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A Hermeneutic Study Of TheEducational Theories Of Willa Cather

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A HERMENEUTIC STUDY OF THE EDUCATIONAL THEORIES OF WILLA CATHER

A Dissertation

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Marie Hassett McDonough

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APPROVAL SHEET

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ABSTRACT

The hermeneutic analysis conducted for this study suggests that five theories about American education may be found in Willa Cather's work. First, she believed that the needs of the individual, not the society, should be the primary concerns of educators. Second, she shows us that the family and the community may play an important role in a learner's development, but cautions that the learner should not be seen as limited to the values and attitudes of the family and community. Third, she believed that Americans had developed a warped view of education, confusing the memorization of facts about art, literature or philosophy with the knowledge that arose from studying those things directly. In keeping with this belief, her fourth theory suggests that schooling and education are not the same thing, and that schools could in fact squelch learning by boring students with rote learning, excessive memorization, and an unwillingness to provide a rationale for the material learned. Finally, Cather shows us that she regarded teaching, as it was practiced in colleges and universities while she was a student and then a teacher, as a career that stifled those who had talent, provided a safe haven for those persons without talent who were unwilling to work, and left female teachers especially exposed to community scrutiny and criticism.

This study and these findings may be of use to researchers looking for new ways of exploring American education at the turn of the century. It is also hoped that the process through which Cather's life and work were examined may serve as a model for researchers wishing to engage in similar analyses of other American writers.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1906, Willa Cather, an English teacher at Allegheny High School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, composed a letter of farewell to her students, that read in part, "One always has to choose between good things it seems. So I turn to a work I love with very real regret that I must leave behind, for the time at least, a work I had come to love almost as well" (Bohlke 173). The work Cather refers to is journalism; she had just accepted S. S. McClure's offer to move to New York and become managing editor of McClure's magazine. In her own memoir of Willa Cather, Elizabeth Sergeant notes that this was a difficult decision for Cather "above all, because of her love of teaching the young" (Sergeant 38).

Two years later, in a letter to Sarah Orne Jewett, Cather confided the difficulties she was having in her work at McClure's as a result of her editorial position. Apparently, the work of reading and selecting manuscripts had proven burdensome, and Cather complained to her friend that she was forced to read huge amounts of material, badly

written, and that this work had drained her of all her energy (PC). While we might normally consider this a fair complaint from an editor, the knowledge of Cather's time as a teacher of English only two years before should raise questions. How could manuscripts written by professional journalists prove more enervating to their reader than the weekly themes of high school students? How could Cather characterize the material as poorly written when her recent memory could surely provide worse examples? What about teaching gave Cather more energy and enthusiasm than the editorial work for which she had left the classroom?

Hermione Lee has suggested in her biography of Cather that "Cather the schoolteacher is not as vivid a figure as Cather the ambitious, busy journalist," and that her "five-year job [as a teacher] did not make a mark on her fiction" (57). However, as the letters above indicate, Cather herself found that teaching did something for her that journalism alone could not. As we look through Cather's personal writings, nonfiction, and fictional work, it becomes quite clear that education and teaching were subjects that consistently occupied her, and that her five years of teaching helped her to see in a new way. As Elliot Eisner has pointed out, a student in school and a student of school are very different people (Eisner 83). Willa Cather, as a public school student in the 1880s, a teacher in the early 1900s, and a writer exploring educational issues throughout

her career, had the opportunity to be both.

American Schools in the Early Twentieth Century

Willa Cather's formal teaching experience took place in public schools quite unlike the one she had attended in Red Cloud, Nebraska. As a student, she was one in a class of only three, in a school that "did not offer adequate preparation for a university course. It was especially weak in scientific instruction" (Brown 49). Allegheny High School, large enough to need a department structure for different subject areas, presented a much different version of secondary education. Too, the increased clamor from the business community for schools that prepared students not only for college coursework, but for immediate employment in Pittsburgh's factories and offices would mark a change for Cather.

Educational historians have generally characterized the American schools at the turn of the century as institutions heavily influenced by theories of scientific management. Andrew Carnegie, an outspoken critic of American schools, and a Pittsburgh resident, urged his fellow citizens to give their children a "practical education," one that would fit them for a life in industry (Callahan 8). The fear of German industrial competition led businessmen to demand that vocational education become a more commonly available option for students, a demand that was met in 1917, with the passage

of the Smith-Hughes Act, insuring federal money for vocational programs.

Not all of the proponents of practicality in education wished, as Andrew Carnegie did, to see the abolition of much of the classical, liberal arts-based high school curriculum. William James' Talks to Teachers, published in 1899, paints a much different picture of what constitutes a practical education. He claimed that the real value of manual training was that it would "give us citizens of an entirely different intellectual fibre" (James 35). He further warned his listeners that "[p]sychology is a science, and teaching is an art; and sciences never generate arts directly out of themselves" (7-8).

Despite warnings of this sort from men like William James, American educators embraced a number of "sciences" of education in the hopes of improving school and pupil efficiency. Willa Cather, teaching in Pittsburgh, surrounded by the words of men like Carnegie, Frick, and Mellon, may have found her work difficult if she did not agree with the principles of education those men espoused.

American Teachers in the Early Twentieth Century

Despite the many studies of this period in America's educational history, researchers know comparatively little about what teachers were actually doing, or how they responded to the demands of the social efficiency champions.

As O. L. Davis points out, often "prominent rhetoric of the times has been taken to represent common practices in the schools. Such conclusion is conspicuous error" (Short, ed. 81). Davis suggests that the stories of teachers who worked in these schools would help researchers to understand what actually happened there on a day-to-day basis.

What we do know about teachers has been culled primarily from records and histories of urban schools like Allegheny. We know that the majority of classroom teachers were women, and almost all school administrators were men. Teachers unions were still young organizations, and female teachers in most cases knew that they could be fired if they married. As Nancy Hoffman states, "Victorian ideology encouraged her [the teacher] to think of teaching as an extension of her life as a daughter, and as preparation for her true work--motherhood" (WTP 210).

Purpose of the Study

As Hermione Lee's comments illustrate, Willa Cather is not commonly seen as a source of educational wisdom, by either literary scholars or educational historians. However, a careful and thorough examination of Cather's fiction, nonfiction, and personal writings suggests that such a study has potential value for scholars in both fields. By analyzing Cather's writings, we will see that she has a contribution to make as an educational theorist, concerned

with a balance between the elitism commonly attributed to Matthew Arnold and the egalitarian values expressed by Frederick Jackson Turner in his analysis of the importance of the frontier to the development of a specifically American character.

Statement of the Problem

By examining the role of teachers and education in the work of a major American author, written during a period when the role of schools was of critical concern to many citizens, we will gain greater insight into the ways that Cather's contemporaries viewed schools and schooling. The systematic evaluation and analysis of Cather's writings can provide us with one of the few detailed accounts of how teachers felt about what they did, and Cather's background gives her unique authority as a writer concerning this issue; at the time when she wrote the bulk of her fiction, Willa Cather was the only prominent American author to have attended a public school and a public university, and to have taught in the public schools. That most of her writing is fiction should not deter us; in the last several years fiction has come to be regarded as one of the most potent sources of material for researchers interested in the ways that teachers are viewed by our society (Hoffman 1994, Isenberg 1994, Joseph & Burnaford 1994). The disclosure of Cather's educational theories, clearly, will help educational historians to

broaden their perspective on a period that has been characterized almost exclusively as a "cult of efficiency" (a term that will be discussed more fully in Chapter 4).

Rationale for the Study

In her study of the role of education in the lives of four women, A Generation of Women (1979), Ellen Condliffe Lageman explains that her "analysis of each life has been built around the notion that education is a process of interaction by which individual potential (instincts, propensities, talents) is activated, shaped, or channeled and a change (an observable or consciously felt difference) thereby produced in the self" (6). Although this study examines not only Cather's education, but her thoughts about the process of education for others, Lageman's definition of what education is provides a helpful means of organization. If we conceive of education broadly, the elements of Willa Cather's life and art converge into a meaningful pattern.

In their book, The Social Construction of Reality (1967), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann posit that each of us creates a "symbolic universe" to make sense of the world as it presents itself in our lives. Two of the tools that they list as essential to this process are religion and mythology, both of which help us to build repertoires of possible roles. Although religion may play a rather small role in the envisioning of one's self as a teacher, a

mythology of teaching exists for almost every American. The systematic exploration of Cather's construction of the teaching world as she found it, both in the classroom setting and beyond, will add considerably to the depth and breadth of resources for most students of education, as well as expanding the knowledge base of their professors. And Berger and Luckmann, while they may stand out for constructing such a formal model of scaffolding, are not alone. Other researchers have commented on the need for working professionals to have a range of possibilities in place whenever they think about conflicts and dilemmas in their work.

Donald Schon's The Reflective Practitioner (1983) has been a staple of education classes for years, and he advocates the same kind of worldview-development that Berger and Luckmann claim as a universal practice. In Schon's work, the focus is not on how we have developed our views, but on how those professionals with rich and diverse maps of their terrain are able to enhance their practice. Through the use of examples from many fields, Schon demonstrates the ways in which a highly developed symbolic universe of one's profession enhances the likelihood that individuals will be able to accept new challenges and produce high-quality work.

Finally, works like Daniel Boorstin's The Image (1965) give still more impetus for studying the fictional portrayals of teachers in a systematic fashion. His thesis, that we

have become a culture dependent on images rather than substance, and that we have come increasingly to rely on compacted, primarily visual sources for information has been demonstrated more and more in the years since the book was first published. The image of the teacher appears on television, in news programs, comedies and dramas, and in popular film, influencing millions of viewers' opinions about teachers. Even if students did not stand to gain in terms of professional development from this type of study, their critical sophistication about the impact of media images on all types on real-world events, and their own image in the communities where they will work, would be enhanced.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

While every effort has been made to locate and examine as much of Cather's extant writing as possible, omissions are inevitable. Because Cather in her will forbade the publication of her personal correspondence, researchers must travel to the collections where the surviving correspondence is held, or request copies of the materials from archivists. As this material is housed in over forty collections nationwide, the researcher has limited its use, relying primarily on the collections of the Lilly Library at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, and Houghton Library at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The most significant delimitation of the study was the

decision to use only the biographical studies from the 1950s in the analysis process, and regard the later biographies simply as background literature. While the later works do refine our understanding of the facts of Cather's life, they do not substantially add to or alter our image of her as a person or as a teacher.

The other critical delimitation of the study requires the reader to recognize that, while this study relies heavily on the examination of fictional texts, it is not for that reason a literary analysis. Cather's novels and short stories are simply pieces of a larger mosaic, and are considered here for the themes and ideas they contain, not necessarily for the forms in which those themes and ideas are expressed.

Overview of the Study

Chapter One has provided an introduction to the problem around which this study is constructed, a statement of purpose and rationale, a statement of the limitations and delimitations of the study, and an overview of how the study has been organized.

Chapter Two includes a brief life of Willa Cather and a discussion of the background literature for this study, touching on educational and social history, contemporary fiction, biographical/critical material, and methodological theory. Each of these specific elements help to provide the

broad context necessary for thorough hermeneutic analysis. In order to understand what Cather's ideas about education might be, and what makes them notable, we must have some understanding of what her life was like, and of the social forces affecting American ideas and practices of education in the period of approximately 1880-1915. Since Cather's primary mode of expression was fiction, we need to see how her writing differed from what she read and what her contemporaries wrote. The abundant biographical and critical writings on Cather allow us to see how others have conceptualized what she did and what her reasons might have been. Finally, as the term "hermeneutics" remains difficult to explain, references are included that trace the evolution and development of this mode of analysis, and show how others have used it to examine literary and social issues.

Chapter Three draws on the background literature in methodology as it presents the theoretical underpinnings of the study and the manner in which the analysis was conducted. Included are the definition of hermeneutic method used in this study, some discussion of what authority this definition rests on, and how hermeneutic method, so defined, translates itself into practice here.

Chapter Four presents the analysis itself. Using categories constructed through the examination of Cather's life and work, the researcher will demonstrate the ways in which education was made an important issue in Cather's

thought, and the ways in which she expressed her ideas through writing (fiction and nonfiction) and acts.

Chapter Five presents and discusses the educational theories of Willa Cather as they have appeared through the analysis.

Chapter Six concludes the study with a summary of the outcomes of this research, a discussion of what has been gained through the exploration of this topic, and recommendations for further work of a similar nature.

Chapter 2

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter will begin with a brief outline of Willa Cather's life. To understand the choice of references that serve as background for this study, the reader should have some familiarity with Cather's educational experiences and her career as a writer.

The materials that provide background for this study may be grouped under four general headings: educational and social history, contemporary fiction, biographical/critical material, and methodological theory. The works discussed in this chapter have been selected for their value in clarifying the context in which Cather's work was written, and to demonstrate similarities and differences between Cather's work and that of her contemporaries.

The Life of Willa Cather

Willa Cather was born on December 7, 1873, in Back Creek, Virginia, to Charles and Virginia Cather. One of seven children, Cather was educated at home by her

grandmother while the family lived in Virginia. She and her parents moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska in 1883, when Cather was nine, living first on a homestead and then in the town proper. Coming from the lush landscape of Tidewater Virginia, Cather was at first dismayed by what she saw in Nebraska, and described it as "bare as a piece of sheet iron" (Bohlke 10). However, she eventually learned to love the sensation of space and possibility inherent in the vast expanse of the land.

Cather attended the public school in Red Cloud and was part of a graduating class of three in 1890. Her commencement speech, printed in the Red Cloud newspaper, is her first published work. In it, she claims that Americans face a great challenge; they must reject the superstition of their forefathers and embrace science, the only true path to learning. Although it may not seem surprising that Cather would choose education as a topic for a commencement speech, what may seem unusual is her persistent pursuit of that topic in further writings.

