

CHAPTER III

BIOGRAPHY OF THE NOVELIST

Willa Cather (originally Wilella Cather) was an American novelist and short-story writer who celebrated the pioneer traditions of the Nebraska prairies and the deserts of the South-West. She was born in Back Creek Valley, near Winchester, Virginia, on 7 December 1873. The society in Back Creek was predominantly Protestant, a mixture of Northern-Ireland Calvinists and German Lutherans. Charles Cather, Willa's father, was an easygoing, soft-spoken, and tender hearted man. Willa loved him dearly and was always closer to him than to her mother. Mary Virginia (Jennie) Boak, Willa's mother, was a domineering woman. She provided the power that drove the household. She was a handsome but tyrannical lady who applied strict discipline toward her seven children and would punish them harshly for wrong-doings. But she also gave freedom to her children to develop their own personalities. Despite her discipline in enforcing good behavior in the family, Mrs. Cather also had a great capacity in enjoying life and caring about things. Willa inherited her mother's temperament – and the two often clashed.

When she was eight-years-old, her father took the family to move from the tranquil, ordered life of Old Virginia society to a ranch near Red Cloud, Nebraska, then a frontier land of immigrant people. Red Cloud was a small town in the middle of a rough prairie, and the settlers who inhabited the town were mainly Scandinavian, Bohemian, and French immigrants who made their effort to

cultivate the obstinate land. After a year of homesteading, the Cather family settled in the little frontier village itself. Willa Cather grew up among the immigrant farmers of the region. Her childhood environment greatly influenced her life as a writer and became one of the main resources from which she extracted the vivid depictions of character and setting. The pioneer life of the Old West gave first awakening to her imagination and deeply colored her later life and work.

She was educated at home, and then went to school in Red Cloud High School. This was a mark of intelligence, for not many people could go to school in those days. After graduating from school, she continued her study at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln. There, she supported herself by writing drama criticism for the *Nebraska State Journal*. During her days in college, she exhibited her talent for journalism and story-writing. She graduated from university in 1895 and directed her steps toward journalism.

Miss Cather left Nebraska at 22 and headed for Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. Her first occupation was doing editorial work on *The Home Monthly*. To find more time to write poetry and stories, she left this job to teach Latin and English in Pittsburg high-schools. She wrote a collection of stories, entitled *The Troll Garden* (1905), which included the famous *Paul's Case*. The story impressed the great publisher and editor, S.S. McClure, that he offered Miss Cather an editorial position on *McClure's Magazine*. Willa Cather then moved to New York and became a brilliant managing editor of the reform-minded magazine.

However, on her visit to Boston, she met Sarah Orne Jewett, the New England author who would later on be her life-long friend, and she advised Miss Cather to give up journalism entirely. "It is impossible for you to work so hard," Miss Jewett wrote, "and yet to have your gifts mature as they should." Willa Cather gave a deep thought about the older writer's suggestion, and in 1912 she decided to give up her comfortable income in journalism for a riskier – but more rewarding – career of a novelist.

In the same year, she paid her brother a visit in Arizona, and on her way back east, she spent two months in Red Cloud refreshing her childhood memories. For the next 15 years, she spent her life in a Greenwich Village apartment with a roommate, Edith Lewis – who later on became her biographer. During these years, Miss Cather wrote twelve novels: *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Antonia* (1918), *One of Ours* (1922), *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). She also wrote poetry and collections of short stories, such as *April Twilights* (1903), *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920), *Obscure Destinies* (1932), and *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948 – published posthumously). In her works, Miss Cather created strong female characters, who had the courage and vision to confront all obstacles in their difficult lives. Katherine Anne Porter the writer of *Lesbian and Bisexual Fiction Writers* wrote in her book, "She was a good artist, and all true art is provincial in the most realistic sense: of the very time and place of its making, out of human

beings who are so particularly limited by their situation, whose faces and names are real and whose lives begin each one at an individual unique center. Indeed, Willa Cather was as provincial as Hawthorne or Flaubert or Turgenev, as little concerned with aesthetics and as much with morals as Tolstoy, as obstinately reserved as Melville. In fact she always reminds me of very good literary company, of the particularly admirable masters who formed her youthful tastes, her thinking and feeling."

In 1922, Willa Cather won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, *One of Ours*, which depicted a boy from the Western plains who leaves home to fight in World War I and got killed in France. The World War gave a great impact toward the novelist's world view. After World War I, Willa Cather was gravely distressed by the loss of spiritual values that accompanied the growth of materialism and technology in the Twentieth Century. Like many other modernist writers, she was troubled by the growing mechanization and mass-produced quality of American society. She wrote, in 1922, that the world broke in two for her. Starting from this year, her writings became more concerned with finding alternative values to the materialistic life she increasingly felt around her. Her novels (for example *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House*, two novels preceding *My Mortal Enemy*) depict the spiritual and cultural crisis of the main characters. The frustration with modern society and the sense of spiritual decay were also reflected in her personal life, when she – parallel to her entering the new phase of writing – joined the Episcopal Church for her spiritual search in this same year. It is notable that, though Miss Cather was brought up in a devout Protestant family, she was also

fascinated by the grandeur and ceremony of Catholicism. Thus she often wrote about characters with Catholic background.

The theme of Willa Cather's works concerns most with the lives of pioneers on the American frontier (whether it may be more or less dominant). It is a theme so deeply linked to her own life that she almost could never escape it. In an interview, Miss Cather once said, "The years from 8 to 15 are the formative period in a writer's life, when he unconsciously gathers basic material." These were roughly the years she spent in Webster County, Nebraska, the land she later left for the city but which she could never truly escape – for which, consciously or not, she became a spokesperson. All her fictions (including those short-stories and novels which are not set in the West) were built around pioneer traits and themes: courage and struggle, sensitivity to the land, child-parent ties and adolescent restlessness, the debilitating aridity of small-town life on the prairies, the quest for ancestors, and the sense of the legendary and historical past. She became a champion in presenting these aspects of the older society against the modern, industrial, and materialistic world. Her work reveals the great knowledge, understanding, deep-felt love and respect toward people who live the pioneers' life.

In her work, people can also see the matter of the nature of love which runs like an ever-present current beneath many of her stories, which often deals with the sacrifices people are willing to make for love. For Willa Cather, love is not to be seen in the shallow sense of love between opposite sexes – and it was most certainly not to be seen as an entirely positive feeling. The choices her

characters make for the sake of love or in search of love provide the focus for a very interesting approach to her work.

Cather's style is very condensed, and mostly it gives a sense of "top of an iceberg" quality much in line with that of Hemingway's. She was undoubtedly one of America's most important modernist writers. She devoted her life for 33 years solely for writing novels until her death in New York City on 24 April 1947 at the age 73. (<http://fp.image.dk/fpemarxind/biography.htm>)

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS