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Article Summary: Gale sees Cather's exploration of the past as a key to her greatness. He identifies many examples of her use of flashbacks and real-life characters. Major themes related to the past in Cather's work include immigrants, art, Europe, and the American Southwest.

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Photographs / Images: Cather in 1893, Cather in mature years

WILLA CATHER AND THE USABLE PAST

BY ROBERT L. GALE

WHEN death came to Willa Cather in 1947, she left behind her a production of twelve novels and many short stories, not to mention some slight poetry and a few significant critical pieces. In the years since her death, her position as a fiction writer in the best American tradition has become steadily more secure. And it is safe, I think, to say that in the years to come she will be looked upon with more and more appreciation and will eventually take an earned place among such other genuine American novelists of the first rank as Cooper, Hawthorne, Twain, James, and Faulkner. To me one key to her greatness, as it is in differing ways to theirs, is her sense of the past.

Of Willa Cather her companion Edith Lewis once wrote that "She never altogether lost the past in the present."[1] Her fiction is simply a living over of that unlost past. She habitually transmuted into art the four really momentous experiences of her life: (1) her migration at the age of

[1] Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record* (New York, 1953), p. 57.

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about ten years from Virginia to Red Cloud, Nebraska, with her beloved parents; (2) her introduction at the University of Nebraska to the world of opera and drama, which followed a girlhood including intense reading of various classics; (3) a series of trips to Europe—to France in particular—beginning in 1902; and (4) her discovery in 1912 of America's great Southwest. All of these stirring revelations made Willa Cather in subtle ways discontent with the mere present and anxious to explore the past. The form this inquiry took was her fiction, through which run four leading themes of interest, immigrants, art, Europe, and the Southwest.

Having been uprooted herself at a tender age and thrust into an alien soil, Willa Cather was unusually sympathetic toward the problems of Czechs, Swedes, and other immigrants portrayed in her fiction. For example, in *My Antonia* the narrator Jim, like Willa Cather, leaves Virginia to move to Nebraska, where he observes tradition-rich European immigrants doing valiant battle to tame the raw land. The foreign families receive high praise for working hard and sticking together:

> One result of this family solidarity was that the foreign farmers in our country were the first to become prosperous. After the farmers were out of debt, the daughters married the sons of neighbours—usually of like nationality—and the girls who worked in Black Hawk [i.e., Red Cloud] kitchens are to-day managing big farms and fine families of their own; their children are better off than the children of the town women they used to serve.[2]

In the 1922 novel *One of Ours*, which castigates the materialistic descendants of these immigrant Nebraska families, we read that the hero Claude Wheeler "could remember when all the farmers in this community were friendly toward each other; now they were continually having lawsuits. Their sons were either stingy and grasping, or extravagant and lazy, and they were always stirring up trouble."[3] Fortunately, this was not Willa Cather's last word on Nebraska. Her final short story, suggestively entitled

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[2] Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston and New York, 1918), p. 200.
[3] Cather, *One of Ours* (New York, 1922), p. 102.

"The Best Years," pictures again what she called "the beautiful Nebraska land which lies between the Platte River and the Kansas line"[4]; here is the area in which is enacted the tragic but rewarding life of Lesley Ferguesson, evidently of second- or third-generation Scandinavian extraction. The girl is a sixteen-year-old school teacher whose devotion binds together an assortment of children sent by farmers to a country school at Wild Rose. The whole story is a pastoral evocation of the author's childhood in Nebraska amid others also born elsewhere and migrant.

By reading and theater-going Willa Cather migrated through time to previous epochs—to ante-bellum Virginia, to Quebec during the reign of Louis XIV, to the time of the Spaniards in New Mexico, to medieval France, to Virgilian Italy. She read English classics, repeatedly including Shakespeare and Bunyan, with both of her grandmothers; she learned to read Latin at home, and she read it and Greek—Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Anacreon, etc. — with a friendly old dreamer in Red Cloud; and when she went on to the University at Lincoln, the theater there was the scene of superb performances by stars of stock companies, which performances Willa Cather not only saw but also described maturely in her column for the *State Journal.*[5] Therefore, no one familiar with her biography is surprised that even her earliest novels contain references to the classics and to the theater. The inscription for *My Antonia,* which is not only one moral of the book but also an apt one for its author's life, is appropriately Virgilian—*Optima dies . . . prima fugit.* In the novel, Jim the narrator goes to Lincoln to study under a brilliant young Latin scholar, who talks to him of Pompeii, of Virgil at Brindisi, of Dante's adoration of that "sweet teacher." It is not by chance nor is it extravagant that a recent critic should call Alexandra Bergson, heroine of *O Pioneers!,* "a kind of Earth Mother or Corn Goddess, a Ceres who presides over