In the fall of 1890 Cather entered the preparatory division of the University of Nebraska. Many high school graduates were required to do one or two years of additional work prior to beginning college-level coursework. That only one year of work was required of Cather is a testament more to her native intelligence and interest in learning than in the quality of her high school.

As an undergraduate, Cather originally intended to major in science. She changed her mind after one of her freshman compositions, a theme on Carlyle, was submitted for publication to the State Journal by her instructor. As she later wrote to a friend, seeing her words in print had a powerful effect on her life (Bohlke 180). She plunged into journalism, writing articles, stories, and reviews for both college and Lincoln publications.

After her graduation from college, Cather accepted a position at the Home Monthly in Pittsburgh. She would stay in Pittsburgh for almost ten years, working as an editor, journalist, and schoolteacher. It was in Pittsburgh that Cather met Isabelle McClung, the woman widely regarded by scholars as the love of Cather's life, and it was in the McClungs' home that Cather would write what became her first two books, April Twilights (1902) and The Troll Garden (1905).

After accepting a teaching position at Allegheny High School in 1902, Cather continued to teach until 1906, when S.S. McClure, publisher of McClure's, offered her a position as managing editor of his magazine. McClure's was one of the original "muckraking" magazines; its most famous feature is probably Ida Tarbell's expose of the practices of the Standard Oil Company. In her farewell letter to her students, Cather explained that she enjoyed teaching very much, but felt that she needed to take this new challenge

(Bohlke 173).

It is impossible to say what Cather's career might have been if she had not met Sarah Orne Jewett in 1908, while on assignment in Boston. Jewett's advice to the younger writer, now famous, provided Cather with the incentive to take a leave of absence from her job at McClure's to devote herself to writing fiction full time. With Isabelle McClung, she went to Cherry Valley, New York, for a chance to rest and pursue her writing. While there, she completed her first full-length novel, Alexander's Bridge (1912), and wrote two stories, "The Bohemian Girl" and "The White Mulberry Tree." The first of the two stories was published in 1912; the second was combined with another story, "Alexandra," to create what may be Cather's most famous novel, O Pioneers! (1913).

In the next twenty years, Cather would publish another nine novels and countless short stories set in the Great Plains states that she had learned to love as a child, the desert southwest, and colonial Canada. She won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1923 for the novel One of Ours (1922), and in 1944 was awarded the Gold Medal of the National Institute for her lifetime contribution to American literature. Cather's last novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl, published in 1941, returned to the scenes of her earlier childhood in Virginia.

Willa Cather died in April, 1947. Her last book of

short stories, The Old Beauty & Others, was published posthumously in 1948.

Educational and Social History

Willa Cather attended public school during the 1880s and 1890s, and attended the University of Nebraska at Lincoln from 1890 to 1895 (this includes a year of additional preparatory work). She then taught in the Pittsburgh public schools from 1902 to 1906. The historical materials chosen as background for this study, therefore, focus at least in part on the years from 1880 to 1910.

One of the most obvious sources of information about curriculum history in America is Herbert Kliebard's Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958 (1995). Kliebard details the academic and political wars waged over what should be taught in American high schools and gives the reader valuable insight into the forces that contributed to the passage of the Smith-Hughes Act, providing federal money for vocational education, in 1917.

Henry Perkinson's study of the American schools, The Imperfect Panacea: American Faith in Education 1865-1990 (1991), spends less time on the structural aspects of school history than on the guiding ideals behind them and the ways that schools were perceived in the public imagination. This work proves especially pertinent because the author focuses primarily on the years between the Civil War and World War I.

Raymond Callahan's Education and the Cult of Efficiency (1962), long regarded as a classic of educational history, traces the increasingly held American view of the public high school as a place where all students should be trained for their future careers, especially students who will not have the opportunity to attend college. Callahan's book is of especial interest as background for this study because of his focus on businessmen like Andrew Carnegie, based in Pittsburgh, the city where Willa Cather taught school. It is not hard to understand, after reading Callahan, why teaching in a city like Pittsburgh would present special challenges to a teacher with a belief system like Cather's.

For insights into the ways that the curricular battle was joined at the post-secondary level, W. B. Carnochan's The Battleground of the Curriculum: Liberal Education and American Experience (1993) provides an in-depth discussion of what the author sees as two competing views of collegiate education, one stemming from the views of Matthew Arnold, the other from Cardinal Newman. Carnochan links the debate between these two men to the innovations at schools like Harvard during the tenure of Charles Eliot, delineating the argument between college curriculum as a prescribed course versus a choice among elective classes.

Nancy Hoffman, in Woman's "True" Profession: Voices from the History of Teaching (1981), seeks to make the practical business of teaching, as it was understood in

Cather's time, more immediate for the modern reader. Hoffman uses the writing of teachers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as well as writings designed specifically for use in the classroom, to paint a picture of what teachers did, under what conditions, and how those teachers felt about their work. Many of Hoffman's sources are fictions written by women teachers, based at least in part on their own classroom experiences. One of the best known of these teacher-authors is Anzia Yezierska, whose short story "Children of Loneliness" is presented in Hoffman's text. Of most interest for the purposes of this study is section three of Hoffman's book, "Teaching in the Big City."

Larry Cuban, in How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1880-1990 (1993), bases his study of teachers more on statistical data gathered within specific school systems during specific periods in history. Throughout the text, Cuban cautions the reader that while his study can give some indication of the practices engaged in by specific teachers at specific times, the results cannot be generalized, because historians are limited in their knowledge of day-to-day classroom life.

In order to further expand our understanding of teaching practices during Cather's time as both student and instructor, a number of formal and informal methods texts are available. Two works written for normal school classrooms,

Theory and Practice of Teaching (1885), by David Page, and Elements of Pedagogy (1886), by Emerson White, are excellent sources, detailing what professors of pedagogy believed their students needed to know in order to become effective classroom practitioners. These books include sections dealing with the development of moral character in students, the best methods of drilling grammar or reading skills, the psychology of pupils, and the rights and responsibilities of teachers as defined both by law and teachers' contracts.

Among works written for teachers, but not necessarily for normal school coursework, one of the best known is William James' Talks to Teachers on Psychology (1899). The book is based on a series of lectures James gave for Cambridge public school teachers in 1892. It is a valuable source if only for the fact that few books for teachers written at the time focused so exclusively on the student. Most books on teaching concentrated their exhortations on methods of delivering instruction and touched only briefly on the role of the student in absorbing that instruction. James suggested that teachers attempt to understand the pupil's state of mind and "ingrain into that pupil that assortment of habits that shall be most useful to him throughout life" (66).

In striking opposition to James' concern with each individual student is David Snedden's Problems of Educational Readjustment (1913), a book concerned primarily with making

education more efficient. Snedden's book is an excellent example of the "cult of efficiency" discussed by Callahan and articulates the belief held by many of the efficiency experts, that what mattered was not the quality of education, per se, but the quantity of information that could be crammed into any given student during his/her school career.

In Maxine Greene's The Public School and the Private Vision: A Search for America in Education and Literature (1965), the author contrasts the works and writings of prominent educators from the beginnings of mass public education in the 1830s to the 1920s with prominent American literature from the same period. Greene's analysis forces readers to consider the discrepancies between the vision of human nature expressed in schoolmen's rhetoric with that of authors like Hawthorne, Emerson, Melville and Twain, in order to arrive at a more complex understanding of the interrelationship between these two public arenas.

In addition to works of educational history, it seems important for the purposes of this study to have some sense of the more general historical climate. The period in which Cather attended school, taught, and wrote the bulk of her fiction was a tumultuous one in American history, encompassing the World's Columbian Exposition, the publication of Frederick Jackson Turner's "pioneer thesis," the Spanish-American War, and World War I.

The End of American Innocence (1959), by Henry F. May,

looks closely at the years in which Cather saw her first real success as a novelist, 1912 to 1917. Not only are these years critical ones for understanding the world in which Cather worked, the book is written by a man roughly her contemporary, whose worldview appears to be compatible with her own. While it may not provide the most exhaustive study of American culture during that time, it does allow its reader to look at history from a perspective much like Cather's and understand how the events that shaped the early twentieth century also shaped the way Cather would translate her personal experiences into fiction.

In the Preface to his book Over Here (1980), David Kennedy states that he "has used the occasion of the war [WWI] as a window through which to view early twentieth-century American society" (v). At least two of Willa Cather's books, the novel One of Ours and the collection of essays Not Under Forty (1936), use the war in the same way, making Kennedy's history a natural complement to this study of Cather's work. The focus of the first chapter of Over Here on the intellectual and political climate of the period surrounding World War I provides excellent insight into the anti-European, and particularly anti-German, bias that prevailed during those years, causing so much conflict for Cather, who admired much in European and German culture, art, and scholarship.

Contemporary Fiction

For the purposes of this discussion, the term "contemporary fiction" should be taken as meaning works published in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century, with allowances made for works published slightly earlier or later that had an impact on Cather's own work. Although this will not be a study of Cather's work as literature, it is important to recognize that the literature Cather read informed her sense of the possibilities of her work. It also allows the modern reader to compare Cather's work with that of her contemporaries in order to judge its originality and the individuality of Cather's perspective on American life.

Both Henry James and Edith Wharton have been cited by the critics and by Cather herself as early influences on her literary style. Cather, in her essay "My First Novels" notes that James and Wharton were the most important, or at least the most prominent, American authors writing just after the turn of the century (WCOW 93). The "Jamesian" element in Cather's work is easiest to detect in her early short stories and the novel Alexander's Bridge, where the reader will find European country homes, expatriates living in London or Paris, and a handful of foreign noblemen. This element quickly drops out of Cather's work as she becomes more mature and confident, but her admiration for James' work remains throughout her life. Cather and Wharton, close

contemporaries and the first two women to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (Wharton in 1922 for The Age of Innocence, Cather in 1923 for One of Ours), never met, never corresponded, and apparently shared little beyond their admiration for the works of Henry James. It is striking that two women so close in age and so concurrently successful as writers could depict such radically different visions of American society. Comparing any one of Cather's novels to any one of Wharton's provides great insight into the advantages and limitations of either woman's background and life experience.

During her years as a college student and journalist, Willa Cather wrote scores of reviews of new fiction, reviews that give modern scholars a great advantage in their attempts to sort out her views on writing. In the book reviews collected in The Kingdom of Art (1966) and The World and the Parish (1970), the reader sees Cather holding her contemporaries to the standards set by the writers she admired: Tolstoy, Sand, Eliot, and Shakespeare, to name only a few. She had great scorn for what she termed "lady novelists," including in this group Ouida and Frances Hodgson Burnett. Cather's review of Burnett's one novel for adults, A Lady of Quality, refers to the author as "modest, womanly, little Mrs. Burnett," and suggests that she and her "undeserving heroine make a poor showing" when compared with William Makepeace Thackeray and his much better treatment of

the same theme in Henry Esmond (KA 372-74). Cather was willing to acknowledge the talents of women like George Eliot, Jane Austen, and George Sand, but had little patience with most other women fiction writers.

Nina Baym discusses the rise of the women novelists in her book Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870 (1993), describing "the authors as professionals making a product desired by their clients rather than artists making an object expressing their own genius and talent" (xvi). Cather, it seems, responded to this group of "professionals" less than enthusiastically.

It would be impossible not to mention the work of Sarah Orne Jewett as an influence on Cather's own. Their friendship has been documented by Cather herself, in her preface to Jewett's Country of the Pointed Firs, and many scholars have pored over what remains of the correspondence between the two women. The sensitive reader will have no difficulty in seeing similarities of tone and theme between works like A Country Doctor (1884) and Country of the Pointed Firs (1896) and works by Cather. They share the same attention to detail, the same deep love for the land and the people they describe, and the same questioning of traditional ideas about a woman's role in the community, even as they seem to celebrate tradition. Cather noted in her essay "Miss Jewett" that the author knew "that when a writer makes anything that belongs to Literature . . . his material goes

through a process very different from that by which he makes merely a good story" (NUF 76-77).

When turning to those writers who were, in a stricter sense, Willa Cather's professional contemporaries, writing during the same period, the names that immediately crop up are Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Among poets, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Amy Lowell, Edgar Lee Masters, and Edna St. Vincent Millay came to prominence during this same time. The similarities and differences among these writers serves to enhance our understanding of the striking originality of Cather's work.

One of the claims made in this study, that Cather was alone in her serious attention to the issue of what and how Americans learn, seems to be borne out by the examination of works by the writers listed above. Isolated instances of interest in the classroom setting may be found in Winesburg, Ohio (1919) or Spoon River Anthology (1916), but no consistent pattern can be detected. Both Dreiser's Sister Carrie (1907) and Sinclair's The Jungle (1906) are set in Chicago, but how different is the Chicago encountered by Carrie from the one where Thea Kronborg, the heroine of Song of the Lark (1915) takes her first singing lessons? What is the relationship between the Packingtown so brutally depicted in The Jungle and the one that Thea asks her neighbor to show her? The brutality of urban life, so prominent in American

literature in the early twentieth century, appears nowhere in Cather's writing. Although Cather read and was no doubt influenced by realistic and naturalistic fiction, she chose to reject the classification of realism as "minutely and unsparingly describing physical sensations," and instead claimed that a "vague indication of the sympathy and candour with which he accepts, rather than chooses, his theme" marked the sort of "realistic" writing that she herself found valuable (NUF 45).

One might expect greater congruence between the work of Sinclair Lewis and Willa Cather. Both endured childhoods in Midwestern towns that left them vilifying the "Philistine" element of those towns for the rest of their lives. But where Lewis uses biting satire in works like Main Street (1920), Babbitt (1922), and Elmer Gantry (1929), Cather chooses to create a character like Claude Wheeler in One of Ours and shows the reader how the aspects of small town life that Lewis scorns came to be in the first place and how they can crush sensitive individuals. Characters like Elmer Gantry do appear in Cather's work--the most obvious is the wheedling Brother Weldon, who persuades Claude's mother that the Temple College will be safer for her son's soul than the State University--but these individuals never become the focus of a whole novel in Cather's fiction. She acknowledges the element of pettiness and meanness, but refuses to give it center stage.

Biographical and Critical Literature

Numerous biographies of Cather were written in the 1980s. The three most prominent among them, Sharon O'Brien's Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice (1987), James Woodress' Willa Cather: A Literary Life (1987), and Hermione Lee's Willa Cather: Double Lives (1989) each examine Cather's life from different perspectives and has contributed new insights into her life and art.

O'Brien's work is best defined as a psychobiography, and her stated purpose is the examination of Cather's work in light of the events and relationships of her childhood and early adulthood. The two main points of concern are Cather's relationship with her mother as a catalyst and shaping influence for her writing and Cather's purported lesbianism. O'Brien argues that these and other relationships with women affected Cather's worldview and its expression in fiction more than any other individual element of her background.

James Woodress has written what many scholars consider the standard biography of Cather. Rich in detail, this book traces Cather's life from her birth in Back Creek, Virginia, to her death in New York City. Although Woodress has presented much previously unused biographical information, his silence as to Cather's sexual orientation is as loud as O'Brien's insistence. The relationship between Cather's life and art is presented the most forcefully in the chapters discussing The Song of the Lark and The Professor's House,

widely accepted as Cather's most autobiographical works.

Hermione Lee is, of the three biographers mentioned here, the only non-American, and she noted in her book how unusual it is for an English literary critic to take an interest in Cather. What she wishes to show in her treatment of the subject is the "doubleness" inherent in many of Cather's characters, as well as in the author herself. Her suggestion that teaching experience had little impact on Cather's work as a fiction writer provided additional incentive for this study.

In Judith Fryer's book, Felicitous Space (1986), a study of the uses of space in the works of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather, the author describes the spaces that appear in Cather's fiction as "unfurnished rooms" and "landscapes that are physical and spiritual correlatives" (xiv). While both types of space are prominent in Cather's work, Fryer ignores the recurring schoolrooms and studios where the many teachers and students of Cather's fiction seek to master their material. Most obviously, Fryer analyzes a scene in My Antonia where Jim Burden, the protagonist, sits studying for his classes. While she points out the many spatial images that flash through the young man's mind as he confronts classic literature, she says nothing about the decor of Jim's room, which Cather has herself described rather concretely only a few pages earlier in the novel.

Cather's conflicting attitudes toward women are explored

in detail in Sexchanges, volume two of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century (1989), where the authors point out that her "critical statements raise interesting questions about female misogyny, for the intensity of her hostility implies that--as the old saying goes--it takes one to know one" (174). Given this, it is surprising that these authors do not look at the connections between her teaching, her fiction, and her attitude toward women. They do note that she had to support herself, and that her family saw her writing as a good source of income (172), which makes the omission that much more surprising. Gilbert and Gubar claim that "her greatest literary problem" was her "fatal attraction to a renunciation of passion" (205). If this is the case, then the evidence presented by the stories of her many teachers and students would support the claim.

Carolyn Heilbrun uses Willa Cather's life and fiction as examples throughout Writing a Woman's Life (1988) to illustrate the difficult choices women have been forced to make as writers. When she writes about teaching O Pioneers!, she tells us that her students felt that Alexandra Bergson, the protagonist, "left behind her no path for future women, had lived with no community of women, no sense of bonding with other women" (43). These are ideas that Heilbrun explores over the course of her book, looking at Willa Cather in the context of other women authors and their choices.

While she does not suggest that Cather's decisions were wrong or bad, she does indicate that the author's life forced her to make difficult choices that may not be understood by the contemporary reader.

At the end of the chapter entitled "Educating Women: Governess to Governor," in Ellen Moers' Literary Women: The Great Writers (1976), we are told that Cather "sends Vickie Templeton off to university at the end, with her books, her hard-won scholarship, her cropped hair, full of irritation with her mother for getting pregnant again, and with her grandmother for dying" (242). Moers has used the chapter to explore mother-daughter relationships in the fiction of four twentieth century writers; Willa Cather, Virginia Woolf, Colette, and Gertrude Stein. While these relationships obviously exist in the works of all four women, it is peculiarly ironic in a chapter devoted to the notion of educating women that Moers does not choose to examine even briefly the teaching and learning of Cather's heroines. It is even more interesting given the quotation above, which forces the reader to look at Vickie's relationship with the older women in her family against the backdrop of her imminent college education. If we realize that Vickie's grandmother has partially funded that education, the intermingling of themes becomes even more inescapable.

Methodological Theory

The idiosyncratic nature of qualitative studies makes it challenging for the researcher to select reference materials for any particular project. However, a number of general guides to qualitative research, combined with additional works geared more specifically to the chosen methodology, will allow most researchers to design a study that is coherent and viable. Here, we will see how works from educational research, hermeneutic inquiry, and literary analysis all serve to support the form of analysis presented in Chapters 3 and 4.

Naturalistic Inquiry (1985), by Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba, provides a good introduction to the basic principles and practices of qualitative research. Their chapter "Postpositivism and the Naturalistic Paradigm" outlines the ways in which this form of inquiry is suited to the way we currently look at the world, listing five basic axioms of the naturalistic paradigm and how they differ from those of earlier paradigms. Additionally, Lincoln and Guba provide detailed descriptions of research techniques; their explanation of triangulation was instrumental in helping to design this study.

Bernard Berelson's Content Analysis in Communication Research (1952) has been a standard reference for qualitative researchers since its publication. Berelson's methodology explains how the form and the substance of a text may be

looked at independently, showing the reader how to analyze the structure of a text in order to analyze its contents. The discussion of technical problems that researchers are likely to face addresses a cornerstone of qualitative method, the purposeful sample, by stating that "analysis of a small, carefully chosen sample of the relevant content will produce just as valid results as the analysis of a great deal more" (174). Here, Berelson is looking forward to what will eventually be called saturation, the point in the analysis process when additional materials merely reiterate previous findings, without adding anything new. In this study, not all of the material collected was needed in the analysis, precisely because a smaller sample contained all of the necessary data.

Forms of Curriculum Inquiry (1991), a collection of essays edited by Edmund Short, includes several chapters valuable for the purposes of this study. William Schubert's "Philosophical Inquiry: The Speculative Essay," O. L. Davis' "Historical Inquiry: Telling Real Stories," and David Smith's "Hermeneutic Inquiry: The Hermeneutic Imagination and the Pedagogic Text" all provide justification for the type of analysis undertaken in this study. In each of these three essays, the authors affirm the value of using sources like fiction and biography to investigate teaching and learning. Schubert, especially, points out that "in the most neglected languages of aesthetic and ethical inquiry" there

is great "potential for more comprehensive, penetrating, and flexible insight" into educational phenomena (67).

The classic Louise Rosenblatt text Literature as Exploration (1938), her earliest complete statement of reader response theory, reaffirms some of the ideas found in the texts listed above. She states that the "reading of a particular work at a particular moment by a particular reader will be a highly complex process. Personal factors will inevitably affect the equation represented by book plus reader" (79). This echoes the concepts of researcher bias and of reality as a constructed, subjectively ordered phenomenon that occur throughout the texts on qualitative research. It is important to see how these fit together and how their purposes are still further advanced through the imposition of hermeneutic method.

In Informing Educational Policy and Practice through Interpretive Inquiry (Haggerson and Bowman, ed.s 1992) Patricia Holland's essay "Recovering the Story: Understanding Practice through the Interpretation of Narratives" provides a model for using stories to conduct educational research. She refers to E. M. Forster's Aspects of the Novel (1927) when she says that a story is "more than a catalogue of events, a mere description of phenomena. It is the creation of a new entity of meaning, greater than the sum of its descriptive details" (200). Her work affirms the validity of using fiction to understand teaching and learning

events.

The specific characteristics of hermeneutic inquiry, as a distinct subfield of qualitative research, are difficult to characterize. In Chapter 3, a definition of hermeneutic inquiry and the method by which it was undertaken in this study are presented. Here, we will see some of the background information that is available for those who wish to explore what this kind of work looks like.

Gayle Ormiston and Alan Schrift's The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur (1990) traces the development of hermeneutic theory from its beginnings in nineteenth century Germany to the many permutations that exist today. Part II of the book is devoted to essays on methodology by Gadamer, Betti, Habermas and Ricoeur. The primary issue addressed by these men is that of linguistic universality, the possibility (or impossibility) of communicating a thought or idea from one person to another without any change. They all agree that interpretation is an inevitable activity, in varying degrees, by virtue of the differences in each person's life experience, and consequently, in his or her understanding of language and events.

The Hermeneutics Reader (1989), edited by Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, presents only materials in the German tradition. Of special interest for the purposes of this study are Chapter 9, "The Historicity of Understanding," and Chapter 10, "Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences." Again, the issues

examined are the inevitability of interpretation, the universality of personal bias in understanding the world, and the value of understanding these issues when attempting to examine any kind of social phenomena.

Hermeneutics, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere (1993), by Roberto Alejandro, is an examination of the meaning of citizenship in different contexts. It is in some ways a model for this study, as it is based on an idea, citizenship, that is as commonly used, and as commonly misunderstood, as is education. The author examines the ways in which citizenship has been constructed and the foundations upon which those constructions rest, finally suggesting a model of the public sphere as "a space of fluidity and contingency," of "different voices, different languages, and different silences" (223). Alejandro's work supports the notion that a dominant characterization of a phenomena does not provide the whole story.

Summary

It is hoped that this brief biography of Willa Cather, and the survey of literature that follows it will help to orient the reader to the primary concerns of the study. Given the methodological orientation of this research, it is important to have some understanding of the educational environment during Cather's lifetime, of the ways in which critics and biographers have chosen to look at Cather's life,

and of the ways that her work may have followed or diverged from the paths chosen by other writers. The ideas presented in the final section of this chapter about the individual's construction of reality, the possibility of competing perspectives within a single era, and the habits of interpretation in which we inevitably engage, demand that the reader of the analysis and interpretation presented in the following chapters have some sense of the path that the researcher has followed.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY AND HERMENEUTIC ANALYSIS

Introduction

To develop a coherent framework for Cather's views on education and teaching, a hermeneutic analysis of Cather's own writings, interpretations of her work by literary critics, from both the period in which she wrote and the present day, biographies, and educational and general histories of the period was undertaken. The term "hermeneutic," although it resists simple description, may be thought of as the interpretation of works in their relationship to other works and the further interpretation of that synthesis in the researcher's sociocultural context. This chapter will flesh out that definition with reference to works written about hermeneutic analysis and define more clearly the specific process used to evaluate data over the course of this study.

Hermeneutic Method

"Hermeneutics is about creating meaning, not simply reporting on it. This distinguishes the hermeneutic effort

from, say, ethnographic and grounded theory formulations wherein the task is to try to give an account of people's thoughts and actions strictly from their own point of view" (Short, ed. 201). David Smith's description of hermeneutics gives the reader a good starting point for viewing this methodology, as he immediately makes clear that the researcher is active in the generation of the meaning from the data of his or her study. It would be impossible to talk about situating a body of work, in this case Willa Cather's, into a meaningful context, unless the researcher had defined and described that context.

Smith further clarifies his definition by stating "that the mark of good interpretative research is not in the degree to which it follows a specified methodological agenda, but in the degree to which it can show understanding of what it is that is being investigated" (Short, ed. 201). This suggests that while the researcher may began with a rough plan, and accumulate masses of material, it is entirely possible that the planned approach to that material may shift. Additionally, the amount of material collected may prove too great or too limited, depending on the researcher's findings as he/she begins the process of analysis.

Finally, the test of whether or not a specific piece of hermeneutic research can be considered valid or valuable rests on its ability to show "the connection between experience and expression" (Short, ed. 191). In the case of

this study, that means two things. First, the written analysis of the data should show a clear connection between the experience of learning about Cather's life and reading her fiction and the researcher's synthesis of those two things into a unified perspective. Second, it would appear that the presumption upon which the study is based, i.e., that Willa Cather's experiences as a teacher and learner affected the way she viewed teaching and learning, demands that a clear pattern of interaction between Cather's experiences and her theories, as seen in the data, be demonstrated. In her essay on Cather's fiction, Eudora Welty points out that "[p]ersonal history may turn into a fictional pattern without closely reproducing it, without needing to reproduce it at all. Essences are what make patterns. Fictional patterns may well bite deeper than the events of a life will ever of themselves, or by themselves, testify to" (Slote & Faulkner, ed.s 9). This echoing of the standards for hermeneutic research in an essay of literary criticism leads us naturally to the next important consideration for this study, the interaction between standard literary analysis and hermeneutic research.

Literary Criticism and Hermeneutic Analysis

In his book, Inventions (1982), Gerald Bruns defends the use of hermeneutic process for the study of literature by stating that "[m]eanings in literary criticism (as in daily

life) need to be replenished, not fixed. If words meant the same thing every time we used them, we would very shortly run out of things to say, not to mention reasons for saying them" (3). One way of replenishing the meanings available in a literary text, resituating it so that the reader has a different background against which to examine it, is precisely what a hermeneutic analysis hopes to show. In Mikhail Bakhtin's essay, "Epic and Novel," he writes that "what is served here is the future memory of the past, a broadening of the world of the absolute past, an enriching of it with new images" (19). Literary texts, in and of themselves, provide only one point of view for examining the period in which they were written. They may shed some light on the common concerns of an era, or allow scholars to form some conclusions about what readers valued in terms of form or subject matter, but as documents for examining historical issues, they cannot stand alone.

