

Preface

My interest in the effects of Willa Cather's Virginia background on her canon arose from, among other things, my interest in sociocultural influences. My husband was born and raised in the South, and although he left home at age eighteen and has resided in the Northeast for most of his adult life, he is still in many ways a Southerner. Why then, I wondered, would Cather not have retained much of her own heritage, particularly since those early influences were part of her formative years. Cather not only spent the first nine and a half years of her life in Back Creek, Virginia, but even on the Nebraska plains she was surrounded by her Southern family. In addition to her immediate family, Cather's paternal grandparents, maternal grandmother, and her Aunt Franc and Uncle George Cather had also relocated to Nebraska. Moreover, many Virginians from the Winchester area, where the Cathers had resided for generations, also chose to migrate West following the Civil War. The area of Nebraska in which they settled was often referred to as New Virginia. The point, of course, is that the South went with Cather to Nebraska and continued to influence her in subtle ways, not only during those Midwest years but throughout her life.

One's cultural heritage, that complex network of shared assumptions that bind a given society together, is not easily dismissed. Willa Cather may have rebelled against her mother's genteel traditions, and she may have chosen to ignore her Southern roots, but ultimately the influence of those early years prevailed. We see it in the class consciousness and aesthetic sensibility of her characters and in their sense of place and desire for historical continuity. We also find it in Cather's narrative technique of weaving stories within stories and in her use of folklore. But what most links Cather to the South and to the Southern literary tradition is her use of pastoral modes.

My contention that Willa Cather's versions of the pastoral are a product of her Southern sensibility and share common factors with the Southern literary tradition is supported by sequential analytical readings of seven of her novels with occasional allusions and references to her other works. Further support for my study comes from the many excellent biographical works that detail Cather's early years in Virginia, her relationship to her antebellum parents and grandmother, and their influence on her literary vision.

While I occasionally allude to Southern writers from the antebellum and postbellum eras¹ and suggest parallel stages between Cather's work and the work of Southern authors, this is not a comparative study. My intention is not to explore in depth those possible literary influences and connections but rather to show how the cultural influences Cather shares with these authors have led them in similar directions.

I have used the term *aristocrat* rather than *plutocrat* when discussing many of Cather's characters (although I am aware the term perpetuates one of the myths of the Old South) because I believe the choice reflects Cather's intent, which is to convey a particular state of mind, or elitist world view, an artistic sensibility that shuns crass materialism. This perspective views money as the means to cultural refinement and good taste rather than to mere consumerism.

Willa Cather has often been criticized for her indifference to social activism.² But during her esteemed career Cather's novels often dealt with small-town prejudices against minority groups, championed tolerance and understanding of other religions and cultures, and above all, challenged readers to contemplate more than one side of an issue. And although she was not given to supporting social causes for particular groups, she was indiscriminatingly and fiercely loyal to her friends—people from all classes and religions. She often sent gifts and money to help support the drought-plagued Nebraska immigrant farmers she had known and loved as a child, while choosing to live within relatively modest means.

But Willa Cather's first loyalty was always to her art. When accused by critics of writing about the past as a form of escapist art, she replied, "What has art ever been but escape? . . . the world has a habit of being in a bad way from time to time, and art has never contributed anything to help matters—except escape" (WCW 18–19). Some may seek to change

the wrongs of the world through political and social channels. But when the world is "being in a bad way," we might also gratefully turn to those who would offer us an imaginary sanctuary from the chaos and confusion; to this end, Willa Cather has succeeded beyond measure.