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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Mary Ellen Scofield for the Master of Arts in English were presented July 12, 1996, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Mary Ellen Scofield for the Master of Arts in English presented July 12, 1996.

Title: Willa Cather's Spirituality

Both overtly and subtly, the early twentieth century American author Willa Cather (1873-1947) gives her readers a sense of a spiritual realm in the world of her novels. This study explores Cather's changing conceptions of spirituality and ways in which she portrays them in three of her novels. I propose that though Cather is seldom considered a modernist, her interest in spirituality parallels Virginia Woolf's interest in moments of heightened consciousness, and that she invented ways to express ineffable connections with a spiritual dimension of life.

In O Pioneers! (1913), Cather proposes that those who use their intuition to express themselves recognize and unite with a spiritual current that runs underneath and through all experience and natural phenomena. In The Professor's House (1925), Cather questions whether union with the spiritual current can endure, and doubts the ultimate value of such a union. In Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927), she suggests that recognition of this spiritual current comes and goes, and resigns herself to the need for spiritual traditions, such as Catholicism, to be able to sustain belief in the current, to sense it, and to value a union with it.

All her life, Cather searched for spiritual meaning, expressed in her interest in the philosopher Henri Bergson, in connections between art and religion, and in the Episcopal Church. Cather's conception of spirituality changes, but the spiritual dimension of her novels commonly includes a sense of space, place, transcendence and ambiguity. Because the spiritual realm is beyond words, Cather uses juxtaposition and repetition to create an expansive, imaginative space that resonates silently through her stories. Powerful landscapes express the spiritual realm, and enhance characters' ability to recognize it. Awareness of this realm allows characters to transcend mental and cultural barriers and experience a common consciousness. Cather embraces darkness and contradictions as part of the spiritual realm, resulting in powerful ambiguities. As her spiritual vision changes during her life from exuberant to deeply reserved, these ambiguities become increasingly highlighted in her novels.

WILLA CATHER'S SPIRITUALITY

by

MARY ELLEN SCOFIELD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
ENGLISH

Portland State University
1996

To my large, helpful, supportive family—
Mansons, Scofields, Harlans, Hendersons,
and especially David.

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A Chronology of Willa Cather's Life

Born in Virginia	1873
Moves to Nebraska	1883
Enters Lincoln University	1890
Begins writing column for the <i>Nebraska State Journal</i>	1894
Moves to Pittsburgh to become assistant editor of the <i>Home Monthly</i>	1896
Meets Isabelle McClung and moves to McClung house	1899
Begins teaching high school English	1900
Moves to New York to work for <i>McClure's Magazine</i>	1906
Meets Sarah Orne Jewett, moves in with Edith Lewis	1908
<i>Alexander's Bridge</i>	1911
First visits the southwest, reads <i>Creative Evolution</i>	1912
<i>O Pioneers!</i>	1913
<i>The Song of the Lark</i>	1915
<i>My Antonia</i>	1918
<i>One of Ours</i> , wins the Pulitzer Prize	1921
<i>A Lost Lady</i>	1923
<i>The Professor's House</i>	1925
<i>My Mortal Enemy</i>	1926
<i>Death Comes for the Archbishop</i>	1927
<i>Shadows of the Rock</i>	1931
<i>Obscure Destinies</i>	1932
<i>Lucy Gayheart</i>	1935
<i>Sapphira and the Slave Girl</i>	1940
Dies in New York	1947

INTRODUCTION

When I first read Willa Cather's My Àntonia (1917) at age 15, my favorite books were still Laura Ingalls Wilder's, Dickens's, anything with gripping adventure and eventual romance. My Àntonia was different, and yet deeply compelling to me. The adventures and love ended not in romance but friendship—between husband and wife, between old neighbors. For the first time, I loved a book without the usual plot.

Why? This question began to chase me last year as I renewed my acquaintance with Cather by reading The Song of the Lark (1915) for a course in women writers. In that novel, Thea Kronberg is driven to be an artist to the exclusion of many other aspects of her life. Her ailing mother must die without her when Thea is opening with a major European opera company. She forgets her friends until she needs money or support to further her career. But for all Thea's extreme, sometimes cold self-focus, Cather had again somehow thrilled me, rendered me awestruck.

Two scenes particularly come to mind when I think of The Song of the Lark. They contribute to Thea the character, but they expand my own sense of what it means to be alive, particularly alive, beyond routine, beyond pleasure, tragedy, adventure and melancholy. In the first scene, Thea comes home to Colorado from a year in Chicago. She has discovered that her voice, not the piano, will lead her to success. In that realization she is drawn to the local Mexicans, who sang with her when she was little, and she attends their ball. Afterwards, outdoors in the moonlight, she sings for them, and experiences a soaring feeling both within and from the

people watching her. In that moment, Cather says, Thea seems to absorb what she knows of the Mexicans and to give that knowledge back in song, "as if [it] had come from her in the first place " (202). Thea feels linked to her audience, but there is more to the connection than simply the suggestion of a common consciousness. The connection stands out; it is somehow above, more expansive than connections Thea has with members of her family, old friends, and even her father's Methodist congregation, for which she also has sung in the past. The scene establishes a spiritual current between Thea and the crowd based on their shared experience of music, and their appreciation for its ability to communicate without words the contents of souls.

The second striking scene in The Song of the Lark occurs when Thea is pierced through by the power of the southwestern landscape. She spends several weeks in Arizona, and nearly every day lies in the ancient homes of people who lived in Panther Canyon. She takes blankets and food, and washes every morning in the river. One morning she draws a connection between the stream, the pottery shards she finds there and her own developing vision as an artist.

The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mold in which to imprison for a moment the shining elusive element which is life itself — life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose. (263)

These scenes explore epiphanies in Thea's life, and show Cather grappling to express their meaning. Also, because Cather exalts them as

particularly metamorphic, they resonate throughout the novel. Their prominent positions create an narrative environment where spiritual currents are most highly valued. These scenes haunted me after I finished this book and moved me to read more of Cather. They made me think about myself as an artist, and life's vitality that I too often rush past. They led me to the southwest last summer. They pushed me to write this thesis.

I want to know more about why these encounters move readers so, and whether they express a spiritual quality echoed not just in such moments, but throughout Cather's work. My sense is that they do. I find a particular power underlying Cather's writing, a power I call spiritual. I think that power is there because Cather was preoccupied by spiritual questions. By "Cather's Spirituality", I refer to this writer's almost obsessive quest to discover and articulate "meaning", or a spiritual dimension to life. Cather suggests that there is more to experience than experience alone, that there is an ineffable, imaginative, intuitive, wild, dynamic force interwoven through existence that makes even the simplest of events sacred and meaningful. In all her writing, Cather works with this vision in the way of a spiritual thinker: exploring, questioning, revising. But central to understanding her power, I think, is this essential fact: while her sense of the nature of spiritual meaning changes, her need for *some* meaning, and her struggle to express it, is constant.

This quality is what coaxed me as a young reader into the realm of more sophisticated fiction, and it is what calls out to so many readers as the years go by. In her 1995 New Yorker article criticizing recent feminist Cather scholarship, Joan Acocella calls for "professional critics to give up

and leave [Cather's] books" for the two groups that have traditionally loved her: writers and the public (71). She notes that Death Comes for the Archbishop, published in 1927, sells twenty thousand copies a year. Cather will endure, Acocella decides, because of the evocative quality of her work. "All novelists, all poets want to imagine hugely and then find the perfect, discrete form that will both capture the thought and suggest what was uncapturable in it—glimpse its escaping wings. Few succeed; Cather was one who did" (71). With Cather, often what is not said stirs the imagination as deeply as what is. This "uncapturable" is the realm of the spirit.

Acocella is not alone in noticing Cather's interest in this realm. In his 1994 biography, Edward Wagenknecht credits Cather with the insight of a mystic. "Unlike many writers, she used her imagination not primarily to invent but rather to interpret" the world around her, Wagenknecht observes (48). This position, however, leads him to conclude that Cather was foremost a religious writer, though so many of her characters experience profound awakenings outside institutionalized religion, and some, like Thea, quite pointedly experience them in spite of institutionalized religion. The question of whether religion could be spiritual offered no easy answers for Cather. John J. Murphy, who has written extensively about Cather's relationship with Catholicism, asserts that she grappled with spiritual questions all her life ("Catholic Themes" 58). When Cather was in college she questioned the value of institutionalized religion; when she experienced a mid-life crisis in the early 1920s, she was baptized into the Episcopal church.

I propose that Cather sensed a spiritual dimension in life, an ineffable power that interweaves and underlies existence. The Christian tradition became an important part of that spirituality for her, but her vision always expanded beyond an institution. Like Woolf and other modernists, she was concerned with capturing linguistically moments of recognition of this power, luminous moments of wholeness, of mysterious connection to life beyond the ordinary. In addition, she experimented with techniques to imbue subtly a sense of that force throughout her narratives.

In the following pages, I will explore the spiritual dimension Cather expresses in her writing. I will discuss spirituality as a general concept, and Cather's ideas about religion, art, the human soul, natural landscapes, and a force that interweaves and underlies these elements. I hope to identify both her changing spiritual vision, and the ways in which she articulates that vision in three books written during what Cather and critics agree were her most productive years: O Pioneers! (1913), The Professor's House (1925) and Death Comes to the Archbishop (1926). Each book was written very quickly — the longest project was The Professor's House, written in just under a year. They capture, therefore, her state of mind and her view of the world as she wrote them. I will argue that while Cather believed in fundamental principles about the spiritual nature of existence, doubt led her to question those principles, and to reshape them to include the Church in a fluid, more expansive, and more ambiguous voice of spirituality. In this way I hope to arrive at a better understanding of the underlying, mysterious power I have always sensed in Cather's writing.

CHAPTER ONE

The task before me—to gain a better understanding of Willa Cather's spirituality—feels like an inexplicable, organic mass that resists order. In this opening chapter, I work with the following pieces to provide some structure for my study.

To define better the perimeters of my discussion, I begin with an exploration of the concept of spirituality and its relationship to religion. I then zero in on spiritual dimensions in Cather's thinking and her writing. I review my research of biography and criticism, offering clues of her concept of spirituality, and her interest in articulating meaning in human experience. In a chronological inquiry that leads up to her writing of Q Pioneers!, I describe Cather's religious background and developing devotion to creativity as an expression of the spirit. Finally, I outline the tools I will use in my analysis of her fiction: ideas about Cather's modernist methods for suggesting a feeling without writing about it; and a two-part framework from the field of literary religious studies for evaluating her spiritual purpose in each work.

1

Spirituality

I describe spirituality as any sense of an interconnection among people, things and relationships, and a mysterious, undefinable meaning attached to that connection. While this sense may be associated with the tangible, it lies just beyond it. Throughout this study, I refer to this area of

experience as the spiritual realm, and to its power as a spiritual current. This realm is not positive or negative; rather it includes good, evil and everything in between. Its mysterious power is generally associated with an acting agent or guiding truth, whether that be God or Nature or the Tao. In her book the Tao of Psychology, psychiatrist and Jungian analyst Jean Shinoda Bolen describes the Tao as "the intuitive knowledge that there is a patterned universe, or an underlying meaning to all experience, or a primal source, to which 'I' am connected" (2). Bolen's definition bears striking similarities to the spiritual visions of Walt Whitman or Baruch Spinoza. Both writers conceived of God as the sum total of and the power behind all creation, including "myself." The inclusive description of this realm, one that includes "myself," is particularly useful in considering spirituality in works of literature because it helps to include the reader as well as the writer and the writer's prose. Bolen emphasizes not only a connection among elements in life, but also a link in that connection with "I."

Much of the power in Cather's work comes from this sense of connection her characters feel with the world around them, and from the reader's sense of connection with a Cather story. This is exactly what she thought was important in good writing. In great novels, the divisions between writer, reader, and a story's characters and landscapes dissolve into resounding interconnection. Describing the greatness of Country of the Pointed Firs by her mentor, Sarah Orne Jewett, Cather writes that the book captures the essence behind living things, and becomes life: "The 'Pointed Fir' sketches are living things caught in the open, with light and

freedom and air-spaces about them. They melt into the land and the life of the land until they are not stories at all, but life itself" (On Writing 49).

Jewett was able to achieve the representation of this essence of life through intuition— "to understand by intuition the deeper meaning of all she saw" (On Writing 56). The artist's job is to work with this sense of a deeper meaning and try to recreate it in a work of art. Though Cather refers to this sense as pleasurable, in her novels this is not always the case. One way in which Cather is particularly interesting is in the dark images and tremendous ambiguity that emerge in her writing, that seems to flow in the underlying current she taps into through her stories.

Nowhere does Cather unite these ideas into a description of a philosophy or spirituality, and to have done so would have been uncharacteristic of this private woman. But a contemporary of Cather's, Virginia Woolf, articulates a very similar sense of feeling and interconnection in her essay "A Sketch of the Past." She describes life as divided between "moments of being" or heightened states of consciousness in which she receives sudden "shocks" of realization, and moments of "non-being," or time not lived consciously that feels like "cotton-wool." For her, these shocks generate a kind of rapture connected with the act of explaining them in writing to make them "whole." These moments lead her to a philosophy, she says, "that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art" (72). She suspects that she is a writer because of her intuitive ability to receive these shocks so regularly, and her desire to recreate and

connect them in writing. Recounting these moments of being from when she was a child, Woolf realizes that they "were the scaffolding in the background; were the invisible and silent part of my life" (73). This ability to sense connections, and intuit deeper meanings associated with everyday life, is what Cather hints at in her own writings.

Just as I call Cather's realm of deeper meaning "spiritual," I would also call Woolf's philosophy a kind of spirituality; her sense of life's interconnections, intuitively detected. But Woolf would object vehemently to that characterization. When describing moments of being, she energetically separates her "philosophy" from religion, declaring that while she believes in a common consciousness, it is not connected to Christianity: "Certainly and emphatically there is no God" (72). Her feeling of connection and patterns fits the spiritual realm I have described, but she is defiantly opposed to linking this feeling with a God.

But while Cather was not interested in articulating her own personal vision, she became comfortable with using religion to formalize a spiritual consciousness. Because I will argue that Cather's relationship to religion helps to describe her as a spiritual person, I want to consider the issue of the relationship between religion and spirituality. For my purposes here, religion is different from spirituality. It involves a formal characterization of the nature of the spiritual realm, and a system for relating to it, as in Christianity. For Woolf, interested in Freud and much more self-reflective than Cather, religion played no part in her spirituality. But for Cather, ten years older than Woolf, religion would have been interwoven with spirituality. Cather lived at a time when Western

civilization's relationship with religion was undergoing a metamorphosis. For centuries, spirituality and religion, particularly Christianity, were inextricably joined in the western mind. The Church was the center for spiritual matters on earth; God was the center of spiritual contemplation and action. However, this conception of the Divine changed gradually in the second millennium from an intensely personal presence to a more distant God, a clockmaker who set the world in motion and then stood back. The change began to occur in the Enlightenment, when discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton, for example, began to show that certain predictable physical principles governed the operations of nature, not God.

I believe as people came to see God as not intricately interwoven in their lives, but as an operator behind a huge system, the concept of his presence became increasingly vague to them. This depersonalization led to a separation between the concepts of spirituality and religion. While God remained a friendly or angry Father, involved in people's daily lives, it was difficult to conceive of the spiritual realm as existing separately from Him, or any of His creation. But when God became something apart from daily life, any feeling of rapturous connection, such as what Woolf describes, would less likely be associated with Him. One of the first writers to make a formal break between spirituality and religion was Percy Bysshe Shelley, who adamantly denounced the "tyranny" of Christianity in the early nineteenth century. Shelley spent much of his writing contemplating spiritual feelings, but they were decidedly not connected to

Christianity in his mind. Cather herself went through a period of denouncing Christianity, though she later turned back to it.

This division between religion and spirituality has become increasingly pronounced. Significantly, however, the concept of a spiritual realm has not died. Though this century has witnessed the existential movement and the rise of atheism, events I would describe as the radical result of the dissociation between spirituality and religion, we have become increasingly interested in strengthening our spiritual lives. The last thirty years in particular has seen a rise in interest in the eastern sense of spirituality, of reaching a state of harmony or balance, as described in the ancient Chinese Book of Changes, or the I Ching.

But we are now clearly wary of Christianity and any other religion in the world that fosters fundamentalists, black and white thinking, or violence and discrimination in the name of "God." We have become particularly sensitive to feminist analyses of patriarchal, oppressive elements in the world's mainstream religions. I can point to dozens of derogatory references to Christianity I've encountered over the years in academia, but a case in point useful here is Sharon O'Brien's words about Christian writings in her 1987 biography of Willa Cather. In a section about family female role models for the future author, O'Brien devotes several pages to portraying Cather's great aunt, Sidney Cather Gore, a fervent Baptist and devoted reader of the Bible.

Although a reader of male-authored texts that circumscribed and defined femininity, Sidney was a selective reader who could use her sources to support her own views.

To be sure, her prayers are expressed in a language inherited from patriarchal sources—the Bible, religious tracts, sermons—but at times she uses their rhetoric to assert herself and to influence others. As she writes 'Woman's sphere is limited. But thank God, her prayers are not. (20)

What interests me about O'Brien's description is that she characterizes Sidney's use of religious documents as a kind of manipulation. She implies that religious documents are so patriarchal, they offer nothing unless the reader changes their meanings to suit her ideas, such as the importance that women be considered in political decisions (O'Brien 19-21). It seems impossible to me, however, that Sidney would not also have been influenced by other ideas in the religious texts she spent so much time reading. She must have seen positive qualities in them—power, hope, inner-strength, inspiration—in addition to their patriarchal qualities. This is not a popular conception of Christian doctrine. Indeed, O'Brien writes with a sense of irony and veiled perplexity: "Although religion buttressed the inequality of the sexes, it was also the source and legitimation of Sidney's strength" (19).

But religious works were also a source of strength and example for Cather and many others of her generation, and the generations before her. Think, for example, of the slaves Harriet Tubman and Fredrick Douglass for whom Christianity was key to their struggles for freedom. Cather was well-versed in the Bible, and used allusions and quotation from it throughout her writing. She believed the intensely Christian allegorical book Pilgrim's Progress to be one of the most important books she read as

a child. "It was a book, she wrote..., with 'scenes of the most satisfying kind; where little is said but much is felt and communicated'" (Woodress 23). The strength Cather derived from religion was technique as much as spiritual guidance.

Cather's case, then, provides a fascinating link between the modern era of atheism beginning with Gertrude Stein and Woolf, which separated religion from spirituality, and the era of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and even the earlier transcendentalist Jonathan Edwards, who saw religion and spirituality as interwoven. That is, unlike those who came after her who denounce religion, Cather acknowledges value in religious writing and tradition in her quest to comprehend the meaning of human life and a mysterious power that runs through it. She is part both of the past religious era and coming modern era. Her own struggle then demonstrates that many modernists who were pushing religion aside were simultaneously involved in the very same struggle of the thousands of religious writers before them—how to express the inexpressible. Cather saw that she and John Bunyan and the Biblical writers before them, however much they participated in tyranny, were striving for the same goal: to understand and describe the "scaffolding" behind life which makes us feel interconnected.

When considering spirituality for Cather, it is important to remember that religion did not have for her the taint it has today as an institution that holds people in fear of sin, holds reason in contempt, and holds women in the bonds of patriarchy. Perhaps a helpful way to think about religion can be found in the words of comparative religion scholar

Houston Smith, who recently joined Bill Moyers to host the PBS television series "The Wisdom of Faith." In an interview with Terry Gross on National Public Radio, Smith said that religions, at their best, are "the world's wisdom traditions." They are the coffers of the best we know about the big picture, the two important questions: What is the ultimate reality of existence, and how can we best operate within that reality?

Unfortunately, he said, together with that wisdom, they contain temporal, cultural directives that have done much damage, particularly in regard to the subjugation of women. The thing to do is to focus on the useful qualities in religion, and see the others as part of a spiritual challenge.

In this study, I hope the reader will see the words "religion" and "Christianity" not as a dogmatic, oppressive tradition, but as a formal expression of spirituality (interconnection and underlying power) through one particular tradition, one particular set of ideas about its nature. Though she certainly was conflicted about religion, as we shall see, and most likely saw spirituality and religion as separate, I believe Cather herself was more comfortable with interconnections between religion and spirituality than we might be today.

2

Clues

Exploring Cather's writing, criticism of her writing, and biographical information, I see many clues to the mystery I am trying to unravel: what was the nature of Cather's spiritual consciousness? Spiritual issues were certainly on Cather's mind. Both biographers and

critics have noted ways in which Cather wondered about interconnections between humans and nature and the meaning and mystery behind them. She was concerned with evoking this spiritual realm, both posing questions about it and implying answers. People have noticed this evocative quality in her personality, and critics have noticed it in her work. Following is a sampling of these clues.

From early on, Cather was interested in an essential vitality, a mystery behind life. This comes alive in her high school graduation speech of 1890. The topic was a defense, ironically, of scientific investigation, but she also marches beyond the realm of science:

The most aspiring philosopher never hoped to do more than state the problem; he never dreamed of solving it...Our intellectual swords may cut away a thousand petty spiderwebs woven by superstition across the minds of man, but before the veil of the 'Sanctum Sanctorum' we stand confounded.

(Bohlke 62)

For the teenage Cather, life involved an unsolvable mystery. Her position here can be compared to modern science writers, like Lewis Thomas, who claim that scientific discoveries lead them to a more profound faith in a God who created life's patterns.

People who spent time with Cather saw this "evocative" quality in her personality. She believed in depth of character, commonalty in life experience, and meaning beyond immediate understanding in all people. A writer for "The Lincoln Sunday Star" noticed this when she interviewed Cather on a long walk in 1921:

The longer Miss Cather talks, the more one is filled with the conviction that life is a fascinating business and one's own experience more fascinating than one had ever suspected it of being. Such persons have this gift of infusing their own abundant vitality into the speaker. (Bohlke 43)

Not only did she find Cather innately inspiring, the interviewer also found Cather more inclined to ask questions than to answer them, as if she were accustomed to probing below the surface of anyone she met. Edith Lewis, Cather's companion until Cather's death, comments in a similar vein. Cather may have been reserved with the public, but she did not act superior to others:

She had a gift for immediately creating a personal relationship of some kind with anyone she met.... It was something more than good manners, or even charm. Perhaps it was her instant recognition of their common humanity, of the fact that their claim on life was equal to her own. (Lewis 135)

Lewis introduces her memoir of Cather saying that of all her qualities, she remembers Cather's "talk" the best: "Whatever she said, it had an evocative quality—a quality of creating much more than her words actually stated, of summoning up images, suggestions, overtones and undertones of feeling that opened up long vistas to one's imagination" (xvi).

Of course, Lewis, a devoted editor, knew this was the effect Cather was trying to achieve in her work and may have been working to build

her companion's image after her death. But critics have also noticed this evocative quality in Cather's writing. In his 1949 essay introducing a book of Cather's critical studies, Stephen Tennant identifies in her work a "boundless zest for life. Her greatness, for me, lies in the arrow-like flight of her faith in man ultimately—the eternal vision behind her work—juxtaposed to the homely, simple facts of life" (xiii). Critic Jamie Ambrose calls Cather's work "filled with personal intensity" (xiv). Others, such as Murphy, have identified her writing as religious in undertone—Murphy calls her a writer with "the gift of sight as well as sympathy" ("Catholic Themes" 60). Most recently, Steven Ryan calls the evocative quality of her work "transcendence." He says: "That which is essential to Cather's writing and renders her art so refreshing to the modern imagination is her view of this world as a window to the transcendent" (28).

Like puzzle pieces, I want to assemble dominant themes that emerge from critical observations of her writing and life that relate to the question of spiritual issue, her search for meaning in existence and its relationship to a spiritual current underlying it.