The combining of one of the traditional aims of literary criticism, that of finding themes that run throughout the body of an author's work, with the power of hermeneutic analysis to locate those themes in a broader social context, allows us to look at Willa Cather's life and work together in order to find out more about education at the turn of the century. As O. L. Davis has pointed out, "Telling stories illuminates previously inadequate understanding. Stories also constitute reminders of what is known. They can never

prove the correctness of this knowledge even though a dominant cultural empiricism tends to confer this power on them. Increased light, especially in long darkened spaces of experience, reveals that which has been obscured or hidden" (Short, ed. 78). Although this study of Willa Cather's life and writing cannot provide a definitive answer to questions about how teachers taught and how students responded, it can add new depth to our previous understanding, as we fit what we learn here into prior knowledge of education during this period.

Broad Categories of Analysis

Although it is not possible at the outset of a qualitative study to determine the exact parameters of the work, for the purposes stated here the work was broken down at the outset into major categories/themes, which serve two primary purposes. First, they clearly delineate the layers of context in which we see Cather's work and how our perspective may differ from that of other readers. Secondly, these categories are arranged to make the reader aware of the passage of time and its effect on the interpretation of Cather's writing and the events of her life. Each of these categories will now be discussed further, in order to make clear the process through which material was collected and analyzed, resulting in far more specific categories interacting across the original multiple levels of data.

Educational and Social History

This first level of data provides a basic understanding of education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries in America. While the list of sources used does not exhaust all of the possibilities in the field of history, an attempt was made to select sources written by scholars with varied ideological orientations toward the material. Most of this material serves as background and does not figure directly in the analysis process. Instead, two primary sources (William James and David Snedden) were selected. Neither of these documents is the most common choices to represent the two different points of view it illustrates, and their relative obscurity helps the researcher and the reader to focus on the actual texts, not preconceived notions about these authors and their personal agendas concerning education.

In order to determine whether or not Cather's ideas about education reflect more general beliefs or the beliefs of educational theorists working during the period in which she taught, it was necessary to compare the theory of teaching and education that grows out of analysis of her work with the views expressed in historical writings, both actual documents from that period and historians' conceptualizations of thought on education as it then existed.

The Writing of Willa Cather

Here, the researcher had a surfeit of material with which to work. All of Cather's known fictional works, with the exception of a fragment of the novel she was working on at the time of her death, are easily accessible, as are most of her nonfiction articles and reviews. Brent Bohlke's Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters (1986), collects much of the ephemeral material that would otherwise require endless digging in archives. And although Cather forbade the publication of most of her correspondence, much of what survives has been placed in research collections across the country, where it is available for researchers.

The most closely examined works in the study are those written between 1890 and 1925. The patterns established in this thirty-five year period are only reinforced by the later works; no evidence of strong contradiction was found. The novels and short stories that appeared after The Professor's House, although many of them do continue to build up the pattern of constant attention to education in Cather's work, do not significantly expand or refine our understanding. Some of Cather's later nonfiction, most notably her letter published in an early newsletter of the College English Association, was included in the final writeup, because in it she expands on her ideas about the teaching of literature in concrete ways.

Although there are several different types of text to be

considered here (fiction, nonfiction, personal correspondence, transcripts of speeches and interviews), the conceptualizing of education and teaching remains consistent throughout. One of the most interesting aspects of this part of the work has been the degree to which ideas or opinions expressed by Cather remain consistent across genres.

Biographical and Critical Writing about Willa Cather

Scholarly interest in Willa Cather's life and work has not been consistent since her death in 1947. Although numerous biographies and critical studies were written in the 1950s and early 1960s, interest tapered off after this, and not until the early 1980s did Cather criticism or biography again appear in such great quantity. For the purposes of analysis, the researcher chose to focus on the biographical studies that first appeared in the early 1950s, written by Edith Lewis, E. K. Brown and Leon Edel, Mildred Bennett, and Elizabeth Sergeant. Although later biographical works form a part of the background material for the study, their wealth of factual information did not equal in value the insights presented in the works of the earlier authors, who had access to Cather, her family and friends. As the purpose of this study was to reconcile themes found in Cather's work with events and patterns in her life, personal anecdote, access to friends and family, and direct experience of working and/or living with Cather seemed more important than precision in

dates; depth had more value than breadth.

The primary purpose of including these types of works in this study is to develop a systematic or standardized way of looking at both Cather's life and her work, and the interplay of the two. In this part of the analysis, the researcher attempts to show that many, competing perspectives have coexisted since Cather herself wrote biographical blurbs for her book jackets and that specific biographical views are used to support distinct and often conflicting interpretations of her work.

Researcher Interpretation

Although every attempt to keep an open mind concerning this data was made by the researcher, it is inevitable that some bias will color the findings. Before beginning this dissertation, the researcher had spent a portion of the five years previous studying Cather's life and work, and it was this study that determined the subject and focus of the dissertation presented here. While this investigation of Willa Cather's life and work did not present any previously unknown material that presented a direct challenge to the author's basic assumption, many new and unforseen connections did emerge during the analysis phase of the project. Prior work appears at this time to have provided nothing more nor less than a solid working knowledge of the facts and events of Cather's life and a good grasp of her writing, along with

a continued belief that her work contained much of value for persons interested in the educational history of America.

It is hoped that the final phase of this project presents a new perspective on Cather, one grounded not only in previous analyses and interpretations but in an assessment of her relationship to American education. By recontextualizing Cather's life and work in this way, a structure through which other American writers' work can be reexamined may begin to show itself. America has the only national literature in which teachers figure prominently and consistently throughout history. These fictional teachers can and should serve as a powerful teaching tool for educators and educational philosophers/theorists.

Categorical Interaction and Triangulation

The final process of analysis involved the sorting of material from the broad categories outlined above into more specific themes. After this had occurred, the themes from each category were analyzed in reference to each other, as the researcher sought connections between Cather's life as a teacher and student in a variety of settings with the ideas she presents about education in her writing. The latter process, triangulation, is discussed in Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba's Naturalistic Inquiry as a "mode of improving the probability that findings and interpretations will be found credible" (305). Among the possible types of triangulation

suggested by those authors is the use of multiple types of sources concerning a single concept or type of information. In the case of this study, triangulation among fictional, biographical, critical, and historical sources allows the reader to see how events that occured in Cather's life provided material for or influenced her writing.

Specifc examples of the ways in which categorically arranged data interact to form a more precise outline of the ways Cather's experience contributed to her writing are abundant. In the part of the data gathered from biographical sources and classified under the subheading "Family and Education," there are numerous references to Cather's grandmothers and her Aunt Frank as the informal teachers Cather relied on most prior to attending school. In that part of the data collected from Cather's fictional writings, and labelled "Family Impact on Educational Experiences," we find numerous references to older female relatives who help to direct the education of the younger generation.

Another recurring cross-categorical reference has its basis in Cather's college experiences with Lucius Adelno Sherman. All of Cather's biographers point to this as one of the most trying academic experiences in the author's life, one that would help provide a model for the inadequate teachers in her fiction and serve as an example in her discussions of English teaching as what one should not do to students. Cather left Sherman and the University of Nebraska

behind her in 1895, but as late as the 1930s, she was still describing bad English classes in terms of the activities imposed on her in Sherman's classes.

Perhaps the most direct correlation between biographical and literary incidents can be found in the young Willa Cather's attempts to teach the family servant, Margie, and the young Claude Wheeler's attempt to teach Mahailey in One of Ours. Mildred Bennett tells us in The World of Willa Cather (1951) that Margie, despite Cather's best attempts at teaching her how to read, "succeeded only in learning to tell time" (57). Mahailey, likewise, never managed to read, but could "tell the time of day by the clock" (OO 21).

Examples of the categories into which data were arranged may be found in Appendix B. While no two categories offer strict point-by-point matches of data, the weight of material in each tends to confirm trends and ideas found in the others.

Summary

As the materials discussed in this chapter have shown, hermeneutic research must necessarily be defined in flexible terms, but this does not mean that either the researcher or the reader need be confused as to the methods and materials used in this type of research. In order to create an acceptable new meaning for preexisting materials, the researcher must be able to show what sources have been used,

how they have been organized, and how their intermingling can be tracked through the process of analysis.

Chapter 4

ANALYSIS

Introduction

This analysis of Willa Cather's life and work in their historical context has as its purpose the disclosure of her theories about education. Nancy Hoffman points out in her article, "Inquiring After the Schoolmarm: Problems of Historical Research on Female Teachers," that in studying writing about schools in order to discover how teachers and other authors saw American education, "the writers, including teachers themselves, find exactly what the conventional lore about teachers proposed" (113). Cather's work provides an opportunity both to support and to refute that thesis. Much of the fictional writing that exists about teachers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was written by people who saw themselves as teachers who occasionally wrote, not writers who had taught. Additionally, most of these authors contributed to American fiction an extremely limited body of work. Willa Cather, however, wrote and published a substantial body of work over a period of more than forty years, spoke out on educational issues, and took an active

role in helping to educate younger family members and friends. In her work, some of the traditional stereotypes about teachers are confirmed, but much more that has not been previously documented and discussed when historians have looked at the role of schools, schooling and education in the lives of Americans during this period will become apparent.

This analysis will begin with a brief examination of the two opposing views of education most common to this period through the work of William James and David Snedden. The question of the schools as acculturating forces was chosen to illustrate the clash between the two sides, partly because the extreme contrast makes the differences obvious and partly because the role of education in preserving and transmitting culture is crucial in Cather's work.

Having situated Cather in the midst of this conflict, the analysis will proceed to the exploration of her own family life, the communities that she lived in, and the ways that the impress of those environments can be found in her writing and behavior. It will then proceed to examine her ideas about schools and students. The analysis concludes with an examination of what Cather seems to be saying about the ideal education of an American, with particular emphasis on her use of the arts, both as forms of education and as a measure of individuals' levels of education.

Contrasting Views: William James and David Snedden

When most educational historians think of the years between the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and World War I, they tend to characterize the dominant attitude of the period as one that encouraged what Raymond Callahan calls the "cult of efficiency." Efficiency experts like Frederick Winslow Taylor, with his system for estimating the best way of completing a task by evaluating the man who could perform that task the fastest, were embraced by school systems nationwide (Kliebard 78-81). The influx of immigrants in the 1890s, the steady rise in the percentage of American youth attending high schools, and the steadily broadening rift between those who believed that the primary purpose of the high school was college preparation and those who believed that students from all walks of life should be fitted for their life's work by their high school studies had led to confusion about the best way to educate the greatest number of students effectively.

One of the most powerful forces exerting itself to shape American education at the turn of the century was American business. As Callahan has pointed out, among "the leading critics of the traditional curriculum and one of the strongest proponents of practical education was one of the most influential men in America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century--Andrew Carnegie" (8). Businessmen wanted high school graduates who could move directly into a

work environment dominated by factories and assembly lines and were less concerned with their employees' ability to analyze a text than they were with those employees' ability to arrive at work punctually and work steadily, making few mistakes that would cost employers time and materials.

Not everyone agreed with the efficiency experts and businessmen about the purposes of an education and their championing of efficiency above all other virtues. Perhaps the most obvious non-efficiency expert working in education at the time, John Dewey would have agreed that students should, through their school experiences, learn to cope with the world as it existed. However, he would also have believed that students should not only learn to adapt to what predated them but to make changes in the system. While Carnegie and his supporters lambasted the way schools were run and the knowledge acquired through high school and college curricula, Dewey worked in the Lab School at the University of Chicago, developing what would later be known as the project curriculum. Although the efficiency experts and the educators who would later be labeled "Progressives" appeared to have quite different visions of the schools, both groups would have agreed that school should help equip a child for life.

In order to see how this shared value could be translated into such different modes of educating, we may turn to two works that represent the different sides of the

debate. The slowly emerging Progressive perspective may be found in William James' Talks to Teachers on Psychology (1899); the suggestions of the efficiency experts reveal themselves in David Snedden's Problems of Educational Readjustment (1912). The most basic difference between these two stands on education emerges quickly in both books; James attempts in his writing to help the teacher see the student as the starting point for shaping instruction, while Snedden sees the student as unfinished works, in need of clear structure and strictly delineated tasks. As we will later see, Willa Cather held some beliefs in common with each of these positions, but seems overall to have sided more closely with the Progressives.

William James' book grew out of a series of talks he gave in 1892 to teachers in Cambridge, Massachusetts (James, ix). His views may easily be distinguished from those of the efficiency experts when he describes the introduction of manual training in the schools as a "colossal improvement . . . not because they will give us a people more handy and practical for domestic life and better skilled in trades, but because they will give us citizens with an entirely different intellectual fibre" (35). In this, we can see his anticipation of John Dewey's 1916 work, Democracy and Education, in which Dewey argues that schools are neglectful when they educate only the hand, that the mind and heart must also be considered.

By contrast, David Snedden defines education in the preface of his book as "but one of the phases of this newer social economy . . . capable of being made more purposeful, more scientific, less blind in its methods, less doubtful as to its results" (iii). The goal of reducing the uncertainties inherent in the educational process formed a prominent part of the efficiency experts' agenda. As history has proven, this goal was never achieved, despite the huge influx of standardized curricula, teaching methods, and evaluative methods created by men like Taylor and Franklin Bobbitt and used widely in school systems across the country.

In order to provide more concrete evidence of the differences in attitude between these two writers, let us consider the school as a source of learned culture. William James notes that Americans "wish and expect to enjoy poetry always, to grow more and more intelligent about pictures and music, to keep in touch with spiritual and religious ideas, and even not to let the greater philosophic thoughts of our time develop quite beyond our view" (72). Without suggesting either a specific course of study or a specific method for teaching, James does imply that culture, broadly defined, should be addressed in the schools, in order to provide the resources later for continued understanding of our culture. Snedden, by contrast, asks readers if they can "guarantee that Grecian and Roman history, as taught, will 'function' as knowledge, power, or culture" (99). On the one hand, we see

James proposing an integrative approach to teaching and learning, considering all material as part of a continued process of growth and development; on the other, Snedden questions the value of specific bits of information, apparently not considering that material studied may have a value later that cannot be specified by the teacher at the time of its presentation.

