"What now?": Willa Cather's successful male professionals at middle age

Deena Michelle Baker

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"WHAT NOW?": WILLA CATHER'S SUCCESSFUL
MALE PROFESSIONALS AT MIDDLE AGE

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Deena Michelle Baker
December 2006
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A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

Scholarly criticism abounds examining Cather’s successful women but little study has been given to her accomplished men. This thesis examines three male characters that epitomize the American Dream of professional and material success but they find no contentment once they achieve it. This disillusionment, common in early 20th century America, is particularly so with her driven male professionals, Bartley Alexander (an architectural genius), Professor Godfrey St. Peter (a renowned scholar), and Clement Sebastian (a critically acclaimed, international opera singer). Cather situates these characters at middle age and at the peak of their professional careers which makes the examination of them an interesting study as to the effects of the encroaching modern age on successful men. This thesis begins with a brief overview of Cather’s work, including scholarly criticism of each novel; progresses to the examination of her successful male characters, and concludes with the investigation of Cather as a Modernist writer.
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To my biggest cheerleader. I miss you, Mom.
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CHAPTER ONE
LITERARY REVIEW

If Willa Cather had not been suddenly uprooted from her Virginia home at the age of ten and thrust into "an interminable journey" (Ma 5) to the challenging prairies of Nebraska, literature would be without some of its most shining American contributions. Cather's Nebraska childhood would later inspire her to write the prairie novels (O Pioneers!, My Antonia, Song of the Lark, A Lost Lady) written in the early half of her career. As an adult Cather traveled the Southwest and the memories of those visits would be incorporated into several novels, most notably The Professor's House and Death Comes for the Archbishop. In all Cather authored twelve novels, wrote several volumes of short fiction and many lesser known poems. Cather described her work as "deliberately unfurnished," as explained in her essay "The Novel Démeublé": "The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification. . . . 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. . . . that gives high quality to the novel"
Cather also artfully used the modernist narrative technique of juxtaposition, placing items, and even people, side by side evoking a response from the reader. Cather scholars have recently included her with the Modernist writers, but her literary placement is still up for debate, a significant point that will be addressed later. Regardless of the argument one embraces, Cather has been compared to some of America’s greatest authors and has earned a place among them.

As is often the case with her characters, Cather’s literary career was spurred by a fateful intercession. In 1890 she enrolled in the University of Nebraska with the intent to study medicine and the sciences but a perceptive English professor would change her mind. Unbeknownst to Cather, Professor Ebenezer Hunt submitted to the Nebraska State Journal an essay she had written on Thomas Carlyle (Woodress 72). Cather was not aware of his actions until she saw her essay in print and was thrilled. Six months later she would submit a second essay on her own behalf and it too was published. Cather was only seventeen years old and a freshman at the University of Nebraska but the fateful intervention of her professor changed her course
of destiny—she would be a writer, and a unique one at that.

Guy Reynolds, author of the four volume compendium of scholarship, Willa Cather: Critical Assessments, notes a peculiarity within Cather scholarship and critical opinion. He writes, "There is a continuity across the decades of Cather criticism in the centrality of O Pioneers!, My Antonia, The Professor’s House, and Death Comes for the Archbishop," but at the same time "there are striking discontinuities in the rise of fashion of certain other texts" (2). He explains it is quite common for an author’s later works to be overlooked but unique to Cather, her early ones are as well, especially the first.

Although warmly received at the time of publication, Alexander’s Bridge (published in 1912) is often dismissed by critics who insist it does not resemble any of Cather’s later work, and even she considered it a safe attempt to write what she believed people wanted to read. The novel’s love triangle alludes to familiar themes within typical romance novels: The married, forty-something Bartley Alexander has built the world’s most impressive bridges. In spite of his success he is restless and seeks to experience his vigorous youth again through an affair
with his old college flame, Hilda Burgoyne, and starts to live a double life. Of all those who disparage Alexander’s Bridge, Susan Rowsowski is perhaps the most scathing and asserts, “to discuss Alexander’s Bridge as a novel with Cather’s other novels is to engage in an exercise in futility . . . the action is conventional and the characters are flat . . . [it] is exactly what Cather later said it was—a studio picture” (35). Loretta Wasserman notes similar weaknesses in the text, but both admit there is a Catherian nuance in the story, “however hard to locate, a strain of something transcending the melodrama of the story” (Wasserman 294). What saves Alexander’s Bridge, writes Rosowski, is Cather’s creative telling of Alexander’s youthful self and the warring duality between it and Alexander’s responsible self. For the youthful self, “Cather used a voice that is another matter altogether, one that gathers in independence and power, until in the end it breaks through as her own” (37). Cather’s authorial voice will establish itself more strongly in O Pioneers!.