I begin with her sense of meaning. For Cather, meaning in existence emerges from perceptions that build over time. Perceptions and their changes construct meaning that gives life its richness. Major characters who will be considered in this study, Alexandra Bergson, Tom Outland, Father Latour, all have their own sense of meaning in life, but they also represent meaning over time. They change, and the narrator shows how they are perceived by others at different points in their lives. Perception is the key. Patricia Spacks has noticed this quality in Cather's writing:

Actual happenings within [her] novels matter far less than the ways that the novel's characters and the wise narrator perceive what happens. For this reason, plot summary conveys little of Cather's imaginative effect...she speaks to the postmodern sensibilities of the late twentieth century with her steady implicit consciousness of how tendentiously, often, and how fragilely, always, people construct meaning. (Spacks 39)

Time plays a key role in Cather's dependence on perception: Cather's work "rings with a penetrating awareness of the nature of time's fruitful exposures and of its destructions. Time reveals truth" (Spacks 39). Cather expressed this belief in the power of perception and time in contexts other than her fiction. She had an abhorrence, for example, for people who move from old houses into new ones, she told an interviewer in 1921. A new house lacks accumulated perceptions, she said, and is therefore incapable of being beautiful: "The beauty lies in the associations that cluster around it, the way in which the house has fitted itself to the people" (Bohlke 46). History was high in Cather's priorities. The larger the collection of perceptions associated with a place or an object, the greater power it held for her. Phyllis Robinson attributes Cather's affection for the Episcopal church to its "sense of continuity with an old religious community. It was a Church that placed a high value on the past" (233). As in fiction, so in life; for Cather, perceptions built up over time constituted life's depth.

Meaning also emerges from inside human beings. We are not just perceiving and perceived, we are evolving souls. Vivian Gornick writes in her introduction to O Pioneers! that for Cather, the single largest concern was "the question of how one becomes. In all human beings, she felt, there is what she called a soul, an essential spirit, an expressive, inviolable self" (x). People "become" through creative energy and creative forces around them. In a 1921 interview, Cather said the farmer's wife who loves her work raising children, cooking, gardening, preserving, is an artist—an emerging soul expressing herself in her creativity. "Often you find such a woman with all the appreciation of the beautiful bodies of her children, of the order and harmony of her kitchen, of the real creative joy of all her activities, which marks the great artist" (Bohlke 47).

I have spent this time on the question of meaning because I believe that for Cather, meaning in human life is intricately linked to the spiritual realm. It underlies commonalities of human experience, and it helps to drive creative energy. Cather believed religion and art sprang from the same place, an idea she puts into the mouth of St. Peter in The Professor's House. I am convinced that "place" is the spiritual realm. Following one's creative energy or intuition leads to connection with this realm, just as much as religious devotion.

This realm by no means stays the same in Cather's mind throughout her life, as her characters reflect. For Thea, created by Cather in 1915, spirituality manifests itself not in the formalities of the church or in family relations, but between those who are mutually aware of and deeply moved by the power contained in another human being. For Jean Marie

Latour, created by Cather in 1927, spirituality evolves from history, Catholic tradition, the southwest and the human soul. Nonetheless, there are commonalities that emerge.

Cather's spirituality is often ineffable—what she does not say, what she implies, infuses her work with an imaginative power, a Space, that gives the reader the experience with a power beyond words. Always present in Cather's stories *and* her writing itself is this sense of this mysterious and overwhelming power, the source of our vitality. It is what she referred to as a teenager as the "veil of the 'Sanctum Sanctorum'" before which "we stand confounded." As I described in the opening of this chapter, it is not something "good" or "bad," but a silent but powerful essence.

Cather's interest in the intuition is closely associated with this mysterious power. She relied on intuition in the reader to sense the power in her writing, and she relied on her own intuition to bring it into her novels, Lewis tell us. When Cather wrote, she had a general plan for a story, but then moved in any direction her intuition took her: "She depended on the force of her idea and her feeling to create the pattern of her story" (Lewis 126-7). She rejected anything that could be interpreted to show this mystery disrespect. She resisted psychological analysis. She "rarely talked about her mental processes, and disliked any form of self-analysis" (Lewis 127). In college, she spoke out against a popular new way of analyzing texts by picking them apart word by word and plugging them into mathematical formulas (Woodress 80). She passionately guarded the publication of her books and stories. She wanted people to discover her

books because of the feeling they gave to people, and constantly fought having them included in school curricula and book-of-the-month-clubs (Knopf 212). In her writing and her life, she sought to evoke intuitive modes of discovery, knowing, and seeing. Her faith in this sense of this imaginative space was unshakable.

However, it would be wrong to characterize Cather's spiritual vision as lacking association with the tangible. Place was as important for her as imaginative space. Describing Cather's first journey to the southwest, which she transformed into Thea's journey in The Song of the Lark, O'Brien says that the landscape freed up Cather's creative energy: it had an "expansive impact on her spirit" (Introduction ix). In Cather's work, connection to the spiritual realm involves intense connections to physical surroundings, not leaving the landscape behind, but requiring it. As Thea sang to the Mexican's under the moon, Cather implies that her recognition and reverence for the commonalities between her and her audience did not allow her to transcend the moonlit scene, but welled up because of it. Cather's intense feelings about certain landscapes cannot be separated from other components of her spirituality.

But her vision certainly also involves a transcendentalism, breaking boundaries of individual consciousness to common consciousness, or uniting a character to the forces of nature in an organic interrelationship of life. In his argument that Cather is a transcendentalist, Ryan describes character development in Cather's works as an increasing ability to recognize a realm beyond the boundaries of what we see and experience. "Those who achieve transcendence do so by virtue of their

ability to see through the natural world to the supernatural realm both within and beyond" (Ryan 33). Although the spiritual dimension of Cather's work does seem to include a kind of transcendence, the question of Cather's appropriate relationship to transcendentalism is complicated. Critics note that Cather came to admire Walt Whitman, who wrote the poem after which she named O Pioneers! (e.g. Woodress, Murphy, Schubnell). However, there seems to be key difference between the transcendental optimism of Whitman and what I might call the transcendental realism of Cather. Whitman, and Emerson, conveyed a certain positive all-glowing view of the universe, in which, if people behaved a certain way, became balanced with the aspects of the universe, they would achieve transcendence. Ryan includes Cather in that view: "Her writing affords us a vision of a benign and ordered universe" (33). But this characterization of her work ignores the stark, cold, gruesome images that perpetually accost us in Cather's writing. They become darker as Cather gets older.

This leads to a final commonality I associate with Cather's spiritual vision—that of deeply felt ambiguity. Despite what she says in her own descriptions of her writing, Cather is not at all sure that the underlying power she senses is nurturing or just or pleasurable, nor does she come out clearly supporting one or another vision. Murder, suicide, massacre, betrayal appear with regularity in her work, as well as a powerful unrelenting, indifferent universe. Both in her fiction and her life, Cather was fascinated by dark images, and believed they should be not only acknowledged but respected and embraced. Criticizing the practice of

eliminating violence from children's stories, Cather wrote that children should hear fairy tales with good and gruesome components intact. "She thought it did a child no service to keep him from 'the knowledge that the world is a hard place to live in and that he will have to do many difficult and distasteful things before he gets through with it'" (Woodress 151). In her stories, she frequently juxtaposes sentimental or fresh images with dark ones. Spacks points to Godfrey St. Peter, who, watching his children, simultaneously contemplates the joy of fatherhood, and empathizes with Medea, who killed her children. "Their juxtaposition exemplifies Cather's gift of locating disturbing aspects of the truth" (Spacks 40). Cather's transcendentalism is not beautiful or 'benign' but is more encompassing, including anxiety, evil, woe, indecision, melancholy.

Cather did not refer to herself as a spiritual person, but she did refer to the "spirit." She was a great admirer, for example of J.W.N. Sullivan's book Beethoven: His Spiritual Development, especially for its analysis of the creative life (Harris 21). She described the presence of a "spiritual" center in great literary works at a 1925 modern literature conference at Bowdoin College. She told her audience to ignore technical faults in novels—all the great ones are full of them, she said. "Forget them. Read them for the depiction of the spiritual, mental, soulful life of the great genius that wrote them" (Bohlke 165). Inside Shakespeare, "there is always a spiritual plot inside the crude, course, often violent plot he borrowed from Plutarch or someone else" (Bohlke 155). Her familiar use of the term "spiritual," then, refers to the pleasure she attempts to recreate in her art.

These hints of Cather's spiritual quality, both personally and in her writing, show that there is more to her spiritual moments than the first time reader of her novels may see. There is something underneath. For the remainder of this chapter, I will try to set the stage for exploring the novels more carefully. I'll begin by exploring more methodically the issue of spirituality and its relationship to religion in Cather's day. Then I will look at Cather's development as a spiritual person and an artist, and what influences furthered her development. Finally, I will show some of the modernist methods she developed as a writer to convey certain ideas in her writing, and suggest a model for analyzing the nature of spirituality in her works.

3

"Christianity"

To begin exploring the development of Cather as a spiritual person, I want to go back to her early spiritual consciousness. As I have outlined, religion and spirituality were intricately linked for Cather, and never more so than when she was a child.

There is scant mention in biographies of her family's religious practices. She was born at a time when, like today, the majority of Americans were Protestant, but also when public use of Christian symbols and language was much less controversial than now. The United States was a new experiment in religious diversity, writes social historian Kevin Christiano—"the first society not merely to tolerate some diversity in religious behavior, but to make voluntary church affiliation... the very

basis of its church state system." (49). However, though America was "legally and explicitly pluralistic," it "morally and implicitly favored" Christianity, and specifically Protestantism (60). Citizens were allowed to worship God in their own way, but the Christian God, trinity and the Bible were the assumed objects of contemplation and prayer.

Cather's own experience with organized religion bears this out. She was raised a Baptist (Robinson 232). Her family adhered to basic Christian virtues and read the Bible regularly, but did not apparently spend a great deal of energy demonstrating allegiance to a certain church. Cather's father's family was devoted to their faith: her grandfather and great aunt Sidney converted to the Baptist denomination from their father's Presbyterian loyalties, and allowed no levity on Sundays (O'Brien 19). In her fervor, Sidney prayed that her father would also convert; that "the scales would fall from his eyes to that he might see that unless he too repented, he would likewise perish" (O'Brien 20). But this enthusiasm for the church may have been fueled by the Civil War—denominations sided with either the Union or the Confederates—and it seems to have faded in the next generation. Charles Cather is described as different from his fire-and-brimstone father—he was spiritual, but also "gentle" (O'Brien 14). It is significant that, despite the Cather family's earlier rift over religion, biographies on Cather comment only briefly or not at all on her own early experiences with the church. There is no mention of her mother's religious background, nor her immediate family's attitudes towards the Baptists (see, for example Lee, O'Brien, Woodress, Lewis, Robinson and Gerber.) Although they certainly were Baptists, the very lack of

commentary about religion in the Cather home suggests its unremarkable ranking in family priorities.

Once the family moved from Virginia to Nebraska, they encountered a different religious atmosphere. In a 1923 essay, Cather recalled the variety of churches available to the family when she first moved to the prairie:

On Sunday we could drive to a Norwegian church and listen to a sermon in that language, or to a Danish or a Swedish church. We could go to the French Catholic settlement in the next county and hear a sermon in French, or into the Bohemian township and hear one in Czech, or we could go to church with the German Lutherans. There were, of course, American congregations also. (Woodress 38)

Cather's language here suggests an easygoing attitude towards denominational preferences, in which people could shop around for congregations. Cather presents a similar attitude in O Pioneers!. After fighting with her brothers, Alexandra stops attending the Norwegian church and goes instead to either the "Reform Church" or the French Catholic church with Marie (119-120). It seems that the important thing in Nebraska was to attend Christian churches, no matter the denomination. Like many Americans at the time, Cather and her family and friends most likely considered themselves simply "Christian" with the same underlying religious principles.

We have only a hint of more specific religious influences on Cather as a girl. Cather certainly attended church. Her grandmother taught

Sunday school every week, nine months of the year, and Woodress proposes that Cather would have been compelled to accompany her (42). Another important influence in her younger days was William Drucker, the man from whom she learned Latin and Greek in *Red Cloud*. Interestingly, although Cather's later companion Lewis never met Drucker and only spends part of a page describing him, she is explicit about his religious views—something she does not express interest in when describing other people in Cather's history. "Mr. Drucker was not a member of any church," she writes. "He admired Christ, and believed that every man who loved his fellow-men was an incarnation of the Divine. He was not able to believe in immortality" (22). It is plausible that when Lewis and Cather lived together, this was something Cather remembered particularly about Drucker. These two differing approaches to religion of Cather's grandmother and her teacher are also similar in that they both involve the staples of Christianity. Like many Americans, spirituality for them had similar concepts, although they had different ways of interpreting them.

Drucker's ambivalence towards organized religion seems to have had the larger impact on Cather in her teenage years. In her high school graduation speech quoted earlier, she articulates her developing spiritual sense is, and significantly, it does not have much to do with the church. She denounces those who suspect scientific inquiry as an anti-Christian movement, and infers that Christian principles exist as true and important, but separate from the church.

Superstition has ever been the curse of the church, and until she can acknowledge that since her principles are true, no scientific truth can contradict them, she will never realize her full strength. There is another book of God than that of the scriptural revelation, a book written in chapters of creation upon the pages of the universe bound by mystery. (Bohlke 142)

Her words affirm Christian beliefs, but they are separate from organized religion. She is building on her Protestant base, expanding it. Here she expresses a developing transcendental sense for nature as linked to spirituality, a sense that permeates her later fiction.

In college, Cather actually denounced Christianity and called herself an atheist (Ambrose 102). She saw possibilities for negative effects of religion, expressed in a story she wrote in 1893, her junior year. She depicts a Danish farmer who comes to Nebraska, tries to till the soil, and ends up a crazy religious fanatic "who believes God is punishing him for his sins" (Woodress 78). Although students remembered Cather as unusual and outspoken (Woodress 87), she was not without company in her anti-Christian stance. At the turn of the century, R.H. Linder notes there was a growing faction of evangelist Christians, and of intellectual dislike of Christianity: "There were signs of increasing hostility toward Christianity among intellectuals—based on the new science in the universities and on growing theological liberalism in the seminaries—although confidence in orthodoxy still prevailed in most of the educational institutions of the land" (12). But, despite her reservations

about Christian religion, Cather's writings from her early adulthood continue to refer to heaven and God as though they were assumed components of the universe. In supporting football in college, she wrote in the campus paper, "Of course it is brutal... We have not outgrown all our old animal instincts yet, and heaven grant we never shall" (Quirk 97). A creative writer, she wrote, must "know the world a good deal as God knows it" (Quirk 100). Her well-known quote about women writers from this time also invokes God: "Sometimes I wonder why God ever trusted talent in the hands of women, they usually make such an infernal mess of it" (Woodress 110).

It seems Cather was developing not so much an anti-Christian attitude as an anti-church attitude. When Cather first moved to Pittsburgh after college, her hosts were avid Presbyterians, and invited her to attend their Sunday school. "Cather told the Axtells that her folks were Baptists. Alas, she added, the Baptist minister lived next door and in ten minutes they had him over and upon her" (Woodress 113). Her feelings about organized religion were to change. In 1922, at age 48, she was baptized in the Episcopal Church with her parents. But as a young adult, she was venturing into the world as an artist who grew up in generic, assumed religiosity, but with an undefined sense of her personal relationship with that religion.

4

Religion of Creativity

What Cather did have, however, says Philip Gerber, is a devout belief that intuition should be the guiding spirit in art and the artist. She

wrote over 250 critical pieces for the Lincoln, Nebraska newspaper during and just after her years in college, and in these she spelled out guiding principals about art that stayed intact throughout her life. For the young Cather, Gerber asserts, "Creative power, never synonymous with mere talent nor acquired through effort, is the unique evidence that 'every true artist is in the hands of a higher power than himself, that he cannot do what he will, but because he must'" (135) Interestingly, many of her ideas about art that Gerber quotes are couched in the language of religion. For example: "It takes a whole long life not only of faith but of works to give an artist salvation and immortality" (136), and "a truly artful expression can be approached only through collaborate effort between man's most perfect work and God's divinist mood" (138). Clearly, she is passionate about art in something other than an analytical, logical way. Gerber, in fact, places her in a class of critics he calls "intuitive." She calls art 'an awesome mystery', and seems to use her column to think on paper, rather than to spell out a step-by-step philosophy. Possibly the most explicit description of her ideas came in 1896, only after she had been writing her column for three years, and had been out of college for one:

'Art is not thought or emotion, but expression, expression, always expression. To keep an idea living, intact, tinged with all its original feeling, its original mood preserving in it all the ecstasy which attended its birth, to keep it so all the way from the brain to the hand and transfer it on paper a living thing with color, odor, sound, life all in it, that is what art means, that is the greatest gift of the gods' (136).

That she refers to art as something beyond thought and emotion, something that retains its "ecstasy," resounds with spiritual implications. At this point, however, it is doubtful that she would have linked spirituality with her ideas about art.

But these articulations paved the way for what became a more refined sense of spirituality for Cather, what critics have called her "religion of creativity." She was to declare 26 years later in The Professor's House that religion and art spring from the same source. She had major developments to experience before she reached this point, but this early period in her 20s, as she began to express in words her underlying sense that art expressed something brilliant and mysterious behind life itself, may have been key to those developments.

We have to prepare ourselves in order to receive the help we need in our spiritual evolution, says Jean Bolen, whom I quoted earlier for her description of spirituality. Though it is difficult, she continues, we need to try to articulate what we think or feel about the nature of the spirit:

There are good reasons to discuss that which cannot be known fully through words—because the way for an experience to happen can be prepared. Intellectual awareness and acceptance of a spiritual concept, coupled with receptivity or openness, lay the groundwork for an intuitively felt experience that can then follow. As the Eastern saying goes, 'When the pupil is ready the teacher will come. (3)

For Cather, that teacher was Henri Bergson. Bergson (1859-1941) was a French philosopher who argued eloquently for the power of intuition

over the intellect. His 1907 work L'évolution créatrice was translated into English as Creative Evolution in 1911. This translation had a powerful influence on American thought between 1910-1915 that amounted to a "popular craze," says Tom Quirk (43). In his book Bergson and American Culture, Quirk proposes that Bergson had a profound effect on American artists, and particularly on Cather and Wallace Stevens, because he gave "a full and privileged place to the imagination" (9). Bergson's ideas resounded in Willa Cather's mind, and became a part of her view of the world for the remainder of her life (9).

Like Quirk, as I read Creative Evolution, I am struck by the similarities between Bergson's philosophy and Cather's work. In some ways, Bergson only gave Cather words to express what she already believed. As Gerber showed, Cather early on believed in intuition, and an "ecstatic," vibrant quality that gives a true artist his/her brilliance. But this is not to say Bergson's effect on Cather was any less momentous.

Bergson believed that Life is a continuous process of evolution; of growth and change. Evolution is what defines us as people, so that we are fluid, ever-changing beings. One's memory, the storehouse of past perceptions, influences the nature of future evolution. Intuition, which is organic and internal, helps us to understand life much more than the intellect. The intellect is useful, creating categories for experience and matter, and predicting phenomena. But it is a limited resource: giving us only "partial views of the whole" (Bergson 36). In reality, the course of this ever-evolving process called life cannot be predicted, nor divided into parts. Intellect "goes around life, taking from outside the greatest possible

number of views of it, drawing [life] into itself instead of entering into it. But it is to the very inwardness of life that intuition leads us" (194). Thus, says Bergson:

[Intellect] perceives the features of the living being, merely as assembled, not as mutually organized. The intention of life, the simple movement that runs through the lines, that binds them together and gives them significance, escapes it. *This intention is just what the artist tries to regain, in placing himself back within the object by a kind of sympathy, in breaking down, by an effort of intuition, the barrier that space puts between him and his model.* (194; emphasis mine)

For Bergson, then, the artist—not the scientist or psychologist (practicing early psychology)—is the only member of society who approaches any accurate representation of the nature of life itself. This echoes Cather's statement ten years earlier: "expression, expression, always expression" is what constitutes art.

Bergson goes further, in two very important ways. First, he says that the *method* the artist uses to represent life successfully is by turning down the volume on his/her intellect, and nestling in his/her intuition. This becomes central to Cather's method as a writer. Further, Bergson says that the intuition is "the road that leads to the life of the spirit" (293). Evolution, to him, is an "energized—indeed, spiritualized—process: matter alters in response to, or accompanying, a vital pulse, an *élan vital*" (Wasserman 84).

Cather discovered Bergson at a critical point in her life, the time critics have called an artistic "explosion," when she wrote O Pioneers! Four years earlier in 1908, Jewett had urged her younger friend Cather to quit her job at McClure's magazine and work on her writing full time. Probably the most important advice she ever received, Cather spent the next several years building up the courage and finances she needed to take it. In the fall of 1911, she left McClure's, and early the next spring published her first novel, Alexander's Bridge (1911). Later, Cather called this novel a false start, not really her first novel. Woodress, who praises the book's construction, also has this to say about it: "The novel is somewhat bloodless...a performance of the head rather than the heart, and it does not take hold of the reader the way Cather's later books do" (224).

After it was published, she took her first trip to the southwest. Biographers have described this event as the transforming moment for her as an artist. Woodress opens his book with a description of the journey; Lee calls it "one of the most important journeys of her life" (87). She felt intensely connected to the land there and was inspired by it. It was wide and open like Nebraska, says O'Brien, but also was given definition by mesas, plateaus and mountains. "This topography created a comforting psychological space for Cather, one in which she could let down barriers, release control, and liberate emotional and creative forces" (Introduction ix). The time she spent there, not working but renewing, changed her, says Woodress. "Those weeks off in the desert...took all the kinks and crinkles out, and she felt as if her mind had been freshly washed and ironed and made ready for a new life. She felt somehow confident, as if she had gotten

her second wind" (11). But Woodress's speculative tone—reflected in his words "somehow" and "as if"—is also common in biographies when they hit this point in Cather's life. How could a landscape alone create such a transformation in the writer?

Significantly it was also a few months later that she first read Creative Evolution. Cather wrote to Elizabeth Sergeant, Sept. 12, 1912, that she was enthusiastic about Bergson's ideas (Quirk 125). But perhaps her strongest heralding of Bergson's ideas is the fact that she names the main character in her next book after him: Alexandra Bergson. Cather's transformation as a writer from Alexander's Bridge to O Pioneers! has struck many a critic, not to mention Cather's strongest critic, herself:

In Alexander's Bridge, I was still more preoccupied with trying to write well than with anything else.... A painter or writer must learn to distinguish what is his own from what he admires. I never abandoned trying to compromise the kind of matter which my experience had given me, and the kind of writing I admired, until I began my second novel, O Pioneers! (Bohlke 116)

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that Bergson had at least as cathartic an effect on Cather as her visit to the southwest. The two catalysts reflect what I identified earlier as central components in Cather's spirituality: Imaginative space and place. Because Bergson's philosophy is complex, let me pause here to extract three important ideas Cather found articulated in Bergson that had been with her through her life: (1) Individuals have intuition and intellect. But it is intuition, not intellect,

that leads to true understanding of life, and it is the artist's job to represent that truth; (2) Intellect leads to materialism, or a superficial categorical sense of life's meaning; intuition leads to spirituality, or an internal, divine sense of life's meaning (3) both inanimate matter and time gain meaning only when individuals interact with them and store them in their memories. In Bergson, Cather found not only an affirming expression of her own beliefs—that the artist's job is to capture life's vitality—but also a guide for acting on them.

