

## Introduction

In an 1894 review of a production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Willa Cather readily, if not objectively, rose to the defense of her Southern heritage, calling the play “exaggerated, overdrawn, abounding in facts but lacking in truth,” much like the book (KA 269). She further reproached the author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, whom she envisioned sitting “under cold skies of the north,” for attempting “to write of one of the warmest, richest and most highly-colored civilizations the world has ever known” (270). Although Cather ostensibly eschewed social activism and political issues, she nevertheless took a rare stand on this obviously personal and highly charged political issue.

Yet, true to her contradictory nature, Willa Cather could also be extremely critical of the South, revealing a marked “distaste for the polite conventions and ritual blather of genteel southern society.”<sup>1</sup> During a 1913 visit to her birthplace, Gore, Virginia (formerly Back Creek), she wrote Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant that she found the men cowed and broken, and particularly “disliked the romantic Southern attitude.”<sup>2</sup> Although Cather did not specifically qualify what this attitude might be, we may assume she was referring to the postbellum myths such as the Cavalier legend and the plantation pastorals that were so popular with both the North and South after the Civil War. Apparently she had long since forgotten her own romantic visions of that “highly-colored civili-

zation." On her third and final trip to Virginia she remarked to her lifelong companion Edith Lewis that the acacia trees "had the shiftless look that characterized so many Southern things," but then added, in a typical Catherian reversal, that the wood of these trees "was the toughest of all."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this last example best signifies Cather's own ambivalence toward her Southern heritage.

At times Cather does appear to disregard the influence of these early years, focusing instead on the time she spent in Nebraska. In an oft-quoted interview she stated "the years from 8 to 15 are the formative period of a writer's life, when he unconsciously gathers basic material" (*WCP* 31). Since Cather's family moved to Nebraska when she was nine, her statement does seem to suggest she saw little or no literary value in her Virginia childhood.<sup>4</sup> As noted by Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Mildred Bennett, and others, however, Cather related that those experiences which made the deepest impression on her came before she was twenty, suggesting those first nine years spent in the South were influential. Moreover, the interview in which Cather refers to the ages of eight to fifteen as a writer's formative years appeared in the *Omaha Bee*, a Nebraska newspaper. Willa Cather's ostensible "dismissal" of those early Virginia years may have been nothing more than a desire to emphasize her Nebraska childhood experience for the benefit of her Nebraska audience. When the interview appeared in 1921, all of Cather's novels, with the exception of the first, *Alexander's Bridge*, had been set on the western prairie in either Nebraska or Colorado. To credit her early Nebraska memories (which actually began when she was almost ten) is certainly a valid reason for highlighting those particular years. But whether she intended the statement as a dismissal of her Virginia childhood is questionable.

Like most Southern writers, Cather had a strong sense of place. Constantly associated with the Nebraska plains, she often expressed her displeasure at being considered a regional writer. Nevertheless, her instinct was toward the regional rather than the national. Although she depicted landscapes from different parts of the nation, her deep sense of place—usually attributed to Southern writers—dominated much of her work.<sup>5</sup> "She did not come out of Virginia for nothing," Eudora Welty wrote. "She saw the landscape had mystery as well as reality."<sup>6</sup>

For Cather, the land was a living, breathing entity. Edith Lewis tells

us Cather "saw the country, not as pure landscape, but filled with a human significance, lightened or darkened by the play of human feeling."<sup>7</sup> Welty, a Southerner herself, seems to take Cather's Southern heritage, and its connection to her work, for granted, comparing Cather to William Faulkner, "another writer of Southern origin,"<sup>8</sup> who like Cather, sought continuity through place and history. Bernice Slote confirms the continuity of Cather's sense of place by pointing out that the landscape in her early short story "The Elopement of Allen Poole" is the same landscape Cather would duplicate forty-seven years later in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.<sup>9</sup>

