Excavating Meaning in Willa Cather’s Novels

I  PIONEER-ARTIST

Willa Cather was born in 1873 in Black Creek Valley, Virginia, in the house of her grandmother, her family having lived and farmed the region since the late eighteenth century. In 1883, her family resettled in a farm near Red Cloud, Nebraska, a small midwestern town of twenty-five hundred inhabitants, including many immigrants of Swedish, Russian, and Bohemian descent, with whom the young Cather identified. These often highly cultivated, educated immigrants provided her with experiences and memories that, much later, dominated many of her novels. These people came to represent the common ideal of the cultivated but vigorous, determined, and powerful pioneer spirit which bridged the gulf between East and West, urban and rural, physical and spiritual, natural and cultural.

Cather studied literature and classics at Lincoln before embarking in 1896 on a successful career in Pittsburgh, and later in New York (1906) as editor and arts critic of various magazines and newspapers. She met Sarah Orne Jewett during a newspaper assignment in Boston in 1908, and was influenced both by Jewett’s writing style and by the force of her personality, dedicating her first novel, Alexander’s Bridge (1912) to this great New England stylist.¹ Cather finally resigned from her work as managing director of the famous McClure’s Magazine in 1912 to devote herself to writing fiction. Travels to Europe with her friend Isabella McClung and later with Edith Lewis perhaps affected her less than her trips to the magical American Southwest, which she discovered in the Spring of 1912 on a visit to her brother Douglas in Arizona. Her explorations of the sublimely inspiring ruins of the cliff-dwellers in Walnut Canyon, Arizona, were to haunt her for the rest of her life, and may have affected her work more deeply than any other personal experience.² O Pioneers!, her first full length novel, was
greatly affected by the discovery of this almost supernaturally beautiful country, and two of her finest novels, *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Antonia* (1918) followed. In *The Professor’s House* (1925) and in *Death Comes to the Archbishop* (1927), arguably her other finest works, the magnificent Southwest again plays a central role, and excavation of Cliff City becomes a metaphor for reading and for imaginative activity, and for the archaeological strata and layerings of the human mind and of language itself (and art generally), as Michel Foucault was to elaborate.³

As Cather’s success grew, her disenchantment with ‘modern’ life and the world around her is thought to have increased. Her own values and beliefs seemed to her to diverge increasingly from the consumerism and material, machine-age advances of the post-war period. In England, E. M. Forster had been feeling similar reservations some ten to twenty years earlier. Oppositions that had been thematic aspects of most of Cather’s novels provided the material for this later conflict, oppositions between country and city life, between society, or family, and the individual’s need for solitude, between artistic genius and mediocrity, between nature and the urban, Europe and America, order and chaos, male and female experience, for example. Some of Cather’s novels seem to suggest the possibility of finding a relationship between the spirit of the pioneer or *conquistador* (with all its physical courage, vigour, and elemental natural force) and the spirit of the artist–genius. The opposition for Cather both in her life and in her work was not, however, between nature and art or culture, not between the pioneer and the artist; these are spiritual relations. The most urgent conflict was between mediocrity and excellence, between the pretentious and the genuinely cultivated mind, between the imprisonment of the human spirit in small, mean, petty concerns and the fulfillment of the human spirit by releasing the elemental, creative forces within it, whether through art, nature, religion, or loving human relationship. The enemies of art and of fulfillment she saw as greed, fear of the unconventional, passivity, and mediocrity. Cather explored in her novels the effects of these enemies of creative energy in several different areas: in close human relationship, in art, and in social intercourse.

Cather’s interest in the novel as novel (a work of art), and not merely as a document or repository of ideas, led to an emphasis upon the intricacies and techniques that constitute Cather’s art, and which make her novels artistic in the fullest sense of the word.