Ironically, it is in a 1922 introduction to Alexander's Bridge that Cather is most often quoted for her reference to the influence of Bergson's ideas on her writing. A writer, she says, must depend on "the thing by which our feet find the road home on a dark night, accounting to themselves for the roots and stones which we had never noticed by day.... It corresponds to what Mr. Bergson calls the wisdom of intuition as opposed to the intellect" (Wasserman 83). Cather was as devoted to this idea as one would be to a religion, a reference that she certainly made herself. When Lewis, Cather's companion of 39 years, uses the above excerpt in her memoirs of Cather, she says, "I have quoted this passage at length because it states what became so rooted a part of Willa Cather's literary faith" (78). Religion, as I proposed above, is a coffer of wisdom that addresses the big questions: what is life and why am I here? For Cather, what began as a concept of art and the artist grew into a deep, resounding religion—her path to reach spirituality: "the intuitive knowledge that there is...an underlying meaning to all experience...to which 'I' am connected" (Bolen 2).

Cather's "literary faith" had more to do with what came to her by following Bergson's advice—relying on her intuition—than it had to do with taking his ideas. Though Bergson emerged as a central "teacher" for Cather, like any true artist, she took what she learned from him and made it her own. As she says later, "When a writer once begins to work with his own material, he realizes that, no matter what his literary excursion may have been, he has been working with it from the beginning—by living it" (Lewis 77).

5

Her methods, her purpose

This chapter takes us up to the point before Cather wrote the first novel of my study. Before I turn to it, however, I want to explore in this final section methods that Cather was using in her writing to evoke certain effects, and a method I want to use to explore the nature of the spirituality I see expressed in each novel.

As I noted in the opening of this chapter, there are striking parallels between Cather's and Virginia Woolf's ideas about art. While Woolf is generally recognized for her prominent place in the modernist literary movement, Cather is not. But a growing number of scholars note ways in which Cather could be called a modernist. Phyllis Love notes that Cather's subject matters, which celebrate the past, helps to disguise her writing's "revolutionary qualities" in form, understatement, and experiments with archetypal characters: "She often presents her characters as conduits for a divine spirit, raised above human powers by some force above or below

consciousness, approaching the condition of gods, goddesses or saints" (142). Jane Lilienfeld similarly writes that with unusual forms and understatement, Cather disguised negative feelings under beauty in her novels, "subverting that most traditional of genres: seemingly realistic American regional fiction" (52). In an article pointing out the similarities between Cather's and Hemmingway's theories about fiction, Love says Cather believed in cutting as much detail as possible from writing. Cather wrote about this theory several years before Hemmingway. Love refers to Cather's assertion that the novel has been 'overfurnished' and thus calls her a member of what Joseph Warren Beach called "'the cult of the simple'" (296).

Her own description of the highest achievement in writing hints that modernism plays a role in her craft:

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or deed that gives high quality to the novel. (Cather, On Writing 41-42)

For Cather, say Janet Giltrow and David Stouck, "the highest reach of artistic endeavor remains beyond the power of human language to name or describe although in a genuine work of art in can be felt by the sympathetic reader" (92). In her efforts to strip away as much as she can, leaving only the essential details, Cather relies heavily on principles of juxtaposition. Gerber quotes a particularly telling description, in which

Cather explains that she creates certain effects by placing characters and events next to each other.

Just as if I put here on the table a green vase, and beside it a yellow orange. Now, those two thing affect each other. Side by side, they produce a reaction which neither of them will produce alone. Why should I try to say anything clever, or by any colorful rhetoric detract attention from those two objects, the relation they have to each other and the effect they have upon each other? I want the reader to see the orange and the vase—beyond that, I am out of it. Mere cleverness must go. (147)

In addition, she used the principle of echo, or repetition, to emphasize ideas and images. Lewis says that music afforded Cather an exclusively emotional, inspirational experience. "It ... had a potent influence on her own imaginative process—quickenning the flow of her ideas, suggesting new forms and associations, translating itself into parallel moments of thought and feeling" (48). In an extensive analysis of her language, Giltrow and Stouck discovered that the repeating themes and variations on themes that is common in classical music are accurate reflections of the ways she wrote. Both "deliberately and instinctively," they conclude, she wrote deceptively simple prose that "would reach beyond words and echo, like music, a prefigurative mode of being" (Giltrow and Stouck 95). These methods occur throughout her prose, and I will use them to explore the ways in which she creates an overriding sense of spirituality in her novels.

I also want to push the question of her methods one step further to ask not only how Cather creates a spiritual quality in her novels, but why. Is Cather attempting to push us to believe in something specific, or is she posing questions for which we will discover there are no answers? For a method to answer these questions I turn to literary religious philosophy, and Jeremy Smith's thoughtful analysis of the qualities of religious experiences in literature.

There are two kinds of religious experience literature provides, Smith says: evocative and rhetorical. Evocative literature focuses on perceptual truth—of characters, narrators and readers. Perception leads to a sense of elusive, unexplainable mystery, and thus raises the important questions: "about the origin, destiny, and meaning of the world and of each individual." It is these questions that "represent the religious dimension of perception" (64). Rhetorical literature, on the other hand, not only asks these questions, but offers an answer. Works of this nature focus on the "truth of commitment," not only evoking in the reader perceptions of reality, but expressing for the reader a commitment to a faith, rhetorically suggesting a method for responding to reality. Evocative works, then, focus on observation, empathy, and contemplation, while rhetorical works encourage trust, response and action.

Smith argues that novels tend to be exclusively evocative, and that those that try to be rhetorical end up feeling "heavy-handed." I propose, however, that novels are essentially evocative, but that they range the spectrum of extremely evocative to evocatively rhetorical. For final

analysis of each of Cather's works, I will explore where they fall on this scale of the evocative and the rhetorical of spiritual values.

I turn to this method of analysis because I think that attempts to explain the power of Cather's writing in literary terms have not been particularly successful. The identification of her modernist techniques is the latest in a string of observations about the various qualities of her writing. The challenge to "place" Cather's work increased with each successive novel she wrote. As Acocella says, it is generally difficult to categorize Cather's work: "The parade of American literature goes by, float after float: realism, naturalism, psychological novel, social novel, political novel. Cather belongs with none of them" (71). In their 1991 survey of American literature, Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury classify her a formalist and a naturalist regional writer, together with Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow. The issue of Cather's modernism further complicates the question of where she fits in the history of literature. She experimented as much with her words as her form. In The Professor's House, she experimented with placing a novel within the frame of another novel, and the episodic nature of Death Comes for the Archbishop led to debates over whether one can justify calling the work a novel at all. More and more, Cather broke the modes of convention to experiment.

I suspect that Cather would be enjoying these struggles to categorize her. As we have seen, she was not terribly fond of analysis, and least so, literary analysis. It is not my purpose to try to resolve these issues but to examine the novels for their attention to spiritual issues. I will look at her

novels as a kind of spiritual literature to identify the changing nature of her spiritual vision.

CHAPTER TWO

I have written about Willa Cather as I knew her, but with the feeling that it is not in any form of biographical writing, but in art alone, that the deepest truth about human beings is to be found.

(Lewis vi)

How can we ever know a person? I find biographical information about Cather useful for understanding her state of mind as she developed into a novelist. But as Lewis remarks in her biography of Cather, and Bergson explains in his philosophy, only in art are there reflected the deepest truths about human life. I think Cather successfully captured these truths in her novels, and that they not only speak of life in general, but also of Cather's life specifically. I believe that as Cather changed, so too did her spirituality. I will trace what she shows in her novels in her most artistically fruitful years: 1913 through 1926. I begin with what she called her first novel, freshly embarking on her career as a novelist.

1

Though it contains significant darkness, O Pioneers! expresses an spiritual vision of pervading celebration, and it reflects the state of mind of its writer. Cather wrote this novel in 1912-13, the fall after her first visit to the southwest, and her first reading of Henri Bergson. O Pioneers!, she said, she wrote entirely for herself about people and places she knew well. Because of its air of authenticity, she came to call it her "first" novel.

This was also the novel through which she discovered her most successful writing process: allowing the novel to write itself.

Wagenknecht offers a succinct description of this method: "She tried not to 'write ' at all. She did not wish to 'arrange' or 'invent' anything but to stand aside and let her materials find their own right, spontaneous, inevitable place, instead of being wrenched out of shape and forced into a pattern she had sought to impose upon them" (50). The description recalls Bergson's differentiation between the intellect, which imposes categories upon the world, and intuition, which evolves out of the world's natural shapes. With this novel, Cather let her intuition lead.

The story conveys an essential feeling of exuberance as it traces the relationships between the Bergson family members, their neighbors and the land in Nebraska. Through two opening long sections and three shorter closing sections, readers watch the land transform from rough wilderness to bountiful farmland, and watch characters deepen as they become integrated with that land, developing their relationships with it and with each other. Alexandra Bergson is the prominent figure, and other characters revolve around her in and out of the narrative. Her neighbor Carl leaves Nebraska, returns sixteen years later, and proposes to Alexandra at the end of the book. Marie and Frank Shabata have a difficult marriage, and Marie finds new love with Alexandra's youngest brother, Emil. Though Alexandra struggles with the land and farming, as well as death and the twisted fates of those she loves, she emerges forgiving, awed by life, and hopeful for the future.

When they consider this book, critics focus primarily on Alexandra and the land. Some feminist critics describe Alexandra as a matriarchal visionary, defiant of patriarchal society, or a feminine farmer who works with the land as an alternative to the masculine approach of conquering the land; other critics see her as a transcendental figure who finds a balance between masculine and feminine. (See for example Gustafson, Winters, Ryan, and O'Brien). Lee, like many others, characterizes the book as optimistic: "serene" (118). This may explain why it is one of the least popular of Cather's novels for critical observation. But like much of Cather's work, it is deceptively simple, deceptively serene. First of all, much of this novel is not uplifting but quite dark, actually. The deaths in O Pioneers! far outnumber the births. Winter is the only season given a section of its own in the novel in "Winter Memories." The land transforms and becomes fruitful, but tragedy continues to strike the lives of the characters, from Alexandra's estrangement from her brothers to the untimely sickness and death of the young husband and father, Amédée, Emil Bergson's best friend. We discover that for all its exuberant qualities, the common elements of Cather's spiritual environments — of space, place, transcendence, but also ambiguity — are all present in this novel. While she is certainly concerned with giving readers a sense of an exuberant power both underlying and part of the landscape, and with showing characters' able to transcend by means of their creative power, she is also commingling that sense with grim desolation.

I think the novel's complexity further shows itself in the difficulty critics have placing it into American literary traditions. Critics call this

work variably pastoral, realist, romantic, formal, natural. Lee calls it a blending of pastoral and realist. Demaree Peck represents another school which sees the book as devoutly transcendental. Peck says Cather uses Alexandra's imagination to drive the novel, deliberately enacting Emerson's claim that human beings will absorb the lessons in nature if they look at it the right way. "Alexandra exerts a prophetic vision before which bleak wastes vanish and the world becomes 'a realized will,— the double of man' (Nature 38)" (Peck 20). But as I mentioned in my first chapter, even in this category of transcendence, which more closely resembles my feeling about Cather's writing, the optimism reflected in Emerson's ideas seems ill-suited for comparison to a book so filled with dark events. This novel also contains elements of modernist experimentation as much as her more obviously unusual books. Though is considered a near perfect novel in the conventional sense (e.g. Wagenknecht, Lee), it experiments with squeezing a long time into a short space, covering 18 years in less than 200 short pages, and offers a main character new in American literature; the successful professional woman.

I think this novel is particularly indicative of my proposal that Cather's goal as a writer is not so much to contribute to a certain vision of literature as to find new ways of writing to suggest a spiritual philosophy that was her own. Cather later wrote that a key difference between Alexander's Bridge and O Pioneers! was that in the former novel, she was attempting to participate in the realist experimentation that occupied Henry James and Edith Wharton. Her attempt to craft a novel like James, she wrote, is exactly why the novel failed (Lee 83).

2

In a pattern I will continue throughout this study, I will open my exploration of the spiritual nature of O Pioneers! with its treatment of institutionalized religion. We know early on that Christianity is interwoven in the Bergson's lives. They commonly use words associated with that religion. Alexandra likes to say that, caught on a desert island, her mother "would thank God for her deliverance, make a garden, and find something to preserve " (19). Alexandra reads a Swedish Bible on a Sunday afternoon in Chapter 3 and her church-going brothers in "cloth hats and coats, never worn except on Sundays" (21). Churches are a standard institution in people's lives, and they attend regularly.

But the quality of people's devotion to church seems to be generic rather than specific. There is a curious flexibility in church affiliation. Alexandra and Emil sometimes go to the Catholic Church with Marie on Sundays (76), and after Alexandra quarrels with her brothers, the narrator tell us, "she has stopped going to the Norwegian Church and drives up to the Reform Church at Hanover, or goes with Marie Shabata to the Catholic Church, locally known as the "French Church" (119-20). In addition, the events that take place at the church are not all specifically Christian. It is at the French church where Emil and Marie first kiss at a Bohemian fair, and where Amédée spends much of his social life. When he dies, the narrator notes that the church was "the scene of his most serious moments and of his happiest hours. He had played and wrestled and courted under its shadow. Only three weeks ago he had proudly carried his baby there to be christened" (163). The role that the church

played in Amédée's life is representative of the role it plays in many lives in this part of Nebraska.

The French church gradually takes on a prominent position in the novel. One of the novel's most powerful scenes occurs at the church, when mourners gather for Amédée's funeral at the same time as children, their families and the bishop gather for the annual confirmation ceremony. For the French community, the church represents the most significant elements of life—birth, commitment to God and to others, death. The church also holds a central position in the community of the novel. Marie and Frank go to church regularly; Marie socializes there and Frank watches her and sulks(76). Emil also spends time at the church to see both Marie and Amédée. He takes Carl to a fair there, and attends a dinner and fair there with Alexandra when he comes home from Mexico. Though she seldom appears as a member of any community, Alexandra is more often a member of this church community than anywhere else. She helps out at the French church supper and fair, and attends church there with Marie. And throughout the novel, community gatherings center around the church. Though other communities are mentioned—Sainte-Agnes where Frank Shabata goes to Moses Marcel's saloon, and Omaha where Marie Shabata was raised—and though the book opens with the cold scene in Hanover, the overwhelming majority of the community scenes focus on this church. In this sense, the French church reminds me of the role that a school can play in a small community as the place where all the members of the community meet regularly for both social and political reasons; if the school closes, the community dies.

Both characters and the narrator give power to the church. Not mentioning but hinting at the love Emil feels for her, Marie says early in the book: "I wish you were a Catholic. The Church helps people, indeed it does" (98). Amédée plans to have many little Catholics in order to fortify the church. When Emil is in Mexico, Marie finds the church gives her strength. But the power expands later when Cather uses a picture of the Church to open the most tragic section of the book "The White Mulberry Tree":

The French Church, properly the Church of Sainte-Agnes, stood upon a hill. The high, narrow, red-brick building, with its tall steeple and steep roof, could be seen for miles across the wheatfields, though the little town of Sainte-Agnes was completely hidden away at the foot of the hill. The church looked powerful and triumphant there on its eminence, so high above the rest of the landscape, with miles of warm color lying at its feet.... (135)

Cather describes the church as more prominent, more visible than the town of the same name, situating the spiritual institution and its rituals as more higher than the nearby town, and events that happen there.

However, Cather's feelings about the church become powerfully ironic when she closes this climatic section of the novel with Ivar discovering the church-going Marie Shabata and Emil Bergson lying together in the field, shot dead by Marie's church-going husband. Their associations with the church did not save them from their finally triumphant humanness, which led to adultery for Marie, and murder for

Frank. The idyllic scene of the church in the opening stands in stark contrast to Ivar's closing cry "God have mercy on us!" And yet, with her keen sense for ambiguity, Cather has also succeeded here in evoking a Christian God as a significant concept, associated with a spiritual realm addressed by the church, and yet separate from the institution. The church and the cry for God's mercy are like parentheses around this weighty section. The spiritual realm, expressed in Christian language, stands as a power that is most pronounced in the fundamentals of existence; of love, life, community and death.

Before I close this section about institutionalized religion, I want to mention graves and graveyards, another staple of this novel I consider associated with the church. They appear prominently towards the opening of the novel—John Bergson yearns to be in one, Emil clears the Norwegian graves where Mr. and Mrs. John Bergson are buried—and towards the end when Amédée is to be buried, and Alexandra is caught in a rainstorm at the same graveyard Emil earlier cleared. These are sights reminding the reader that death is a part of the life of the novel, a part of the pioneer's spiritual community.

3

The church, however, is only one of many elements in O Pioneers! that evoke the spiritual realm of mysterious interconnections underlying the universe, life and death. The church holds a key position in the most tragic portion of the novel, but we do not encounter it at all until well into the middle of the novel, when Emil goes to the French church late in

section two. If Cather is a master of juxtaposition, then we have to pay attention to her choice. Though her reputation has been that of an old-fashioned writer celebrating the past, traditional Christianity sits only in the background of this novel.

The religion of Ivar and Marie present ways in which Christianity in this novel is more expansive than the traditional concept of it. The element in the novel that most challenges that tradition is the character of Ivar. We spend the entire third chapter of the novel with Ivar, who lives like an ancient Christian ascetic in the desert. Wagenknecht goes so far as to refer to this character as a "Russian saint" (74). A devout Christian, Ivar does not attend church because he has "a peculiar religion of his own and could not get on with any of the denominations" (25). He is short with long shaggy hair, wears no shoes and dons clean shirt on Sundays. His home blends so well with the land that "you could have walked over the roof of Ivar's dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation" (24):

He best expressed his preference for his wild homestead by saying that his Bible seemed truer to him there. If one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land, the smiling sky, the curly grass white in the hot sunlight; if one listened to the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence, one understood what Ivar meant. (25)

His Spartan existence recalls Thoreau, but his religious devotion and his shaggy appearance give him a deeper spiritual quality. When Alexandra

takes her brothers and Carl to see Ivar this Sunday, he is memorizing a passage from the Norwegian Bible about nature, and the resources God made for each animal. Ivar seems to have similarly found his own place in the world, among animals and the wild land. He will not allow people to shoot birds on his pond, and when he moves to Alexandra's farm after he loses his land, she sets him up in the barn near the horses. He has a gift for understanding animals, and for healing them when they are sick.

Ivar has visions. He comes to Alexandra, concerned that people want to put him in an asylum because of these visions. "You know that my spells come from God, and that I would not harm any living creature," he tells Alexandra. He goes on to explain that Christian worship should be personal—presenting a Christianity quite different from that of Marie, who believes in the power of the church. He says:

You believe that every one should worship God in the way revealed to him. But that is not the way of this country. The way here is for all to do alike....At home, in the old country, there were many like me, who had been touched by God, or who had seen things in the graveyard at night and were different afterward. We thought nothing of it, and let them alone. (59)

Characteristically, Cather does not recount the particulars of Ivar's visions, she only infers that they are divine. We are given instead only a sense of a mysterious connection with God, and that sense is more powerful than if it were more specifically defined.

So, although O Pioneers! contains traditional Christian symbols of church and piety, the character of Ivar challenges the traditional idea that religious devotion must be guided by the church. Ivar is devout, and powerful. Following his advice about animals, Alexandra becomes one of the richest farmers on the Divide. He seems to have two understandings—that of the spirit and that of the body; and his spirit is the stronger. He goes barefoot to appease his strong, rebellious body that yearns to yield to temptation. There are no limits placed on the feet, he says, and so he gives them full reign to stomp in filth. He seems almost a medium between this life, and a realm beyond the earthly. He has a mysterious understanding of the needs of animals, knowing when a horse is hurt, and how hogs wish to be kept. An old man, he survives the "devout" Marie, and sustains Alexandra through her grief. After the death of Marie and Emil, he functions as a spiritual guide for Alexandra and those around her. "When the eyes of the flesh are shut the eyes of the spirit are open. She will have a message from those who are gone, and that will bring her peace. Until then we must bear with her" (180).

However, Ivar is also limited in his spiritual vision. He is a consistent character in his devotion to Christianity, but he cannot see beyond this vision. "These wild things are God's birds" he tell Lou and Oscar. "He watches over them and counts them, as we do our cattle; Christ says so in the New Testament" (27). After Emil and Marie have died, he scolds Alexandra for thinking without reference to Christian ideals about the state of their souls. "'Mistress,' said Ivar reproachfully, 'those are bad thoughts. The dead are in Paradise.' Then he hung his

head, for he did not believe Emil was in Paradise" (182-3). Ivar reinforces the Christian concepts—the Bible lays out the nature of God, of Heaven, Hell and unpardonable sins.

Marie offers a contrast to Ivar's devotion. Both she and the narrator describe her as "devout," and in one conversation, Emil associates her with Ivar for mourning the shooting of ducks. But she also is aware of different mandates, outside of Christianity. We see her reading palms at the Church fair, a pagan activity in a Christian institution. Her thoughts about other religions are further articulated in conversations with Emil. In their first conversation, Emil, finishing up his mowing in the Norwegian graveyard, asks why an old Bohemian family wasn't buried in the Catholic graveyard. "Free-thinkers," Marie tells him (52). The comment is inserted into this conversation off-hand, but we get this impression: Marie knows that though there are church-going Christians on the Divide, there are also those who reject the institution. The theme of reaching beyond Christianity becomes more personal to Marie in another conversation with Emil outdoors, under a white mulberry tree. Marie talks about religions before Christianity, and admits she is drawn to them:

The Bohemians, you know, were tree worshipers before the missionaries came. Father says the people in the mountains still do queer things, sometimes,—they believe that trees bring good or bad luck....The old people in the mountains plant lindens to purify the forest and to do away with the spells that come from the old trees they say have

lasted from heathen times. I'm a good Catholic, but I think I could get along with caring for trees, if I hadn't anything else.
(95-6)

Her comment is surprising from someone who invokes the image of the Church regularly through the text. It shows that her spirituality is not limited by Christianity—that her devotion is to worshipping a spiritual realm that can be defined in other ways. This is more subtly implied as she sets her plants out through the winter of Emil's absence, and yearns for spring. She believes in the light under the snow—not in the sky, in Heaven. "Down under the frozen crusts, at the roots of the trees, the secret of life was still safe, warm as the blood in one's heart; and the spring would come again! Oh, it would come again!" (128).

However, Marie is certainly more caught up in Christianity than Emil and Alexandra. Emil is not Catholic, nor is he devoted to the church for any reason other than its fairs, and its hold over two of his favorite people, Amédée and Marie. His sense of the spiritual realm emerges in his visions of Marie. As he and Marie talk in the fields, he sees her suddenly not as a person, but "like a troubled spirit, like some shadow out of the earth, clinging to him, and entreating him to give her peace" (148). In his bed he falls to imagining Marie looking at him with love. "In that dream he could lie for hours, as if in a trance. His spirit went out of his body and crossed the fields to Marie Shabata" (112). But perhaps his most intense spiritual journey is the one he takes to meet Marie under the white mulberry tree for the last time. Like a mythic hero, his soul seems to "soar like an eagle;" "it seemed to him his mare was flying" and "his

life poured itself out along the road before him as he road to the Shabata barn"(165-66). In this state, which began in church, he is described as being in a state of "rapture" from the music; not the sermon.

But it is in the experience of Alexandra that we find the novel's most blatantly non-Christian spiritual references. Her comments about the dead are a case in point. When she thinks of the dead, she sees spirits traveling the world, not residing in Heaven. After she gets caught in a rainstorm at the graveyard where her brother is buried, she tells Ivar she is glad she has gotten cold clear through "When you get so near the dead, they seem more real than the living....Ever since Emil died, I've suffered so when it rained. Now that I've been out in it with him, I shan't dread it" (182). Similarly, the dark night when Carl decides to leave her house to seek his fortune, the two look at the picture of her father. She says "I hope he does not see me now. I hope that he is among the old people of his blood and country, and that tidings do not reach him from the New World" (114). Her spiritual sense is never described as Christian. She connects, first and foremost, with the land, the Genius of the Divide. Outside her farm one evening early in the novel, the narrator tells us: "It fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security" (45). We never catch this glimpse of her soul attending church; it is only outdoors that this feeling comes to her. As she drives home with Emil from the river country, she overwhelmed with love for the land:

It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her.

