say of the stars applies as well to their dreams. The stars are taken as the symbols of the dreams, of an ideal or a direction in life; and the enchanted bluff is such a dream. Readers may smile at the "bluff" story, but can they deny the fact that every one of them had once such a bluff, or such a star, in his early childhood? Can every one who bears a beautiful dream

fulfill it at last? Is it human nature to create something ideal in the imagination, a North Star to guide their journey? On their way, will someone wonder whether there is something wrong with the dream or the direction and lose his way? Will someone believe in it but be prevented from pursuing it? Will someone succeed as the dreamers? All we are led to see about human nature comes from what we are told about nature itself.

One of the most important natural elements in the story is the sand-bar on which the romance of the lone red rock and its extinct people is told: “The warm layer of air that had rested over the water and our clean sand-bar grew fresher and smelled of the rank ironweed and sunflowers growing on the flatter shore. . . . When the water fell low in midsummer, new sand-bars were thus exposed to dry and whiten in the August sun” (411). Here, the sand-bar is described as clean, fresh, and innocent. The boys “had been careful not to mar the freshness of the place” (414). Having finished talking

about the story, they “curled down in the warm sand” (418). However, sand in reality contrasts with the lone red rock in imagination in every way: the former is soft, concrete, clean, fresh, warm, and innocent whereas the latter is solid, obscure, legendary, exotic, and alluring.

Embedded in Cather’s descriptions of nature are clues to human nature. In them we come to see that dreams are developed in people’s hearts and souls when they are even in their innocent childhood. Perhaps they can’t be fulfilled. Perhaps they only serve to give us what we need: something to live for. What if they cannot be realized? It is not the fulfillment but the dream itself that is passed from generation to generation. In “The Enchanted Bluff,” Bert has been let into the story, the dream is moving on to the next generation, the sands are still shifting with the flow of the river.

Despite the fact that some dreams will never be realized, as long as human beings live, dreams will live on. ◆



Chuck Peek's classroom at Northeast Normal University.

“Neighbour Rosicky”: A Portrait in Pastels

WANG LIYING (JANE)

What is the place of the individual in society? At dinner one night, Wang Liying and several others carried on a conversation with us about the significance of their names and how they might connote uniqueness. Here she addresses one of the features of Cather's writing that makes her unique. In doing so, she demonstrates that individual style is not window-dressing but, rather, the vehicle for substance.

Willa Cather is well-known for a writing style different from that of other American writers. At the same time, the feature of her works that accounts for her particular position in American literary history is that her works deal with the theme of the pioneering spirit. When style and content are put together, we find more emotion than plot. In other words, with the development of the story, readers are attracted more by the touching and appealing emotional feelings expressed by Cather than by the drama of the plots. In fact, there are few dramatic plots and often no climax and no critical conflicts but, in their place, such things as depictions of trifles of day-to-day kindnesses. Usually these depictions of ordinary daily life are told through frequent use of flashbacks or characters' retrospection, accompanied by the flowing of the narrator's passion and emotion. Expressions of emotion become primary and plots become secondary. In this way, Cather's works share the modernist aesthetic.

The characters in her works are often the immigrants from Europe, the Old World, to the Americas, the New World, seeking a new life of freedom in, for example, the West, the Midwest, Southwest, and Great Plains of America. Their optimistic attitudes towards hard life and painstaking spirits under harsh situations receive high praise in Cather's work. In addition, the beautiful scenery of the country she describes catches readers' eyes while the genuine emotional love within human relationships moves readers to tears.

All of these features find expression in her touching story of “Neighbour Rosicky.”

Cather introduces Rosicky's kindness and friendliness by using an omniscient point of view. The objectivity of this omniscient voice persuades readers to believe what she describes is true. Cather also moves in and out of various characters' minds as she develops Rosicky's story and his gift to love those around him. Rosicky recalls from his point of view his voyage from his native country, Czechoslovakia, to the poor German's tailor shop in London, to New York, and finally to Nebraska, his “paradise” where he owned a farm. His inner world is vividly and truly presented in his flashbacks. Between these flashbacks to Rosicky's past, the point of view shifts from Rosicky to those who like Rosicky, principally Doctor Burleigh, who recalls how he received a warm reception in Rosicky's home on a snowy winter night, and Rosicky's wife,



It was as if Rosicky had a special gift for loving people, something that was like an ear for music or an eye for colour. It was quiet, unobtrusive.