This type of comparison could be carried through many aspects of the teaching and learning process, but the example above should illustrate the kinds of views that stood opposing each other in the battle over the purposes of schooling for late nineteenth century and early twentieth century America. It was in the midst of this battle that Willa Cather attended the public schools of Red Cloud, Nebraska, and the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, worked as a journalist in Pittsburgh, moved on to teach in the Pittsburgh public schools, and finally arrived as a writer in New York, first as the managing editor of McClure's magazine and then as a novelist. Her continued attention to educational issues was tempered not only by her own experiences as a teacher and student in formal educational settings, but by her family's attitudes toward the process of education and her many learning experiences in settings beyond the classroom. As we begin examining the biographical works written by those that knew her, a picture of Cather as an inevitable educator, whether or not defined by schools and

classrooms, begins to emerge.

Family Perspectives on Education

Willa Cather came from a family full of teachers which took its responsibility for educating its young quite seriously. Cather "always said that she got her best education from the foreign women on the Divide, and from her grandmothers, who read her the Bible and Shakespeare" (Sergeant 27). She would emphasize this point to interviewers throughout her life, and Elizabeth Sergeant would not be the only biographer to make a statement like this. Although Cather would acknowledge the assistance of a few devoted teachers in helping to develop the later novelist, she constantly referred to family members as her best teachers, "taking education as she herself did, in the broadest sense" (Sergeant 28).

In addition to her grandmothers, Willa Cather's Aunt Frances Smith Cather, Boston native and Mt. Holyoke graduate, "distributed more manna in the wilderness than anyone else," according to her niece (Bennett 14). Aunt "Frank," as she was called, serves as the model for Aunt Georgiana in Cather's short story, "A Wagner Matinee." In that story, the narrator recalls the pivotal role played by his aunt in his own education, "hearing me recite Latin declensions and conjugations, gently shaking me when my drowsy head sank down over a page of irregular verbs. It was to her, at her

ironing or mending, that I read my first Shakespeare, and her old text-book on mythology was the first that ever came into my empty hands" (CSF 237). Of the real Aunt Frank, Mildred Bennett notes that "[s]he led the singing and taught a class of young people," who "admired her intellectual attainments--in some of her presentations of Emerson and other transcendentalists they caught a glimpse of a different life" (14).

The interweaving of familial and educative roles began, as we see here, quite early in Cather's life. Cather would later make it her business to provide financial support for nieces, nephews, and younger siblings to attend college. She put her younger brother, Jack, through the Carnegie Institute of Technology (Sergeant 137), and once took to Gloucester a young niece whom she was "sending through college" (Sergeant 71). E. K. Brown describes her as "a formidable and intense aunt," whose "interest in each of the Cathers of the next generation was serious and intense" (288).

Willa Cather would not be the only one of Charles and Virginia Cather's children to teach. Her brothers Roscoe and Douglass each "taught school and helped to the utmost" when her father was struggling financially (Brown 65). Elsie Cather, one of Willa's younger sisters, taught English in the public schools of Lincoln (Bennett 38). Clearly, Cather and her siblings had been raised to see teaching as valuable work. Roscoe, who had taught in a country school after his

own high school graduation, would later attend the University of Nebraska and then go back to teaching, at a time when the majority of the teaching population was female, and a career in teaching was not, for men, held in high esteem (Bennett 37).

The evidence of a strong familial commitment cannot entirely explain Willa Cather's own lasting exploration of educational issues in her work, although it does allow us to see that an affinity for the educator's role may have been acquired very early in her life. As we move from the examination of her family's attitude toward education to descriptions of her experiences as a student, formal and informal, in the communities of Red Cloud and Lincoln, further clarification of Cather's ideas begins to emerge.

Communities as Sites of Learning

E. K. Brown has remarked on Cather's "dismissal of the experiences of early childhood" (3), in response to Cather's statement that "the years from 8 to 15 are the formative period of a writer's life, when he unconsciously gathers his basic material" (Bohlke 31). While this statement may seem strange to some critics and biographers, it makes sense in the context of Cather's lifelong interest in education and its impact on individuals. Before the age of eight, Cather had no formal schooling, and her life was essentially bounded by her family. After this, she began attending school, and

forming relationships with both adults and children outside of those that her family had created for her. It was only after the age of eight that she could see family, school and community values interacting, shaping her emotional and intellectual development. Members of the communities of Red Cloud and later of Lincoln would do much to refine Cather's vision of education, teaching, and scholarship.

In a letter Cather wrote to be read at the 1909 commencement ceremonies in Red Cloud's high school, she said, "I am very sure that Miss King was the first person whom I ever cared a great deal for outside of my own family. I had been in her class only a few weeks when I wanted more than anything else in the world to please her" (Bohlke 175). E. K. Brown tells us that "[i]t was probably with her that Willa Cather read Paradise Lost, one of her first literary experiences" (32). Clearly, this was a woman who helped to shape the direction of Cather's thought; the last short story written by Willa Cather, in 1947, "The Best Years," tells the story of a former high school teacher turned county superintendent, a character based on Eva King Case. The same story, in Elizabeth Sergeant's words, "confirms this relationship between an elder sister and her younger brothers as of basic significance to Willa Cather's life" (286). The intermingling of themes so significant in Cather's life, begun so early, help reinforce the supposition that Cather used teaching and learning as basic metaphors with which to

frame the important people and events in her life.

In an essay on Cather that appeared in The Art of Willa Cather (Slote and Faulkner, eds 1973), Eudora Welty suggests that the author "opened her mind to the past as she would to a wise teacher" (8), and states further that "Willa Cather was a born learner" (11). While it is possible that Welty sees all authors as continual learners, it is interesting that she chooses this language specifically to describe Cather, as this connects her with the biographers who knew Cather and her family and described her in much the same terms.

Cather demonstrated, as a student, a blend of confident independence and an awareness of how earlier experiences affected her later learning. When, as a university student, "she didn't like a teacher or his methods, she wouldn't attend his classes" (Bennett 214). The English department, under the direction of Lucius Adelno Sherman, was, she felt, "too analytical, their tearing apart of the classics in an attempt to find their basic formulae too brutal" (Bennett 204). What she had hoped to find in her classes was "the experience of great literature and the knowledge of great civilization" (Brown 52). Years later, in The Song of the Lark, Thea Kronborg's high school principal will be referred to as one of her "natural enemies . . . who in addition to lethargy and stupidity has the deeper sin of diagramming poems in the manner of Professor Sherman" (Brown 191).

Cather did not arrive at her condemnation of Sherman without prior experience that had shown her other methods for teaching literature. While still a high school student in Red Cloud, she had studied Greek and Latin "with 'Uncle William Ducker,' not a relative but a well-educated Englishman who took an interest in her" (Bennett 119). As her companion of forty years, Edith Lewis, notes in her own memoir of Cather, "Her passionate hero-worship of this old scholar was augmented, if anything, after she entered the University of Nebraska, and began to study Latin and Greek under more routine methods" (22). After learning, on her own and with the help of older friends, to enjoy great literature for its own sake, "some of the courses she took seemed to her pedantic and sterile" (Brown 52).

Despite her success in the first two years of her college career, experiences like those she had with L. A. Sherman and other teachers who did not stimulate her led her to write to a friend that "she had decided that she could never be a scholar, that she was not meant for that" (Lewis 32). This is important in part because it alerts us to the need for a distinction, when reading Cather's work, between scholarship and teaching. Not all of the scholars in the pages of Cather's fiction are teachers, although they may hold teaching positions, and clearly, not all of the teachers she depicts are capable of serious scholarship.

Having explored some of the home and community

influences that shaped Cather's educational life, and seen the distinction she made for herself between the activities of scholarship and teaching, let us turn to her published work for evidence of how those experiences and beliefs played themselves out in her fiction.

The Fundamental Role of Learning

Although it has passed unnoticed by many literary critics, the vast majority of main characters in Willa Cather's fiction are teachers or students. In stories where this is not the case, characters often use their educational experiences as a way of identifying and explaining themselves and their relationships to others. The story "A Night at Greenway Court" contains no references to formal schooling, but the narrator informs us in the opening paragraphs that he has come to Greenway Court because his father "greatly regretted that [he] should be brought up in a new country, so far from the world of polite letters and social accomplishments," and so has sent him here to be with one of the "foremost scholars of his time, Thomas, Lord Fairfax" (CSF 483). The men who attend Harvey Merrick's wake in "The Sculptor's Funeral" suggest that instead of sending the deceased East for college, "where he got his head full of trapesing to Paris and such folly," he should have had been sent to "some first-class Kansas City business college" (CSF 182). The playwright in "The Treasure of Far Island" got his

start through "an old school friend of his father's who had turned manager" (CSF 273), and the narrator learns the tale in "The Affair at Grover Station" because the cashier at the railroad office he travels through on a university geological dig was a classmate of his at Princeton (CSF 339). Everywhere, characters use education to explain and define themselves, most often providing information about their families' views or attitudes about education as well.

Moving forward to the novels, the same pattern appears. The observer and family friend in Alexander's Bridge is one of Alexander's former philosophy professors. In O Pioneers!, Alexandra tells Carl after Emil's death that her brothers say she "ruined him by sending him to college" (176). Thea Kronborg, in The Song of the Lark, experiences "the hostility of comfortable, self-satisfied people toward any serious effort" when she comes home from her studies in Chicago for the summer (266). In My Antonia, Antonia tells Jim how sad her father was to leave behind in Bohemia "the man what play long horn like this"--she indicated a slide trombone. "They go to school together and are friends from boys" (59). And in One of Ours, Nat Wheeler sends his son Claude to the Temple College instead of the State University because the students there "were less likely to become too knowing, and to be offensively intelligent at home" (24).

This pattern of academic reference echoes and reinforces patterns found in Cather's life. Herself the product of a

family that saw the value of education, she was later able to depict selfless older women helping to educate children or parents who made deliberate choices to enhance the quality of educational opportunity. However, as she also saw families in the community around her in which education was held in some suspicion, she could show her readers how families, consciously or not, attempted to limit their members educational experiences or to denigrate any academic progress that had been achieved.

Other factors, especially Cather's ideas about what constituted Americanism, would influence the ways in which her fictional families responded to an ambition for learning. Before examining this strain of her thought, however, we must turn to the other half of the equation necessary for learning, the teacher.

What Makes an Educator?

The teachers in Cather's fiction are both male and female. They teach in rural and urban high schools, colleges, or private settings. Both positive and negative types of teachers emerge over the course of Cather's writing career, but it is interesting to note that those who gain the author's respect for their intelligence and/or scholarship are men. Although we know that Cather enjoyed the benefits of strong friendships with at least two female teachers from her own high school days in Red Cloud, her depictions of

female teachers present teaching as a way-station for attractive women and a last resort for women without other resources.

The role of the female teacher in her community remains ambiguous throughout Willa Cather's writing. Generally respected for her academic abilities, she may not be sought after socially. In "A Resurrection," the narrator says of Miss Margie, "Yet, though she had passed the dreaded meridian of thirty, and was the village schoolmistress to boot, she was not openly spoken of as an old maid" (CSF 426). In O Pioneers!, we know little of Evelina Oleson, the village schoolteacher, except that she was "a homely girl in thick spectacles," who still walks "like a camel" (26). Thea Kronborg's father tells his wife that Thea is "too peppery and too fond of having her own way . . . That kind make good church-workers and missionaries and school-teachers, but they don't make good wives" (SL 90). In the case of Gladys Farmer, Claude Wheeler's high school friend turned schoolteacher in One of Ours, the reader knows that although "she taught at Frankfort High School for twelve hundred a year, she had prettier clothes than any of the other girls. . . . Her new hats and suede shoes were discussed and criticized year in and year out" (80).

The women listed above may have been respected for their knowledge or their efforts as teachers, but it becomes quite clear through these examples that a teaching position in no

way guaranteed them that they would not be evaluated according to a more traditional scale of female worth. The Victorian ideal of motherhood shines through when a narrator describes female teachers saying, "You can find them everywhere slaving for and loving other women's children. In this sorry haphazard world such women are often cut off from the natural outlet of what is within them; but they always make one" (CSF 436). Although Cather may not have described herself in these terms, the fact that she remained single, taught school, and in fact contributed a great deal of time and money toward the education of "other people's children," both within and outside her family, might cause us to wonder why she remained so negative in her portraits of women teaching. Only in her last story, "The Best Years," do we see a young woman teacher who appears to be fitted for her work. Even this story does not entirely vindicate the female teacher, Leslie Ferguesson, as she dies of an illness contracted when she helped to rescue her students from a sudden blizzard that came up during school hours.

Apparently, while Willa Cather maintained a great level of respect for teaching throughout her life, what she saw of women in the public schools did not convince her that teaching could be a satisfactory or fulfilling choice for any woman who had alternate opportunities. These female teachers are constantly defined by what they lack, whether personally, in terms of intellect, strength of character, or

relationships, or in monetary terms, with reference to the poverty that was common to those women.

Male teachers and scholars provide a dramatic contrast to their female colleagues. Not only do they appear noble for their sacrifices to education, they have managed to find fulfillment through teaching as Cather would not allow women to do. Emerson Graves, the title character in "The Professor's Commencement," sums up his philosophy about teaching for his sister, and in doing so, provides readers with a clue about Cather's own attitude toward the fostering of education.

> If one labors at the garden of youth, it must be free from the passion of seeing things grow, from an innate love of watching the strange processes of the brain under varying influences and limitations. He gets no more thanks than the novelist gets from the character he creates, nor does he deserve them. He has the whole human comedy before him in embryo, the beginning of all passions and all achievements. (CSF 285)

Teaching, it seems, can be an acceptable career only if one does not become too bound up with the schools or the students. Emerson Graves suggests that a successful teacher must love the process of learning and not the students who engage in it; teaching as a way of the teacher's learning more about human nature is what makes it an acceptable job.