When writing O Pioneers! Cather followed the advice of Sarah Orne Jewett who admonished her to write about what she was familiar with, telling her to find “[her] own
quiet center of life, and write from that to the world” (Lee 22). Jewett also encouraged her to pull from experiences which “teased the mind,” and Cather’s Nebraska past gave her plenty of material. In *O Pioneers!* we find the motif of returning to childhood memories which will repeat itself in most of Cather’s works (Stouck 13). The novel centers around Alexandra Bergson’s heroic effort to build one of the richest farms on the Divide. The land is personified as stubborn and unyielding, but Alexandra’s nurturing will coax it into submission. Initially Cather had her doubts about the subject, as “the novel of the soil” (Woodress 237) had not yet become fashionable, but critics warmly embraced it. A long review in the *Chicago Evening Post* by Floyd Dell was quite complimentary of *O Pioneers!*: “It is touched with genius . . . it is worthy of being recognized as the most vital, subtle and artistic piece of the year’s fiction” (240). Readers welcomed the story where the emerging American mid-west was both the setting and a personified character in the book.

To create her breakthrough novel Cather episodically pieces together three previously written short stories: “Alexandra,” “The Bohemian Girl,” and “The White Mulberry Tree.” Throughout her career Cather continues pulling
from short stories to furnish her novels. Her first short story, published in 1892, was a bleak tale reminiscent of her farm days in Nebraska. "The Mahogany Tree" tells the story of a Bohemian immigrant who kills himself on his Nebraska farm (Woodress 77). The story would later become a significant portion of My Antonia (published in 1918), one of Cather's most acclaimed novels. "The Joy of Nelly Deane" would be integrated into Lucy Gayheart and "The Blue Mesa" would become the chapter "Tom Outland's Story" in The Professor's House. Readers and scholars alike have sometimes been critical of the disjointed chapters in her novels, but her experimental style is a technique common to the modernist writers that would follow her.

Cather often incorporated personal elements in her literary creations, pulling from private experiences to craft her stories. Edith Lewis affirms this and points out that the characters in her books become the symbols of her own understanding of life, representing "her loves and scorns, beliefs, appraisals, refusals" (24). Scholars have often noted, as Merrill Maguire Skaggs does, "that this most autobiographical of writers often leaves traces of her intellectual struggles and passions in the texts of her novels" (10). Thea Kronborg in Song of the Lark is
arguably Cather's most autobiographical character, paralleling her early years when she left Nebraska to become a writer. Thea puts up an ambitious fight to free herself from her small town trappings and becomes the acclaimed opera singer, "The Kronborg." Edith Lewis wrote that Willa Cather most resembled her character Thea Kronborg in drive, fearlessness and determination in establishing herself as a credible writer (39). Reviewers of Song of the Lark were enthusiastic but some complained the novel was over written (it was almost three times the length of O Pioneers!). It seems Cather agreed since in later years she would revise it, cutting out what she perceived to be the more flowery passages.

Cather not only incorporated parts of herself in the novels, but several of her characters were inspired by real life friends and family from her early years. My Antonia's title character is taken from the more pleasant memories of her Nebraska days. The female protagonist of her fourth novel is modeled after Annie Sadilek Pavelka, a Bohemian hired girl who worked for one of the neighbors (Woodress 289). In the novel Cather chose to tell a reminiscing tale from the viewpoint of a male narrator—a choice she would often make in the future and would later
have to defend. Cather received much criticism for her brave entry into masculine territory where she “could portray the psychological complexities of the opposite sex just as well as those men [James and Flaubert] had done,” and “By the literary rules of the day, it was a punishable offense” (Skaggs 8). Regardless of the patriarchal criticism, *My Antonia* is a modest commercial success and becomes one of Cather’s most admired. In the novel she is able to create a perfect balance of bitter and sweet, where “the cruel and ugly scenes and characters balance nicely the pleasant memories” (Woodress 294).