Then the Genius of the Divide, the great free spirit which
breathes across it, must have bent lower than it had ever bent
to a human will before. (42)

This image is pointedly echoed in what is for me the most striking image in the novel: the personification of this spirit underlying the "great operations of nature;" the golden man who visits her in her dreams, lifts her, and carries her across the fields.

It was a man, certainly, who carried her, but he was like no man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter....She never saw him, but, with eyes closed, she could feel that he was yellow like the sunlight and there was a smell of ripe cornfields about him"(131)

When she is young, the vision makes her "angry," but as she grows older, he comes more often when she is tired to relieve her of her weariness. In his final appearance, she sees that he is not a vision at all, but quite real, and recognizes for the first time that he is "the mightiest of lovers." Significantly, this "fancy" comes to her most often on Sunday mornings.

But the contrasts between the spirits of all these characters come full circle. Alexandra and the Christian Ivar have a bond that people do not understand. Together, they successfully resist the Bergson brother's plan to put him in an asylum. She comes to him for advice more often than anyone else, she tells him. Like a hermit or a monk, Ivar holds fasts and long penances, and only Alexandra can break them by talking and listening to him. And when Alexandra is first struck by her overwhelming love for the Divide, she is humming a Swedish hymn (41).

4

Underlying these professions of various faiths are signs of a broader spirituality, more ephemeral, throughout the novel. This is the imaginative space Cather exudes in all her work. It is primarily affirmative in this novel. Though it involves a certain ambiguity in some of its characterizations as indifferent, it most prominently involves the landscape and it allows the main character to transcend her self and unite with it.

Though often writers unconsciously create understated signals of their beliefs, with Cather it is more difficult to say what was unconscious and what was conscious. Recall that in "The Novel Dmeubl" Cather intimates that she intends to give her reader subtle, unnamed sensations: "It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it...that gives high quality to the novel." As I read this novel, I see Cather pointing my attention in this way to a certain power behind the universe expressed in light, land and the nature of human beings.

Cather's use of light in her works is well-recognized (see for example Peck 14). Warm, golden light, as in Alexandra's dream of the golden man, appears throughout O Pioneers! and signals in different ways an intense life force in both people and the land. I associate it with the pulsing energy Marie trusts to be contained in the earth in winter, and the disappearing light "throbbing in the west" when Carl tells Alexandra his family is moving away. Lamplight reveals to Emil that his older sister is in

fact a beautiful woman (150). Light is particularly active in the early morning before Carl first observes Emil and Marie together:

Carl sat musing until the sun leaped above the prairie and in the grass about him all the small creatures of the day began to tune their tiny instruments. Birds and insects without number began to chirp, to twitter, to snap and whistle, to make all manner of fresh shrill noises. The pasture was flooded with light; every clump of ironweed and snow-on-the-mountain threw a long shadow, and the golden light seemed to be rippling through the curly grass like the tide racing in. (82)

Light is life's conductor at whose signal all creatures awake and sing from their souls. The reference to instruments is particularly noteworthy because, as I've mentioned, music had a powerful impact on Cather's creative process and she saw it as one of the ultimate expressions of intuitive thought (Lewis 48). The image of light as the force that brings out each creature's individual song connects with the Bergson ideal: each being is an emerging soul striving to express itself.

Light celebrates life, and particularly sunlight. The passionate Marie has little specks of it in her eyes: "points of yellow light danc[e] in her eyes" (85). When Emil finds Marie under the mulberry tree in their final moments alive, "Long fingers of light reached through the apple branches as though a net; the orchard was riddled and shot with gold; light was the reality, the trees were merely interferences that reflected and refracted light" (166). The light here not only sets the scene for the intense life that

occurs in love, but it also takes on a strangely entrapping but also protecting quality by being compared to a net. This is not the first time Cather compares light to a net—she does it also when Marie and Alexandra are sitting in the orchard together: "They made a pretty picture in the strong sunlight, the leafy pattern surrounding them like a net" (85). But because it is used in the scene when Emil and Marie consummate their illicit love, we know that the light is not always innocent or beneficent. As a net in this scene, the light urges Emil to express his passion—his intense life—and lie down with Marie under this tree. It seems to imply that the light approves of the match, and will prevent them from falling. The light cannot, then, be a Christian light, for in Christianity this would be such a serious sin, that Ivar believes Emil went to hell for it. Instead, the light expresses a spirituality that celebrates passion, beauty, hope, intuition and love without reference to traditional religion.

The land below the sun is less interested in human beings and their situations than the image of light in the novel. It is described instead as something with its own personality and "moods" (14) that operates sometimes in defiance of people, sometimes without any consideration of them at all. John Bergson calls the land an enigma, "like a horse that no one knows how to break and harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces" (14). A number of critics have said that the land, in fact, is the central character in this novel, citing Cather's own reference to it in the opening chapter: "The great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society" (10).

But she seems not so much to be referring to the land as an entity separate from human beings as one that contains a mysterious power over which humans have literally no control. Cather implies this power and prominence in the novel from the opening words:

One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away. A mist of fine snowflakes was curling and eddying about the cluster of low drab buildings huddled on the gray prairie, under a gray sky. The dwelling-houses were set about haphazard on the tough prairie sod; some of them looked as if they had been moved in overnight, and others as if they were straying off by themselves, headed straight for the open plain. None of them had any appearance of permanence, and the howling wind blew under them as well as over them. (3)

Not one human being appears in these opening sentences. Cather, trained as a journalist and thus an advocate for active voice, has closed the opening sentence in the passive voice, as though to give power to an unnamed source. Behind the sentence lies the question: "Who or what is trying to blow Hanover away?" This is the Genius of the Divide, not the land itself, but a power that lies underneath it.

The land's personality evolves from wildness to fruitfulness as the novel progresses, but not from anything humans do with it. It becomes happier, more joyous. When Carl comes back to the Bergson farm after 16 years, the land is much more productive. Alexandra tells Carl that it "had

its little joke," but then it "woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still" (74). This description implies that the land contained this richness all the time, it was just asleep—in a wild dream state of sorts from which it emerged into farmland. It is not humans who have had this effect on the land; it is the seasons. Cather enacts the union of the two in a beautiful passage in the first pages of section two:

There is something frank and joyous and young in the open face of the country. It gives itself ungrudgingly to the moods of the season holding nothing back. Like the plains of Lombardy, it seems to rise a little to meet the sun. The air and the earth are curiously mated and intermingled, as if the one were the breath of the other. (50)

Cather gives no reason for this transformation—she implies only that humans were lucky to be on the prairie when it happened. A pioneer has to live through the good times and the bad times, imagining that land can be fruitful when the time is right. "A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves," the narrator tells us (32). Perhaps this is because the pioneer has no control over how the elements will decide to behave.

The personality of the land, its evolution over time and its alteration with its union with the air, is echoed in the novel's characters, creating an underlying sense of connection between the land and human beings. Like the land, characters are portrayed as having personalities in them that emerge more fully through time, and in relationships. This

does not imply that Cather is supporting a Christian ideal that all people have a kernel of good within them. Quite the contrary, Cather suggests that people have only a kernel of themselves within them— whether annoying, helpful, difficult, or odd— that grows stronger as they age, and alters in relationships. Twice the narrator tells us that as they grow older, Oscar and Lewis only become more and more like themselves. They are not described as particularly likable people—Oscar is "as indolent of mind as he was unsparing of body" and Lou "fussy and flighty" (36). But they are described in a positive light when they come together. "The two boys balanced each other, and they pulled well together. They had been good friends since they were children. One seldom went anywhere, even to town, without the other" (36). As they become older and marry, they lose the balance that they provided each other, and it has a negative effect. Carl admits to Alexandra that he "liked the old Oscar and Lou better", just as he liked the old, wilder version of the land (75). Though they quibbled with Alexandra's ideas beforehand, it is after the brothers are married that they become estranged from their sister.

Cather also demonstrates the concept of emerging souls in the preview we get of Emil's and Marie's personalities in chapter one. Emil exhibits a tendency to get his own way, and to get into trouble for it. Against prudence, Alexandra lets Emil take his kitten to town in a snowstorm, and it ends up on top of a telegraph pole. Similarly, Marie, playing with Emil and flirting with the men in the store, shows that she is someone who charms men and women alike. She emerges into a woman who has increasingly passionate effects on men, and that passion in both

Emil and her husband Frank leads to her death. Towards the close of the book, Carl tells Alexandra "There are women who spread ruin around them through no fault of theirs, just by being too beautiful, too full of life and love. They can't help it. People come to them as people go to a fire in winter. I used to feel that in her when she was a little girl" (197).

These three elements of light, land and inner, evolving personalities I see underlying the novel and creating its deep sense of universal connection and mystery. And significantly, they are joined in Alexandra. This begins from the first moment we see her. She is the first image associated with light in the novel, which begins with a passage describing the gray landscape. Emil sees his sister as a "ray of hope" (4) and Alexandra is said to have "a shining mass of hair" —shining not in the sun (it is snowing) but because of its "reddish-yellow" color (5-6)—the color both of fertile earth and the sun. This association is reinforced at the close of this chapter, after Carl lights Alexandra's lantern for the long ride home through the snowstorm:

The rattle of her wagon was lost in the howling of the wind,
but her lantern, held firmly between her feet, made a moving
point of light along the highway, going deeper and deeper
into the dark country. (12)

Light, country and her strong personality merge in this image of her sturdy feet stabilizing the light, and descending into the country like a goddess of the earth and light.

When we see her in section two, sixteen years later, she has reaped the benefits of the earth by letting it express itself. This has resulted in her

creation of "one of the richest farms on the Divide."¹ Cather reinforces Alexandra's affinity for the earth in the next paragraph: "You feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best" (54). In addition, Alexandra's appearance and central personality reflect all colors and qualities associated with light. Her personality is the same when she was young, but it has evolved more, and therefore is more pronounced. She is described as "sunnier and more vigorous" than when she was a girl, but otherwise with the same "clear eyes" and "fiery" hair. She is tanned in the summer, but where she is not tanned her skin has "such smoothness and whiteness as none but Swedish women ever possess" (55). Alexandra, then, embodies the most powerful forces in the novel in a fluid trinity. Her central, evolving personality is the light and the earth.

Images throughout the novel tell us that these forces of the earth and the sky are balanced in Alexandra. She is associated with streams, a symbol of rain and snow from the sky that is shaped by the earth. Early on the Bergson Homestead is described as adjacent to Norway Creek, "a shallow, muddy stream that sometimes flowed, and sometimes stood still at the bottom of a winding ravine" (13). This is not the constantly flowing river of the river country, which she rejected for the high country; it is a stream that sometimes sinks into the earth, sometimes flows above it. The image re-emerges in a description of Alexandra's personal life, which is "like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there, at intervals months apart, and then sank again to flow on under her own fields" (129). Alexandra's subconscious river is associated with Norway

Creek in this echo. By bringing this image back in the heart of Alexandra herself, Cather imbeds in her text an implication of Alexandra's deep connection to the land, deeper than the creek itself. Another image in the same chapter seals this implication. One of her happiest memories, the narrator tells us, is from watching a duck in a deep pool of the river with Emil one morning.

A single wild duck was swimming and diving and preening her feathers, disporting herself very happily in the flicking light and shade...Years afterward she thought of the duck as still there, swimming and diving all by herself in the sunlight, a kind of enchanted bird that did not know age or change.

The duck seems a narcissistic vision— Alexandra's subconscious has just been described in the same way, as swimming atop and diving below like a river. She also here connected to the fertile land, remembering times when she has been near the earth and "felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination in the soil" (129).

Alexandra gradually becomes more like the earth and sky than like a human being. She is open, like the country—she does not hide the fact that she wants to give her niece a piano, although her sister-in-law has asked her not to say anything about it. She is unconcerned with what people "say" about her affairs, whether that be keeping Ivar on her homestead, or marrying Carl who is younger and less wealthy than she. Carl tells her that it is her fate to live among small men, bringing to the reader's mind the large golden spirit man in Alexandra's dreams.

Although other people in the novel are described as unable to make a mark on the land, she, with the help of Ivar, is able to do so—as mentioned above, she "expresses herself ... in the soil" (54). Pioneers must have imagination, the narrator tells us, but by the fourth section in the novel, the narrator also tells us that Alexandra doesn't have much imagination (129). She is not really interesting to other people: "Her mind was like a white book, with clear writing about weather and beasts and growing things. Not many people would have cared to read it; only a happy few" (130). By the close of the novel, Alexandra has not only made her mark on the elements, but has merged with them, in the same way that the land merged with the seasons. In the opening scene, she and her lantern became enshrouded by the dark land. But in the closing scene, she becomes both light and earth. "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" Here the elements have merged in a fertile union—Alexandra, light and the land become one dynamic, spiritual being.

Alexandra's emergence into light and land wraps Cather's work in to an affirmation of the interconnection between powerful underlying forces that connect all life—light, land and evolution. The connection is not necessarily always bright, and ultimately the power of light and land dominate over anything any human can do. "We come and go, but the land is always here" Alexandra tells us. "And the people who love and understand it are the people who own it—but only for a while" (198).

If this early novel of Cather's is infused with this spiritual vision, is it evocative or rhetorically so? That is, does Cather merely evoke in us questions about the ultimate powers in the universe and the way that humans should behave within it, or is she giving her readers answers to those ultimate questions?

For this consideration, the growing critical school exploring Cather's modernism is particularly useful. Recall that Gerber points to Cather's belief in "juxtaposition" as a method of achieving desired effects in the novel—as in a painting when a blue and yellow vase are juxtaposed to create an impression of green. Significantly, juxtaposition is also the method that Jeremy Smith attributes to the most religiously evocative works. Through juxtaposition, a writer, like Faulkner, "evokes the concrete question of meaning and origin of a world which could contain ... radical contrasts. "Analyzing the opening section of O Pioneers! with attention to juxtaposition, then, we can see that not only does the work feel spiritually evocative—lead the reader to wonder about life's meanings and interconnections—but that Cather set up the opening of her novel to give an evocative sense of sacred mystery.

The section contains five chapters. As a whole, they are layered like an onion—the outer skin, chapters one and five, describes the land; the inner skin, chapters two and four, human frailty, death and separation; and at the heart, in chapter three, lies Ivar, the Russian saint. The section thus points to the central articulation of the sacred that is implied throughout. The chapters that precede it are colder, set in winter and filled

with dark images. After Ivar has shown that the land brings out his deep religiosity, the subsequent chapters continue to contain darkness, but they are also infused by light; they are set in autumn, and contain more echoes of love and human connection to one another, and the land.

The first and last chapters most intensely imply omnipotent mystery. A powerful, unnamed force is introduced, as we have seen, in the opening pages. Alexandra descends with her light "deeper and deeper into the dark country" as though descending into the underworld, to the heart of this force. In the fifth chapter, Alexandra affirms her love for this land, asserts that they must have "faith" in it, and the "great, free spirit" bends down to her, as if responding the devotion she has promised. The second and fourth chapters focus on human tragedy, and connection. John Bergson lies dying, and he thinks of human failure in his family—his failures farming; his father's bad marriage at the end of his life; his sons' failure to be as strong and smart as his daughter; his wife's failure to adapt to her new home. In the fourth chapter we learn that Carl's family has failed, and also learn more of the weaknesses in Lou and Oscar. But connection between human beings is introduced here as a source of light—mutual understanding between the Bergson brothers brings them balance, and has brought friendship and aid to Alexandra and Carl. Ivar, the spiritual/earthly/mysterious adviser stands as a central figure helping to interpret the mystery, and devise strategies for living in harmony with its wild moods.

Cather has cleverly used this opening section to imply to the reader intermingling of spiritual elements thus setting a tone, a backdrop of all-

encompassing spirituality for the rest of the novel. In this way the work is evocative.

However, I would venture that the work is not merely evocative, but also rhetorical. Evocative works give us an intuitive perception of mystery, and raise questions about the value of life—is it "ultimately good, evil or even indifferent"? (Smith 69). Rhetorical works offer an answer to the questions that arise from mystery; they offer "an expression of commitment involving both trust and loyalty" (74). I sense that Cather is offering us an answer.

It expresses itself in two ways. One is the upward ascent of the tone of the first section after we encounter Ivar. She seems to say to us that spiritual commitment based in an affiliation with the land will bring out love, and love will help light some of life's darkness. But further, through Alexandra and the story's narrator, Cather offers a kind of spiritual guidance, an answer to questions about the human condition, and how to operate in a world so much more powerful than human beings. Evocative questions arise throughout the novel about the value and meaning of human life with constant exposure to the overwhelming Nebraska landscape, indifferent to the humans settling it. Carl notes to Alexandra that there are only two or three human stories that keep telling themselves over and over. But Cather also offers an answer: the meaning of human life resides in the soul's quest to express itself. Both narrator and Alexandra comment repeatedly that characters in the novel become more like themselves, and can't help who they are; Lou and Oscar, Marie, Carl all emerge into people they were born to become. Through her

actions, Alexandra models for us the best ways to allow this destiny to take its course. She urges us to ignore what people say about us and shows us what we should do instead; rely on our intuition, and express ourselves through it. Here, then, is Cather promoting a spiritual faith in intuition, which she believed from the time she was young, and which she found articulated in Bergson's writings.

Reading O Pioneers! I am drawn into this spiritual guidance not only through empathy for characters and their emotions, but through the narrator's direct reference to me. I am invited directly to visit Alexandra's farm through Cather's repeated use of the second person:

"Anyone thereabouts would have told you that this was one of the richest farms on the Divide, and that the farmer was a woman, Alexandra Bergson.

If you go up the hill and enter Alexandra's big house, you will find that it is curiously unfinished and uneven in comfort. One room is papered, carpeted, over-furnished; the next is almost bare....

When you go out of the house into the flower garden there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds, planted with scrub willows to give shade to the cattle in fly-time. (54)

From the point of this personal invitation, time in the novel remains in the immediate past. Thus you never leave this feeling that you are

visiting the Bergson homestead, and that in order to recreate the same harmony you found there when you first arrived, you would do well to follow the model set for you by Alexandra, a model of openness, kindness, personal expression, and devotion to the Genius of the Divide.

On that note, however, the event that closes O Pioneers! is strangely unsettling: Alexandra and Carl have agreed to marry. Alexandra has evolved into a kind of goddess of the earth, and has been held up as a model for living according to intuition, devoting oneself to one's art, but she will now relinquish her independence and devote herself to a marriage. Surprisingly, she asks Carl "You would never ask me to go away for good, would you?" as though she might consider it if he did ask her. Deference to Carl seems contradictory to Alexandra's character as we have come to know her. Nor does Cather paint this union as a glorious occasion—we don't see Carl asking nor Alexandra accepting, nor does the reader feel as though Alexandra is rejoicing. Offering a deliberate contrast, Carl says in the presence of Emil and Marie, one felt "an acceleration of life." That relationship was clearly different from the one between him and Alexandra. He has told her it is her fate to live among small men, and she acknowledges in this closing scene that her dream of the golden man is unrelated to this reality of marrying Carl. Instead, they have resolved that living alone is a difficult option in life, and so will marry. Marriage will be Alexandra's attempt to alleviate loneliness—it does not represent a happy ending, nor is it a holy sacrament. She appears to be giving in to marriage like one gives in to the fact of death, or life's melancholy. The closing sentence of the book does not celebrate Alexandra's union Carl; it

celebrates her union with the light and the land. But it will become increasingly difficult for Cather to treat relationships with so little regard, as we shall see in The Professor's House.

Note:

1. A number of critics have written about the possibility that in this novel, Cather implies that because Alexandra is a woman, she was better able to understand how to farm the land than her father. The theory goes that the land comes to life under her management because she adopts a harmonious, nurturing philosophy of farming whereas her father and his peers tried to fight, or conquer the land. Though I disagree with him that Alexandra has "masculine" qualities that help to render this theory unfounded, Neil Gustafson writes convincingly that there is no evidence for this implication in the text: John Bergson remains an important figure for Alexandra throughout the novel, and she sees herself as continuing his dream of farming the land, not changing it. Also, as I am proposing in this chapter, I think that Cather meant for the land to be literally beyond human control, whether it was feeling fertile or not. Although I think Alexandra gradually becomes a figure more powerful than other human beings, the land is still more powerful than she. Gustafson's article, published in the summer of 1995, is the most recent article I've found on the issue.

CHAPTER THREE

Particularly on the heels of reading O Pioneers!, I find The Professor's House deeply unsettling. Lee says the book is not depressing to her (252) because the Professor's crisis is not her central focus as a reader. But as many biographers have commented, Cather used this novel to write through her own mid-life crisis. Cather herself called it "nasty" and "grim," and was surprised to learn it was selling well (Woodress 369). Examining the book as an expression of Cather's spirituality reveals a deeply disturbed writer.

1

The melancholy tone surrounding Alexandra's human union with Carl takes over in The Professor's House. In this work, Professor Godfrey St. Peter has been married since he was young. He has lost interest in his family, and is particularly troubled by their materialism. Only in moments when he is alone believing he will die soon, and when his pupil Tom Outland is on the Mesa—difficult times themselves—do we get relief from the tone, and come out again into the clear air and find intuitive souls. By the end of the book, the Professor has returned to melancholy, and has realized that in order to live among others, he must learn to live "without delight." As much as O Pioneers! represents spiritual celebration, The Professor's House represents spiritual crisis.

Cather wrote The Professor's House eleven years after her creative explosion when she first visited the southwest, and read Henri Bergson.

She sealed her belief then that putting faith in intuition leads to superior creativity and connection with universal mystery. Her Bergson-inspired method of relying on her intuition and memory became her *modus operandi*, and lead her to success. In 1922, she won the Pulitzer Prize for One of Ours. But, as she was fond of saying, "The road is all, the end is nothing": success was not the same as striving towards it, and she was disillusioned by the money and the fame that she had won (Woodress 335). In addition, she had suffered personal tragedy. Isabelle McClung had been Cather's life love, but in 1916 she decided to marry Jan Hambourg. The union plummeted Cather into a deep depression. She emerged from it, but in 1923, she went to visit the couple in their new home in France, where they had set up a room for her. They hoped she would live with them, but she found she could not focus, and left. O'Brien says it was during this visit that she most profoundly experienced the loss of Isabelle (240). The Professor's House began as she was headed home from visit (Stout 88-89). Biographers refer to this time in Cather's life as a period of deep emotional turmoil, and speculate whether this is what she refers to in 1937, in her collection of essays "Not Under Forty", when she says this is the time when "the world broke in two" (Woodress 335).

The prevailing tone in this novel is gloomy and anxious, a stark contrast to O Pioneers!. It has three sections. The first, "The Family," is the longest and outlines St. Peter's dissatisfaction with the state of his life. His wife has built a new house with money he won for his life's work, Spanish Adventurers in North America, but he is reluctant to leave the old house. He recalls with longing the sounds of his wife and daughters

beneath him as he wrote in his study, a sewing room on the third floor. His children are married, his wife separated from him in spirit, and his dearest friend and student, Tom Outland, is dead. When his family leaves for the summer, the Professor moves back to his old house and begins to annotate Tom's diary. The book's middle section tells the story of Outland and his friend Roddy Blake, who lived in New Mexico and discovered an ancient Cliff City in a mesa. Tom goes to Washington D. C. to try, unsuccessfully, to interest archeologists in their discovery, and Roddy sells their artifacts to a German collector while he is gone. They fight on Tom's return, Roddy leaves, and after a time on the mesa alone, Tom arrives at the Professor's house. The final section is short, tells of St. Peter intuiting his approaching death, his panic over his family's immanent return, and his near suicide.