— “Neighbour Rosicky”

Mary, who tells a story about his hard life and how Rosicky goes through it with calm and optimistic attitudes. In addition to all these devices that reveal Rosicky's character, we have Rosicky's own words related to us. For example, after the heat and drought have wasted his crop, he says, “No crop this year . . . That's why we're having a picnic. We might as well enjoy what we got” (253).

The omniscient voice, Doctor Burleigh's and Mary's narratives, and Rosicky's own retrospections form one single consistent perspective of Rosicky's love for people, love for the land, optimistic and pioneering spirit, and honest and simple mind, until Rosicky emerges a person totally different from the mean people who were always thinking of getting ahead, while Rosicky agrees when Mary says, “I'd rather put some colour into my children's faces than put money into the bank (240). This portrait emerges less through plot than simply through words and actions full of emotion. From this we can see that Cather adopts a particular way to present the characters in which descriptions of plots should be dealt with in terms of the emotions of the people who express them.

Cather's works show the modernist aesthetic in that Cather moves into different characters' minds to give a true description of them. This technique can be seen as a sort of psychological realism, the first voice of the stream of consciousness, a technique often used by modernist writers. The flashbacks develop within the flowing of the characters' minds. In “Neighbour Rosicky,” Rosicky's retrospection does not occur in chronological order. For example, in section three, Rosicky is sewing in his house, but his mind is running back over his life in London and New York. This allows him to express his preference for country life through his analogy

contrasting city life and country life with the aquarium and the sea (respectively). Rosicky (and others like him) emerge as fish who desire the freedom of the sea. After that, Rosicky goes into his childhood in his hometown. In section five, another flashback about his hard, poor life in London occurs, again while Rosicky is sitting in his warm house on the day before Christmas. Still in the section, Rosicky relates to his children his unforgettable experiences in London and then New York in more detail. All these memories are arranged with the flowing of characters' minds, not in chronological order. In a word, Cather's story moves forward in steady chronological order interrupted by retrospections out of chronological order; together these make up what there is of plot and serve to engage the emotional feelings of readers. As one critic said, Cather's manner of writing is like the use of pastels in painting: displaying gentleness, elegance, freshness in the morning air and various colors of nature. Through such “pastels,” Cather creates in her works their poetic portraits and touching atmospheres.

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Cather's Philosophy of Life in "Neighbour Rosicky"

XU GANG (STEEL)

Xu Gang was, so far as I know, the only student in the class from Mongolia. He is scheduled to return there to teach. A diligent student, working on Chinese American author Frank Chin, Xu Gang (like many Chinese students) also taught English elsewhere in Changchun. The "enlightenment" he points to here, and the view of reality behind it, no doubt influenced his decision to return to his homeland.

Chang Yaoxin claims that Willa Cather was one of the few "uneasy survivors of the nineteenth century" (332). Growing up on the Nebraska prairie, the Old West became the center of moral reference against which she measured modern existence in most of her work. In general, Cather's values are traditional. She once said that, "In 1922 or thereabouts, the world broke in two" (qtd. in Chang 332). For some time, she lived then between two worlds, rejecting the modern and escaping into a refuge of the past. From that past she drew values which our world stands in need of today.

Her thoughts in this regard are reflected clearly in her famous short story, "Neighbour Rosicky." In the story, mainly about the life experience of old Anton Rosicky and told through the techniques of flashback and reminiscence, Cather outlines a vivid picture of Old Rosicky and his simple yet full life. Rosicky is of Czech descent. He once went to work in the cities of London and New York; but the miserable experience and the suffocating atmosphere in those big cities disappointed Rosicky, and he always felt uneasy and empty there. Eventually, he went back to a countryside, where he married, raised his children, and planted his own farm. The whole family lived harmoniously in their pastoral world.

It is in her depiction of Rosicky, and the contrast between his life in the city and his life in the countryside, that Cather

expresses her love for the simple and tranquil rural life and her abhorrence for the suffocating urban life.