Cather’s propensity to model characters after people she knew was not always appreciated by those she wrote about. A striking example can be found in her fifth novel, *One of Ours*, in which Cather’s protagonist Claude Wheeler is modeled after her cousin, G. P. Cather, who was tragically killed in France while fighting the First World War. She read the letters he had written to his mother and was deeply moved. James Woodress writes that Cather was very close to G. P. but she felt, “He never could escape the misery of being himself except in action, and whatever he put his hand to turned out either ugly or ridiculous” (304). One only has to read *One of Ours* to
see the painful parallels between Claude Wheeler and G. P. Cather. Upon its release the novel was criticized as romanticizing the war, but Hermione Lee attributes this scorn to the "big male American writers" who "ferociously castigated" the war and felt a woman could never adequately portray the subject (167). Regardless of the criticism, One of Ours earned her a Pulitzer Prize in 1923 and gave her the financial security she desired.

Cather’s sixth novel, A Lost Lady, may have been her most popular and was made into a feature film. It was a best seller in the 20’s and critical opinion is highly favorable (Middleton 88). Again Cather will use a male narrator, Niel Herbert, to tell her story. It is from Niel’s eyes that we see the charming Marian Forrester and observe her interchanges with others in the novel. Cather parallels Marian’s decline with that of the pioneer spirit. Barry Chabot, in his book Writers for the Nation, accurately points out that A Lost Lady marks a time for Cather “whereby the focus gradually shifts to later stages in the history of this new land [Midwest]” (51), and “when Cather compares past and present, the latter is always found wanting” (63). Jo Ann Middleton, in her book Willa Cather’s Modernism, succinctly summarizes the novel’s
theme. It is “an indictment of modern values and a plea for a return to the old ways” (95). Of course longing for the old ways is not a new theme for Cather but it will manifest even more strongly in *The Professor’s House*.

The themes running through *The Professor’s House* are hauntingly familiar. It so closely resembles *Alexander’s Bridge* that James Woodress, Susan Rosowski and several other Cather scholars argue *The Professor’s House* suggests a reworking of the material taken from Cather’s first novel (Woodress 220). Both men long for the zeal and freedom of their early years and express regret for the sacrifices made in pursuit of success. In *The Professor’s House* Cather has honed her skill and articulates the Professor’s feelings through imagery and juxtaposition that was lackluster in *Alexander’s Bridge*. At this particular point in her career Cather, like her male protagonist Professor Godfrey St. Peter, is stuck in a middle-age milieu and she projects her feelings onto her main character. Cather’s autobiographical tendencies has been noted prior but James Woodress asserts *The Professor’s House* is psychologically “the most autobiographical novel Cather ever wrote” (222). The disillusioned and burned-out Professor laments his life of
the Cather needs for them to say, speaking more powerfully than mere description. Through the use of juxtaposition the reader can make the leap comparing Tom’s experiences to those of the Professor and the novel’s structure becomes artistic genius.

In *My Mortal Enemy* Cather will take her experimental form a step further, creating the quintessential minimalist Novel Démeublé (Middleton 118). In the brief novel she manages to throw out as much explanation as possible producing the “deliberately unfurnished” version of eighty-five pages. It can be argued that Cather went too far, for some critics complained the novel was underdeveloped (Woodress 388). The story’s main character, heiress Myra Driscoll, gives up her fortune to marry Oswald Henshawe. Myra grows bitter over the years because Oswald cannot support her in the manner to which she is accustomed. The couple live on the edge of poverty destroying each other with harsh words and arguments.

Critical response for *My Mortal Enemy* varied widely from scorn to enthusiastic praise (Middleton 118). The novel is certainly not a pleasant one in subject and theme, but the merit of its minimalist form must be noted.
Death Comes for the Archbishop is Cather’s ninth novel, written at the height of her success and one of her best. It also marks the end of her most intensely productive fifteen years. Published in 1927 the book was “a great critical triumph” and Cather believed it to be her best novel (Woodress 391). She experienced great pleasure in researching and writing the novel and would miss her beloved characters, Father Latour and Father Joseph. In Death Comes for the Archbishop Cather dedicates an entire book to her adored Southwest, recreating the lives of the French Archbishop and his vicar as they worked to establish the Catholic Church among the Indians of the harsh region. The two priests must travel extensively and experience much hardship as they work their way on their two white donkeys. The story is another tribute to Cather’s admired pioneers in which she is able to celebrate their vision, perseverance and accomplishments (Chabot 78). It is a joy to read about the two priests who balance each other in their distinctly different personalities and methods. Cather so convincingly portrays the spiritual components of the Catholic life that some thought she must have converted, but she remained an Episcopalian (Woodress 410).
Many Cather scholars have noted, as David Stouck does, a change in tone that separates her later works from the early prolific years. He also notes that later in life, Cather was "no longer driven by the Faustian urge to power through her writing," and took more time in completing her novels. Stouck asserts that Cather's last four novels reflect a philosophical change in Cather stating, "[she] came to view her lifetime dedication to art as placing selfish and consequently tragic limitations on the demands of life itself" (42). Nuances of the cost of success can be detected in many of Cather's novels but it is certainly pushed to the forefront in her later works. Merrill Maguire Skaggs, in her book, After the World Broke in Two: The Later Novels of Willa Cather, makes an exhaustive study of this time in Cather's life when things seemed to break apart, pointing to several events of significant loss and criticism that hurt her tremendously.

