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Willa Cather's Great Plains Trilogy:
The Formative Landscape

The novels *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Antonia* are often considered together as Willa Cather's great plains trilogy. Although the three novels are quite different from each other, they do share a fascination with the magnificent, harsh prairie landscape and with the women of that world.

Cather describes the great plains landscape in language that is quite similar to the language she uses to describe the women themselves. Examining the language she uses to describe the landscape and the women, alongside her comments in her recently published correspondence (*The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, ed. Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout, 2013), helps us ascertain what she most appreciates in the strong, vigorous women she admires as well as what she most values in the landscape of her own formative years.

The Recently Published Letters

An important contribution to Cather scholarship emerged in 2013: the publication of *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. Of course, many of the letters have long been available in various places. But Jewell and Stout have now made it possible for Cather readers and scholars to enjoy a large collection of her letters, arranged chronologically and carefully edited, with minimal but effective editorial commentary.

In an extended review of the new *Selected Letters* titled "Making a Scene: Willa Cather's Correspondence," published in *Harper's*, Christine Smallwood

describes the publication of the new book as “a major event—though not one that reveals the author to have been among the wittiest or most entertaining correspondents in the American tradition” (87), a comment with which I heartily disagree, by the way. She rightly goes on to explain that Cather’s “letters are pushy, annoying, affectionate, over-bearing, frankly immodest, and falsely modest. They brim with wide-eyed gosh-me self promotion, health complaints, the occasional paranoiac insight (for color) and insults (for the recipient’s own good) (87).

The review also addresses the fact that Cather did not want her letters to be published. It is true that in her will Cather forbade the publication of her letters. As Jewell and Stout point out, however, she did not systematically collect and destroy her correspondence; over 3000 letters survive. Among the letters destroyed, apparently, were most of those to Isabelle McClung Hambourg and Edith Lewis.

The letters that do survive and are published in the new collection, however, are fascinating to read and provide important insights into the life and work of Cather. She was an amazingly prolific letter writer. Even toward the end of her life, when a tendon in her hand was causing her intense pain, she still wrote many letters, apologizing all the while about the quality of her handwriting and the infrequency of her letters. Her letters are sometimes businesslike; she writes to her publishers, often quibbling about details concerning the covers of her novels or the typography in them. Her letters are sometimes funny, as when she writes to her longtime friend Carrie Miner Sherwood and complains of certain illustrations in “Two Friends”: “The editor gives a western story to some nut who has never been west of Hoboken, and who thinks that all Western men are rough-necks,” and then

adds, "I hate publishing stories in magazines, anyway, and only do it because they pay me very well" (469). Many of the letters are quite touching, written to family and friends, and full of care and concern for those she has known for years.

In addition to giving readers glimpses into Cather's life, the letters give readers important insights into the nature of the characters and the landscapes of her novels. The letters reinforce not only Cather's love of the Great Plains landscapes but also her belief that the strong, vigorous women who called those landscapes home were formed by them and were indeed inseparable from them.

O Pioneers! (1913)

Before we examine any of the letters, let's consider Cather's interview for the *Philadelphia Record* in 1913 in which she describes her introduction to the Great Plains after leaving Virginia, where she was born and lived during her childhood.

I shall never forget my introduction to it. We drove out from Red Cloud to my grandfather's homestead one day in April. I was sitting on the hay in the bottom of a Studebaker wagon, holding on to the side of the wagon box to steady myself—the roads were mostly faint trails over the bunch grass in those days. The land was open range and there was almost no fencing. As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything—it was a kind of erasure of personality.

I would not know how much a child's life is bound up in the woods and hills and meadows around it, if I had not been jerked away from all these and thrown into a country as bare as a piece of sheet iron. I had heard my father say you had to show grit in a new country, and I would have got on

pretty well during that ride if it had not been for the larks. Every now and then one flew up and sang a few splendid notes and dropped down into the grass again. That reminded me of something—I don't know what, but my one purpose in life just then was not to cry, and every time they did it, I thought I should go under.

... I think the first thing that interested me after I got to the homestead was a heavy hickory cane with a steel tip which my grandmother always carried with her when she went to the garden to kill rattlesnakes. She had killed a good many snakes with it, and that seemed to argue that life might not be so flat as it looked there. (xi)

Indeed, Cather soon realized that although the landscape was flat, life in Nebraska was not flat at all. In the same interview, she describes the Nebraska farm women whom she found fascinating. "I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of those old women at her baking or butter making. I used to ride home in the most unreasonable state of excitement; I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said—as if I had actually got inside another person's skin" (xii).

Cather writes to her friend Zoe Akins in 1912: "I am so glad you liked 'The Bohemian Girl.' Yes, I really think it's pretty good myself. I'm doing another about three times as long about the same country. In this new one the country itself is frankly the hero—or the heroine—though I think the people, Swedes and Bohemians, are rather interesting too" (169-170).

In *O Pioneers!*, the country itself—the very landscape—is the heroine.