Of all her works, The Professor's House has most captured critics' attention in the last twenty years. Its odd structure and multifaceted themes at first promoted questions about its quality as a novel. But though initial reviews were mixed, it is now considered one of her most accomplished works (Lee, O'Brien, Woodress, etc.). Cather said she meant to make this section, the "Tom Outland Story," like an open window in a Dutch painting to "let in the fresh air off the Blue Mesa" (Bohlke 193).

A major focus of critics' speculation has been the novel's saturation in autobiographical material. They point out the many similarities between Cather and the Professor. St. Peter is about the same age as Cather, he loves to cook gourmet food, is captivated by the southwest, and he writes in an innovative style which recently won him a major prize. Like

the Professor, Cather was attached to a sewing room in the McClung's house in Pittsburgh, where she wrote several books. The house was sold in 1917. At the same time, however, Cather inserts a number of elements that can be construed as critical of the Professor—he is misogynistic, and has been happy to be quite separated from his family through the years. This has lead some to suggest that this work is a fluid, inconclusive study in Cather's dual self-love and self-hatred. Others propose that the book is about a love triangle created by the Professor's love for Lillian and then Tom, and stands as a bitter comment on the mess that resulted from Cather's relationship with Isabelle, and Isabelle's subsequent marriage. (Stout 93; Bell 122, for example)

Critics also explore social issues Cather seems to be addressing in the novel. A number of feminist critics say Cather is using St. Peter to show follies in men. Jean Schwind argues that St. Peter consistently misreads the women in his family, and Alice Bell points to literary and historical references in the novel that could indicate Cather's sympathies lie more with St. Peter's wife and daughters than with St. Peter. Stephen L. Tanner contends instead that narrow focus on gender relations in the novel blinds readers to the more important issues Cather addresses: the fear of old age, the tension between solitude and society, the relationship between present and past. In that same vein, most recently critics have explored visions of history in the novel. Though as a young woman, Cather was devoted to science and a progressive view of history, they point out that in The Professor's House, she glorifies the pre-science age, and refuses to confront the confusions brought on with World War I (e.g. Wilson and Stouck).

To be sure, all these issues emerge from this "novel of confusion" as Wagenknecht calls it. But I am struck by their sheer diversity, and am reminded of the many literary categories that critics have assigned to O Pioneers!. Particularly when they attribute to Cather specific philosophical stances on gender relations, history or science, critics seem to me to be looking only at the forest's trees. They propose that her aim is to promote certain ideas, a practice that would have gone against Cather's holistic, intuitive conception of art.

Recall that Cather believed that art's purpose was to reflect life and the mystery behind it, not promote certain social views. She criticized her friend Elizabeth Sergeant for writing an article on tenement conditions, and tended to turn conversations with the socially conscious writer to literary themes. (Woodress, "Cather and her Friends" 90-92). Cather did choose details carefully to make sure they each contributed to the story in some way. But they flowed from her intuitive sense of how to contribute to a mood (Cather on Writing 10), not from a careful map. For her, as for Bergson, the purpose of art was to present life's truths, not to dissect them, categorize them and present them in a logical way. This is the method she discovered in writing O Pioneers!, and it did not change with the years. In his exploration of Bergson's effect on Cather, Tom Quirk writes:

Her mature art proceeded from the same imaginative vision she had forged in the years before the Great War, and though she acquired a certain personal bitterness and regret, her aesthetic stance and its philosophical foundation, if not its accompanying optimism, remained pretty much in tact. (164)

When writing, Cather rejected her intellect, relying on her intuition to allow her novels to take shape. Tom voices this underlying idea well when he explains why he didn't retrieve his catalogue of the Cliff City's artifacts: "I didn't want to go back and unravel things step by step. Perhaps I was afraid that I would lose the whole in the parts" (227-8).

I think Alice Bell is probably closer to the mark of the underlying theme of The Professor's House when she likens Cather's vision in this novel to her articulation of Katherine Mansfield's vision: "'One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking them, and half the time pulling away from them'" (123).

Relationships become the focus of this novel, as they were not in Q Pioneers!. Even more importantly, I think, is the concept of flux that Bell credits Cather with trying to capture in this novel.

In The Professor's House, Cather seems to say that change—accelerated by relationships money and unforeseen events—does not always go in the direction of intuition, and sometimes intuition draws a person in more than one direction. I think that this realization devastated Cather's faith in an underlying, affirming mystery to the universe, and its connection to intuition. She still believed, it seems, in a power of the universe, but that power cannot help one through the trials of life.

Examining the circumstances of American society at the time of the novel's publication, and Cather's reaction to them, sheds some light on what the writer was going through as she produced this novel. Cather's growing skepticism about life stemmed not only from personal hardships,

but from the sweeping changes emerging in society after World War I. For the western world, which saw history as the story of God's creatures learning increasingly civilized behavior, the Great War was cataclysmic. Historians declared the entire conflict was "utterly incapable of rational explanation" (Wilson 71). The profits of capitalism in the years that followed lead to economic prosperity for a new class of Americans, and developed into a driving materialism that set the tone for the rest of the century. Paul Johnson sets the opening of his survey of modern times in May 1919, after the war had ended. Citing Nietzsche, he says that because of the horror of the war, God was dead, and the history of the modern world can be described as an attempt to fill the void left by "the collapse of religious impulse" (48).

Cather, who rejected the values of this emerging era, turned to the church. In December 1922, together with her parents, she was baptized into the Red Cloud Episcopal Church. This was not the Baptist church of her heritage, but it was an historical church, full of ritual and reference to the past. Her interest seems to have been more than passing: she sent regular checks to the altar guild, and corresponded for the rest of her life with the Bishop of Red Cloud (Lee 240). I think this conversion is indicative not only of the nature of her crisis, but of the change in tone that comes with her subsequent novels. She was asking significant questions about the nature of life and its purpose, and gradually—maybe even superficially at first—she turned to religion for solace.

Her conversion did not answer her questions immediately. She seems not to associate her conversion to the church with joy or certitude.

On the subject of her spiritual questioning, Woodress asserts, "In her search for a spiritual mooring she also came to think, as she has Myra Henshawe say in My Mortal Enemy, that 'in religion, seeking is finding'" (338). Lee points out that in The Professor's House, "the religious material, though a far cry from her earlier robust satires on Christian hypocrisy, was used equivocally and indirectly." I think the anxiety in The Professor's House is deeply rooted in an underlying sense of spiritual crisis, and the continuing questioning that it brought her.

That crisis was all the more profound because of her former faith that devotion to intuition would lead to a steady evolution of the soul and a joyful connection with the spiritual current underlying the land and life. That faith was now crushed. She had discovered that souls have more than one direction they want to go, and one cannot go in all of them. Henry S. Canby was right on the mark when he reviewed the novel for the "Saturday Review of Literature", when he explained why this was the most interesting of all Cather's novel: "the soul, after all, is the greatest subject for art" (Woodress 337).

2

In O Pioneers! Cather expressed faith in an underlying, vibrant and guiding mystery to life, symbolized in light and land, and reflected in evolving souls. Even in scenes of death, the novel emits a sense of exuberance. The Professor's House projects a sense of deep dislocation and eerie inconclusiveness. In looking at the work for its spiritual expression, the first quality I notice in The Professor's House is the hectic atmosphere

in the first, largest section. It is literally filled with bits and pieces connected to the modern world. Taken together, these particulars feel like a game of Trivial Pursuit: Tom Outland's vacuum principle that revolutionized aviation, consequences of State Legislature's funding power, Louie's brother's silk trade in China, Dr. Crane's measurements of space, Augusta's failed investment in the Kinkoo Copper Company, the Norwegian architect, trained in Paris, who will design the Marsellus' house. They send the reader's mind to various parts of the world, and various realms of life. But the overall effect is to form a din around the Professor's life. Even bits of Christian doctrine are sprinkled in when the Professor asks Augusta about the obscure days in the Catholic calendar—All Soul's Day, Ember Day, and Maundy Thursday.¹ The dissonant assembly of pieces then stands as a stark contrast to the resonant detail that follows as we come to Tom's mesa: yucca-fiber mats, a ladder of pine-trunks spliced together, the spring that welled up out of rock into a stone basin.

The points in the novel when the characters have a sense of connection, reverence or harmony with the earth or each other, are similarly scattered. They come only in pieces, and in recollections: Godfrey's vision of his history, his time in Paris and with Tom; the St. Peters' lost love, Tom's time near and on the Mesa with Roddy and Henry; the Professor's life as a boy. A sustained sense of an underlying, transcendent mystery in the universe does not occur until the Tom Outland Story, more than half-way through the novel, and then again when we come back to the Professor in the final, short section. I find it

particularly telling that Cather did not write the novel all at once. She began the middle section first. Its impetus was in an unpublished work she started after her 1916 trip to New Mexico, "The Blue Mesa." She turned it into The Tom Outland story in 1922, but it remained in her portfolio (Woodress 284, 323). In it resides the spiritually affirmative tone of O Pioneers!. But here, this sense is not stable, and the novel presses upon us not to have illusions that they can continue: they have either passed into memory, or they occur in temporary states—Tom is dead, the Professor is only alone for the summer. The spirituality in Alexandra Bergson's life intersected Christianity with the Divide and expressed her connection to an underlying power; the spirituality in Godfrey St. Peter's life is fleeting and skewed—no one part drifts easily into the other.

Cather's depiction of institutionalized religion in the novel is the first clue to the nature of its confused sense of the spirit. Christianity is present throughout the novel, but significantly, unlike the community in O Pioneers!, St. Peter's community has no common bond in a church. It never even shows us a church. We only hear the church bells from St. Peter's study's window. The St. Peters, despite their apostolic name, do not attend church. On Sunday mornings, Godfrey—who is, apparently, God-free—eats breakfast with his wife, an obligation he despairs of in the third chapter. Several times, including once on Christmas, he crosses paths with Augusta as she is coming from Mass.

A devout German Catholic, Augusta serves as the novel's connection to the church, which the Professor refers to as "Augusta's Church" (85; 253). Quietly, she has been trying to convert St. Peter back to

Catholicism, the religion of his father. She is the spokesperson and weathervane for church opinion. She disapproves of tobacco and "mixed marriages" (83) between people of different Christian denominations, and repeats her priest's denunciation of false hair. When St. Peter insists on keeping two female sewing forms in his study, she looks down her nose as she does "when the dark sins were mentioned" (13). Her attention to the church does not always speak well for her character—her rigid adherence to puritanical ideals makes her seem severe, and sometimes foolish. Against Louie's advice, she invests, unsuccessfully, in a company recommended by many fellow church members. When she finds St. Peter nearly asphyxiated from the gas, she thinks it an "ugly accident" and doesn't want the neighbors to know about it. She enjoys St. Peter's risqué comments, although she does so only because "she was sure of his ultimate delicacy" (9). When people speak badly of St. Peter because he says "slighting things about the Church" (83), she tells them he doesn't mean what he says. As a regular church attendant, she is also linked to the only other "church-goer" in the book, the disagreeable Horace Langtry (43).

But she also exudes strength that increases as the novel progresses. She is physically strong, intending to carry her forms and sewing machine down three flights of stairs herself. She is a strong seamstress—the Professor notes, "No light French touch about Augusta; when she sewed on a bow, it stayed there" (14). Her strength becomes more complex in the novel's closing scene, when she has carried St. Peter into the clear air outside his study. She faces these situations squarely, like she faces death, and does not shy away from life's realities and darkness. St. Peter notes

"she wasn't afraid to say things that were heavily, drearily true, and though he used to wince under them, he hurried off with the feeling that they were good for him, that he didn't have to hear such sayings half often enough" (255-6). Her demeanor and her name bring to mind St.

Augustine, the Christian thinker who believed in the deep sinful nature of human beings, and the unlimited grace of God. She is similarly puritanical. But again, she is not a member of the church.

In contrast, the novel's official representative of the church, Father Duchene, Tom's teacher, is never shown operating in his churchly capacity, and is in fact quite worldly. We see the Belgian missionary devoted to intellectual pursuits, and to scholars. He read Caesar and Virgil with Tom, and taught him Spanish. Tom went to meet St. Peter because Father Duchene admired the Professor's scholarship; he said the Professor had written "the only thing with any truth in it ... about our country down there" (97). His sensibility is oriented not in the spirit but in the intellect. He senses that the Cliff City is "sacred," but not for its inherent aura—which Tom later calls "religious"—but only because its inhabitants overcame "mere brutality" (199). He makes no comment about the startling coincidence that the patterns on the vases are identical to ones that are found in Greece, by which Cather implies there are psychic connections between human beings. Anticipating the Cliff City will interest an archeologist from the Smithsonian, Duchene says "he will revive this civilization in a scholarly work" (199), implying that, as unschooled people, Roddy and Tom cannot revive it, and that a scholar's meticulous study can. Like Augusta, the priest also has a healing

influence, but it is not tied to the church. He joins Tom's doctor in advising Tom to live in the open for the summer after a bout with pneumonia, and spends time with Tom and Roddy when their older companion Henry is killed by a rattlesnake. But we do not see him saying religious rites over the dead. This is also a priest who inspires Tom to head to Europe to fight in World War I in August 1914, the very month war was declared. For a missionary, he is extraordinarily tied to modern, intellectual concerns.

The incongruous characters of Augusta and Duchene, as well as the absence of church, shows me Cather is feeling unsettled about religion. St. Peter, in fact, undermines institutionalized religion entirely in the book's fifth chapter. His wife and son-in-law Scott listen to a lecture he is giving his students. He argues that science has not really brought humanity very far, and that life was richer when religion was the primary focus. But his description of religion has an intensely scientific air to it.

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....And that's what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives. It makes us happy to surround our creature needs and bodily instinct with as much pomp and circumstance as possible. Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the

end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had. (55)

Though the content is fascinating (and often cited), notice the tone. It is laced with irony: "pomp and circumstance" "glittering angels" "makes us happy." St. Peter sounds like an atheist explaining away institutionalized religion as something that satisfies a human need, not something that helps humans connect with a mysterious, spiritual force.

It is not until we get out to the Mesa that Cather begins to link Christianity with something more than human need. She does this on one level with a third person, or former person: the unofficial Christian artifact, Mother Eve. Henry gives the name to a mummified woman the three men find in a room above the Cliff City. She is in a terrifying pose: "There was a great wound in her side, the ribs stuck out through the dried flesh. Her mouth was open as if she were screaming, and her face, through all those years, had kept a look of terrible agony" (192). It calls to mind a picture of the Expulsion from Eden, and by implication, Cather likens the Cliff City to Paradise.² But the reference comes only from the outsiders; they use it to help express their awe for the place. It is their language for the spirit, though there is nothing inherently Judeo-Christian about it.

Father Duchene has a strangely course reaction to the mummy and her name—he laughs, and proposes "slyly" that she may have been murdered by a husband who found her with a lover (201). But as Schwind cleverly detects, Cather clearly indicates that this is merely Duchene's interpretation—using qualifying words in his speech such as "I seem to smell," and "perhaps" (Schwind 76). In addition, such a story line would

be exactly parallel to the tragedy in O Pioneers! of Emil and Marie's deaths. We know that Cather did not portray that with any humour, and have no reason to suppose she would have changed her assessment of such a scenario. Tom, Roddy and Henry have a different, reverent feeling about Eve. After Henry names her, they wrap her in a blanket, and carry her down gently to a room in the city itself. When Roddy sells her to the German collector, Tom tells him he would have rather "sold my own grandmother" or "any living woman" than Eve (221). But the most interesting thing about this woman is that she actively expresses her connection to the Mesa. As the collector is carting all his purchases out of the mesa, Eve and the mule carrying her fall into Black Canyon. Roddy speaks of the incident as though this were no coincidence. "She refused to leave us" he says (223). Though Roddy is speaking ironically, the event is inexplicable, and it stands out. Cather recounts it twice, once in a reference by the mule's owner, and then with Roddy's explanation. The effect is clear: there is a spirit to the place, Eve is connected to the spirit, and it works as an active power that protects the mesa and the people who lived there. A similar force seems to be at work when Henry is struck and killed by a rattlesnake—like the snake in Eden—as they attempt to enter a more hidden group of caverns and artifacts. Enough, the spirit seems to tell them.

By setting Tom's first encounter with the Cliff City on Christmas Eve, Cather gives an even more direct implication of the connections between Christianity's spiritual significance and the spirit of the Mesa.

When he sees the cliff city for the first time, he is at a loss to describe it, except to liken it to a sculpture.

Such silence and stillness and repose—immortal repose. That village sat looking down into the canyon with the calmness of eternity. The falling snow-flakes, sprinkling the piñons, gave it a special kind of solemnity. I can't describe it. (180)

Though he and Roddy had agreed to climb it together, Roddy does not rebuke Tom for going without him. "He seemed to realize from the first that this was a serious matter to me, and he accepted it in that way" (181). That night, Tom cannot sleep. "The moon was almost full, hanging directly over the mesa, which had never looked so solemn and silent to me before. I wondered how many Christmases had come and gone since that round tower was built" (182). This event is a convergence of spiritual elements—holy birth, transcending time, beauty, art, companionship, land.

3

In Tom Outland's country, Cather attempts to resurrect the affirmative spiritual sense that permeated her earlier novel. She works to create a space in which the land resonates and people can transcend themselves to reach a powerful, creative spiritual current. As in Alexandra's Great Divide, the land around the Blue Mesa has a powerful underlying mystery that connects life around it, and energizes the people there. The land seems almost alive, light empowers those who come

there, and people's souls evolve in the midst of the elements. Tom recognizes this feeling. He says:

I liked the winter range better than any place I'd ever been in. I never came out of the cabin door in the morning to go after water that I didn't feel fresh delight in our snug quarters and the river and the old mesa up there, with its top burning like a bonfire. (173)

Living in harmony with this land seems to make good things happen to Tom and Roddy. This is where the curiously charmed Henry comes to them. "Life was a holiday for Blake and me after we got old Henry," Tom says. He is almost more like a good spirit than a human being. Tom notes with fascination: "I used to wonder how anybody so innocent and defenseless had managed to get along at all, to keep alive for nearly seventy years in a hard a world as this" (176). The old man has a unique sense of transcendence, counting among his family members "four dead and two still-born" sitting around his mother's dinner table when he was young (184). Henry is similarly blessed, living on this land with the two young men, and finds that their adventure will also fulfill one of his life long dreams. He tells them, "In me youth it was me ambition to go to Egypt and see the tombs of the Pharaohs" (183).

However, we begin here to see an increasingly pronounced ambiguity in Cather's spiritual vision. Unlike the general underlying positive influence of the land and light on the Great Divide, here there seems to be two levels of existence: living near the mesa, and living on the mesa. Living in the winter range brings blessings into the makeshift

family's lives, and from this location they become more captivated by the mesa's mystery. Its shadow brings them a sense of the power of the land, and because of the mesa, Tom declares this land is "the sort of a place a man would like to stay in forever" (168). But like their cattle, Tom and Roddy are drawn to climb the mesa, to leave the harmony of their lives, cross the dangerous river and penetrate it. The cattle bolt towards the mesa because they smell the wild cattle already there, according Sitwell Company foreman. Tom and Roddy also seem drawn to the wild, forbidden quality of the mesa. Something about it calls to them, pulling them across the river.

On the mesa, powerful natural forces get their full, concentrated expression in the novel. And they are almost too powerful. While light and land were interwoven as important forces throughout O Pioneers!, in this novel their focus is here. Light hovers over this particular piece of the earth, illuminating it for the reader as the place of intensity.

It was light up there long before it was with us. When I got up at daybreak and went down to the river to get water, our camp would be cold and grey, but the mesa top would be red with sunrise, and all the slim cedars along the rocks would be gold—metallic like gold foil. Some mornings it would loom up above the dark river like a blazing volcanic mountain. It shortened our days, too, considerably. The sun got behind it early in the afternoon and then our camp would lie in its shadow. After a while the sunset colors

would begin to stream up from behind it. Then the mesa was like one great ink-block rock against a sky on fire.

The mesa seems virtually alive, unlike any other landscape in The Professor's House. When the sun is not on it, it looks to Tom like a "big beast lying down" (170). After a thunderstorm, the mesa went on sounding like a drum, and seemed itself to be muttering and making noises" (172).³ While the land around the mesa is beautiful, the cabin "snug," the mesa offers a more powerful, challenging connection to the forces of nature. This is not the land of the Great Divide, accessible by anyone with a horse, nor does it suggest majestic indifference to human beings. The mesa—a "beast"—demands respect: it is very difficult to get to, surrounded by sheer cliffs and a deep, rapid river. Walking carefully on the rocks that line the bottom of its canyon, Tom comments that one misstep might cripple you. It is a place of extremities.

With this concentration of a mysterious life-connecting force, the mesa brings out an intuitive connection with the land, and intense ambition. In other words, it helps people to rely on their intuition to evolve, an effect that recalls Bergson's philosophy. The mesa seems to have brought out these qualities in the people who lived here. Their art and architecture harmonize perfectly with their surroundings. The central element of the Cliff City is a tower that "held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something" (180). Tom hasn't seen one like it before in other ruins. "I felt that only a strong and aspiring people could have built it, and a people with a feeling for design" (182). After his description of the tower, I expect it to resemble a kind of church, a

religious gathering place. But Father Duchene's educated guess supposes it would have been used both for a lookout tower, and for astronomical observations. It seems in their reverence for the light and the land, they were able to grow with their potential as human beings. If art and religion are the same thing, as St. Peter professed earlier, then art-religion inspired the people who created this place, and harmonized their connection to the land and their ambitions.

Similarly, Tom and Roddy have ambitiously yearned to be the first modern men to climb the Mesa, but when Tom finally crosses the river that guards it and commences his ascent, he begins to sense it is more than another mountain to climb. The air, alone, contains a mysterious quality. "It made my mouth and nostrils smart like charged water, seemed to go to my head a little and produce a kind of exaltation. I kept telling myself that it was very different from the air on the other side of the river, though that was pure and uncontaminated enough"(180-181). When Roddy and Henry join him later, "We went about softly, tried not to disturb anything—even the silence" (186). They are having similar feelings to the cliff dwellers. They find no wool, implying that their predecessors did not kill the mountain sheep. They cannot bring themselves to kill one of these creatures either, says Tom: "there's something noble about him—he looks like a priest" (191). They sense that the place they have discovered is sacred. It is different from Washington, which inspires awe in Tom at first, but quickly becomes a disappointment. On the mesa, their awe only grows.

However, the three modern men are unable to unite the awe with the ambition inspired by the mesa. Their reverence gets lost in their quest

to catalogue the material they find. Roddy and Henry wanted to profit monetarily from their work; Tom wanted to profit in fame from it. It is only after all the chance for gain has been lost that Tom rediscovers his sense of awe for the mesa. The night he comes back from looking unsuccessfully for Roddy, he says

"...in a sense, that was the first night I was ever really on the mesa at all—the first night that all of me was there. This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole. It all came together in my understanding, as a series of experiments do when you begin to see where they are leading. Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness.... For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion. (226-227)

Tom's sense of awe is probably closer to the feeling that the cliff dwellers had for the mesa. With it, Tom is able to study intensely, to reach for his potential. He feels as though the sun were providing him direct energy, so powerful and overwhelming that he is glad for the darkness of night when it comes. But there is not really a sense of triumph here. This religious feeling that inspires in him intense self-evolution and ambition comes only when he is alone, after he has sent Roddy away. He tells the Professor forebodingly, "Anyone who requites faith and friendship as I did, will have to pay for it" (229). Somehow, not influenced by the modern world, the cliff-dwellers were able to bring together all the elements of being human: unity with the land, emerging human ambition and unity

with others. The modern men could not. When Tom was united with others, he was unable to experience the religious unity with the land because of modern forms of ambition: money, fame. Presently Tom leaves the mesa, and heads off to the modern, analytical world of college.