[4] Cather, *The Old Beauty and Others* (New York, 1948), p. 100.
[5] Lewis, *op. cit.,* pp. 14, 21-22, 37.

the fruitful land."[6] Willa Cather read Homer, Virgil, and other classical writers long and devotedly, and their view of things was often hers.

Willa Cather tried too soon to use in fiction the impressions she had gathered during her first trips to England and the Continent; the result was several false starts, including some of the short stories in *The Troll Garden,* a few uncollected pieces, and her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge.*[7] But then she wisely let her memories of Europe mellow while she turned back to her Nebraska childhood and youth to write her first significant fiction. Not until *One of Ours,* which begins bitterly in the Nebraska of the generation after the heroic pioneers, did she take a maturely conceived fictional character back along her path to the Old World. But soon others followed Lieutenant Wheeler, including Godfrey St. Peter of *The Professor's House* and Fathers Jean Latour and Joseph Vaillant of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*: the history professor is given scholar days in France and Spain to live over in retrospect, while the Catholic missionaries to the American Southwest never forget their French childhood and always delight in their trips back home and to Rome.

To pursue her characters, Willa Cather often betook herself to Europe, at least once mainly to revivify her impressions of Count Frontenac's quarter of Paris. This feat of imaginatively walking into the past she was skilled in; as her biographer E. K. Brown, writing specifically of *Shadows on the Rock,* puts it, "Willa Cather had an extraordinary power of obliterating from a historic scene its modern encrustations. She had done so at Avignon, and at Paris, more recently at Santa Fe; she did so again at Quebec."[8] She could not often personally meet in the encrusted

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[6] David Daiches, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (Ithaca, New York, 1951), p. 28.

[7] Willa Cather quaintly regarded *Alexander's Bridge* as only one of her two "first novels," the other being *O Pioneers!;* see Willa Cather, "My First Novels: (there were two)," *The Colophon: A Book Collector's Quarterly,* Part VI (1931), n. p.

[8] E. K. Brown, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography,* completed by Leon Edel (New York, 1953), p. 270.

present a relic of the simpler past. Once, however, she did so, when she encountered at Aix-les-Bains Madame Franklin Grout, the *Caro* of Gustave Flaubert's *Lettres a sa Niece.* There were two literary results: a charming essay entitled "A Chance Meeting" and the fragile character Gabrielle Lady Longstreet, heroine of the short story "The Old Beauty."

The most inspiring travel Willa Cather ever did was to the American Southwest, seeing which in 1912 for the first time was, according to her biographer, "the principal emotional experience of . . . [her] mature life."[9] Her friend Miss Lewis, writing of this revelation to the novelist, exclaims that "a whole new landscape—not only a physical landscape, but a landscape of the mind, peopled with wonderful imaginings, opened out before her."[10] Her fictional use of the Southwest became increasingly important over the years. In *The Song of the Lark* the place merely helps Thea Kronberg to find herself—in time; then it inspires "Tom Outland's Story," the central third of *The Professor's House,* in which the past-ridden history professor turns to the manuscript diary of his now-dead student Outland and finds Tom's account of the kind of adventure in the Southwest which the teacher for the most part has only written about; and finally the magnificent locale is the setting for almost the entire novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop,* and its past is made to come alive again there in a series of splendid episodes and flashbacks.

It is obvious that all writers use experiences from their past, but Willa Cather was more than ordinarily conscious of the past when she wrote, and her usable past included an early youth spent in observing immigrants in the Nebraska to which she herself was a migrant, a youth, and indeed a long adulthood, devoted to art as it came down in many forms from the past to her, repeated visits to old Europe for rest and stimulation and sustenance, and finally

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[9] *Ibid.,* p. xii.
[10] Lewis, *op. cit.,* pp. 80-81.

nothing less than adoration of America's past as reflected in her Southwest.

And now to make two germane points concerning Willa Cather's technique: (1) she regularly used real-life persons, known to her through observation or reading, as models for her created figures; and (2) she shows the influence of the past on the present by habitual use of flashbacks.