Alexandra, the central character, is inextricably linked to the land. She battles the harsh elements. She battles the townspeople who mock her daring to invest in more and more land. She battles her own brothers. At one point, Lou says to his brother Oscar, "This is what comes of letting a woman meddle in business. . . . We ought to have taken things in our own hands years ago. But she liked to run things, and we humored her." Oscar responds, saying, "The property of a family really belongs to the men of the family, no matter about the title. If anything goes wrong, it's the men that are responsible" (72-73). Despite the battles, or in part because of them, Alexandra cannot imagine leaving the land behind. As Alexandra reunites with Carl at the end of the novel, she reminisces about her longing to see the ocean and the shipyard where her father had worked many years earlier. She says to Carl, "But you would never ask me to go away for good, would you?" Carl replies, "Of course not, my dearest. I think I know how you feel about this country as well as you do yourself." Alexandra says, "I've lived here a long time. There is great peace here, Carl, and freedomI thought when I came out of that prison, where poor Frank is, that I should never feel free again. But I do here." Alexandra then takes a deep breath and looks off into the red west as Carl murmurs, "You belong to the land. . . as you have always said. Now more than ever" (124). The novel concludes, "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (125)

The land, the landscape, has formed Alexandra since her arrival in Nebraska in her girlhood. It has made her strong, independent, ambitious, and fiercely

determined. Carl is right: she belongs to the land and the land to her, and she cannot be separated from it.

The Song of the Lark (1915)

Although Cather's next novel, *Song of the Lark*, has several distinctly different settings, it is clear that the Great Plains landscape of Thea Kronborg's childhood is a formative influence on her, remaining a part of her throughout her life. In an appreciative letter to her friend Helen Seibel regarding *The Song of the Lark*, Cather writes, "You seem to have like the book [*The Song of the Lark*] in the way in which I wanted it liked and to have read it in the spirit in which I wrote it. If I had written a preface to the book, I would have said 'I for one am tired of ideas and 'great notions' for stories. I don't want to be 'literary'. Here are a lot of people I used to know and love; sit down and let me tell you about them" (215).

Thea's travel to the desert makes a dramatic contribution to her becoming an artist, but Thea's early life on the Great Plains is inseparable from her character. In a letter to her friend Katharine Foote, Cather writes: "My theme was always her 'Moonstone-ness', and what she gave back to Moonstone in the end" (216).

Similarly, in a letter to her friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Cather explains, "it's all really done from the Moonstone point of view. . . . For, of course, my point was not the development of a genius—my point is always Moonstone, what she got from it, what she gave back to it" (218).

Of course the desert landscape, too, was formative to Cather, and it is to Thea as well. Cather explains to Ferris Greenslet, literary editor at Houghton Mifflin, regarding *The Song of the Lark*, "Unless you had lived all over the West, I don't

believe you could possibly know how much of the West this story has in it. I can't work over it so much that I ever blunt the 'My country, 'tis of thee' feeling that it always gives me. When I am old and can't run about the desert anymore, it will always be here in this book for me; I'll only have to lift the lid" (199). And in another letter to Ferris Greenslet, Cather explains of Thea, "It was the Cliff Dweller ruins that first awoke her historic imagination—so necessary to a great Wagnerian singer—and that there, away from drudgery for the first time in her life, she really grew, all at once, into a powerful and willful young creature, got her courage, began to find herself" (205).

Although Thea's historic imagination is awakened in the desert, her character has already been formed by the magnificent, harsh Great Plains landscape. The challenges of life in that landscape (moonscape?) have made her a fiercely determined, independent young woman, willing to defy ordinary expectations: to leave Moonstone to go to the great city of Chicago, and eventually to leave Chicago for Europe. Even her life as an opera singer had begun, unknown to herself, in Red Cloud, Nebraska. In a letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Cather explains, "Then in Red Cloud they truly love, as they say 'the voice.' It fills them with pleasure and content. She had to be a singer for them, not because I happen to go to the Opera a great deal. I wasn't trying to put something over on Red Cloud" (219).

My Antonia (1918)

In her next Great Plains novel, *My Antonia*, Cather returns home to Red Cloud again, to the delight of her readers and to the approbation of her critics. In a letter to her brother Roscoe Cather, she writes, "All the critics find 'Antonia' more artistic.