Place, as Welty suggests, affords the writer a sense of history and continuity. Moreover, as the fictional works of numerous antebellum and postbellum writers reveal, history and the pastoral are inexorably intertwined in the Southern literary imagination, as they are for Cather. Cather shares all of the aforementioned traits with Southern writers, but it is her use of pastoral modes, more than any other fictional characteristic, that most reflects her Southern heritage and unites her work with the Southern literary imagination. The stages through which her variations on the pastoral advance correspond to a paradigm unique to Southern literature: the need to reclaim the pastoral ideal, followed by disillusionment and alienation, leading to a deep desire to reconcile human experience within a historical context.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Cather also uses variations of the pastoral that duplicate those frequently found in Southern fiction. According to Lucinda MacKethan, "southern literature frequently takes as its departure point three specifically pastoral motifs: the urge to celebrate the simplicities of a natural order; the urge to idealize a golden age almost always associated with childhood; and the urge to criticize a contemporary social situation according to an earlier and purer set of standards."<sup>11</sup> Willa Cather, at various times, incorporates all of these Southern pastoral motifs into her work. Similarly, the themes surrounding her versions of the pastoral, particularly her treatment of exile and alienation, are also a product of her inherent Southern sensibility. For Cather, exile and alienation have their direct correlation in the postbellum experience of occupation, Reconstruction, and the westward migration of disillusioned Southerners.

While it may be true that "neither the antebellum South, of which her grandparents and parents often spoke, nor the South in reconstruc-

tion which she had known as a child became a temple of her imagination,"<sup>12</sup> in any manifest sense, Cather's work is nonetheless replete with allusions and images connected to these early years. Her Southern sentience permeates what Jo Ann Middleton calls the "vacuoles"<sup>13</sup> of her fiction. Through her use of pastoral modes, her Southern sensibility emerges as yet another "thing not named":<sup>14</sup> the quiet center of Cather's unspoken political views, a vision frequently elitist and often Old World in its hierarchical dimensions.

The word "pastoral," for most readers, conjures up images of rural life, of simpler times, of order and innocence. In the case of Southern writers the pastoral plot was almost always one of domination by the white patriarchy. Elizabeth Harrison argues convincingly, for example, that the Southern pastoral version of the New Eden (what Louis Simpson calls "the garden of the chattel"<sup>15</sup>) "served only the Southern white patriarchy,"<sup>16</sup> which had designed a culture that associated women and slaves with land ownership. The survival of the Southern agrarian system, and by extension, the Southern economy, depended on the myth of an edenic plantation culture. For this reason, as Lucinda MacKethan points out, the South has been the only region in America to identify itself ideologically with the pastoral myth of Arcady.<sup>17</sup>

Simpson finds two distinct variations in the myth of this New World pastoral: "a New England 'garden of the covenant' and," as previously mentioned, "a Southern 'garden of the chattel.'"<sup>18</sup> While the early Virginians had originally established a covenant with God, as did their New England counterparts, the covenant failed because their focus shifted to commerce, particularly to the profits gleaned from raising tobacco.<sup>19</sup> With the introduction of white bondmen, and later black slaves, to work the fields, the Virginia plantation owners prospered and grew wealthy. While seemingly feudal in structure, the widespread and systematic use of African slave labor in the Southern states—although not entirely confined to the American South—conflicted with the democratic spirit. Consequently, by the early eighteenth century, chattel slavery "demanded to be incorporated in the myth of the South" and its vision of the edenic garden,<sup>20</sup> leaving the Southern literary imagination to find a way to justify the presence of slavery in the redemptive garden.

The antebellum novels of William Gilmore Simms, John Pendleton Kennedy, Nathaniel Beverly Tucker, and William Wirt, among others,

became the means by which the myth of harmonious plantation life was reinforced. W. J. Cash, Louis Simpson, and others have suggested this early pastoral tradition in Southern literature arose, out of necessity, as a means of defending chattel slavery. However, as Simpson points out, Southern literary minds, in attempting "to accommodate the pastoral mode to the antipastoral novelty of the South as expressed by the institution of African chattel slavery," ultimately produced what he terms a "culture of alienation."<sup>21</sup> Inevitably, these antebellum Southern writers found themselves cut off from the rest of the literary world by their connection to and acceptance of the politics of slavery.<sup>22</sup>

Although the Civil War abolished chattel slavery, it also destroyed the South's agrarian economic system. Without slave labor, landowners had no recourse but to hire workers to tend their fields. But the war had left many of them without the financial resources to do so. As Raymond Williams points out, the consequence of man's fall from grace was that he no longer could easily pick the fruits of nature but was condemned "to earn his bread in [*sic*] the sweat of his brow; that he had incurred, as his common fate, the curse of labour."<sup>23</sup> For the first time since the introduction of chattel slavery into the South, plantation owners had to earn their living without relying on the sweat of other brows.