Cather found solace in religion, perhaps inspired by her time of writing Death Comes for the Archbishop, and religion would play a significant part in the following novel, Shadows on the Rock. On a brief visit to Quebec Cather was inspired by the city's churches, French
architecture and gardens that seemed to defy its Canadian surroundings. To center a story in a city she knew little about would be a new challenge. Hermione Lee, in her book Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up, points out that Shadows on the Rock is "the only one of her novels which used materials quite outside her experience, acquired through research" (292). Although Quebec was unfamiliar to Cather her explorations of it tapped similar emotions experienced when writing a preceding book. In Shadows on the Rock, as in Death Comes for the Archbishop, Cather pays tribute to the colonial enterprises of the church "insisting that religion is crucial to the successful founding of a colony worth living in" (Skaggs 142). Unfortunately, the temptation to compare the two novels left many readers feeling disappointed in her latest work. Some of her friends even detested it, complaining "as if they had ordered a highball and she had given them chicken broth" (Woodress 432). By this time in her career any new Cather release was highly anticipated but many hoped her next novel would have "more edge to it" (433).

Cather fans and critics were pleased that for her next release she would return to her Nebraska roots in order to write Obscure Destinies. In it we see a
softening in her characters, particularly in her older ones who have seen much loss and suffering over their long years. The book is actually a compilation of three short stories, "Neighbour Rosicky," "Old Mrs. Harris" and "Two Friends," all of which Cather wrote while her mother lay dying (Lee 309). Although the first two short stories end in the death of the title characters, prior to doing so they are able to pass on life affirming wisdom to the loved ones they leave behind. "Two Friends" is the least well-regarded of the three and is the story of a long-time friendship that is destroyed when the two men enter into a discussion on politics. James Woodress and Cather's close friend Zoe Akins agree that "Old Mrs. Harris" is the best of the three (441) but "Neighbour Rosicky" is "one of Cather's best known and most admired stories" (438). The chorus of praise for Obscure Destinies is short lived as the sentiment turns upon the publication of her penultimate novel, Lucy Gayheart.

Unlike Alexander's Bridge which was denounced by Cather herself, Lucy Gayheart is strongly disparaged by literary critics who complain it is an unsuccessful reworking of themes from Song of the Lark. Susan Rowsowski claims Lucy Gayheart is a "nightmare of
adolescence" (69), comparing the character of Lucy to the powerfully driven Thea Kronborg in *Song of the Lark*. Rowsowski also mistakenly asserts that the story resembles Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and is a dark Gothic tale in which the character Sebastian feeds off Lucy's youthfulness. Sally Peltier Harvey counters Rosowski's assertion stating that "Lucy's identity problem starts long before she meets Sebastian, and continues long after his death" (122).

Regardless of how the reader perceives Sebastian and Lucy, in Cather studies *Lucy Gayheart* appears to be the novel everyone loves to hate (Williams 31), charging it is overly romantic and contrived. Critics also complain of Lucy's weak and irresolute character, a point Cather herself will acknowledge and tire of. Perhaps that is why she is killed off so early in the novel.

Another complaint is that the novel reads like a trite dime-store novel. David Stouck, however, counters that to perceive *Lucy Gayheart* as such is to ignore the last third of the book. He explains: "The novel is built around three tales of love, three tales of remorse and reprise" (45). Linda Chown echoes Stouck's observations stating that in *Lucy Gayheart* each of the three characters (Lucy, Sebastian and Gordon) encounters a "trauma of self
confrontation," and that the novel is "more than a piece of nostalgia" (120). Chown's and Stouck's assertions are similar to what James Woodress (370) said of The Professor's House: The stories of Lucy, Sebastian and Gordon are a "three part sonata," an artistic harmony of composition (Chown 124). One must keep in mind that in each of Cather's novels she experiments with narrative technique and that may have been what she was doing with the conventional love story format. Cather was annoyed with popular love story novels and it would be very much like her to defy the expectations of the traditional format she loathed.