Through Rosicky's reminiscences, we get to know his pathetic experiences in London and New York, and the "unease" they created in him. In London, young Rosicky lived in a shabby corner of a poor German tailor's room. He was hungry and dirty the whole time. One Christmas Eve, he was so hungry that he couldn't resist the temptation and ate almost half of the goose that his hostess was saving for Christmas Day. However, with the help of a kind rich man, young Rosicky was able to leave London for New York where his life changed for the better. There, "[H]e was never hungry or cold or dirty" (242). But, as the days passed, he began to get restless and felt something was missing in his life. One day, sitting in the sun, he was suddenly struck by New York's emptiness. Cather writes: "The lower part of New York was empty. Wall Street, Liberty Street, Broadway, all empty. So much stone and asphalt with nothing going on, so many empty windows. The emptiness was intense, like the stillness in a great factory when the machinery stops and the belts and bands cease running" (243). Located at the center of



Chuck and Nancy Peek with a group of Chuck's students. Xu Gang (Steel) is in the back row at the far left.

American economic and cultural life, Rosicky senses a moral and spiritual void; suddenly it struck Rosicky that this was the trouble with big cities: "they built you in from the earth itself, cemented you away from any contact with the ground, like the fish in an aquarium who were probably much more comfortable than they ever were in the sea" (243).

Deep in his heart, the tranquil and pure rural life is calling him, so Rosicky turns his back on the city and settles in the west on the prairies of central Nebraska. There, he and his family live a harmonious and self-sufficient life and Rosicky overcomes his restlessness and finds contentment. There, he renews the tie with the earth, the farm, animals, and the growing things "which gave him the strength growing up on his grandparent's farm in Czechoslovakia" (243). To him, the earth is a source of subsistence and spiritual nourishment.

Rosicky cares little about material wealth, in spite of the growing wealth of his neighbors; what he cares about more is the well-being of his family. When the creamery agent comes to the Rosicky's to persuade them to sell him their cream, telling them how much money their neighbors are making on their cream, Rosicky wasn't tempted at all. He agreed with his wife's comment, "I'd rather put some colour into my children's faces than put money into the bank" (240).

Here, we can see Rosicky's attitude toward what Matthias Schubnell notes is the "shift from traditional close-knit farming to the industrialized farming operation" (5). For Rosicky, this shift threatens the solidarity of rural communities and the independence of individual farmers. He would rather live harmoniously with nature, without the need to hurry through life, driven to skimp and save by the desire for more money. Life in the countryside may not be as colorful or rich in material goods; but, for Rosicky, it is a paradise:

Hardships, certainly; it was a hardship to have to sell your stock because you had no feed. But there would be other years when everything came along right, and you caught up. And what you had was your own. You didn't have to choose between bosses and strikers, and go wrong either way. You didn't have to do with dishonest and cruel people. They were the only things in his experience he had found terrifying and horrible, the look in the eyes of a dishonest and crafty man, of a scheming and rapacious woman (255).

We can see clearly Rosicky's disgust toward the literal and moral filth of urban society. And, as Schubnell suggests, Rosicky "accepts nature's adversity and finds his ecological identity in nature. To him, winter is not a bitter, dark and harsh season but a time of rest for vegetation and men and beasts, for the ground itself" (6). In spite of its hardships, life in the countryside is more pure, orderly,

and meaningful; while life in the city is degraded, full of vice and violence.

In order to keep his family living in the peace of the countryside, Rosicky narrates his miserable experiences in the city and also sacrifices himself to help his eldest son live through the hard times. Even in bad health, he helps raking up the weeds, with the hope of alleviating the heavy burden of farming for his children—lest they might abandon the farming life.

Having devoted all his life to his family, death does not come as a threat to him, for Rosicky knows that life and death form a natural circle in nature. We can see his attitude from his reflections on passing the graveyard: "It was a nice graveyard, Rosicky reflected, sort of snug and home-like, not cramped or mournful. . . . A man could lie down in the long grass and see the complete arch of the sky over him, hear the wagons go by" (237). At the end of the story, Dr. Ed seems to express Cather's approval of Rosicky's life: "Nothing could be more undeathlike than this place; nothing could be more right for a man who had helped to do the work of great cities and had always longed for the open country and had go to it at last. Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful" (261).