Unlike her women teachers, Cather's men are portrayed as excited, satisfied scholars and teachers, gifted men who occasionally lack in personal characteristics but even then have redeeming talent. Thea Kronborg's first vocal teacher,

Madison Bowers, "had all the qualities which go to make up a good teacher--except generosity and warmth" (SL 218). Jim Burden's instructors at the university create "an atmosphere of endeavour, of expectancy and bright hopefulness" (MA 166). The professor at the State University who supervises Claude Wheeler's work in European history "talked rapidly, as if he were addressing his equals, with none of the coaxing persuasiveness to which Temple students were accustomed. His lectures were condensed like a legal brief, but there was a kind of dry fervour in his voice, and when he occasionally interrupted his exposition with purely personal comment, it seemed valuable and important" (OO 34).

These instructors are far more attractive and compelling than the "withered women who had taken doctorate degrees and who worshipped furtively through prism spectacles" in the balcony of the opera (CSF 193). Among the men, teaching has ennobling force, allowing them to reach and enlighten a broad audience; when comparing this to the sense of confinement and futility that surrounds most of Cather's female teachers, it is hard not to believe that Cather, despite her own teaching experience, saw women as distinctly inferior in terms of scholastic ability. When it is further considered that many of the male teachers in Cather's fiction taught in universities and most of the women taught in public schools, it becomes necessary to explore the settings in which learning takes place, and how students feel about their

schools and their teachers.

Schools and Students

Willa Cather never questioned the importance of learning, but she frequently questioned the value of specific kinds of learning. She was unwilling to accept that someone was intelligent or learned simply by virtue of time spent in school, and she did not believe that a lack of schooling necessarily indicated ingnorance. Aunt Charlotte, in the story "Uncle Valentine," "read little, it is true; what other people learned from books she learned from music,--all she needed to give her a rich enjoyment of life" (UVO 8-9). By contrast, Bayliss Wheeler, Claude's brother in <u>One of Ours</u>, "was the boy who always got the answers to the test problems when the others didn't, . . . never giving a neighbour the benefit of his cleverness" (77). And yet, of the two characters, Aunt Charlotte appears to have learned a great deal more than Bayliss and to have turned her learning into a source of enjoyment, rather than an opportunity for one-upsmanship. In an early story, "The Fear that Walks by Noonday," the reader finds that Horton, the hero of the tale, "was not very much at home in college. Sometimes in his loneliness he tried to draw near to the average man, and to be on a level with him, and in so doing made a consummate fool of himself, as dreamers always do when they try to get themselves awake" (CSF 510). However, Horton's football

teammate, Reggie, "was one of those men who, by the very practicality of their intellects, astonish the world. He was a glorious man for a college" (510). The narrator of "The Joy of Nelly Deane" reports that when she had trouble with her veil, "she [Nelly] laughed her old merry laugh and told me there were some things I would never learn, for all my schooling" (CSF 63).

The comparisons among the quotations above, chosen from material covering more than twenty-five years, indicate that Cather did not necessarily regard school curricula as the learning of most value to all Americans. Many of her most admirable characters have spotty or nonexistent schooling, and many well-educated characters have lost something vital in the process of becoming "educated."

The relationship between schooling and learning remained a complex one for Cather. Of her own work, she said in 1915, "If I hadn't again grasped the thrill of life, I would have been too literary and academic to ever write anything worth while" (Bohlke 15). In 1924 Cather told an interviewer:

> By the fine reader I don't necessarily mean the man or woman with a cultivated background, an academic, or wealthy background. I mean the person with quickness and richness of mentality, fineness of spirituality. You found it oftener in a carpenter or blacksmith who went to his books for recreation and inspiration. (Bohlke 69)

The kind of learning that went on in schools did not always help to create readers of this sort. It would appear, in fact, that for many of Cather's characters, conventional

schooling proved detrimental to the development of real knowledge or artistry.

Most Cather scholars agree that the author maintained an interest in art and artists throughout her life and that this interest can be seen in the many artists, especially musicians, that appear in her novels and short stories. Few scholars, however, have noted that these artists "do not often appear practicing their art, or theorizing about it, and never do they attempt either theory or practice at length; they appear in their relations with others, usually either with nonartistic persons or persons who are merely appreciative" (Brown 118). We might add to this statement that artists are often seen in the process of learning about their art, or instructing others. In fact, in the education of the artist, Cather indicates more clearly than anywhere else what she believes about education.

Educating the Artist: Americans and Tradition

Throughout her writing career, Willa Cather shared with her readers what she thought Americans should know and become. Most important, she let it be known that this becoming, if it were to be successful, involved a continuous, sustained effort on the part of the learner. This belief appears in an early story, "The Count of Crow's Nest," first published in 1896. In it, the young protagonist tells Paul (the Count) that he had assumed him to be "more of a student

than a man of affairs," to which the Count replies, "Student is too grave a word. I have always read; at one time I thought that of itself gave one a sufficient purpose, but like other things it fails one at last" (CSF 457). To be a student, here, implies more than the kind of passive absorption of textbook knowledge with which studying is sometimes equated. To be a student, the count suggests, involves effort and a sense of purpose. In a much later story, "The Bookkeeper's Wife" (1916), "Percy Bixby was like the model pupil who is satisfied with his lessons and his teachers and his holidays, and who would gladly go to school all his life" (UVO 88). The contrast between these two uses of the term "student" makes clear one of the differences in Cather's mind between useful and useless education. The Count refuses to consider himself a student, because he lacks a sense of purpose; Percy would like to remain a student because, in this context, it would allow him to avoid the need for self-direction.

Thea Kronborg's growth in artistry presents further evidence that the student must be internally motivated for genuine learning to take place. As a young girl, Professor Wunsch tells her, "Some things cannot be taught. If you not know in the beginning, you not know in the end" (SL 69). In Chicago, Harsanyi tells Thea "Every artist makes himself born. It is much harder than the other time, and longer. Your mother did not bring anything into the world to play

piano. That you must bring into the world yourself" (SL 153). Later, he makes an even more critical distinction when he tells her, "You have brains enough and talent enough. But to do what you will want to do, it takes more than these--it takes vocation" (SL 183). This process of learning was what interested Cather, and as Elizabeth Sergeant notes, "the author dreaded . . . from the first page of the book that she must push Thea right out on the Metropolitan Opera stage . . . what she cared about was the struggle and not the success" (146-47).

The definition of education as a personal struggle for growth and knowledge helps the reader to see more clearly what Cather meant when she suggested that an "aversion to taking pains" was a significant problem for American culture (Bohlke 149). The differences between two other characters in The Song of the Lark, Thea's sister Anna and the brakeman Ray Kennedy, help us to understand better the distinction between genuine learning and the acquisition of secondhand culture, even when the outcomes appear to be quite similar.

Mrs. Kronborg considers Anna the most "American" of her children. "Everything had to be interpreted for Anna. . . . Scarcely anything was attractive to her in its natural state--indeed, scarcely anything was decent until it was clothed by the opinion of some authority" (116). Here, Cather presents what she regarded as the negative side of Americanism, a willingness to abdicate the authority of

independent thought to someone else. By contrast, Ray Kennedy, who has had little formal schooling, reads history and literature by his campfire, and uses "bookish phrases . . . because they seemed to him more adequate than colloquial speech. He felt strongly about these things, and groped for words, as he said, 'to express himself.' He had the lamentable American belief that 'expression' is obligatory" (101-02).

In the examples presented here, one character has chosen to trust authority so as not to be forced into making her own decisions. For Anna, conventional acceptance is more important than knowledge. Ray, however, uses the words he finds in books to support ideas and opinions he has struggled long and hard to formulate. Although the limits of his education have made it difficult for him to choose wisely which authorities he borrows from, he still retains control of what he chooses to believe. Not only does this show the reader that learning must be under the control of the learner, it suggests what Cather felt one of the genuine purposes of institutionalized education should be; the passing on of tradition.

James Woodress has noted that Willa Cather's works "generally have this double strength of experience from life and experience from books" (Slote and Faulkner, eds 58), and it is easy to see, in her characters' attempts at learning, how difficult she believed that balance was to achieve. She

said that it took "a long time to get out from under the traditions which hamper a young writer" (Bohlke 76), but firmly believed that if this tradition was denied students in their formative years, "in their maturity they have no background" (Bohlke 191). Native intelligence could compensate for many shortcomings, but without a sense of the traditions already in place, the learner, especially if the learner is an artist, operates at a disadvantage.

As the years went on, Cather became more and more vehement about the need of all Americans to be exposed to other cultures. When in 1921, she spoke out against Nebraska's new law forbidding the teaching of foreign languages to young children, she asked, "Will it make a boy or girl any less American to know one or two other languages? . . . According to that sort of argument, your one hundred percent American would be a deaf mute" (Bohlke 149). She attacked Americans as "afraid of not being standard. There is no snobbishness so cowardly as that which thinks the only way to be correct is to be like everyone else" (Bohlke 149).

These late public outbursts are not a new strain in Cather's thought. In one of her earliest short stories, "A Son of the Celestial" (1896), we find Yung, "a little white haired Chinaman who knew Sanskrit as thoroughly as his own tongue" (CSF 524). Living in San Francisco, Yung is much sought after for assistance by local professors, whom he willingly helps. But while the professors have respect for

Yung's learning,

> Yung did not have quite so much respect for the gentlemen as they had for him . . . he knew knowledge from pedantry. He found American schoolmen distasteful. . . . Of course, Yung was only a heathen Chinee who bowed down to wood and stone, his judgement in this and other matters does not count for much. (CSF 524)

Cather had seen the routine devaluation of foreign cultures by self-satisfied Americans and regarded it as one of the worst facets of the national temperament. Almost twenty years later, in My Antonia, Jim Burden would remark, "If I told my schoolmates that Lena Lingard's grandfather was a clergyman, and much respected in Norway, they looked at me blankly. What did it matter? All foreigners were ignorant people who couldn't speak English" (129).

The arts were a natural measure of individuals' knowledge of other cultures, because it would be impossible to know much at all about opera or classical music, painting or the development of literature, without venturing beyond the American border; however, Cather demanded even more than the high level of effort and pan-culturalism that have already been discussed. In order for learning of any kind to be meaningful, it was necessary that the learner be able to use it in some productive way. A frequent target of Cather's, women who belonged to "culture clubs," illustrates the difference between knowing and comprehending.

In "Flavia and Her Artists" (1905), we find the title character seeking out the artistic elite for visits to her

home, despite the fact that "all Flavia's artists have done or ever will do means exactly as much to her as a symphony means to an oyster" (CSF 164). For "Flavia it is more necessary to be called clever than it is to breathe" (165), but she appears to have no values or standards, no ability to judge the works of the artists she surrounds herself with beyond the opinions of the critics. She will be joined in Cather's pantheon by a group that appears in a later story, "On the Gull's Road" (1908), "who, primed with inexhaustible information, were discussing the baseness of Renaissance art" (CSF 83). The narrator says of them, ". . . their faces recalled to me Rembrandt's picture of a clinical lecture" (CSF 83). The mingling of a discussion of art with an image designed to conjure up a contrasting image of science leads us to the final theme in Cather's work that must be considered as it affects her views of education; the relationship of art and science, and the relationship of each to education.

Dwelling on Old Riddles: Art and Science in Education

In order to see the degree of constancy and change in Cather's views about the role of education, let us compare a part of her 1890 high school commencement speech with a speech by Professor St. Peter to one of his classes in The Professor's House (1925).

> All human history is a record of an emigration, an exodus from barbarism to civilization; from the

> very outset of this pilgrimage of humanity, superstition and investigation have been contending for mastery. Since investigation first led man forth on that great search for truth which has prompted all his progress, superstition, the stern Pharoah of his former bondage, has followed him, retarding every step of advancement. (Bohlke 141)

> Science hasn't given us any new amazements, except of the superficial kind we get from witnessing dexterity and sleight of hand. It hasn't given us any richer pleasures, as the Renaissance did, nor any new sins--not one! Indeed, it takes our old ones away. It's the laboratory, not the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world. (PH 68)

At first glance, these two statements appear to be making different claims; however, if we examine them in the light of all the preceding data, we will see that the latter statement is simply the more refined, mature, and subtle expression of a philosophy that developed throughout Willa Cather's life. The acceptance of St. Peter as the voice of the author is grounded in the many parallels between his life and Cather's. St. Peter is just Cather's age, and both have recently been awarded prizes for their work (he the fictional Oxford Prize for History, she the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction). Additionally, we know that St. Peter's attic study bears a strong resemblance to Cather's own attic workroom in Pittsburgh, at the McClungs' house. Edith Lewis, Cather's companion of forty years, called The Professor's House "the most personal of Willa Cather's novels" (137).

It would be easy to substitute for Cather's terms "superstition and investigation" the words "religion and

science." Cather was fascinated by medicine as a young adolescent, and drew criticism from neighbors for her interest in dissection (Brown 43). Allusions to this practice later in the speech would seem to substantiate a reading that equated investigation with science. But Cather, even at this age, had read a great deal of American and English literature and had studied Latin for several years; she chose her words carefully.

What else did Cather investigate during her adolescence? As we have already seen, she was drawn to literature and music and to the people who could help her learn. It was not only in her taste for zoology that Cather was exploring areas unknown to her classmates and neighbors. By the time she graduated from high school, Willa Cather had probably read more widely than most of the citizens of Red Cloud, coming into contact with ideas that would have offended many of them.