In Cather's final novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl (written in 1940), she returns to her original southern roots but the novel takes on an unexpected topic—slavery, and reverses the traditional elements of such a narrative. Cather creates a slave-girl protagonist, Nancy, who is unmercifully ruled by a white invalid mistress, not a whip bearing man as typical. Her mistress' husband is sympathetic of Nancy's position but does not rape her as men as slave-owning men are often portrayed. Nancy escapes, marries a Canadian and acquires financial success. Skaggs speculates that Cather deliberately
frustrated the expectations of her audience (172). Edith Lewis agrees that the book is “uncharacteristic” of Cather in that it does not have the usual qualities one most looks for in her novels, but argues it has “very strongly the quality of permanence, of survival; and that as time goes on, it will take a higher place in any estimate of Willa Cather’s work” (185). Perhaps Lewis’ is right as lately even Toni Morrison has made note of it.

Although the tone of Cather’s later works is much more melancholy than her earlier novels, she does not leave the reader in a morose dead end where the suffering of life is unbearable. Instead she uses her characters, usually the elder, more minor ones, to encourage us on. Merrill Maguire Skaggs sees the parallels, also stating that in Cather’s later novels “she very slowly works out her own salvation . . . to find a way to weld her world whole again” after her world seems to have broken in two (10). Cather shares with us in her story “Old Mrs. Harris” the conclusion she may have come to herself: “The end is nothing, the road is all,” admonishing the reader to appreciate life and look at it as a journey, not a destination.
A similar empathetic message can be found in Lucy Gayheart. Sally Peltier Harvey sees the novel as a "plea for compassion" (128) that can best be seen in the character of Mrs. Ramsay who was once aloof, rigid and demanding but is now, later in life, changed—a softening has taken place. The older Mrs. Ramsay is more interested in people and treats Lucy with a "divine compassion." Mrs. Ramsay’s words to Lucy echo what the older Cather might say to the budding artist, "I don’t like to see young people with talent take it too seriously. Life is short; gather roses while you may. . . Make it as many as you can, Lucy. Nothing really matters but living" (LG 139). Mrs. Ramsay’s admonition is poignant, endearing and compelling. Lucy Gayheart reflects the change in Cather’s own philosophy for in her later years she came to the conviction “that not art but only life truly matters in the end” (Stouck 41).

Over the years Cather received a fair share of criticism for her experimental minimalist style (Middleton 11) and male asserting narrative technique, but there is little doubt much of the criticism can be attributed to sexual politics, not the failure of her talent (Chabot 48). We can hear Cather’s lament in the cynical words of
Godfrey St. Peter in The Professor’s House: “No body saw that he was trying to do something quite different—they merely thought he was trying to do the usual thing, and had not succeeded very well” (PH 22). Skaggs summarizes the problem for Cather: “Repeatedly readers have dismissed her exact, meticulous sentences as oversimplifications and her controlling intelligence as simplistic sentimentality. Her precision has seemed too certain to hold attention” (11). Cather personally defended her writing style in an interview with Latrobe Carroll in 1921, stating that she writes in such a way as to “make things and people tell their own story simply by juxtaposition, without any persuasion or explanation on my part” (Leddy 182). This vacancy of explanation has led critics to speculate that Cather wrote in a unique code and “many attempts to find the concealed key to Cather’s narrative locks” still take place today (Benfey 141).

Cather has often been criticized by other artists for not entering into the political conversation that demanded change, particularly pushing America toward Socialism. Although not overtly political, she does make her views known, especially in The Professor’s House. In it Cather inserts her own commentary on materialism, scientific
advancement and religion as observed in an early 20th
century America that struggled with its rapid evolution
into the modern world. St. Peter tells his students
“Science hasn’t given us any new amazements, except of the
superficial kind” (PH 55), arguing that science generates
“ingenious toys” but they are just a distraction from the
real problems of the day. St. Peter launches harsh
criticism at the clamoring for materialistic excess, which
he calls the “orgy of acquisition,” (135) and is pained by
its vulgar display. In St. Peter’s words we can hear
Cather’s own position on the changes taking place in
America in early 20th century. For her it was a historical
breaking in two of the idealized past from the brooding
present.