Old Rosicky is Cather's depiction of an ideal man. Through the narration, we can see clearly that the life Rosicky pursues is the ideal Cather herself longs for, the kind of life in which human beings are friendly to each other and at the same time can live harmoniously with nature. Nowadays, we are living in a morally degrading modern society in which the relationships between people are becoming more and more indifferent and the pursuit of material wealth more and more the sole aim of life. Many take for granted that human beings are in control of the universe, and so we are blindly destroying nature in the name of economic growth. Willa Cather was sensitive enough to perceive these human misconceptions at an early time, and this short story undoubtedly leaves an inspiring record of a thinking mind's response to the predicament of modern life. It enlightens us even today. ♦

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Three Women, Cather's Message in "Old Mrs. Harris"

ZHOU LIANG (LINDA)

Zhou Liang is a perceptive student, an active learner. Pursuing her belief that she cannot become an expert in American Literature without first-hand acquaintance with America, she is in the process of applying to two dozen American universities for admission to a PhD program. (It will be a sad commentary on American education if she is not admitted at one of them.) In all this, she is thoroughly modern—with the sensitive modern's concern for what went before.

Among all the other moving stories of Willa Cather I have read, I particularly like the story of "Old Mrs. Harris." Every time I read it, I am moved to tears. The original title, "Three Women," emphasized its place along with the singular story of "Neighbour Rosicky" and the companion piece, "Two Friends." The final title, as it and the other two stories were collected in *Obscure Destinies* in 1932, emphasizes the semi-autobiographical story of Cather herself, as she lived in a small town on the Great Plains with her mother and grandmother, as well as with four younger children, her father, and a servant girl. It is this emphasis that points the story toward the life of people like me, women of a younger generation.

Like the other two stories in *Obscure Destinies*, the episodes of the ordinary pioneer family, the Templetons, are presented, as Professor Peek has pointed out, "on a quiet surface current with a rip tide beneath." From the perspective of Mrs. Rosen, who is quite an inquisitive and kind-hearted neighbor, a mysterious Mrs. Harris gradually walks into the mind of the reader: an affable, composed, "unprotesting," and "unprotected" woman (264), who arduously takes care of the whole household without any complaint about the scant attention her family gives her. Seven times in the story, the "pore" lady is either foreshadowed or clearly shown suffering from deteriorating health. For instance, her feet are swollen.

Ironically, it is the servant Mandy and Mrs. Harris' neighbor Mrs. Rosen who notice the changes in her situation, while her beloved daughter Victoria and granddaughter Vickie are both so self-absorbed that they pay Mrs. Harris little heed. Despite this, Mrs. Harris, the backbone of the family, silently worries about what worries Vickie, tries to solve Vickie's college money problems, and feels apprehensive about receiving visitors alone. She hides the sweater Mrs. Rosen gives her because "her daughter couldn't bear to have anything come into the house that was not for her to

dispose of" (271). No matter how she is neglected by the younger generations, she still holds a genuine, long-lasting love towards her family: she enjoys her function as a story teller, darns the torn pants and stockings of the children, and prepares the family meals.

The depiction of Mrs. Harris's inner thoughts is moving. She "smiled complacently" on the praise of her daughter's beauty in a new dress (267); the smile on her face every time she sees the children playing in the back yard is "a real smile, she was glad to see them" (267). Every night in her prayers she gratefully whispers, "The Lord is my shepherd" (311, 313). To the very end, when she peacefully dies, her "pilgrim's progress" is accomplished—she is such an unselfish, devoted lady that we feel great respect for her nobility.

While the sometimes heartless Victoria is to blame for much of the neglect, we can also feel the author's sympathy and affection towards this woman, presented to us as something of a typical southern "goddess." In the early part of the story, she is selfish and even sometimes a little mean, especially when we learn that she "couldn't bear that special dainties should come into the house for anyone but herself" (264) or when we learn that Mrs. Harris has to have her feet rubbed in the kitchen because "Victoria didn't like anybody slopping about" (270). Similarly, Mrs. Harris keeps her soap in a tin tobacco-box and avoids it getting mixed in with the children's because, "Victoria was always sharp about it" (272). It is once remarked of Victoria that "She takes no more responsibility for her children than a cat takes for her kittens" (273).