An "exodus from barbarism to civilization" indicates much more than the freedom to wield a scalpel. As the data show, civilization for Cather meant culture and tradition. The barbarism she rejected later in her life had little to do with a denial of science; rather, it was the denial of individuality. And when we compare this early statement with the later one, it appears that science, for all the benefits it may have to offer, has become a tool against civilization.

The characterization of science as "dexterity and

sleight of hand," and the opposition of this to the Renaissance, marks quite clearly what Willa Cather thought the increased reliance on scientists and their work had done for American culture. Civilization was the building and preserving of tradition, but science had stripped the meaning and importance of human action. Without consequences for our actions, the whole carefully constructed system of values that existed in world culture suddenly became meaningless, and the people who had relied on those cultural sources to add meaning to their lives had been cast adrift. Superstition, fear of the unknown, had retarded progress, but science, in its newest form, had rendered many types of progress meaningless.

Perhaps the most pernicious aspect of science as it is presented by Professor St. Peter is its negation of the individual. In the speech quoted above, he goes on to state:

> I don't think you help people by making their conduct of no importance--you impoverish them. As long as every man and woman who crowded into the cathedrals on Easter Sunday was a principal in a gorgeous drama with God, glittering angels on one side and the shadows of evil coming and going on the other, life was a rich thing. . . . Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had. (PH 68-69)

Professor St. Peter wants his students to understand the primacy of the individual, without which, he contends, life becomes purposeless, void of significance and therefore of value. In taking away the possibility of meaningful

struggle, science has robbed us of the only thing that allows us to build civilization.

The young Willa Cather certainly would have understood the fears of her older self. Much of her own young life, until she was finally able to make a career of writing, was for her a struggle to create and maintain an individual identity. Just as she rejected a literary realism based on "the cataloguing of a great number of material objects" and "explaining mechanical processes" (NUF 45), she rejected the science that emphasized routinization, standardization, and the biological basis of human character and behavior. Her investigatory interests were not in creating laws designed to eliminate the need for thinking, but in pondering the unknown, in the hopes of achieving a deeper understanding of the world around her.

Summary

Over the course of time, Willa Cather's writing, both fictional and non-fictional, treated the process of education as an arduous journey of discovery, in which authority was to be questioned, tradition respected, and passivity avoided. Her own upbringing gave her a deep respect for learning and a sense of responsibility for aiding the learning of others. In her writing, she consistently questioned how and why we come to learn the things we do, probing to find which conditions enhanced and which constricted opportunities for

education. In the process, she developed strong convictions about our national character, and how it had been shaped by the learned values that we shared. The next chapter will present the theories about education that may be derived from Cather's writing, and will attempt to give readers some sense of how those theories fit together.

Chapter 5

THE EDUCATIONAL THEORIES OF WILLA CATHER

Introduction

This chapter will present Willa Cather's five primary theories of education as they have been revealed through the analysis presented in the previous chapter. The order of presentation will move from the broadest, most inclusive theories to the narrowest and most prescriptive. It is hoped that this structure will give the reader some sense of how each individually articulated theory functions in relation to the others.

The Primacy of the Individual

The most basic of Cather's theories about learning has to do with its purpose. She believed that the needs and goals of the individual were the most important things to consider with respect to learning. While she did not object to learning that allowed individuals to become productive members of the societies they lived in, this was not a necessary component of all education; learning, for Cather, was measured by the growth and development of the individual.

This belief alone sets her apart from the educational efficiency experts and many of the traditionalists, despite her seeming conservatism in matters of curriculum.

The comparison between the work of William James and that of David Snedden in Chapter 4 demonstrates the difference between these two positions when James suggests that the impact of vocational training on the individual's mental state is what makes manual training important, and Snedden, by contrast, extols the value of fitting school curricula more closely with the economic needs of the state. Seen in this context, Cather's own statement in 1925 that the "one education which amounts to anything is learning how to do something well, whether it is to make a bookcase or write a book," becomes more clear (Bohlke 80). When she goes on to say, "I wish we could go back, but I am afraid we are only going to become more and more mechanical" (80), she is not lamenting the emphasis on vocational training, necessarily, but the manner in which it is taught and the way students taught in that manner are learning to think.

It is not only in this statement that we see Cather's commitment to the individual's needs and desires, as opposed to those of the larger society. Emerson Graves, in "The Professor's Commencement," stays in teaching "to bring some message of repose and peace to the youth of this work-driven, joyless people," attempting to show his students that they need not be limited to the goals set for them by parents and

future employers (CSF 290). Alexandra, in O Pioneers!, is happy that Emil has been to college, so that he could gain "a personality apart from the soil," separate from the work of the family (124). Perhaps the best example of Cather's endorsement of education for the sake of the individual comes from The Song of the Lark, when Thea begins to take voice lessons in Chicago.

> She had always told herself that she studied piano to fit herself to be a music teacher. But she never asked herself why she was studying voice. Her voice, more than any other part of her, had to do with that confidence, that sense of wholeness and inner well-being that she had felt at moments ever since she could remember. (188)

Thea has made what appears to her at this time to be an economically risky but personally satisfying decision regarding her training. When Thea becomes a world-renowned opera singer at the end of the novel, Willa Cather sends her readers the message that it is better to do what one loves than to do only what others expect.

The Place of the Family and Community in Education

The family occupies a central place in Cather's theories of learning; she believed that one's family could provide more assistance than any other group in developing a child's desire to learn. The community, likewise, was in Cather's mind a source of knowledge and ideas in the form of older and more experienced frineds and neighbors. However, her belief in the potential assistance that families and communities

could provide does not override her commitment to the basis of learning as the individual's needs and desires. Consequently, lack of family and community support was not considered an insurmountable obstacle. If the family and the larger community did not provide support for the learner, he or she simply had to work that much harder. In a 1931 essay based on an interview with Cather, Louise Bogan would say, "Greatness, to her mind, is up to the individual; the culture into which he is born can be of little help and less hindrance to the complete, freely functioning artist" (Bohlke 118). The family and the community might erect early barriers to learning but did not have the power, ultimately, to prevent an individual willing to pursue his or her goals.

Willa Cather acknowledged the role her own family had played in her education by reading to her, sending her to school and to college, and providing her with books to read and private space to think. While she knew she had been fortunate and knew that the family could have an enormous impact on any child's education, she did not believe that the individual was forced to accept the family attitude passively. She suggests in her high school commencement speech that the "boy who spends his time among flowers and stones is a trifler," but "if he becomes a great anatomist or a brilliant naturalist, his cruelties are forgotten . . . it is generally safe to admire a man who has succeeded" (Bohlke 142). The "boy" in question here has obviously come under

censure from the community in which he lives, but this is not, in itself, enough of a reason for Cather to envision him as abandoning his work. Thea Kronborg is not deterred from her goals by "the hostility of comfortable, self-satisfied people toward any serious effort," even though that group includes members of her own family. And in The Professor's House, Tom Outland will sacrifice his whole past life to stay true to the values he has learned through his education.

Tom Outland, who appears one day in Professor St. Peter's garden, has lived his whole life in the desert southwest. Although he has never been to school, he has studied with a priest for many years and impresses St. Peter with his knowledge of Latin (PH 113). He has left his home to attend college because of a fight with his one friend, Roddy, over a village of Indian artifacts. Tom had gone to Washington, to try to interest the Smithsonian in his findings. When he was unable to do so, he returned home, depressed, only to find that Roddy had sold everything to a German art dealer, and intended to give the money to Tom for college. When Tom finds out, he tells his friend:

> There was never any question of money with me, where this mesa and its people were concerned. They were something that had been preserved through the ages by a miracle, and handed on to you and me, two poor cow-punchers, rough and ignorant, but I thought we were men enough to keep a trust. (PH 244)

Tom's values have been built on the love and loyalty Roddy had always shown him, but those values were deepened and

extended by what he had read with Father Duchene in Virgil and Aristotle. Although selling the artifacts would have been well within the bounds of acceptable behavior for the community in which he lived, Tom's individual learning forced him to reject the money, and further his education without assistance. Tom's decision, like Thea Kronborg's determination in the face of criticism and Cather's own high school disregard for prevailing attitudes in her community are indicators of another of Cather's theories about learning: Americans often reject or avoid education when its results cause them to deviate from standard, accepted patterns of behavior or belief.

Relationships Between the Learner, Learning, and Society

As in the theories articulated above, the learner is the central figure in Cather's theory of how individuals learned in American culture, and what obstacles to learning they faced beyond those that might be erected by the family or immediate community. Quite simply, she thought that Americans had developed a warped view of what it meant to be educated. She thought they had confused the memorization of facts about art, literature, or philosophy with the knowledge that arose from studying those things directly. Her attitude toward learning, in this case, mirrors the Protestant belief about religion. Protestant denominations allow for no intermediary between the worshipper and God; Cather refused

to accept that an individual who memorized facts or accepted the determination of an authority, without personal investigation, could ever be truly educated.

Speaking before the Omaha Society of Fine Arts in 1921, Willa Cather suggested that some of the attitudes which "'helped retard art' are: standardization, indiscriminate Americanism, false conventions of thought and expression, aversion to taking pains, and superficial culture" (Bohlke 149). The evidence in her writing shows that this attitude had been developing from her earliest days as a writer. In an 1894 article, she attacks ladies' literary clubs because "they are too desperately learned. They read all the dryest books," even though "Kant's philosophy is not half so enjoyable or beneficial as a novel by Thackeray" (KA 180). She does not begrudge these women the opportunity to increase their knowledg but regards their method as self-defeating. In 1895, Cather notes of the American theatre, "With us training is not requisite to a 'star,' to say nothing of talent; only 'nerve' and money" (KA 201). Even at this early stage in her career, Cather attacks what she sees as a system of valuing art based not on well-trained critical judgement but on the invoking of distant authorities or commercial success.

"Flavia and Her Artists" is a fictional satire on the same subject. The artists that Flavia likes to have around her she has chosen because of their reputations. Her own

ability to understand or appreciate their work is nonexistent. As one of her guests says of her, "She reads papers on the Literary Landmarks of Paris, and the Loves of the Poets, and that sort of thing, to clubs out in Chicago. To Flavia it is more necessary to be called clever than it is to breathe" (CSF 165). What Flavia and other like minded women are doing, Cather says, is antithetical to the true process of becoming educated.

Later, in O Pioneers!, Cather shows her reader a more direct resistance to education in the attitudes of Lou and Oscar Bergson. After Emil, their younger brother, goes to college, "they resented every change in his speech, in his dress, in his point of view"; the narrator says that the "only thing that would have satisfied them would have been his failure at the University" (OP 138). Later, Lou and Oscar tell their sister, Alexandra, that she "ruined him by sending him to college" (176). Although Emil has consistently made suggestions to his sister about her farming practices that have had successful results, Lou and Oscar are unwilling to accept them until Alexandra has gone ahead. Earlier in the novel, Cather's description of the brothers sums up what she saw as the negative side of Americanization.

> They did not mind hard work, but they hated experiments, and could never see the use of taking pains. Even Lou, who was more elastic than his older brother, disliked to do anything different from his neighbors. He felt that it made them conspicuous and gave people a chance to talk about them. (OP 26-27)

Clearly, Cather believed that the pioneer spirit, the willingness to face new challenges and take risks, was essential for the continued cultural development of American citizens.

Schooling and Education

As we have seen earlier, Willa Cather did not equate schooling and education. In keeping with the theories we have already examined, she believed of schools that they were useful as long as they exposed students to the cultures of the world through literature, art, philosophy, etc. However, when school became merely the rote memorization of facts, or an attempt to force students to accept ideas or beliefs without any explanation to justify those beliefs, school was not only not a place of learning, it operated to squelch learning before it could begin. Cather would consistently question the relationship between education and formal schooling, always suggesting that one might be educated without studying in school, that, in fact, schools sometimes did more harm than good.

In descriptions of Willa Cather's own early education, by her biographers and in her own words, the informal storytelling of women is played up, and her formal high school experiences are minimized. In the section of Chapter 4 concerning schools and students, it becomes clear that Cather measures education according to its ability to help

learners develop as people. "The Professor's Commencement" has shown the reader that Cather admired educators and their work when thought and feeling are goals of study. In her most famous short story, "Paul's Case," she shows her lack of respect for education that does not share these aims.

The story opens at a disciplinary hearing where Paul's teachers list their grievances.

> Disorder and impertinence were among the offenses named, yet each of his instructors felt that it was scarcely possible to put into words the real cause of the trouble, which lay in a sort of hysterically defiant manner of the boy's; in the contempt which they all knew he felt for them, and which he seemingly made not the least effort to conceal. (CSF 243)

Although Paul is not one of Cather's most sympathetic characters and the author shows us that he is not especially bright, gifted, or hardworking, it is clear that his problems in school stem from his inability to conceal his belief that he is learning nothing of any use. He dislikes his teachers' "pitiful seriousness about prepositions that govern the dative" and wants his fellow students to see "that he considered it all trivial" (CSF 252).

If this were the only occasion where schools were described in such unflattering terms, it would not have much weight; however, later writing will include similar descriptions. Thea Kronborg's school principal "taught school because he was too lazy to work among grown-up people," and "by inventing useless activities for his pupils,

such as the 'tree-diagramming system,'" he avoids any serious effort (SL 91). In My Antonia, Jim Burden tells the reader, "Usually I had learned the next day's lessons by the time I left the school building" (139), indicating that he, too, is suffering the effects of schooling that does not allow him to make any real progress. And in One of Ours, Claude Wheeler knows at the end of his summer vacation that "he was going back to the wrong school, that he was wasting both time and money" studying at the Temple College (29). Cather's own belief in the value of education has not convinced her that schools, or teachers, are always helping their students.

The inadequacy or wrongness of the school curriculum and structure does not affect only students. After analyzing the depictions of teachers in Cather's work, it is safe to say that she regarded schools as potentially damaging to instructors as well. As was shown in Chapter 4, in order for teachers to be successful in Cather's estimation, they, too, had to learn from their experiences. And despite her own success as a teacher, and her enjoyment of teaching, her writing shows us that she regarded the profession of teaching as an unsatisfactory one.