4

Something also happened to the cliff-dwellers. Over and over the modern visitors wonder what could have devastated this population. There are only four mummies here, so disease cannot explain it. Duchene and later an archeologist suppose that they must have had another camp off the mesa, and that another tribe may have killed them there. I think Cather suggests another possibility: they moved. Like the Professor's family, they became increasingly able, and decided to desert this beautiful place with so many memories to find a better place. Cather makes this suggestion by drawing parallels between this city and the deserted Professor's house. Both are empty, with signs of former life; active kitchens, baths, narrow stairways. Both the adobe walls and the walls of the Professor's study are the same, pale yellow color. The front courtyard encloses the village like the Professor's garden, and the sewing room/study in the Professor's house is sloped with a low ceiling, like the back court-yard of the cliff city that Tom describes as "exactly like the sloping roof of an attic" (186).

Of course there are also stark differences: The Professor's house is "almost as ugly as it is possible for a house to be," with ill-fitted doors and an unsatisfactory tub, and the cliff-dwellers' residence is breath taking,

beautifully designed and carefully, patiently perfected, refined. The spirit of this place is powerful and seem to have blessed the people who lived here. But there is no escaping the similarities between the states of the two places. Tellingly, the mummies in the village, hollow shells of human beings, that are much like Augusta's forms. Augusta's form, "the bust," and Mother Eve have similarities. The bust sounds like a deceptive mother who appears sympathetic and always disappoints—"Though this figure looked so ample and billowy (as if you might lay your head upon its deep breathing softness and rest safe forever), if you touched it you suffered a severe shock" (9). Eve, who is traditionally not called a mother but is named "mother" here, gives no such illusions of actually being motherly. In the Professor's modern world, appearances are much more deceptive than on the natural, spirited mesa. But both are empty female forms found in the highest rooms of these two residential structures. Later, in an echo of the parallel, the Outland and his companions find three more mummies in a cave, a man and two women, who could be shadows of the professor and the two forms in his attic. The mummies were apparently people who would not move, who would not change, who are sealed up in cement in their old residence. Although these people had lived with a deep connection to their land, and artistically revered the spirit of it, their lives, like the life of the Professor in his old house, could not be sustained.

More than suggesting the fate of the cliff-dwellers, though, I think the parallels show what emerges as the main issue that makes this novel so disconcerting: change. No matter how well they evolve, no matter how

good they have it, humans are driven to change, and its effects generally lead not to betterment but ruin.

Bergson's philosophy that so sparked Cather's interest suggested that human beings are constantly evolving into what their souls yearn to become. Attention to intuition, allowing a universal, spiritual force to inspire the intuition, drives that change. In O Pioneers!, Cather affirms this belief. Even if the soul's evolution leads to untimely death, people realize their soul's destiny, evolve up to their potential in a celebration of life. Now, eleven years later, Cather seems to have been thwarted from this optimistic vision. Yes, she seems to say, we do evolve and grow, but as we do so, we change. Relationships change us, events change us, achievement changes us. And changes of life are not necessarily positive. There is no guarantee that we will necessarily evolve into a greater and greater expression of our souls. Our souls can be left in the dust as we change.

This issue runs throughout the novel. The book opens with change, and with the Professor protesting it while bitterly resolving he must accept it. "St. Peter knew that he could not evade the unpleasant effects of change by tarrying among his autumn flowers. He must plunge in like a man, and get used to the feeling that under his work-room there was a dead, empty house" (6). St. Peter is obsessed by the unpleasant effects of change: he laments that he and his wife had children at all, that his daughters have grown up, that Tom grew up and became a scientist, that they have moved, that his wife is interested in their new expanded family, that his histories are done. Always we learn of sparks, evidence that characters

have had moments or periods in their lives when they were carefully, easily evolving, trusting their intuition and melding with their souls.

Then, always, we learn that some event, some relationship has changed that course. This is also part of human nature. We watch Katherine's life molded by her relationships. Cather laces descriptions of Katherine with the suggestion that she could have become an artist; that she had a particular ability to sense people's deep personalities, and represent them. She was "very clever at water-colour portrait sketches" and her teacher urged her to study at the Chicago Art Institute (52). But her relationships got in the way of this creative power. Jealous of her sister's engagement to Tom, Katherine became engaged to Scott, a choice that surprised St. Peter. "Scott had a usual sort of mind, and Kitty had flashes of something quite different. Her father thought a more interesting man would make her happier" (53). When she paints her mother, the image is harsh, and when she paints her sister, the image is false. These representations ring true to the reader, because they are how Cather has subtly described them herself. But as a daughter and younger sister, Katherine does not want to believe these images, decides she cannot paint, and does not continue developing her talent. Now her constitution is controlled by jealousy of her sister's wealth.

The St. Peters' marriage similarly began with intensity and then was changed for the worse by relationships. They were very much in love, as we discover primarily in the simple and powerful scene at the opera when the Professor muses they should have been shipwrecked together, and Lillian replies, to his astonishment, "How often I've thought that!" (78).

But when Tom arrived in their lives, he drove them apart in a way that cannot be remedied. There's a feeling of inevitability in the descriptions of these changes—Tom did nothing to purposefully come between the husband and wife. He was taken with Lillian, but she became jealous of the devotion he evoked in her husband.

Changes also come with money. Ironically, money arrives in people's hands as a reward for following intuition, as it did for St. Peter. The design for his history came to him in a moment of intense connection to an underlying mystery as he sails aboard a boat. Looking up at the Spanish Sierra Nevadas from the purple sea water, "the design of his book unfolded in the air above him, just as definitely as the mountain ranges themselves" (89). The design of his history brought him financial rewards, but with those rewards came the end of the history, the new house and the move. Similarly, Louie, an electrical engineer, took Tom's discovery, developed it and marketed it. His monetary rewards—which follow from a devotion to his own abilities, his own spark—cause horrid changes in people throughout the Professor's life. Katherine becomes jealous of her sister and Louie, Rosamond becomes selfish, The Cranes become insufferable. Behind Louie stands Tom, also an accomplished soul who followed his intuitive gift. Looking out on Hamilton after visiting Robert Crane, Professor imagines "If Outland were here tonight, he might say with Mark Antony, *My fortunes have corrupted honest men.*" Cather places a great deal of emphasis on the negative effect of money—resulting from innocent ambition, self-evolution. She piles one dreary scene upon another until the atmosphere becomes positively stifling, and

I am thrilled when the open window of the second section arrives and gives me relief.

But, as we have seen, even the success of those who were most connected to the land, most devoted to intuition and evolution, is fleeting and incomplete. Tom and his friends are ultimately unable to unite their various modes of being human; connecting with the undercurrents of the land, following intuition and ambition, developing relationships. Tom requites his friendship, then becomes caught up in his studies, frightened at his "heartlessness" (229) for being unconcerned about where his friend went. Although the open window gave me relief from Hamilton, it doesn't satisfy me either. Cather creates the effect particularly well by positioning this section so far in the past. I was glad to be transported to the mesa and the past, but it has offered me the only relief of the book, and all the while that I am reading it, I am increasingly aware that the story is an old one recounted only in the Professor's mind, told about a dead civilization by a man who is now dead. Increasingly also, I am anticipating the return to the present.

Curiously, then, I feel more of an affinity with the state of connection the Professor feels with land and soul directly after Tom's story. The Professor cannot suffer the presence of his family, and believes he is about to die, but in revisiting Tom's tale, he has suddenly learned to appreciate the undercurrent of life to the exclusion of anything else.

Light does not penetrate him. He is only interested in earth and woods and water. Wherever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places

were alike to him. He was not nearly so cultivated as Tom's old cliff-dwellers must have been —and yet he was terribly wise. He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. He seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father. He was earth, and would return to earth. (241)

He sounds to me like an accomplished Buddhist monk, who has realized that all is vanity, nothing on earth is ours. He is reconnected with his "original self," discovering the ability to day-dream, developing his imagination, and spending time "deeply recognizing" (241). These are qualities that come to people in youth and in old age. His state of mind is similar to Tom's time on the mesa—both men feel a sense of connection to the undercurrents of the earth, and a sense of disconnection with those close to them: Roddy; Lillian. But on the mesa, the youthful Tom was perfectly happy, able to ignore what he had done to Roddy. The Professor is not happy. He is aware of what he is doing—living with his original self to the exclusion of those who were close to him—and feels instead a "sad pleasure" (241). Many critics see this time as a symbol of the Professor's anti-social behavior, or of his myth that there exists an original self (e.g. Oehlschlaeger 85; Swift 311). But Cather has placed this period so soon after the distant story of Tom that I think she is holding it up for me as much more plausible, more attainable than Tom's spiritual state. I can connect with the Professor in the present tense much more than I could with Tom, who is dead, in the past. The Professor muses over what Tom

meant to him; he brought him a second youth. Sharing his thoughts with Tom "was to see old perspectives transformed by new effects of light" (234). It is as though the solar energy Tom absorbed radiated from the young man. But the Professor's account of the dead man also brings to mind what Scott said earlier in the book, that Tom becomes gradually less real to him, "a glittering idea" (94). I get the same impression. Juxtaposed to Tom's existence only in recollection, the Professor stands out as alive, present, possible.

However, the Professor's state of deeply recognizing is also impossible to retain. He cannot stay alive and alone. Like everything else in this book, it must change. His wife, son-in-law and daughter will return. He resists the notion of change again, and nearly kills himself in the process. Augusta, the church's devout member, saves him.

When he awakes from his brush with death, he finds himself glad to have been called back to the living, but not exuberant. Although Augusta has saved his life, he is not struck by that fact at all. He is merely glad she is with him. He feels "warm and relaxed" (256). Something about her—her representation of the "bloomless side of life" makes him feel an instinctive "obligation to her." She is not a glittering idea, but "real"(257). With her stability, "seasoned and sound and on the solid earth," she provides a way of getting through change—the change of the house, the changes that death brings, the changes of his daughters, as she sewed larger and larger clothes for them (256). With this companion, a devout member of the church, St. Peter thinks he is able to face the future. But Cather stops

there, very abruptly. We don't know how well this solution will work for him—we never get to see.

5

In a primarily rhetorical work, a writer offers answers to questions about the nature of existence and our purpose on earth, as Cather did in O Pioneers!. Clearly, however, her purpose has changed; in this novel, Cather primarily raises questions. Using the categories I have described to explore the nature of the spiritual quality in Cather's works, I find The Professor's House only intensely evocative, offering no satisfactory answers to the troubling questions it raises, from the value of companionship to the value of good intentions. The confidence and affirmative spiritual vision expressed from O Pioneers! has gone, and while space and place and transcendence play their own parts in this work, they dissolve finally into a pool of ambiguity. To frame this discussion, I want to revisit Jeremy Smith's discussion of evocative and rhetorical works. He proposes that evocative literary works attempt to give readers the experience of perceiving a mystery, a "great void" that underlies existence. When we perceive a mystery behind existence, we become curious about the "origin, destiny and meaning of the world and each individual" (64). An evocative literary work, then, gives us:

a perception of the world that involves a vague mysterious background of feeling, a turbulent unease that demands an answer to a question it can scarcely grasp. This unease is the

concrete experience behind the questions we pose about the meaning of existence. (Smith 64)

Unease is the perfect word to describe my feeling as I read and attempt to analyze The Professor's House. Each time I latch on to a new idea of solutions I think Cather is offering to its gloom, I find a contradictory point of view. Louie is an annoying character, for example, because he exhibits no quiet reserve, no sense of decorum. He seems to exploit Tom, he seems to treat Rosamond like a possession (though she also seems to encourage it), he talks about his money and his purchases, he calls another man's wife—his mother-in-law— "Dearest." But he has perhaps the kindest nature of anyone in the novel, and moves the Professor to call him "magnanimous and magnificent" (149). The Professor, on the other hand, exhibits a reserve that causes a pensive sadness in his wife. The reader has to agree with her when she tells him: "This reserve—it becomes in itself ostentatious, a vain-glorious vanity (37)." Cather offers no answer to this contrast.

The couples in the novel offer similarly unresolved contrasts. Kathleen found comfort in Scott; the Professor and Lillian no longer live in harmony; Louie loves Rosamond but treats her like a possession; Tom has died and left the Professor alone. I see different tragedies in each couple. Scott was a consolation to Kitty after her sister became engaged to Tom. The Professor says that Lillian had thirty of his best years, and during that time, their union was harmonious. Tom and the Professor brought out wonderful qualities in each other, but we see them at their peak only when they are each alone. Another confusion arise from the topic of

intuition. Cather expresses publicly and in her critical writing an ultimate faith in intuition, and in some instances, reiterates it here. The shape of the Professor's history unfolds for him intuitively. Science is not work for Tom—he intuitively understands it. But other characters also are intuitive, and it does not mean that they stay that way, nor does it lead them to success. Lillian was an intuitive woman when the Professor met her, and continued to be for a long time (38-39). She is now materialistic and petty. Louie seems completely unable to be intuitive, he cannot see when his actions are hurting other people, and yet he is quite successful. And, as I outlined above, the rewards that come to those who act intuitively have disastrous effects.

The questions are endless in this novel. Do men cause the troubles of women, or women, the troubles of men? What does companionship mean? Is solitude or companionship preferable? Is it worth it to follow one's intuitive gifts? What is the meaning of the heart's labors, if monetary rewards are destructive and happy memories do not console? Does there exist an "original self," can the original self bring happiness? I am struck by the immediate revelation in the novel that St. Peter looks better, the fewer clothes he is wearing, and that he loves Lake Michigan and loves to swim. This is rooted firmly in what he later calls his youthful, original self. But in the closing pages when he consciously discovers this part of himself, he is convinced that this original self has been lost; has not played any role in his adult personality. This is a baffling contradiction.

Particularly evocative for me are the Professor's attentions to people's hands. He notices Augusta's hands seem very stiff for someone who sews. He comments twice on how beautiful Lillian's hands are, and in their tragic moment of happy memories at the opera, he pulls one of her gloves through his fingers. One of the strongest visual details he remembers of Tom is his hand—he gazes at it as Tom holds in it two turquoise stones for his daughters. In the closing pages, he looks at his life as a succession of "catching at handholds" (240), and in this we note the clasping-to-others feature of the hand. But, as we see in the description of Augusta's hands, hands also allow us to create, to follow our intuitive abilities and produce art. Here I think of the Professor's lecture on art and religion again. With hands, we produce the art that brings us the only happiness life affords, the Professor says. "With the theologians came the cathedral-builders; the sculptors and glassworkers and painters. They might, without sacrilege, have changed the prayer a little and said, *Thy will be done in art, as it is in heaven*" (56) Art is the only way to express heaven on earth, Cather says. The hand, then, expresses the dual nature of human beings—reaching for others, and sculpting to express one's nature and unite with the great mystery. The frustration with trying to pin Cather down increases when I realize that she has also demonstrated that relationships—our handholds— also sculpt our lives.

These questions, I think, are at the root of the Professor's spiritual crisis. Smith says, "The aim of evocative works is to express the truth of the human condition, while the aim of rhetorical works is to express a religious commitment. The truth of the human condition involves a

sense of mystery that is religious in its dimension" (61). He quotes religious scholar H. Richard Niebuhr to describe this perceived mystery:

This reality, this nature of things, abides when all else passes. It is the source of all things and the end of all. It surrounds our life as the great abyss into which all things plunge and the great source whence they come. What it is we do not know save that it is and that it is the supreme reality with which we must reckon. (62).

Note how close Niebuhr's description of the mystery comes to the Professor's description of deeply recognizing: "He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths" (241). After meeting with so many questions, the Professor is unsure about the nature of existence, and finds himself facing this mystery, this void that underlies that existence. But, he discovers, this is not something he can interact with when he is with other people.

In a rhetorical move, Cather offers Augusta, the heart of the church as the solution to this dilemma of not being able to connect with the spiritual realm in the presence of others. Her Augustinian influence makes the Professor realize that life is not meant to be a perpetual feeling of connection, of joys and sorrows. "Augusta was like the taste of bitter herbs; she was the bloomless side of life that he had always run away from" (254). I am reminded here of Woolf's description of moments of non-being, the "cotton wool" that makes up the majority of our lives, as apart from the exceptional moments, the moments of being. Because she accepts these moments, and accepts darkness, Augusta becomes a healer

for St. Peter's spirit—not glorifying life but enforcing its weight, its hardships, its moments of non-being, and accepting them.

Cather has also set up the entire novel to reflect Augusta's—the church's—embrace. She appears within the first few pages, and establishes herself as an authority on morality and the church. She appears again exactly half-way through the first section, on Christmas Day, to help orient the Professor with liturgy on the Virgin Mary. Each Catholic reference in this scene is about Mary. Here Augusta moves from an expert on social morals to liturgical structure. The Professor asks about several terms that are used in "The Litany of the Blessed Virgin" (Dictionary of Mary, 161-3), and wonders if they are from "The Magnificat." Augusta is astounded at his lack of training, and tells him the Virgin "composed" the Magnificat. The Professor goes away inspired, and writes away the morning as though, echoing the words of Mary in The Magnificat, his soul also magnifies the Lord (83-84). Augusta finally appears at the end as a life-giver, and she is reading her unspecified, "much-worn religious book" (253).

But I am struck by Cather's choice to then end the novel so quickly. It feels false, somehow, like a last minute solution tacked on for convenience. The embrace of the church becomes not warm and heartfelt, but almost insincere, dutiful. I find even this semblance of rhetoric, offering the church as a reliable remedy to doubt, only evocative. Several critics find hope and affirmation of community in this final scene. Fritz Oehlschlaeger says the scene shows the Professor is no longer bound up with himself, but part of the interacting world. "For Cather, the life of hope is the journey of an incarnate being bound together with others in a

rich interplay of invocation and response" (86). Schwind goes so far as to call Augusta the novel's hero. But I have to agree with Matthew Wilson that the ending feels stoic and resigned. Augusta represents the good, the bad and the petty of institutionalized religion, and hardly brings the same kind of spirituality the Professor and Tom felt in solitude. In having her "save" the Professor, and thus evoke his sense of obligation, Cather seems to breathe a deep sigh, and turn to the church's structure to see her through a world of change, materialism, relationships. Her faith in an underlying exuberance—in "delight"—has crashed. The church offers a security that devotion to a vague spiritual realm celebrating life and the soul's evolution could not bring. The church has a calendar with various days for various duties, the priests repeat the same liturgy Mass after Mass. Cather's personal, individual spirituality has turned up short in crisis, and needs stability. With the next novel of this study, we will see that she becomes resigned to the need for the church as a community of faith.

Notes

1. St. Peter laments that without Augusta around, he will not remember certain holy days, including Ember Day. My step-father, an Episcopal priest, admitted to me that he didn't know about Ember Day until he had served in the clergy administration of a church. Ember Day occurs twice year, in the autumn and during Lent in the spring, and is used for clergy to pray for those who are seeking ordination. In Cather's day, before Vatican II, Catholic nuns used these days to pray for vocation—a calling to serve God—among Catholics.

2. I disagree here almost entirely with Jean Schwind, who also explores the significance of Mother Eve. She says Cather uses the name Eve to show the incompatibility between the Cliff City culture and the patriarchal Judeo-Christian religion. Knowing Cather's reverence for this tradition, now fully expressed in her commitment to the Episcopal church, I think this is highly unlikely. On the contrary, I think Cather is linking the spiritual feeling one gets in the southwest with that which one gets in church, or in contemplating religious stories.

3. Thunder reverberating in the mountains is a symbol of spiritual power in several cultures. It is one of the symbols of gods in the I Ching. Thunder also makes a great impression on Jonathan Edwards. In his "Personal Narrative," he writes that before he turned to God, thunder scared him; after he had accepted God into his heart, thunder thrilled him, made him "feel" God, and moved him to chant or sing.

CHAPTER FOUR

When I first read Death Comes for the Archbishop, I came to it directly from O Pioneers!. It felt restrained and aloof after Cather's enthusiasm from thirteen years before, when she had discovered her own artistic voice. But now, after experiencing the distress Cather expresses in The Professor's House, this later novel of 1927 feels like cool, clean water. It is less vital than the first book, but infinitely more tranquil than the second.

1

Cather began Death Comes for the Archbishop in the summer of 1925. She had finished The Professor's House early that year. She followed it that spring with the rapid production of My Mortal Enemy, which Woodress calls "the most bitter piece of fiction she ever wrote" (380). Then, having written these troubled works (Woodress says she used them to write through emotional turmoil), Cather went back to the southwest, and underwent a transformation. Whereas The Professor's House clearly comes from a woman in crisis, Death Comes for the Archbishop clearly comes from a woman of repose.

The idea for the book came to her when she was in Santa Fe with Lewis the summer of 1925. As a devoted student of the southwest and its history, she had looked for sources to tell her more about Jean Baptiste Lamy, the famous archbishop of New Mexico from 1850 to 1889. That summer, she found one on the bookshelf in the La Fonda Hotel: The Life

of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebent (1908) by William Howlett. Machebent was the a lifelong friend and companion of Lamy, and the book tells of both their lives. Woodress says that the discovery sparked in Cather an "inner explosion" like the one she experienced before she wrote O Pioneers! (393). "Cather stayed up most of the night reading the book, and by morning the design of Death Comes for the Archbishop was clearly in her mind" (393). She wanted to write a legend.¹ Her plan for the book, she said, was taken from a series of frescos by Puvis de Chavannes of the life of Ste. Geneviève. Clinton Keeler describes the series:

Progression is given by the movement of the viewer from panel to panel.

...There are flat tones, few contrasts and no vivid colors. The total effect of color in the painting is that of monotonous overlaid with a kind of pale light, which, metaphorically, seems to put a distance in time and space between the viewer and the objects viewed. (253)

Keeler's account of the paintings corresponds very well with the pace and the solemn, quiet tone of the novel. It is composed of a series of nine periods in the life of the bishop, Jean Marie Latour, and his companion Father Joseph Vaillant, that correspond generally with the historical Machebent and Lamy. The segmented structure is well-suited for depicting the lives of the Catholic priests who went to live in the early west. They were required to travel a great deal, and interact with all the cultures they encountered. Lee points out that the structure also reflects Cather's own experiences traveling, both in the southwest specifically, and throughout

the country and Europe, visiting her family, and searching for quiet places to write (264).

The prologue, a dinner party, shows church officials in Rome deciding to appoint Latour as Bishop of the newly annexed, rugged territory of New Mexico. The first chapter then opens with Latour on his way from Santa Fé to Old Mexico for documents to prove to doubting parishoners that he is indeed their new bishop. Throughout the narrative (as Cather preferred to refer to it), Cather drops us in the middle of action like this; rarely do we see the beginnings of a journey, nor do we hear the beginning, middle and end to any particular episode all at once. Each of the book's nine sections acquaints us with different aspects of Latour's life. We gradually learn about his lifelong friendship with Vaillant and see his quiet influence over his Diocese of Native Indian tribes, Mexicans, Americans. Latour appreciates their many customs and their versions of religion. He is formal, graceful, reserved and sensitive to aesthetics; Vaillant is rough, ugly, familiar and sensitive to good food. The friends part when Joseph becomes Vicar of Denver in the Rocky Mountains. In the end, although the Archbishop expected to retire in his native France, he finds that he has become more attached to the dry, cool mornings of New Mexico, where "he always awoke a young man" (272). He ends his days by the Santa Fé cathedral he commissioned to be built out of golden rock from a nearby hill.

Looking at its critical reception, I am first struck with the difference between the tone of writing about this novel and about The Professor's House. Critics of The Professor's House draw a vast and divergent range of

conclusions: some sound angry at Cather for having written about a man who is so disengaged from the women in his life, some patronize the Professor himself, and pontificate about where he went wrong. Few look at the crisis—neither the Professor's nor Cather's—with empathy, nor see it in the context of the Cather canon. The critics of Death Comes for the Archbishop are generally more reverent of the work. It is possible that this novel offers fewer points of utter confusion, though it contains a tapestry of conflicting voices. It has gained much less attention than The Professor's House in recent scholarship.