However, I rarely, if ever, see characters in Cather's stories as absolutely negative, especially when she is depicting the loveliness of pioneer women. They, too, possess qualities the author seems to cherish. Again, from the shifted perspective of Mrs. Rosen toward Victoria, we begin to feel the young and beautiful mother is actually an enthusiastic lady, one who "would give away anything she had. She was always ready to lend her dresses and hats and bits of jewelry for the school theatricals, and she never worked people for favors" (278).¹ We are told "there was something warm and genuine about her" (279), and we can feel the author presents dual aspects of her character: on the one hand, she is heartless in her treatment of her mother; on the other hand, she is unselfish as we can see in the episode of her kindhearted behavior toward the poor Maude children at the social.

The third woman, of course, is Vicki. Not as sharp as Victoria, she has a "happy disposition" (276). Here again, as Professor Peek suggests, it seems there are two Vickies as well: one "good"

No matter how [Mrs. Harris] is neglected by the younger generations, she still holds a genuine, long-lasting love towards her family.

Vickie who helps grandma to look after the little boys and works hard at learning in school, and one “not-so-good” Vickie who is self-absorbed and can only focus on her own concerns. Saddened by the lack of money for college, Vickie relates her situation to Mrs. Harris “briefly and dryly, as if she were talking to an enemy.” Indeed, at the moment, “Everyone was an enemy; all society was against her” (301). When Mrs. Harris sees that she gets the needed money, “she didn’t thank her” and “having brusquely announced her news, Vickie hurried away” (305, 306). And when Grandma is severely sick, Vickie is still preoccupied with thoughts of how she has “no trunk and no clothes or anything” for college (311).

As Mrs. Rosen says, “These young people are full of their own affairs” (303). We see Victoria and Vickie, full of their own affairs, against the backdrop of Old Mrs. Harris’ devotion and sacrifice. As the contrast impresses itself on us, the foreshadowing of the story’s closing suggest that this story can recycle, recur; and that possibility strikes a warning note. We find that Victoria, already a little afraid of Vickie, sees in her someone “who seemed to her to have a hard streak” (301). Again pregnant, Victoria worries over the fact that, “she had had babies enough; and there ought to be an end to such apprehensions, sometime before you were old and ugly” (308). No wonder that the younger generation, first Victoria’s and

then, in its turn, Vickie’s will come finally to realize their heartlessness: “I was heartless, because I was young and strong and wanted things so much. But now I know” (314).

Thus the story is a successful reminder for a younger generation, my generation, that more attention should be paid to the silent older generations who devoted so much to them, to us. Personally, I feel the story is touching because I myself am a combination of Vickie and Victoria. I am busy with my studies and my boyfriend, demanding whatever I need from my mother, yet paying little attention to her life or my father’s. My mother is not so poor as Old Mrs. Harris, but often her devotion is just as ill-rewarded. The story makes me regret that I was heartless before. I regard it as a reminder: I should spare more love and attention for her whom I will one day become. ♦

Note

¹The shift in Mrs. Rosen’s perspective is perhaps a technique frequently used by Cather, as when Dr. Ed in “Neighbour Rosicky” at first misunderstands that the Rosickys did not quite get ahead but later realizes that Rosicky’s life was complete and beautiful.

Willa Cather and the Theme of Alienation

LONG RUICUI (MELANIE)

Long Ruicui finds herself in the first generation of Chinese students to face the “job crunch.” The rapid growth of Chinese universities has swelled the ranks of graduates seeking employment as secondary and college teachers, and the number of available positions has not kept up with the growth of graduate programs. Drawn first from an older way of life, it is not certain what room there will be for Melanie and her generation in China’s new economy.

One of Willa Cather’s major subjects is alienation. We can see an intensive sense of alienation sparking many of her works. This theme can be found in her explorations of the dreams and euphoria of the young in settling the west, the growth of the artist, the terrors of a life un-lived seeking redemption in war, the pain of love, the onset of age, and the gap between desire and memory. The heartbreaking “obscure destinies” show the theme of alienation most distinctly.

For Cather, the sense of alienation is inevitable and cannot be dispelled. For instance, at the end of “Old Mrs. Harris,” Cather relates:

Thus Mrs. Harris slipped out of the Templeton’s story; but Victoria and Vickie had still to go on, to follow the long road that leads through things unguessed at and unforeseeable. When they

are old, they will come closer and closer to Grandma Harris. They will think a great deal about her, and remember things they never noticed; and their lot will be more or less like hers. They will regret that they heeded her so little; but they, too, will look into the eager, unseeing eyes of young people *and feel themselves alone*. They will say to themselves: “I was heartless, because I was young and strong and wanted things so much. But now I know.” (313, my emphasis)

Although Victoria and Vickie may understand Grandma Harris when they are old, by then old Mrs. Harris will have already “slipped out” of the world long since. Their belated recognition will have become meaningless to her. Indeed, all will have become meaningless to her. In this sense, Mrs. Harris is alienated from her world. But, even alive, she is alienated in that even those closest to her—the people of her own environment, her own culture—cannot understand her.