The Limits of Teaching as a Profession

Teaching was, in Cather's mind, a noble vocation but an unrewarding profession as it could be practiced in American colleges and universities. Her distrust of the

institutions of learning made her reject the possibility that teaching in America could be a rewarding career. Instead, it stifled those who had talent, provided a safe haven for those persons without talent who were unwilling to work, and left female teachers especially exposed to community scrutiny and criticism.

Even the most successful of Willa Cather's teacher characters, Godfrey St. Peter, cannot claim that teaching has significantly enriched his life.

> All the while that he was working so fiercely by night, he was earning his living during the day; carrying full university work and feeding himself out to hundreds of students in lectures and consultations. But that was another life.
>
> St. Peter had managed for years to live two lives, both of them very intense. He would willingly have cut down on his university work, would willingly have given his students chaff and sawdust--many instructors had nothing else to give them and got on very well--but his misfortune was that he loved youth--he was weak to it, it kindled him. (PH 28)

Although St. Peter has managed to do creative scholarship while teaching a full load, it has exacted a high price. His effort in the classroom, "feeding himself" to students, is a "weakness," almost an addiction that he cannot overcome. When the novel opens, St. Peter has completed his multi-volume history but still has classes to teach in the fall. As the story progresses and St. Peter sinks further and further into depression, it becomes clear that the scholarship gave him the strength to get through his teaching; without it, he cannot justify to himself his

efforts in the classroom.

Cather herself published a book of poetry, April Twilights (1902) and a collection of short stories, The Troll Garden (1905), while she was teaching high school English in Pittsburgh. Despite this, she clearly did not believe that teaching was a good career choice for creative people after a first few years.

Summary

Willa Cather's belief that education was valuable primarily as it benefitted the individual and not necessarily as it made the individual a more useful or productive member of society made her skeptical about the value of formal schooling. She would wholeheartedly endorse the potential of the schools to help children learn about the traditions available to them, the culture that already existed, but she had little patience with schoolwork when it did not contribute to this larger goal.

Throughout her life, Willa Cather decried the passive acceptance of authority in matters of art and culture, and questioned the role of the American schools in fostering that passivity. She feared that the values she held dear were being undermined by a culture that pursued standardization in all areas of life and reduced the need for effort, accepting shoddy work and second-rate ideas.

Although she had great respect for many of her former

teachers, and although three of her siblings would also become teachers, Willa Cather did not hold the position of the professional educator in high regard. Instead, she saw teaching as a career that ground down what was most valuable in talented individuals, and gave shelter to incompetents.

In 1938, John Dewey asked in his book Experience and Education, "How shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?" (23). It seems safe to say that throughout her career, Willa Cather actively sought to answer the same question, believing that in the answer she would find the way to preserve what was best about American culture while looking forward to the new creations of the future.

Chapter 6

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Many times during the writing of this dissertation, people have asked what value an examination of Willa Cather's life and work could possibly have for teachers or teacher educators. While it is hoped that the value of the work has become more clear from reading the study, this chapter will detail the aims with which it was undertaken, what value it may have for educators, and how it may be used for further research.

Summary

In recent years, many researchers have become interested in the ways that teachers are depicted in the popular media. Although we often hear that America is an anti-intellectual nation, a glance at television and film offerings during any given week might make this a hard claim to sustain. More than two dozen films have been made about schools in the last decade, from the fact-based Stand and Deliver, released in 1988, to the fictional Dead Poets' Society which appeared in

1991, and most of these films have done good business at the box office. It would be hard to find a situation comedy on prime time television that does not include at least one character who is in school, lives with an old school friend, or wants to go back to school; think of "The Simpsons," "Saved by the Bell," or "Head of the Class." Compulsory attendance laws have insured that school will be one of the few experiences all Americans share, even if our experiences in those schools are vastly different from one community to another.

School attendance was not so universal in Cather's time, and most students would not graduate with a high school diploma, but school was perceived, as it still is today, as a tool for getting ahead. An education was thought to give the student advantages over his competitors in the work force. And just as we have seen in recent years, the public during the period when Cather taught was galvanized by the debate over how students should be educated and what they should learn.

Examining Willa Cather's work for evidence of how she perceived teaching and learning appeared to be a valuable task, for multiple reasons. As has been noted, she is one of the only American authors to explore the topic in any detail and to do so over a long period of time. Her experiences as both a student and a teacher gave her insight into the world of the classroom that other writers have not had and that has

been lacking in the histories of education in this period. Additionally, the pervasiveness of school imagery in our culture seems to have desensitized us to the message that those images convey. The in-depth examination of one author's use of, and response to, education may provide some clues for the analysis of other depictions of teachers, both contemporary and historical.

As was indicated in Chapter 1, this study was conducted in order to provide more information about Willa Cather as an educational theorist and to shed light on how teachers may have regarded their work at the turn of the century. Little information concerning teachers' practices is available to researchers and historians, who are forced to rely primarily on materials created and preserved by school systems, not individual classroom teachers. Cather, who continued to use the classroom as a setting for her fiction for many years after she had stopped teaching, provides scholars with an opportunity to look at the values and beliefs that she held about teaching and learning.

In order to discern Cather's theories about teaching and learning, a hermeneutic investigation was conducted, using histories of the period, writings about education from the period, Cather's own work, and biographical and critical studies of Willa Cather's life and art. These materials were analyzed for content having to do with educational philosophy and practice, as well as the conditions under which education

was acquired. As the material was collected and analyzed, themes began to emerge from the data concerning Cather's ideas about teaching and learning. The analysis presented in Chapter 4 is arranged according to these emergent themes.

The hermeneutic form of this study was chosen for several reasons. First, the variety of materials allowed the researcher to examine issues and events from multiple perspectives. Second, the requirement that data or events be interpreted with regard to the many contexts in which it can be placed allowed the researcher to draw from multiple disciplines in the course of background research, insuring that the discoveries made here could have value for work in many fields. Finally, there is an obvious compatibility between hermeneutic analysis and literary criticism as it is currently practiced. The theories that have emerged here may therefore be tested according to more than one standard.

The theories that did emerge from the analysis indicate that Willa Cather shared ideas with both educational traditionalists and educational progressives. She tended to agree with the traditionalists about the value of a curriculum rooted in the past and based heavily on the classics, while sharing with the progressives the belief that the purpose of education was to enrich the lives of individuals, not necessarily to fit those individuals to be productive members of society as it then existed. She saw the family and the community as potentially valuable allies

for anyone pursuing educational goals, but did not think that learners were limited to the attitudes or perspectives of their families or communities. Education, for Cather, was a way of connecting oneself to the larger culture, seeing oneself against a rich backdrop of historical knowledge.

Discussion

Although I had read all of Cather's fiction many times over before beginning this study, and had some vague ideas about what I would find while researching this dissertation, I was surprised by the sheer quantity of educational references in her work. I had read, in critical articles, that some of her experimental early fiction appeared to be disconnected from the body of her work, lacking her usual thematic concerns. However, as I read "Son of the Celestial" (1893) and "The Conversion of Sum Loo" (1900), I could not help comparing these foreign scholars to Lena Lingard's grandfather in My Antonia. Already these stories about the "heathen Chinee," show that Cather was preoccupied with the place of learning in American culture.

Also surprising was Cather's attitude toward female teachers. It is tempting to speculate that her own high school teaching experience frequently left her feeling powerless or under the control of others and that this contributed to her depiction of these women as victims of society and their work. But Cather repeatedly said that she

enjoyed teaching, and biographers like Elizabeth Sergeant, who knew her, and Edith Lewis, who lived with her, confirm that she found teaching a rewarding occupation. Perhaps her negativity is best understood when we recall her critical attacks on women novelists in her early years as a journalist. There, too, she believed in her own ability as a writer, but not that of most other women. Apparently, she was able to see herself as separate from the group "female teachers," just as she had earlier separated herself from "female writers." Her more respectful treatment of male teachers indicates that it was not the work itself, but the role women were forced to play, that she found repugnant.

The two novels that Willa Cather always claimed to enjoy the most, The Song of the Lark and One of Ours, are also the two that concern themselves most explicitly with the process of education. They are longer, more detail-filled novels than any of her other works, and more traditional in form. It interests me that the one is generally characterized as a story about an artist, the other as a story about a boy who goes to war, when, reading them in close succession, they could also be seen as two novels of Americans finding their way in a world rich with Old World associations.

Perhaps what continues to surprise me the most is the relative silence from critics and scholars about the place of education in Willa Cather's work. Despite references to her teaching in biographies, and the publication of her farewell

letter to her high school students in Pittsburgh, no one appears to have been interested in exploring this vein in her thought. The reasons for this silence on the part of scholars are not entirely clear, but there are some possible explanations.

Perhaps the most obvious reason can be found when we consider who has been reading Cather's work. The people studying Willa Cather do not think of themselves primarily as English teachers but as literary critics or specialists in American literature. In those arenas, teaching has not generally been considered an important theme in our national literature, and as qualitative researchers would point out, a fact cannot exist without a theory. If no place has been made for teaching as a component of literary works, it is unlikely that teaching will be found. Since my own background has forced me to work simultaneously within the disciplines of American literature and educational history, the commonalities between the two fields would naturally occur to me more readily.

It is also possible that the constant barrage of teaching imagery in our popular culture has made us less willing to pay attention to the specific instances in which it occurs. Views of schools, schooling, and learning in our society have been a source of conflict since Horace Mann first proposed his plan for common schools, and the debate seems to grow more bitter with the passage of time. We see

the problems that exist in our schools in the newspaper, and hear about them on the radio and on television. Most people do not feel the need to look for more information about what schools should be; they have enough difficulty defining a position with regard to the information they already have. It is up to concerned teachers and scholars to help us all make sense of what we see and read each day, and understand how we come to believe what we do about schools and teaching.

Recommendations

The specific beliefs held by Willa Cather and expressed through a lifetime of writing and speaking may not be of great importance to educators. They cannot use these theories to turn their schools around, instantly create better students or teachers, or win over a doubting public. However, Cather's theories, and the study that examines them may serve a number of other purposes.

First, the method by which Cather's life and work were examined here may be used to study the works of other writers and educators. Especially as we move forward into the later twentieth century, we have access not only to published works but to private papers in archives and private collections. When a writer is still living, we may have the opportunity to talk with him or her about these issues. May Sarton, who has written many novels that touch on educational themes, has also published volumes of autobiography and of her journals.

Given that material, the number of her friends still living, and the fact that she has been willing to do interviews over the years, shows us that Willa Cather does not have to be the only author to provide us with a comprehensive view of what it means to be an educated American.

Next, it should be acknowledged that many of Cather's works can, individually, provide readers with a great deal of information about the teaching and learning process. It is likely that the same may be said of stories and novels by other American writers. Few of the many American bildungsroman (coming of age novels) fail to include passages or whole chapters about their characters' school lives. The genre of young adult literature, likewise, includes much material about schools. These kinds of novels, and others, should be seen as potential sources of information about teaching and learning for educational historians and teacher educators. Classic novels like The Catcher in the Rye and A Separate Peace give readers a glimpse of what education might mean to a disaffected student.

Finally, I would suggest that educators cannot afford to ignore material like this. Ian Frazier tells us, "Nowadays most places have a double existence: one in reality, in their physical selves, and another in the imaginations of people" (Zinsser, ed. 40). Nowhere is that statement more true than in the case of the American schools. We have all gone through years of schooling, and the experience lives on

in our minds, colored by reports of others' experiences, whether fact or fiction, oral retellings or television movies. Given the conflicting messages about education that we receive daily, it should be no surprise that we cannot decide what schools should be, what students should learn, or how teachers should be evaluated. Perhaps the answers can be found in the stories we have not examined.

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APPENDIX A

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CSF *Collected Short Fiction*

KA *The Kingdom of Art*

MA *My Antonia*

NUF *Not Under Forty*

OO *One of Ours*

OP *O Pioneers!*

PC Personal Correspondence

PH *The Professor's House*

SL *The Song of the Lark*

UVO *Uncle Valentine and Other Stories*

WCOW *Willa Cather on Writing*

WTP *Woman's "True" Profession*

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE ANALYSIS PAGES

References to Female Teachers

In early May 1896 she drove from Red Cloud to Blue Hill for a dance and spent the night talking with a young girl who had that name [Lucy Gayheart], a fine, delicate, sensitive creature who seemed to her pitiably unsuited to teach school in that rough remote village (Brown 298).

With the housework and the monotonous grind of her work at school, Miss Margie had little time to think about her misfortunes, and so perhaps did not feel them as keenly as she would otherwise have done. It was a perplexing matter, too, to meet even the modest expenses of their small household with the salary paid a country teacher (CSF 435).

Thea was still under the first excitement of teaching, and was terribly in earnest about it. If a pupil did not get on well, she fumed and fretted . . . Wunsch had taught only one pupil seriously, but Thea taught twenty. The duller they were, the more furiously she poked and prodded them. With the little girls she was nearly always patient, but with pupils older than herself, she sometimes lost her temper (SL 92).

But no matter in what straits the Pennsylvanian or Virginian found himself, he would not let his daughter go out into service. Unless his girls could teach a country school, they sat at home in poverty (MA 128).

Though she taught in the Frankfort High School, for twelve hundred a year, she had prettier clothes than any of the other girls, except Enid Royce, whose father was a rich man. Her new hats and suede shoes were discussed and criticized year in and year out (OO 80).

. . . I saw Nelly hurrying to school with several books under her arm. She had been working up her lessons at home, I thought. She was never quick at her books, dear Nell (CSF 63).

She had been a good pianist in her day, I knew, and her musical education had been broader than that of most music teachers of a quarter of a century ago (CSF 239).