Death Comes for the Archbishop has always been popular, but not always with critics. John Randall called it a novel of local-color, and wrote a scathing critique of it for avoiding conflict and struggle. Lindeman outlines humorously the many failed attempts to place it in literary categories. But it has gradually gained critical respect. The work seems to evoke a particular affection from those who admire it, and two critics I've encountered refer to the Archbishop as though he were an actual person (e.g. Lindeman 15; Woodress 409). They explore Latour's reserve, his relationship with Vaillant, and are intrigued by the book's similarities, differences, and pure proximity to The Professor's House. Margaret Doane offers a fascinating study of the similarities between the Professor and Latour, who both have a reserved quality. Skaggs traces the change that Cather goes through from The Professor's House to Death Comes for the Archbishop, recognizing that the Professor finally takes a leap of faith towards religion, albeit half-hearted, whereas Father Latour took that leap early in his life. The Professor intellectualizes about the connections

between art and religion as attempts to fill a human need to feel important; in Death Comes for the Archbishop, "Cather affirms that art and religion are the same thing—passionate attempts to understand mystery" (Skaggs 399). A number of critics have called the work a highly developed modernist narrative. Woodress calls it remarkable for its wide appeal coupled with radical techniques: "[It] invites comparison with the allusiveness and technical virtuosity of other major twentieth century modernist works" (406). Several critics have explored Cather's use of art in the work, both as a structural influence and as a symbol for religious passion in parishioners. Most recently, reflecting a larger trend in literary studies, critics have explored Cather's attitude toward the history and various cultures described in the book. Some have examined Cather's story and its relationship to the actual history of Archbishop Lamy. Cather gave Latour a much more understanding stance towards the Indians and Mexicans than Lamy did. She was particularly open to other religions and traditions than Lamy, and her primary goal was to delete judgment from the novel.

I see Cather's careful work to refrain from judgment, even to exude acceptance in a novel filled with differing belief systems. In fact, some of the accepting attitudes Latour promotes seem way beyond his time, if not Cather's. Some of her interest in being open towards various religions may have come from her affiliation with the Episcopal Church.² But the accepting attitude Cather demonstrates in the novel also teeters on a line of cool reserve. Objectivity also allows one to stay outside, not to pledge allegiance to anyone, nor give trust to anyone. Cather is no longer the

carefree and exuberant writer who created O Pioneers!. She is very careful to hold herself at the distance that Puvis de Chavannes held from his Geneviève. In allowing people's personalities to speak for themselves, she shows that they all have faults, that none of them have a completely satisfying answer to the ultimate, spiritual questions of how to behave in the world, or the meaning of life. I sense a woman very careful not to set herself up after her period of disillusion.

But she has also passed her crisis. She does seem to offer a tempered hope in this novel that was absent in The Professor's House. In that novel, change was the unpredictable, inevitable element in life that led to melancholy and despair. No matter how devoted one became to intuitive pursuits, no matter how much one worked to pay homage to the mystery underlying and connecting the universe, one could not always feel connected to a spiritual realm. Life ended up "without delight." I think this feeling refers in part to the state of consciousness that Woolf described as "non-being." In Death Comes for the Archbishop, Cather seems to say that religion—a certain hybrid of religion, as we shall see—assures a certain degree of delight in life. While it does not bring constant delight into life, it provides a structure for conceiving of connection to a spiritual current. It helps one to pay attention to the workings of the universe; its images and stories provide support through crisis and a perspective through which to evoke a sense of meaning. She is careful to express this in a tempered way—no one approach to religion is actually deemed "right." It is the faith itself, the belief in a structure for connecting to the

spiritual dimension of life, that is important. Religious faith is the entity in the novel to which she gives her trust.

2

In Cather's careful attempts to remain objective and to affirm the value of other methods of belief, it is almost a surprise when she reminds us that her main characters are, after all, missionaries of Catholic zeal, in the New World to spread The Word as they see it. I think this demonstrates that there is more than one shade of Christianity in this book about two Catholic priests.

Institutionalized religion in this novel begins in Rome, both literally and figuratively. Cather sets up the importance of the Roman Catholic Church in the prologue. At once we know that the controllers of this institution are planners and part of a hierarchical system that ranks them above others. The dinner party opens on a ledge at a celestial height ("Beyond the balustrade was the drop into the air" (3)), and the host of the affair painstakingly controls the sun's light. In this carefully arranged location, the men, three Cardinals and a Bishop, discuss who will carry the message of the church to New Mexico. The new Bishop must be a man "to whom order is necessary" and must be "full of zeal" (8). In this way they are shown to believe New Mexico can gradually become ordered, like their church. The conversation suggests that Latour is a model French missionary—"The French arrange! [They] have a sense of proportion and rational adjustment" (9). Bishop Ferrand says that Latour is "a man of severe and refined tastes" (13).

A representative of the Church, Latour brings young French priests to the diocese, and nuns from Baltimore to start a Catholic school. Gradually, methodically, he replaces clergy who do not uphold the standards set by Rome. He replaces Father Martínez, who believes priests should not have to be celibate, and his miserly friend Father Lucerno. He also replaces Father Gallegoz, who gambles, dances, and spends Sunday afternoons at the hacienda of a rich Mexican widow. Though Latour supports Indian's rights, we also see him wielding his influence on them. When he is camping out with Jacinto he considers the Indian's differences sympathetically—Jacinto's conception that language should be simple, and that the stars must be "great spirits." Latour responds as though he is willing to consider the possibility of other spirits, then ironically, persuasively, requires Jacinto to participate in his God's prayer. "Perhaps they are", said the Bishop with a sigh. "Whatever they are, they are great. Let us say *Our Father*, and go to sleep, my boy" (93). Latour's hypocrisy in this early scene shows tension in his character; he is both open to other ideas, and still indoctrinated by the missionary goals as defined by the Roman Church.

However, Latour himself admits that while he is the better scholar, his friend Vaillant is stronger in his faith. Though we do not see Vaillant converting those who are not Catholic, we see him energized at the prospect of representing the Church for wayward Christians. His role he best describes himself when he says of the wayward Catholics in Arizona "I am *their man*!"(208). In his fervor to leave for Denver, he does not realize until the day before his departure that he will probably never work

with his best friend again. He stands for the order of the Church. He wants to have Latour replace the corrupt Martínez at once, rather than waiting a year for things to die down. Coming to a small village of unbaptized children and unmarried couples, although the people have lived this way for years and it would be easier to baptize the children first, Joseph requires that the couples be married first and the children baptized the next morning. "That order is but Christian ... their parents will at least have been married overnight" (55). As he grows older, his missionary zeal only increases. Early in the narrative he tells Latour he dreams of ending his days in contemplation of Mary in a religious house in France, but instead, he becomes the Church's most active, devoted bearer of the cross in the Rocky Mountains, even after he loses a foot. His enthusiasm captivates the Pope himself, who, in Joseph's presence, loses track of time, neglects engagements, then is moved to call out to him "not in benediction, but in salutation... '*Corragio, Americano!* [Courage, American!]" (229).

Both priests use their authority as representatives of Christian virtues to extract what they want from people. Vaillant persuades the ranchero owner to give him both his favorite mules for the Vicar and the Bishop. Latour persuades Doña Isabella to state her age in court in order to make sure she gets her husband's inheritance, and that the church receives the money after her death. They stand for the Church. Joseph says the last rites to the miser Father Lucerno, despite the fact that Lucerno and Martínez organized a schismatic church to oppose the new Bishop's rule. Latour says Mass at the small churches in the diocese.

But there is another form of Christianity in New Mexico, and it wells up from the people who live there. They have deep beliefs based in traditions that may have originated in Rome, but that they have made their own. In the first small village we see in the novel, *Agua Secreta*, Father Latour discusses Santiago with Benito's grandson, and discovers that in this part of the world, he is the saint of horses. "Isn't he that in your country?" the grandson asks. "No, I know nothing about that," Latour replies (29). The small town of Abiquiu, where Padre Martínez was born, practices a "fierce and fanatical" Catholicism, with a Passion Week of bloody reenactments of Christ's crucifixion. When the reserved Latour comes to Taos, the people demonstratively kiss his Episcopal ring:

In his own country all this would have been highly distasteful to Jean Marie Latour. Here, these demonstrations seemed a part of the high colour that was in landscape and gardens, in the flaming cactus and the gaudily decorated altars,—in the agonized Christs and the dolorous Virgins and the very human figures of the saints. He had already learned that with this people religion was necessarily theatrical. (142)

The people of New Mexico humanize Catholicism, bring it very close to their lives and fill it with their passion. Nowhere is this more apparent than in their embrace of the Virgin Mary.

The Catholic stories that most touch the people in Latour's diocese are those that have to do with Mary and the Holy Family. The story of the appearance of Jesus, Mary and Joseph to Junípero Sera makes the traditional image, objectified by the Church in stained glass or sermons,

become real and alive. Walking through the desert without a guide nor provisions, the Franciscan missionary and a companion came to a Mexican shepherd's house with a man, woman and child. He was given food, water and shelter for the night, continued on his journey, and arrived at a mission the next day. No one could believe it, so they returned to the site and the house was gone. Recalling the story, passed on to him orally by missionaries, Latour thinks to himself:

There is always something charming in the idea of greatness returning to simplicity—the queen making hay among the country girls—but how much more endearing was the belief that They, after so many centuries of history and glory, should return to play Their first parts, in the persons of a humble Mexican family, the lowliest of the lowly, the poorest of the poor,—in a wilderness at the end of the world, where the angels could scarcely find Them! (276-77)

The stories that can be humanized in this way become the doctrine of a people who, Cather reminds us again and again, cannot read.

The most powerful image is of Mary, and she has found her way into many aspects of people's lives. With all the Christian imagery in the novel, she appears many times more often than any other Christian figure, including God and Jesus. The common Christian greeting among people is "Ave María Purísima," and in churches the most popular figures are the small figures of Mary, for whom many enjoy creating clothes and jewelry. The first religious story the two priests hear in the new diocese is of Our Lady of Guadalupe, in which Mary appeared to a poor, elderly

monk, and to prove her appearance for his doubting Spanish Bishop, performs a miracle: she makes roses bloom out of season, tells the monk to pick them and return to his Bishop. Before the Bishop, the monk opens his robes, and in place of the roses is a picture of the Virgin. Father Vaillant is moved to tears by the story: "All these Catholics who have been so long without instruction have at least the reassurance of that visitation. It is a household word with them that their blessed Mother revealed Herself in their own country, to a poor convert'" (49-50). It is not like the story of the Holy Family, which is passed among missionaries. It is a folk-tale told over and over, and is documented at the region's most popular shrine. The story serves to create the feeling that Mary has a special affection for this part of the world.

Cather deepens this sense by having Mary speak also to the French priests. As Father Vaillant leaves Santa Fé for his new work in Denver, it is clear he will never work with his best friend again. The Bishop suffers from the loss. But when he returns to his study:

He seemed to come back to reality, to the sense of a Presence awaiting him. The curtain of the arched doorway had scarcely fallen behind him when that feeling of personal loneliness was gone, and the sense of loss was replaced by a sense of restoration.... It was not a solitude of atrophy, of negation, but of perpetual flowering. A life need not be cold or devoid of grace in the worldly sense, if it were filled by Her who was all the graces; Virgin-daughter, Virgin-mother, girl of the people and Queen of Heaven. (254)

The many sides of Mary come to him in a rush, and we see that she fills not only her traditional role as a comforting figure, but also as a source of joy.

Her power is all the greater because she speaks to all Catholics. Gary Brienzo suggests that Mary is the central, unifying force in the novel, bringing together "the noblest and the meanest members of society" (33). She can elevate the meanest above the others. This is most powerfully achieved in the Mexican slave, Sada, who, in her devotion to Mary, ministers to a depressed Bishop Latour. Because her Protestant owners forbid it, she has not been in a church for nineteen years. Kneeling beside her, Latour is able to experience vicariously Mary's power.

He seemed able to feel all it meant to her to know that there was a Kind Woman in Heaven, though there were such cruel ones on earth. Old people, who have felt blows and toil and known the world's hard hand, need, even more than children do, a woman's tenderness. Only a Woman, divine, could know all that a woman can suffer.

.....

'O Sacred Heart of Mary!' she murmured by his side, and he felt how that name was food and raiment, friend and mother to her. He received the miracle in her heart into his own, saw through her eyes, knew that his poverty was as bleak as hers. (217)

Mary plays two roles here. She provides divine solace to a woman with a very difficult life, and she shows Latour, a Bishop who has devoted his life

to God, that religious wisdom is deepest in the most lowly. He realizes that "this church was Sada's house, and he was a servant in it" (217). Mary throws the hierarchy of the church in disarray. Before her, all souls are leveled.

Mary thus unifies the church into a intimate community in the book, encompassing not only the hierarchical representatives of Rome but also the lowly Catholics of New Mexico. Cather reinforces this concept by using the structure of the special church bell representing Mary for the structure of the narrative. Latour wakes his first morning at the Episcopal residence in Santa Fé to the sound of the Ave Maria bell, "marveling to hear it rung correctly (nine quick strokes in all, divided in threes, with an interval between)" (43). Cather inserts this episode in the first section of the book, coupled with the story of the Lady of Guadalupe miracle. The dominance of Mary's influence in the area having been established, her bell then reverberates through the nine sections of the novel. Like Latour's Ave Maria bell, the sections can be similarly divided into threes. The first three sections show the priests in their first years in Santa Fé and their religious devotion; the second three sections show the lives they lead separately, interacting with the various people in their diocese; and the third three sections have a more deeply religious tone, focusing more closely on the church, showing the priests in contemplation and devotion, in separation, and finally death. In this concrete enactment of the Ave Maria, Cather joins the concept of Mary—the mother and daughter of God—and the structure that the Church provides for Catholics' lives.

3

The structure and the stories within that structure show the power of the Church in people's lives. Cather makes it clear, however, that souls and devotion exist outside of the Church. She gradually shows us that the people we are coming to know are human beings, and that they are already connected by a force more powerful than the church: humanity. This is the principle that Latour understands when he kneels in Lady Chapel beside Sada. It is also something that Cather extends throughout the book, connecting not only Christians but all the residents of New Mexico.

Her attention to icons—concrete entities that contain spiritual significance—begins to show this common consciousness: humans connect natural and hand-made items with spiritual beliefs.³ Vaillant knows the power of icons blessed by the Pope for the people he ministers to, and recounts as significant the story of the family who remained devoted to their faith by keeping Catholic relics in a cave after their mission was sacked by Apaches. But this capacity to link the tangible to the intangible is also common to other cultures. When Latour finds the waterhead of Agua Secreta, he reflects:

This spot had been a refuge for humanity long before these Mexicans had come upon it. It was older than history, like those well-heads in his own country where the Roman settlers had set up the image of a river goddess, and later the Christian priests had platted a cross. (31-32)

The sense of common iconography continues through the ages, transcending faiths. The nursery Virgins are decorated by the people in New Mexico: "She was their doll and their queen, something to fondle and something to adore, as Mary's Son must have been to Her" (254). But Latour reflects also that Mary satisfies a human need:

These poor Mexicans ... were not the first to pour out their love in this simple fashion. Raphael and Titian had made costumes for Her in their time, and the great masters had made music for Her, and the great architects had built cathedrals for Her. Long before Her years on earth, in the twilight between the Fall and the Redemption, the pagan sculptors were always trying to achieve the image of a goddess who should yet be a woman. (255).

For a Bishop, Latour has an expansive mind to understand these commonalties. He seems to see not only icons but religion itself as a way of expressing deeper human qualities. Icons also bring history to mind—as Latour is dying, he touches his signet ring and is taken back to scenes of his youth with his best friend, Vaillant (281)

Cather also demonstrates a human consciousness by successfully differentiating between the priests and their underlying composition as men. When Latour visits Gallegos, who likes to dance, gamble and visit the rich widow, we hear that the Bishop and Vaillant have discussed the need to remove him from his position. "Yet" Latour reflects as he takes his leave, "there was something very engaging about Gallegos as a man " (83). The same can be said for the infamous Father Martínez.⁴ In addition

to running a household too disorderly for Latour's tastes, he is openly sexually active, and argues that there is historical precedence for this. He is rumored to have cheated Indians out of their land before they were to be executed. But he also has qualities that Latour appreciates. He looks forward to seeing his unusual face, and has never heard a more powerful Mass than Martínez's. "The man had a beautiful baritone voice, and he drew from some deep well of emotional power.... He had an altogether compelling personality, a disturbing, mysterious, magnetic power" (149-50). He may be a priest who refuses to adhere to the strict Catholic guidelines, but he is also a man with "compelling" qualities. Even the Pope is shown in a human light when Father Vaillant leaves him after his extended audience. The Pope "call[s] out to the missionary , as one man to another" (229).

Latour and Vaillant also clearly have personalities that are a part of them, and would be a part of them, regardless of their faith. Both are drawn to fine things—Latour loves his silver toilet items given to him by Antonio Olvidarez, and Vaillant, good food and fine wine. Vaillant almost joined the army before he decided to become a priest, and the reader cannot help but see that this occupation would have also suited his fervent personality. Cather's careful use of their names also indicates that there is a distinction between man and priest. The narrator refers to the two men by church-related titles—Jean Marie Latour is called Bishop, Bishop Latour, Father Latour; Joseph Vaillant is called Vicar, Father Vaillant and Father Joseph. But when alone together and when they are reminiscing, they call each other by their first names, and even by

nicknames. While the church defines them in the world, they have personalities and personal histories unrelated to their positions. Their friendship is another entity in itself, intersecting with their priesthood, but also existing outside of it. When Joseph is leaving for Denver, Latour reflects "As a Bishop, he could only approve Father Vaillant's eagerness to be gone, and the enthusiasm with which he turned to hardships of a new kind. But as a man, he was a little hurt that his old comrade should leave him without one regret" (249).

Latour particularly distinguishes between himself as a man and as a Bishop. The division, and the capacity to notice a division, suggests that there is an observing entity within the Bishop's mind, more objective than just the Bishop, and just the man. His ability to recognize the division becomes particularly keen toward the end of his life, when Latour clearly distinguishes between what is happening to "him" and what is happening to himself in a religious context. "More and more life seemed to him an experience of the Ego, in no sense the Ego itself. This conviction, he believed, was something apart from his religious life; it was an enlightenment that came to him as a man, a human creature" (288). The implication here is that there exists a kind of soul within a human being that has a capacity for enlightenment, apart from any particularly religious faith.

I think Cather is re-establishing a spiritual vision that affirms a belief in a common consciousness, part of a spiritual current that underlies all experience. She is suggesting that there are central elements to the spirit of human beings that all human beings have, regardless of

their beliefs, or disbeliefs. Latour is able to transcend his religious training to comprehend this realm. He is able to understand that there are commonalities between human beings that underlie their differences and connect them. Cather builds on this concept through intermingling traditions, particularly in Latour's mind. A scholar, he is aware of many different cultures and their beliefs. After Vaillant surprises him using an old silver bell for the Ave Maria, Latour tells his friend the tradition of using church bells during a service came from the Moors, and began in the Muslim religion. Vaillant says he is trying to make his bell into an infidel, and calls the fact belittling. Latour replies, "Belittling? I should say the reverse. I am glad to think there is Moorish silver in your bell" (45). He uses church imagery to describe what he sees, but he does so consciously, almost laughing at himself. Watching the white goats in *Agua Secreta*, Latour likens them to the lambs in the Bible. "The young Bishop smiled at his mixed theology. But though the goat had always been the symbol of pagan lewdness, he told himself that their fleece had warmed many a good Christian, and their rich milk nourished sickly children" (31).

Cather is proposing that a transcending consciousness leads to these similarities. By distinguishing between humanity and priesthood, and showing the interweaving of cultures among humanity, she opens the door for a recognition of similarities between Catholic and Indian religion, and Latour's increasing appreciation of Indian culture. Descending into the Stone Lips in the snowstorm, Latour likens the place to a Gothic Cathedral, and learns that it is a ceremonial place. Something in both cultures—so different in other ways—has created similar spaces for

similar purposes. Cather also suggests these commonalities in her treatment of contemplation. She establishes early that silence and reflection play a role in the lives of the priests. Vaillant harbors the hope that he will be able to end his days in contemplation of Mary, and rejoices when he can do this while incapacitated during the Month of Mary. Yet the only time we see a priest actually contemplating is in a Navajo hogan, which seems perfectly designed for the task. The setting in a sandstorm, evokes images of the Desert Fathers of early Christianity. Yet it is an Indian who provides the location, and the right situation. Latour's friend Eusabio is happy to give him three days by himself, and does not question his need for reflection. The fact that Latour develops a friendship with this Indian further shows a commonality between the two men that allows them to cross lines that their two different religions might draw for them.

Icons similarly play a role in Indians' lives. Parrots were sacred to the Indians, Father Jesus tells Latour, and the Catholic priest treasures a carved wooden parrot given to him. At Ácoma, Latour recognizes the literal evocation in the words "The Rock." The rock is one name people call St. Peter in the Christian tradition, but here the figure—signifying stability and a method of rising above the earth—has emerged as a powerful entity in this "reptilian" culture. (103) He does take a dislike to the cave, but he does not explain this as though the place were inherently evil; he attributes his repugnance to himself. When Zeb Orchard talks about the Indians' traditions with disrespect, Latour subtly rebukes him.

"The things they value most are worth nothing to us. They've got their own superstitions, and their minds will go round and round in the same old ruts till Judgment Day."

Father Latour remarked that their veneration for old customs was a quality he liked in the Indians, and that it played a great part in his own religion. (135)

Latour seems to see religious devotion itself as another commonality among humans, particularly expressed by the Indians. He feels a religious silence around the Indian pueblo outside Taos as he walks with Father Martínez. It "had been the seat of old religious ceremonies, honeycombed with noiseless Indian life, the repository of Indian secrets, for many centuries" (151). When he is visiting Eusabio, he comes upon his family in a drumming ceremony. The little boys there have on their faces "an expression of religious gravity" (230).

However, as Orchard says in reply to Latour's attempt to link Catholicism with the Indians' religion, the Indian culture is quite different from Catholicism. "The trader told him he might make good Catholics among the Indians, but he would never separate them from their own beliefs. 'Their priests have their own kind of mysteries'" (135). Latour also recognizes the vast difference between him and Indians as he camps out with Jacinto.

There was no way in which he could transfer his own memories of European civilization into the Indian mind, and he was quite willing to believe that behind Jacinto there

was a long tradition, a story of experience, which no language could translate to him. A chill came with the darkness. (92)

4

Something else, though, works underneath the surface of this narrative to pull the various parts together, and ultimately unify all its people, as well as separate them from other cultures: the power driving the earth and the sky and the water of New Mexico.

It begins with the water. Underground streams are common through the country, and they are life-giving. At Ácoma, the natives carry their drinking water up "from a secret spring below" (98), and through Arroyo Hondo flows "a rushing stream which came from the high mountains." From its high source, the water rushes down to just above the valley, where Vaillant has stopped to watch "the imprisoned water leaping out into the light like a thing alive" (165). Water emerges as a central motif in the opening scene of the book, when the Bishop finds a stream in the desert. He comes upon a village by a stream called "Agua Secreta" and walks to find the waterhead. "All about it crowded the oven-shaped hills,—nothing to hint of water until it rose miraculously out of the parched and thirsty sea of sand. Some subterranean stream found an outlet here, was released from darkness. The result was grass and trees and flowers and human life" (31) We come to see the source of this water in the ceremonial Indian cave. Jacinto takes the Bishop to listen to an underground stream. The Bishop puts his ear to the ground:

He told himself that he was listening to one of the oldest voices of the earth. What he heard was the sound of a great underground river, flowing through a resounding cavern. The water was far, far below, perhaps as deep as the foot of the mountain, a flood moving in utter blackness under the ribs of antediluvian rock. It was not a rushing noise, but the sound of a great flood moving with majesty and power. (130)

Cather's repetition of this image—water flowing underground and emerging in bubbling springs to give life—begins to remind me of Henri Bergson's beliefs about the nature of life. He describes life as an ever changing, ever-evolving force: "an energized—indeed, spiritualized—process: matter alters in response to, or accompanying, a vital pulse, an *élan vital*" (Wasserman 84). The artist taps into this force through her intuition, and embodies it in art. The ultimate goal of the artist, then, is not to achieve a beauty or an ideal form unto itself, but to capture its spiritual essence—its connection to the spiritual current indwelling in all experience.