Victoria and Vickie, too, experience this sense of alienation. From Victoria’s standpoint, she considers that she has tried her best to belong to her society, but frequently she suffers her society’s rejection and misunderstanding. Vickie, too, although she gets great help and understanding from her grandmother, does not seem to fully appreciate that fact and, instead, feels misunderstood and alone. Each suffers the same alienation as did old Mrs. Harris.

There may have been many reasons why Cather depicts alienation so consistently. If, as some allege, she was a lesbian, then her experience as a lesbian would have had to have led to a sense of alienation at some level. Even nowadays, the topic of homosexuality is still a social taboo, let alone how the matter stood at the turn of and the early years of the 20th Century. Even if not known at the time, her unusual circumstances (unusual in the norms of the day and age) must have made her seem to some degree abnormal, and in this she would certainly have felt a strong sense of alienation.

Or the focus on alienation may have stemmed from the ironic fact that this in some ways most rooted of writers had, in another sense, no real roots. That is, what roots she had were actually her memories. She lived a somewhat transient life—born in



The Foreign Language College at Northeast Normal University.

Virginia, growing up in Nebraska, moving to Pittsburgh and then New York, with stints in the American Southwest and Europe. Each seems to have left her with memories perhaps more real to her than the place she was in at the moment. While she was in New York, she would long to be in the Southwest, where she could sense a frontier still uncharted and full of promise . . . where, too, she could experiment with various roles and identities, try on “costumes” that she could discard at will . . . where she could fulfill a longing for the earlier days of the frontier, be in some sense reborn as a pioneer. So she would go to the Southwest.

However, once in the Southwest, she would be faced with the changing reality of the place, feel doubly the loss of the old ideal, and thereby experience rootlessness. It was not her home, the home where the people and places she knew were, that world that had drawn her away from the prairie in the first place. So she would leave the Southwest and go to New York.

My point is that she never seemed to have found a wholly suitable place and thus felt hurt and alienated from her circumstances no matter where she was. No wonder the world seemed to her to be ever-changing, a place with no stability.

Life, however, must continue, and for her it continued through memory and dreams. Her memory gave her courage to face reality; memory gave her identity. Thus she would open “Two Friends” with this passage:

Even in early youth, when the mind is so eager for the new and untried, while it is still a stranger to faltering and fear, we yet like to

think that there are certain unalterable realities, somewhere at the bottom of things. These anchors may be ideas; but more often they are merely pictures, vivid memories, which in some unaccountable and very personal way give us courage. The sea-gulls, that seem so much creatures of the free wind and waves, that are as homeless as the sea (able to rest upon the tides and ride the storm, needing nothing but water and sky), at certain seasons even they go back to something they have known before; to remote islands and lonely ledges, that are their breeding-grounds. The restlessness of youth has such retreats, even though it may be ashamed of them (315).

Memory provided Cather her sense of the roots that were so illusive in her experience. She could build a castle in the air of memory and set up there her own world. There, the sense of alienation became less important, less painful, for memory offered her the sense of being at home. There she could gain some sense of attachment.

However, Cather also realized that memory and dreams are just built on sand. Although people hope they can build their dreams on rock, this hope itself is merely a dream, an illusion. They must get down to earth or someday break to pieces and, in the rupture, find all the worlds they built now totally meaningless. Maybe human beings must get rid of memory and dreams so they can continue their earthly journey. This captures the human dilemma: we need memory to save us from being alienated and to support our future life; but memory in some ways destroys our courage for facing reality and prevents us from our future lives. In this dilemma is the ultimate alienation. ♦

Old Mrs. Harris: Faithful and Successful Southern Mother

LI DAN (RUBY)

We could not get to know all the students all at once and our acquaintance with Li Dan came only as the semester went on. Although prosperity has leveled some of the variety once more typical of China's regions, the migrations that have accompanied the prosperity have made a new generation of Chinese aware of how behaviors taken for granted at home can appear strange when seen in a new environment. Li Dan takes up this theme in her treatment of "Old Mrs. Harris."