A man in the Nation writes that ‘it exists in an atmosphere of its own—an atmosphere of pure beauty.’ Nonsense, it’s the atmosphere of my grandmother’s kitchen, and nothing else” (261). This is a novel of memory—of her life on the plains and the people with whom she shared it as a young woman. Her memory of her life on the Great Plains was so real that many residents of Red Cloud sought to find themselves or their neighbors thinly disguised in the novel. Sometimes, they were wrong—but not always. Cather was thrilled to find her Red Cloud readers, for the most part, appreciative of the novel. In a letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Cather writes, “The Red Cloud public is ready now to hear a good word, for after ‘Antonia’ they really came round, and said ‘yes, it was exactly like that; that is the way we remember it.’” (299)

Cather acknowledges the importance of her own memories of the Great Plains in a letter to “His Excellency the President of the Czechoslovak Republic,” Thomas Masaryk, who deeply appreciated *My Antonia*:

I have the good fortune to preserve friendly relations with most of my characters, even after I have put them in books. ‘Antonia’ and her twelve splendid children are flesh and blood realities. Every time I go back to them I feel how much more interesting and lovable they are than my picture of them. I wish I could present them to you in person. The life of our Middle West is so big and various, so ugly and so beautiful that one cannot generalize about it. All one can do is to write of what came against one’s own door-step, so to speak. (365)

Writing about “what came against one’s own door-step,” Cather is assiduous not to caricature the people of whom she writes. In another letter to her brother Roscoe, she explains wittily, “I knew that there was a common way of presenting common life, which is worthless, and a finer way of presenting it which would be much more true. Of course Antonia’s story could be told in exactly the same jocular, familiar, grapenutsy way that Mr. White thinks is so American” (272).

Cather respects her heroine in *My Antonia*. She has survived and thrived in the harsh Great Plains landscape, with its prolonged winters, its fierce heat, its isolation, its loneliness. Near the conclusion of the novel, Jim Burden describes Antonia as a child, a young woman, and now an old woman. His memory captures her in images from her life on the plains:

Antonia kicking her bare legs against the side of my pony when we came home in triumph with our snake; Antonia in her black shawl and fur cap, as she stood by her father’s grave in the snowstorm; Antonia coming in with her work-team along the evening sky-line. She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true. I had not been mistaken. She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one’s breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. (274-275)

The landscape *is* Antonia; Antonia *is* the landscape. While the novel contains some descriptive passages which portray the landscape, Cather is careful not to overwrite them. To a Miss Chapin, of *The Forum*, she explains, “I think it’s rather a mistake to emphasize the landscape—to me that suggests ornamental descriptive writing, which I hate” (385).

Concerned that her readers appreciate too much her description of the Great Plains, she writes to her friend Zoe Akins: “I wish I could get rid of ‘atmosphere’ and be another kind of writer for awhile” (472). And she explains to Stephen Tennant, “Nearly all my books are made out of old experiences that have had time to season. Memory keeps what is essential and lets the rest go. I am always afraid of writing too much—of making stories that are like rooms full of things and people, with not enough air in them” (393).

Cather particularly resented being defined as a “geographical” writer, and she loathed people’s efforts to adapt the novel in one way or another and to make film versions of the novel. Regarding a “barbarously reconstructed version of ‘Antonia,’ she writes, fuming,

The lady has tried to make it a story of action; now it was never meant to be a story of action. . . . Then your educators go and make this text as much like Zane Grey as possible. The reconstruction by Miss Hahn has neither Zane Grey’s merits nor mine. . . . She [Antonia] made her way by being what she is, not by being the compromise her publishers have several times tried to make her. (478-479)

Twenty years after the novel was published, Cather writes to Ferris

Greenslet, complaining:

Why can't we let Antonia alone? She has gone her own way quietly and with some dignity, and neither you nor I have reason to complain of her behavior. She wasn't played up in the first place, and surely a coming-out party, after twenty years, would be a little funny. I think it would be all wrong to dress her up and push her. We have saved her from text books, from dismemberment, from omnibuses, and now let us save her from colored illustrations. I like her just as she is. (540)

In one of the most telling letters in the entire collection, Cather writes to her friend Carrier Miner Sherwood,

though there have been many imitations of Antonia and some of them good, I really was the one who first broke the ground. . . . You never can get it through peoples heads that a story is made out of an emotion or an excitement, and is not made out of the legs and arms and faces of one's friends or acquaintances. . . . As for Antonia, she is really just a figure upon which other things hang. She is the embodiment of all my feeling about those early emigrants in the prairie country." (492)

Cather likes Antonia "just as she is" because she is a strong woman, strong enough to be "a figure upon which other things hang." She is strong enough to be the embodiment of the prairie, of life on the Great Plains.

In one of her letters written late in her life, Cather muses on her life filled with travel as she writes to Carrie Miner Sherwood:

I am not exaggerating, Carrie, when I confide to you that I would rather go

home to Red Cloud than to any of the beautiful cities in Europe where I used to love to go I am sure you realize, as my brother Roscoe always did, that things have always hit me very hard. I suppose that is why I never run out of material to write about. . . .I do not so much invent as I remember and re-arrange.” (647)

In her Great Plains novels, Cather remembers and re-arranges, sketching the prairie landscapes she loves and associating with them the women that call those landscapes home. In so doing, she finds great happiness and provides her readers great happiness as well. As she wrote to Blanch Knopf, “It’s always a joy to be back here—I get more thrills to the square mile out of this cornfield country than I can out of any other country in the world.” (332)

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