While the plantation pastoral may have begun with the antebellum writers, the conditions imposed by Reconstruction gave rise to a new variation on the old myths, a unique version of Arcadia that continues, even today, as a major literary motif.<sup>24</sup> Postbellum writers began to envision a new Arcady, a vision of the antebellum plantation culture that evoked a nostalgic longing for the old ways.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the Civil War, as Merrill Maguire Skaggs notes, "focused the nation's attention on the South," creating an interest in and a demand for Southern literature in both the North and the South.<sup>26</sup>

Wanting to present their region in the best light, the postwar South "found its literary outlet . . . in a lament for a lost Eden. . . . Literature was the last battleground on which the values of the Old South were tested."<sup>27</sup> The pastoral themes of exile and loss suited the ideological purpose of the postbellum writers. Thus they were strongly influenced, as was Willa Cather, by Virgil's *Eclogues* and the idylls of Theocritus. They identified with Virgil's visions of civil discord, occupation, and the expropriation of personal property, confirming Raymond Williams's

contention that “the contrast within Virgilian pastoral is between the pleasures of rural settlement and the threat of loss or eviction.”<sup>28</sup> Faced with postwar occupation, Southerners withdrew into their collective experience, an experience not only unique in the history of America but confined to a single region.<sup>29</sup>

As the rest of America put its postwar energy into creating new and better industries, the South continued to lag behind in production. To counterbalance the activity of the teeming North, Southern writers of the Reconstruction period envisioned a new Arcady. They created regional landscapes, visions of bucolic tranquility and simplicity, as a literary antidote to the thriving industrialization of the North and the migration of many of their discouraged countrymen to the wild and untamed West.

Postbellum writers Joel Chandler Harris (creator of the Uncle Remus stories among others), John Esten Cooke, Thomas Nelson Page, and others resurrected the myth of the edenic plantation, redeeming it from pre-Civil War Abolitionist fiction like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. By evoking romanticized images of the past and permeating them with a sense of loss and nostalgia, these writers created a vision of an ideal civilization, one threatened, like *ancient Rome and Greece*, with extinction. They frequently employed a common literary device: a loyal Negro narrating the plantation legends, bemoaning the loss of happier times, despite the abolition of slavery.<sup>30</sup> In this revised version of the pastoral plantation myth, the freed slave chooses to stay on and help his now “dependent” master. The irony, of course, although it eluded these early postbellum writers, was that the plantation economy and the welfare of the master and mistress had always been dependent on chattel slavery, an irony that would not escape Cather (as is evident in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*) and subsequent Southern writers like Faulkner or Welty. As Francis Pendleton Gaines has pointed out, however, from a contemporary viewpoint, the faithful Negro narrator served as a literary device that intentionally presented “a beautiful felicity of racial contact,” thus advancing a distorted view of race relations.<sup>31</sup> Willa Cather’s family was very much a part of both the antebellum and postbellum Southern culture. Their presuppositions regarding relationships between blacks and whites, which would have included a belief in segregation, conformed to those of their fellow Southerners.

During her literary apprenticeship, Cather wrote two early short stories, "A Night at Greenway Court," and "The Elopement of Allen Poole" (published anonymously), using the South as her setting. A third story, "The Sentimentality of William Tavener," although not set in the South, nonetheless has Southern characters who, like her own family, have been transplanted to the West. Following these early experiments, Cather would not return to the South as her subject until her final novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, Cather's journey back to her ancestral roots through her fiction parallels the stages of the Southern literary experience: the need to find order in the pastoral ideal, the disillusionment that accompanies the inability to justify the historical reality with the mythical creation, followed by a strong desire to understand the past, no matter how painful, and the part it plays in the ongoing human drama.