Love runs like an ever-present current beneath many of Willa Cather's stories. Often it is undying, devoted, and connected with people's willing sacrifice. To Cather, love is not only revealed in the narrow sense of love between a man and a woman, but can also be seen in a broad way. In the short story, "Old Mrs. Harris," the title character shows her infinite love to her family and is shaped to be a faithful and successful southern mother.

Old Mrs. Harris devotes to the family fully, quietly, dutifully. First, she faithfully fulfills her duties in the family. Everyday she gets up "as soon as the grey light began to steal in the room" (272) to prepare breakfast to the whole family. She drudges together with Mandy, a bound girl, doing work such as darning for the boys and herself after supper. Second, Mrs. Harris shows great concern to her offspring. She loves her grandchildren and enjoys the time with them. She reads to them and lets them lie in her bed. And the moment she hears the children running down the uncarpeted back stairs, she forgets her painful feet and is intoxicated by their freshness. She also protects the future of young Vickie, her granddaughter. Even after winning a scholarship through hard competition, Vickie still meets financial difficulties before she can start her first year of college. While her father weakly hopes she will postpone her plans, and her mother fails to understand her distress, Mrs. Harris asks the Rosens to grant Vickie the necessary loan, the arrangements all remaining unknown to all, even to Vickie.

Though she keeps the house, slaves for the whole family, and loves them, her own living conditions do not fit her position as grandmother, nor honor her contribution to the family. Her room is not a room at all, but a passage-way from kitchen to dining room, cluttered with the sewing-machine, the children's rocking-horse, and the clothing they throw off as they rush by. Her bed is hard, without springs and with only a thin cotton mattress. Her nightgowns are patched and sewn. In addition, her things are almost required to be invisible in the house. Her calico dresses and the tobacco box holding her soap are kept behind a cloth curtain in one corner, and her comb is kept in her pocket. She obediently follows "an understood rule that she was not to receive visitors alone" (268), because she never wants to arouse Victoria, her daughter's,



Statue of Confucius, found often on campuses in China. This one is at Northeast Normal University in Xian.

jealousy or to make her cross. In such poor and neglected condition, old Mrs. Harris never makes any complaint or shows any resentment. She resignedly and wholly accepts all these conditions and exhausts her ability to uphold her family's dignity and unity. Even at the moment she is dying, she does not want to stir up the family or linger on to be a burden.

Old Mrs. Harris' profound love, resignation to heavy housework and poor living condition arouse her neighbor's curiosity and even create some malice toward Victoria. Mrs. Jackson sniffs that she would never keep someone in her kitchen to bake for her. Mrs. Rosen is also bothered by Victoria's treatment of her mother, as well as her mother's position in the family, which seems little above that of Mandy. Gradually, however, the nature of the position Mrs. Harris occupies in this family is revealed. We discover that her position is understandable only against the backdrop of a southern "feudal society" of which Mrs. Harris is a remnant. In that society, from which the Templeton's have come, women of Mrs. Harris' age

“
But the road had led westward, and Mrs. Harris didn't believe that women, especially old women, could say when or where they would stop. They were tied to the chariot of young life, and had to go where it went, because they were needed.”

— “Old Mrs. Harris”

keep in the background and spend most of their lives in the back kitchen and pantries and back dining-room. “She [old Mrs. Harris] believed that somebody ought to be in the parlour, and somebody in the kitchen” (288). She puts forward her handsome daughter, “the belle,” and makes her the mistress of the house. To see Victoria a household drudge would have meant “real poverty, coming down in the world so far that one could no longer keep up appearances” (288).

Grandma Harris must be understood in this context: the world of the old South. She finds her identity within the group, formerly a big kinship circle and its surrounding community. Now, times and places have changed, and the circle has shrunk to just her daughter

and her family. Thus Mrs. Harris' faithful southern lifestyle seems to go against the grain in this democratic western town. Only in the society and social expectations of the “west” do the Templeton's arrangements seem strange.