In this narrative, water represents this current. It is like the vital force of the earth, underlying it, and coming up to the surface to give life—a life that contains that force. It is represented in the colors of green and blue. The stream that runs through the Mexican village Agua Secreta forms a green ribbon in the desert, "greener than anything Latour had ever seen, even in his own greenest corner of the Old World" (24). It gives life to clover and trees and homes with gardens. Green vegetation throughout the book shows there is some outlet for the underground

river in the area. There are blue-green acacia trees in Isleta, and the mountain outside Taos that Indians pay tribute to at sunset is covered with greenery. There are three cottonwoods at the site of the Holy Family miracle.

Over the underground river lies red and yellow earth and sand, dotted with trees. Outside Santa Fé there are "sharp red sand-hills spotted with juniper" (253). Laguna, set by a stone basin filled with water, is surrounded by petrified sand dunes, "long waves of soft, gritty yellow rock, shining and bare except for a few lines of dark juniper that grew out of the weather cracks—little trees, and very, very old" (89). The elements of the earth's crust are dramatically represented in the Mesa country, where, "from a flat red sea of sand rose great rock mesas" (94). They intermingle; sand forms rock, rock forms sand. The underlying composition of this crust is laid bare here:

This plain had an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness; as if, with all the material for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together, on the eve of being arranged into mountain, plain, plateau. The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape.

Cather indicates that this place is still in its creation stage, and reinforces that by likening the view from the Mesa during a thunderstorm to Creation morning. But Cather also hints that this could be the remains of a dead civilization. "This plain might once have been an enormous city, all the smaller quarters destroyed by time, only the public buildings left,

—piles of architecture that were like mountains" (94). Like people, civilizations go from dust to dust. Sand is a powerful image here, running over the desert, interfering with growth that water spurs. Outside Eusabio's hogan, old cottonwoods grow gnarled with the perpetual sandstorms.

Topping these layers is the sky, and it dominates the country. "There was always activity overhead, clouds forming and moving all day long....The whole country seemed fluid to the eye under this constant change of accent, this ever-varying distribution of light" (96). The sky—the source of rain, wind, air and light—is the enactment of perpetual change. The changing light on the mountain is what captivates the Taos Indians and holds them in a "religious silence" (150). When Latour travels with Eusabio back to Santa Fé, he becomes all the more aware of it. Under it, "the desert was monotonous and still....Elsewhere, the sky is the roof of the world; but here the earth was the floor of the sky. The landscape one longed for when one was far away, the thing all about one, the world one actually lived in, was the sky, the sky!" (231-32).

The trinity of water, earth and sky intermingle and emerge everywhere in New Mexico, blended in an organic, fluid mixture that has been crafted into a city, a home, a stream, a hill, a season. Latour and Vaillant see the mixture when they ride into Santa Fé: "at one end a church with two earthen towers that rose high above the flatness. The long main street began at the church, the town seemed to flow from it like a steam from a spring" (22). Vaillant sits in Latour's garden, the narrator describes the force of spring: "The air and the earth interpenetrated in the

warm gusts of spring; the soil was full of sunlight and the sunlight full of red dust" (200). They are reduced to basic colors in Laguna in the church, "painted above and about the altar with gods of wind and rain and thunder, sun and moon, linked together in a geometrical design of crimson and blue and dark green" (89). The same colors emerge when Latour finds the stone hill from which he will build his cathedral. The hill is yellow "very much like the gold of the sunlight that was now beating upon it", surrounded by green stone hills and facing "the declining sun and the blue Sandias" (239).

Separately and together, the elements accurately and spectacularly reflect the nature of life. The changing clouds, the rushing water, the sandstorms—all represent life's fluid instability. Most striking to me is the three-day sandstorm Latour lives through in Eusabio's hogan. It is spring, the time of full rivers and strong winds. Water, the life-giving source, runs by the hogan, and is able to cut out a path for itself through the loose sands. It has also been able to give life to trees. But the trees are terribly gnarled by the sand, like people who live in a world of blinding, pelting change. The sand is in perpetual motion and the hogan provides only minimal shelter from the storm. Strangely, this environment Latour finds "favorable" for reflection. The hogan has been a place for him to contemplate the past and the future, a stopping point in the rush of his life, with change literally come alive through the elements and enveloping him. There is no real shelter from it, this experience hauntingly symbolizes, but it can be endured through reflection.

The hogan was isolated like a ship's cabin on the ocean, with the murmuring of great winds about it. There was no opening except the door, always open, and the air without had the turbid yellow light of sand-storms. All day long the sand come in through the cracks in the walls and formed little ridges on the earth floor. It rattled like sleet upon the dead leaves of the tree-branch roof. This house was so frail a shelter that one seemed to be sitting in the heart of a world made of dusty earth and moving air. (229)

As they live in this organic, expressive country, the people in this region begin to be similarly interwoven into the mixture, and elements and the people of begin to reflect each other. Lost alone in the desert, Latour sees that the hills around him are shaped just like Mexican ovens (18). The sage brush around Taos, the home of the old and stubborn Martínez is old and thick (141). After we learn of the Indians' snake worship, the image of the snake is resurrected in the mountain that the Taos Indians' revere; the narrator describes it as "serpentine" (151). The church at Ácoma—and those who built it—defied the fluid mixture and failed as a result. Latour immediately dislikes the church, erected by missionaries who required the Indians to transport its materials from miles away. It does not reflect the landscape at all: "Gaunt, grim, grey, its nave rising some seventy feet to a sagging half-ruined roof, it was more like a fortress than a place of worship" (100). Latour comes to believe it was built for the satisfaction of the missionaries "rather than according to the needs of the Indians.... Every stone in that structure, every handful of

earth in those many thousand pounds of adobe, was carried up the trail on the backs of men and boys and women" (101). The failure of the building is echoed in the story of the Padre who lived there 15 years, and was ultimately killed by the natives.

As the oldest culture living within the organic mixture, the Indians have been completely absorbed into it. In the chapter "Stone Lips," the Pecos Indians' ceremonial cave is literally in the mouth of the earth. Eusabio the Navajo is a particularly strong representative of the Indians, and as Latour travels with him to Santa Fe, he begins drawing some conclusions about Indian culture. "Traveling with Eusabio was like traveling with the landscape made human" (232), Latour notices. "It was the Indian manner to vanish into the landscape, to stand out against it." The Navajo hogans "among the sand and willows, were made of sand and willows" (233). Zuñi runners pass them on their way, and they look like "young antelope" (234). They have an approach to their area that the Bishop thinks arises out of caution and respect. "It was as if the great country were asleep, and they wished to carry on their lives without awakening it; or as if the spirits of earth and air and water were things not to antagonize and arouse" (234). The Mexicans also reflect the land in the way they worship their Bishop and reenact Jesus' suffering during Passion week. As I noted earlier, Latour attributes these actions to the landscape: "These demonstrations seemed a part of the high colour that was in landscape and gardens, in the flaming cactus and the gaudily decorated altars" (142).

As he lives longer and longer in New Mexico, Latour becomes enfolded in the organic elemental mixture. On his first journey among the Indian missions of his diocese, he and his Indian guide Jacinto look at the evening-star, that "flickered like a lamp just lit, and the close beside it was another star of constant light....'You see the little star beside, Padre? Indians call him the guide.'" Latour's situation is reflected in the sky above him, and the news comes to him through an Indian. He becomes fond of sleeping outside, and rejects offers to sleep inside houses during his journeys. After bringing fruit trees from outside the area for his garden, he takes to domesticating the wild flowers there (265). Gradually not only the elements but the essence of the elements become a part of him. When he comes outside the church after the December night in the Lady chapel with Sada, "The peace without seemed all one with the peace in his own soul" (218). This essence finally becomes such a part of him, that he cannot imagine living without it. Though he thought he would retire in France, he finds he misses the air of New Mexico mornings too much.

He did not know just when it had become so necessary to him, but he had come back to die in exile for the sake of it. Something soft and wild and free, something that whispered to the ear on the pillow, lightened the heart, softly, softly picked the lock, slid the bolts, and released the prisoned spirit of man into the wind, into the blue and gold, into the morning, into the morning! (273)

The Bishop has become part of the elements, just as much as he is part of the church, and part of humanity. Bishop Latour is an ecumenical man; he sees a universal church, and he sees a universal family. But if the commonalities among humans were the key to feeling connected with the universe, then he could live anywhere. If the key to feeling connected with the universe were the Catholic church, he could similarly live anywhere. But he aches for a place, for New Mexico. He pledges himself to it, more than to the Church, more than to the human family. The air in New Mexico is not so much associated with its place on the globe, but its distance from the "tamed" land. It reflects the basic elements of nature—of human nature as much as nature itself.

Many visitors to the southwest would agree with the Bishop. The great expanse of sky, the dry warm wind, the sense of perpetual change are all encompassed in the simple beauty—not the stressful motion of a city or even a farm, but motion that reflects the natural, fluid rhythms of life. It seems the same as the rhythm of the heart. For Latour and Vaillant, the Indians and the Mexicans are an extension of that powerful landscape.

And yet there is something in the land that is holy to Latour in a truly Catholic sense. He sees the rolling hills as unceasing undulations of Mexican ovens, but he closes his eyes, and when he opens them, he sees a cross in the juniper before him. The power of Ácoma makes sense to him because of its likeness to his vision of Creation. The wildflowers he domesticates in his garden are blue in the shade that European craftsmen want, "the blue that becomes almost pink and then retreats again into sea-dark purple—the true Episcopal colour and countless variations of it "

(265). His perspective is Catholic. His description of miracles to Vaillant is telling:

One might almost say that an apparition is human vision corrected by divine love. I do not see you as you really are, Joseph; I see you through my affection for you. The Miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon the faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.

Meaning, then, lies in perspective one gains through religious faith, through friendship, through tradition. Vaillant's signet-ring may have a lovely amethyst and inscription (Auspice Maria), but as he touches it on his hand, Latour is sent into a long reverie of his friend. The landscape of the Southwest is inherently powerful, but it becomes particularly alive when it is associated with a story. The simplicity of the Mexican family is a powerful figure in itself—their houses are made of mud, their food comes from the land, their passion reflects the landscape. But their depiction as a Mexican version of the Holy Family gives them an even greater power.

Section seven, "The Great Diocese," is aptly named, and reflects perfectly the community, its members, its religions, its conflicts. It begins with the Month of Mary, which is also spring. Vaillant is recuperating in Latour's garden, and watching the organic trinity in action before him, as the wind picks up the earth, and the grass reflects the sun. There are two conflicting desires in the chapter—the desire for companionship of an old

friend, and the desire to be devout Catholic missionaries. The next chapter, December night, shows through the Mexican slave Sada the holy mystery of faith in Mary. It moves Latour out of his depression over the absence of Vaillant and the consequent loss of a sense of purpose as a missionary. He discovers that his role in the church is to serve people like Sada. He then goes into retreat in a Navajo hogan amid a sand-storm, then returns to Santa Fé (The Saint of Faith), with a representative of the culture that nurtured his reflective spirit. Friendship, duty, spiritual poverty and spiritual renewal, holy mysteries, Mexican Catholicism, elemental mysteries, Indian reverence: they all make up this religious community, and they come together here. They are held together through icons and stories.

5

I think the affirmation of a community interwoven with faith, stories, friendship, and landscape in Death Comes For the Archbishop is rhetorical. Increasingly, Latour and Vaillant become part of this community. They become less European and devoted to Rome and more like the faithful who live in the Southwest. Early in the book, each of them spends much time away from the diocese at conferences, but they gradually come to spend more and more of their time in the west. Vaillant becomes so devoted to his missionary work in the west that he takes on a life of perpetual motion. He harbored the hope early in the book of devoting his last days to contemplating Mary in a religious house in France, and instead ends his days as a rigorous Bishop traveling through

the rocky mountains converting souls and begging for the Church. When he arrives, Latour is fond of reminiscing about France or is taken to places far away in his mind. But in the closing section of the narrative, visiting France, the scenario is reversed when he is taken back to New Mexico: "He sometimes closed his eyes and thought of the high song the wind was singing in the straight, striped pine trees up in the Navajo forests" (272).

I think it is significant particularly that the Indians—who embody the land and religious faith—become increasingly important to Latour's life, both as spiritual compatriots and as friends. In the opening section, there are no Indians. In the second section, Vaillant preaches to a congregation of Indians, but they are silent, and will not bring their children to be baptized. Then, in the third section, Jacinto has become Latour's "guide." From this point, the relationship between Latour and the Indians steadily grows. Gradually I begin to see similarities between Latour and the Indians more than Latour and his former, more institutionalized and European sensibility. Indians take to Latour because he is straight with them. Latour is similar to them in his reserve, and his caution with words. In the end, all of the Archbishop's friends are dead except for Eusabio, who comes to see him as he is dying.

But Cather retains a sense of evocation that is also powerful. The novel ends its affirmation of the pure desert air, at the same time as it is predicting its end. Latour describes his love for the desert, and imbedded in the description he says "That air would disappear from the whole earth in time, perhaps" (273) Latour's open-minded perspective reminds me increasingly of the Professor's tone when he described the significance of

religion in people's lives. It is almost the voice of an anthropologist, on the side, trying to be unattached to any particular belief system, any particular place. It is strange to have a missionary who is so diplomatic that the most forceful method we see him using to spread his faith is to require his Indian "guide" to say the "Our Father" prayer when they are camping out together. The commonalities show religion to be but a response to a human need, not a method of connecting with the divine. When Latour points out these commonalities, he never mentions a God. He himself tells Vaillant on their final parting that he is better than his Bishop. "You have been a great harvester of souls, without pride and without shame— and I am always a little cold" (259-60).

I think Willa Cather is under this feeling. She is pushing her objectivity to the point of scientific analysis, and it holds her back from getting involved. In O Pioneers!, the underlying strength in the novel came from a union of souls and light and land. In Death Comes for the Archbishop, Cather is again suggesting that there is an underlying connection between human beings, but it seems only a happenstance of biology. It lacks a connection to anything else. It is not interwoven with the land, nor with God, nor with a primal power. The connections between human beings lack meaning. They pose questions, but give nothing stable to grasp. Whereas the Genuis of the Great Divide bent down to Alexandra and became personified in her Golden Man, there is no such interaction here. Whatever we value, whatever our connections to others, it is only part of the long fluid history of humanity, determined by our inherent natures as human beings but otherwise insignificant.

The narrative voice is particularly confusing. Very often, it comes from Latour's mind—lets us in on his thoughts. But those thoughts can encompass another perspective so well that it is hard to believe Latour is so accommodating. For example, as he travels with Eusabio, the narrative voice tells that "Father Latour judged that, just as it was the white man's way to assert himself in any landscape, to change it, to make it over a little (at least to leave some mark of memorial of his sojourn), it was the Indian's way to pass through a country without disturbing anything" (232-33). Latour then, in the very next section, show Vaillant the golden hill he wants to cut up create a Romanesque cathedral that he carefully designed. There is a tension here, because the two ways are very different. One shows more "respect" for the land (233), and the land is part of the trinity of this region's mysterious power. But Latour, though he has changed to become more like an Indian, still acts as a "'master'" of nature. There is no way for the reader to know whether Latour understands the difference but allows himself to be as he is and the Indians to be as they are.

Cather's sense of affirmation has changed. She has interwoven the underlying exuberance to the "Sanctum Sanctorum" from O Pioneers! with the questioning that she exuded in The Professor's House to emerge with a reserved respect for the land, and various beliefs.

Notes

1. Though I've seen no analysis on the subject, I think Cather's goal to make this story a legend is one reason she titled the book Death Comes for the Archbishop. Wagenknecht, for one, thinks her title is a disaster, one of her worst. But it is a typical title for medieval legends, the most familiar of which is Sir Thomas Mallory's L'Morte Darthur. That story, of course, is not about King Arthur's death but his legend, and the many stories of people associated with him; the same concept behind this book. Another reason for the title (and for the medieval title) could have been to evoke the sense that human life is fleeting, no matter one's position.

2. Historian R.D. Linder notes that during the 1920s, the Episcopal church was deeply involved in the ecumenical movement, to unify the divergent Christian churches by formally recognizing their common ground in rites and beliefs. The Catholic Church was interested in the same movement. Murphy points out that as the Catholic Church began to enter the modern world, it increasingly saw the need to encompass a diversity of cultures. This was a growing issue in Lamy's time, and more so in Cather's. Eventually, this need to accommodate differences within the church led to Vatican II, the Roman Catholic council of 1962-65 that brought sweeping reform to the church ("Caesura" 26-27).

3. Thomas M. Casey, a monk and religious scholar, says the key to Cather's startlingly successful depiction of Catholics in this book is that she understood the importance of icons in Catholicism. There are two approaches to religion, he says, iconic and aniconic. Aniconic religions

strictly forbid the representation of any deity, and believe in the existence of a deity through history and writings. Iconic religions believe in the presence of God in all things. Catholicism is an iconic religion. He further proposes that Cather herself saw the world in this light, and converted from the Baptist to the Episcopalian church to move from an aniconic to an iconic tradition.

4. Father Martínez was not as evil as Cather portrays him in this novel, according to Ted J. Warner. He was an important, beneficial figure in the history of New Mexico. He did many good things for Taos, including the establishment of schools for both boys and girls, and he was in favor of the separation between church and state, as well as religious freedom. "It is true that the old pastor of Taos exercised ecclesiastical function without the necessary authority, publicly criticized his bishop without due moderation, failed to submit to his proper superiors, and caused a short-lived schism. Jean Baptiste Lamy, however, emerges as not quite the kindly, gracious prelate Cather painted as Bishop Latour" (270). Warner portrays the conflict as one between the equally strong wills of a native priest and an Anglo-European priest. He concludes that Cather does a great disservice to Martínez's memory in this novel. But, I think, though she recounts rumors of seriously unethical behavior, such as cheating the Indians awaiting execution, she also describes him as a magnificent person and scholar with a deep emotional and devotional commitment.

CONCLUSION

Cather's work, even the most difficult, opens the locks on my prisoned spirit in the same way that the New Mexico air affects Bishop Latour. Most novels help me enter a different world or perspective, but Cather alone can not only engage me in a story but also make me feel somehow renewed. I become inspired that even people like the depressed Godfrey St. Peter can find a place of spiritual awakening at some point in their lives. She makes me believe in a spiritual realm, and believe that I can connect with it.

I have discovered in this study methods Cather uses to achieve this effect. She places spiritual moments—times when people feel connected to a greater power—at chosen spots in her works to help them stand out. These are the tips of icebergs I mentioned in my introduction, the evidence of a mysterious, powerful undercurrent running through her works. In O Pioneers!, a spiritual moment closes the opening section, preparing us for gradual ascension through the work, bringing both the characters and the reader closer and closer to a connection with a greater power. In The Professor's House, Cather piques our interest in spiritual moments by dropping them in here and there, and when she finally turns those moments into an open window in the "Tom Outland Story," we embrace it with relief. As that open window starts to close, and Tom's story begins to darken, we are reinvigorated by the Professor's spiritual moment that helps him rediscover his "original self." Death Comes for the Archbishop's opening chapter is infused with spiritual moments—

Catholic, pagan, elemental—that reemerge in the people we meet throughout the narrative, echoing and building a devotion to land, community and religion.

These moments do not stand alone. They occur in a underlying spiritual environment that Cather carefully creates with the use of repetition—repeating words, colors, images. This is strongest in O Pioneers! and Death Comes for the Archbishop, in which she suggests a primal power based in nature. The spiritual environment in The Professor's House is equally powerful, but it is an environment of questions: about the value and nature of modern society, about relationships, about success, about life itself. Repetition of key images such as the Great Divide, Mary, or empty human forms makes a spiritual current seem ever-present underneath Cather's narratives, creating a spiritual environment that fosters connection in particularly intense moments.

Finally, like a composer, Cather uses structure to set a mood, to promote an idea. In O Pioneers!, she sets the mood and the rhythm for the novel in the opening section of five chapters. They follow a progressive rhythm beginning with darkness and friendship, then death, then religion, then death, then spiritual connection with a power behind the elements. The progression creates a sense of spiritual fortitude against despair, built by friendship, religion and finally a sense of a spiritual mystery underlying natural elements. In The Professor's House, she places Augusta as a sparse but parenthetical figure to the entire story, so that the religion she represents becomes a kind of half-hearted answer to the

despair of the rest of the novel. In Death Comes for the Archbishop, Cather builds a sense of a fluid, growing, integrated community through the various stories she presents. Latour's memories of Vaillant become increasingly comforting to him, but he remembers less and less of France. In response to his thirst, his opening religious vision is of Jesus, alone on the cross. His closing religious vision is of the Mexican Holy family, helping another thirsty missionary. The Indians, silent at first, gradually occupy more and more of a place in the narrative until the final part of his life, in which all his American and European friends have died, and only Eusabio is left. Cather's structure thus elevates the personal faith community of New Mexico over the religious hierarchy of the church.

These methods Cather develops with increasing sophistication through the years. But she also undergoes a metamorphosis that changes the nature of the spirituality in her novels. When Cather began her life as a novelist, and was guided by the open feeling of the southwest and the method suggested to her by Henri Bergson, she put her faith in a creative force that human beings could connect with through their intuition, in harmony with the land. There was an overriding, rhetorical stance in Q Pioneers! that said, if you trust your intuition, express yourself the way you feel driven, don't permit yourself to listen to gossip, and allow nature to speak through you, you will live a life of happiness and joyful connection. Dark events will befall you, but you will at least have lived in joy. She expressed this faith through spirit-like Alexandra. In her mid-life crisis, this faith was shattered. The Professor's House questions every tenant of her previous faith. It offers religious devotion as a method for

getting through life, a pillar to hold on to, but it shows life to be an endless series of questions, and a process that ends in melancholy resignation.

Death Comes for the Archbishop sees more value in a religion fostered in a community. Religion becomes for Cather a stable, structured method of connecting to a primal power that includes stories and art and community. Cather's faith is very cautious, however. Her main character does not blindly follow the Church's rule and shut out the value of others, and her narrator does not have blind faith in any one character. Cather now has a reserve about her that makes her want to keep a careful distance, no matter how drawn she is to a particular religion. Only through the meaningful, touching stories of people's lives, and an allegiance to wild land is she able to soften this reserve.

I think also that the difference between the first and last novel in this study reflects the age of the writer. I feel like I've grown up myself with Cather during this study. The first time I read Death Comes for the Archbishop, I was struck mostly by the distant, cautious tone. But when I read it again after finishing my analysis of The Professor's House, I was much more deeply moved by stories that hadn't spoken to me before. I now see Cather in her novels searching for meaning, not finding it while writing The Professor's House, and then, less than a year after finishing that novel, finding meaning, watchful though it is, in Death Comes for the Archbishop. Though she rejected the church at first, the stories and traditions that come from its long history became increasingly helpful to Cather. Religion became a stable pillar for her. She could use Christianity as a foundation upon which to build a new spiritual vision, allowing for

her ambiguous feelings and yet blending space, place, and transcendence into a deep sense of meaning.

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