We know through those familiar with her method that Willa Cather often placed relatives, friends, celebrities, and even historical personages in her fiction. She was not deficient in inventive powers but was simply—to use words applied elsewhere by Henry James—one on whom nothing was lost. Thus, her maternal grandmother, Rachel Boak, became Rachel Blake in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl,* cast in the Virginia of the author's very early childhood; her father provided a few of Mr. Templeton's traits in the short story "Old Mrs. Harris," while Rosicky's fatal heart ailment in the story "Neighbour Rosicky" is identical to that of the novelist's father; and the original of Mahailey, the queer old servant of the Wheelers in *One of Ours,* is really Margie Anderson, who worked for the Cathers in Virginia, went with them to Nebraska, and stayed on for years with the family until her death. Since Willa Cather's immediate family circle, which she frequently used as a model, was a humble one, most of her fiction showing family relationships is close to the soil and almost folksy. Friends too were drafted as models for fictional characters. The real Antonia Shimerda was a Nebraska hired girl named Annie Sadilek; Thea's friend Dr. Archie was drawn with a Red Cloud physician named G. E. McKeeby occasionally in mind; and Eusabio, the classically noble Navajo Indian in *Death Comes for the Archbishop,* was probably patterned in large measure after Tony, the Indian husband of Willa Cather's friend Mabel Luhan, who had a hacienda at Taos.[11] Most characters in the work after

[11] Lewis, *op. cit.,* pp. 25, 27, 142-143; Mildred Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (New York, 1951), pp. 110-111, 114. For a picture of Dr. G. E. McKeeby, see Bennett, *op. cit.,* plate facing p. 108.

the Nebraska fiction, since they are often patterned on acquaintances who had broader bases of experience, are less provincial but also less rugged. This helps to explain why the much later *Lucy Gayheart,* though harking back to the Nebraska of its author's youth, lacks the earthiness of *O Pioneers!,* for example.

Nor did public figures escape Willa Cather's alchemy. The state and background are altered, but it is apparent that the original of *A Lost Lady* was Nebraska Governor Silas Garber's wife Lyra.[12] The American soprano Olive Fremstad, whom the novelist came to know well, was so obviously the inspiration of Thea in *The Song of the Lark* that upon reading the novel she exclaimed delightedly that she could not tell where Thea's life left off and her own began. Gentle little Cecile's father Euclid Auclair, of *Shadows on the Rock,* while drawn with Willa Cather's father partly in mind, is also given many of the professional characteristics of Michel Sarrazin, an early Canadian naturalist. In the same novel, Count Louis de Baude de Frontenac is a real-life personage deriving largely from Francis Parkman's history of the British and French in North America; however, Bishop Laval comes not from the unsympathetic treatment of him by Parkman but from the friendlier researches of Abbe Henry Arthur Scott, whose writing and conversation on the subject Willa Cather knew intimately.[13] Finally, one has only to name Bishops Jean Lamy and Joseph Machebeuf, prototypes of Bishops Latour and Vaillant in *Death Comes for the Archbishop,* to make complete enough a list of real models for Willa Cather's fictional creations, a list which could be extended almost indefinitely.

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[12] For a few years following the Civil War, Silas Garber lived in California, where he met his brother Jacob's sister-in-law Lyra Caroline Wheeler. She was the daughter of Nathan and Susan (Niles) Wheeler, of Columbia, Georgia. Garber, while Governor of Nebraska, married Lyra Wheeler in California, on July 1, 1875. They had no children. She survived him at his death in January, 1905. See Webster County (Red Cloud) *Argus,* January 13, 1905, and manuscript files, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska; I wish to thank the Nebraska State Historical Society for the above information.

[13] Bennett, *op. cit.,* pp. 69-75; Brown, *op. cit.,* pp. 188, 285, 270-274; Lewis, *op. cit.,* pp. 25-26.