In all, with Cather's meticulous and natural skills, especially here with her use of contrast and suspense, we feel a true-to-life mother, faithful, devoting, and consenting to sacrifice. She lives in the crack between two different cultures, and the crack between her small family context and big western environment. In such conflicts, she successfully fulfills her southern-bred motherly duty and, in fulfilling it, obtains her dignity. Thus, the obscure woman who accomplishes a marvelous duty becomes a memorial figure. ♦

Contributors

LI DAN (RUBY), a rural student from Liaoning, a province in North-east China, will graduate with an MA degree of English Literature from Northeast Normal University this July. She will teach in the near future in a university in Changchun.

LONG RUI CUI (MELANIE), belonging in the first generation of Chinese students to face the “job crunch,” seeks employment as a secondary or college teacher.

CHARLES PEEK, currently president of the Willa Cather Board of Governors, teaches at the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK). He has also taught on a regional studies exchange at Texas State and as a Fulbright Senior Lecturer at Northeast Normal University in the People’s Republic of China. Prior to coming to UNK, he taught literature, philosophy, American Studies and Southwest Studies in programs he designed for the experimental College of Public and Environmental Service at Northern Arizona University. His principal interests are Modernist American literatures and the Harlem Renaissance, and, besides numerous articles and poems, his publications include two books on Faulkner and presentations on Cather, Faulkner, Hemingway, and the Harlem Renaissance at international conferences. UNK has presented Peek with its Pratt-Heins Award for Teaching Excellence and its Leland Holdt Award for his contributions in scholarship, teaching, and service.

TIAN YUAN (EVELYN) comes from a rural background and will teach English language and literature in a college after she graduates in July. She hopes to make some contributions to English teaching in China.

WANG LIYING (JANE) lives in Anshan city, Liaoning Province in China and will graduate from Northeast Normal University in July as a postgraduate student. After graduation, she will teach in Shenyang Normal University.

WANG YUN (CATHERINE), a member of the junior faculty at Northeast Normal University, will be one of the first to receive her PhD there.

XU GANG (STEEL), a student from Mongolia, will return to Mongolia to teach. He diligently reads and researches the Chinese-American author Frank Chin, and he has also taught English in Changchun.

ZHOU LIANG (LINDA), pursuing her belief that she cannot become an expert in American literature without first-hand acquaintance with America, has applied to two dozen American universities for admission to a PhD program.



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The 11th International Willa Cather Seminar

Willa Cather: A Writer's Worlds

The Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation, in cooperation with Brigham Young University, and St. Lawrence University, the University of Provence at Aix, and the University of Paris 3 (Sorbonne Nouvelle), announces the 11th International Willa Cather Seminar. It will be held 24 June–1 July 2007 in Paris and at the Abbey St-Michel de Frigolet. The Abbey is located in Tarascon in the south of France, midway between Avignon and Arles.

A committed Francophile, Cather first visited France in 1902 and returned for long stays many times throughout her life. Her companion and biographer Edith Lewis explains that “French culture, coming to it as [Cather] did in her most impressionable year, . . . spoke more directly to her imagination [than English culture], and most definitely influenced her writing.” Cather and Lewis spent the summer of 1920 in the Latin Quarter of Paris in order to imagine living in the Middle Ages, an experience that affected Cather’s subsequent novels.

“A Writer’s Worlds” has been chosen as the seminar theme to encourage broad explorations of Cather’s various imaginative intersections—biographical, geographical, historical, philosophical, literary, social, and others. Cather’s works as seen from a European perspective will be a particular emphasis; given this, the keynote speakers are A.S. Byatt, the Booker Prize-winning novelist and author of introductions to Cather’s works in Virago Editions, and Marc Chénétier (University of Paris 7), whose work includes translations of most of Cather’s novels into French.

In Paris, seminar sessions will focus on sites in the city that Cather drew upon, most especially for *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*. Most seminar sessions will be held at the Abbey, to which seminarians will travel on Tuesday, 27 June. From there, excursions will depart to places in Provence related to Cather’s writing, including Avignon, where Cather set “Hard Punishments,” the novella she left unfinished at her death.

The seminar will be co-directed by John J. Murphy (Brigham Young University), Françoise Palleau-Papin (University of Paris 3—Sorbonne Nouvelle), and Robert Thacker (St. Lawrence University).

Inquiries about the 11th International Seminar, including ideas for sessions, expressions of interest, particular themes to be addressed, and other considerations, should be directed to Robert Thacker at the address listed to the right.



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