Likewise, a listing of flashbacks in the fiction could be prolonged until half the major episodes were identified, so popular a technical device did the flashback become with Willa Cather. Often the flashback is short and simple, as it is when Lucy Gayheart later remembers—and we learn for the first time—how she left Chicago to return to Nebraska as soon as possible after hearing the news of her lover's death in Italy; or when the whole story of the dying slave woman named Jezebel is finally told in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl,* a book which contains nearly a dozen such brief episodes from earlier times. But occasionally the pattern of a whole novel is a combination of a loose forward motion in time and seemingly artless digressions into previous decades, and centuries. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is so constructed—recall Fray Baltazar and Father Junipero, for example—and so is *Shadows on the Rock,* with the stories so given of Count Frontenac's drummer boy Giorgio, Blinker a former torturer for the king, the religious recluse Jeanne Le Ber, and the young Bishop Baptiste de la Croix de Chevrieres de Saint-Vallier. By the time of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl,* Willa Cather's last completed novel, the flashback technique has become so skillfully managed that the digressions are regularly as interesting as the main action, which might almost be said to exist mainly to support them.

The controlled release of information through flashbacks during an entire work is exciting when employed by an expert. All through our reading of *A Lost Lady,* for instance, we wonder how Captain Forrester met Marian, his wife and the lady of the title; but only in the last significant flashback do we learn. Also, early in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* it is hinted that once long ago Latour inestimably aided Vaillant during a spiritual crisis; but not until the last book are we sufficiently prepared, Willa Cather seems to say, to understand the implications of that crisis, and so not until then—fifteen pages before the end of the whole novel—does she open that window on the past.

Willa Cather in 1893

Willa Cather in mature years

(From painting by Leo Bakst)

The impression is surely mistaken that Willa Cather foolishly turned her back on the present and dreamily lived in the never-neverland of the past.[14] She was alive to her age, witnessed and displayed courage in it, and met the illustrious of it. The most courageous persons she ever knew were the heroic immigrant farmers of Nebraska, but she later also thrilled to the different sort of pioneering of the Pittsburgh iron kings and still later to that of such stalwart editors and publishers as S. S. McClure and Alfred A. Knopf. She could not know war heroism directly, but she responded to the combat death in France of her cousin G. P. Cather, whose foreign field she visited, with a surprisingly good war novel, *One of Ours,* in which, incidentally, the section called "The Voyage of the Anchises" sprang from the war journal of a New Hampshire doctor she met and admired.[15] As a young woman of remarkable drive she was able to meet such literary notables as Stephen Crane, A. E. Housman, Mark Twain, and E. A. Robinson; and later her friends from various branches of the arts were innumerable—Sigrid Undset, George Arliss, Yehudi Menuhin, and so on.

When Willa Cather saw idealism and initiative weakening as the generations advanced, she concluded ever more strongly that the past—perhaps without ever really containing "the good old days" so celebrated in anecdote—was best. She regarded 1922 as the year which approximately marked the time when the world "broke in two," as she put it in the preface to her collection of essays provocatively entitled *Not Under Forty,*[16] meaning that readers under forty years of age would simply not understand them. Before the First World War the farmers of the Middlewest were still Homeric in their vigor, France still showed all people cultured and meaningful living, and bureaucracy

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[14] Such an opinion is to be found in Granville Hicks, "The Case Against Willa Cather," *English Journal,* XXII (November, 1933), 703-710.

[15] Brown, *op. cit.,* pp. 81, 125ff., 326-328; Lewis, *op. cit.,* pp. 118-119. For a picture of G. P. Cather, see Bennett, *op. cit.,* plate facing p. 108.

[16] Cather, *Not Under Forty* (New York, 1936), p. v.

had not yet debilitated old-fashioned American democracy. Claude Wheeler was only too happy to leave Nebraska and voyage in time as well as space back to France, where he even thought of staying on as a farmer after the War; his conclusion is summarized thus:

> Life was so short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together.[17]

In "The Old Beauty," the aged but still beautiful Lady Longstreet recalls the fine old way of life in southern France, and it is perhaps symbolic that the fragile woman is destroyed by a chance encounter—a minor automobile collision—with two noisy American women who represent typically rootless and unappreciative twentieth-century tourists. And Tom Outland's frustration when he fails in Washington to obtain needed government support for his archeological work in the Blue Mesa cliff-city tells us much indeed about Willa Cather's opinion of the rabbit-warren of federal politics.

And so Willa Cather felt that the past was best—best because the great-hearted pioneers of her youth were better than their sons and grandsons, best because no one age can produce more than one or two supremely fine artists and the past is full of ages, and best because then—whether in Europe or in the American Southwest—roots were deeper in time.

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[17] Cather, *One of Ours, op. cit.*, p. 406.