The reflective backward glance at the past permeates
many of Cather’s novels, a characteristic that has gained
her criticism for being too nostalgic (Middleton 31). In
her book of essays, Not Under Forty, she calls herself one
of the “backward,” explaining that for her it is more
gratifying to look back than to look forward. That is not
to say that she did not look to the future, but “she never
lost the past in the present — and sometimes the beauty
and stimulus of the new only heightened her nostalgia and
regret of the old" (Lewis 57). Sally Peltier Harvey also notes Cather's characteristic dual perspective, in which she keeps "one eye lovingly, almost elegiacally, on the past, and the other — usually a hopeful eye — on the future" (3). Harvey writes that Cather was concerned with the influences Freud and Darwin were having at the time and sought to find a way to rescue the American Dream of individual opportunity and achievement that these influences were eroding. At times, Cather found it difficult to see a place for herself in the rapidly changing world where materialism and greed seemed to rule the day.

Willa Cather's meticulous style, inventive use of juxtaposition and the tight structure of her "deliberately unfurnished" novels makes her, as Guy Reynolds asserts, "a writer's writer" (1). Although not all her novels were warmly embraced, a subject that will be addressed in the next chapter, even the lesser known are more frequently appearing in critical commentary. Skaggs summarizes the problem for Cather: "repeatedly readers have dismissed her exact, meticulous sentences as oversimplifications and her controlling intelligence as simplistic sentimentality. Her precision has seemed too certain to hold attention"
Cather, herself, was pleased with what she was able to accomplish in her life and at seventy years old wrote to friend Zoe Akins “that she had gotten from life much of what she wanted and had also been able to escape, for the most part what she strongly didn’t want—too much money, too much publicity, too many people to meet” (Harvey 137). Many of Cather’s characters will fight to maintain the same balance between life and art, public and private self, past and present. In her art and in her life Cather crafted both to be what she wanted. Her novels reveal her deeply philosophical confrontation with life and as she worked out the answers on her own she shared them with her readers.
CHAPTER TWO

"WHAT NOW?": WILLA CATHER'S SUCCESSFUL MALE PROFESSIONALS AT MIDDLE AGE

Through determined diligence, hard work and the fortunate courtesies of fate, many of Willa Cather's talented characters achieve accomplishments of epic proportions. Scholarly criticism abounds examining Cather's successful women, but little study has been given to her accomplished men. Three male characters stand out as they epitomize the American Dream of high achievement and material success, but find no contentment once they obtain it. This modernist angst of disillusionment, common in early 20th century America, is particularly so with her driven male professionals, Bartley Alexander (an architectural genius), Professor Godfrey St. Peter (a renowned, published scholar), and Clement Sebastian (a critically acclaimed, international opera singer). Cather situates these characters at middle age and at the peak of their professional careers. Contrary to the fulfillment expected of success, the men find no pleasure in their achievements but are instead preoccupied with regret and
apprehension for the future—“What now?” seems to be their lingering question.

It is interesting to note that all three novels, *Alexander’s Bridge*, *The Professor’s House*, and *Lucy Gayheart* were a commercial success for Cather, regardless of what she or literary critics might have argued against them. Although Cather tried to distance herself from her first novel, claiming it was a superficial book, Stephen Tennant perceptively points out that in *Alexander’s Bridge* “All the books that were yet unwritten are implicit in the narrative of this intensely felt short story” (*WCW* xxii). In *Alexander’s Bridge*, as in *The Professor’s House* and *Lucy Gayheart* which followed, Cather aesthetically takes a hard look “at the social landscape in which her strong individuals sought their identities and rewards” and points in retrospect to the “unanticipated burdens of success [that] have complicated [their] existence” (Gerber 74).

Also important is the dichotomy Cather presents of public and private self. The struggle between her characters’ conflicted “other” self that must “balance self goals with responsibilities to others” (Harvey 7) presses her characters to make decisions they often
painfully regret. Cather’s successful professional men look to the past for comfort and long for the uncomplicated early days of freedom and vigor. Not willing to succumb to a future with no pleasure, they “quest for some mode of redemption or release” (Stouck 47), making selfish and destructive attempts to find personal fulfillment and reconcile their emotional void.

Bartley Alexander is an architect who has built the world’s most impressive bridges. His current project is so grand that it will challenge his ability and the laws of physics. Questioning whether the demanding schedule and accomplishments really mean anything, he is restless and seeks to experience his vigorous youth again through an affair with a past love, Hilda Burgoyne. Alexander lives a double life – his mature self lives at home with his wife and his young, impulsive self lives in Europe with his mistress. Alexander’s duality weighs heavily upon his conscience, and he is in anguish as to what to do.

Symbolic of Alexander’s own life, his incredible bridge in progress cannot withstand the strain demanded of it and collapses, ironically drowning Alexander who is on it at the time.
Godfrey St. Peter has recently completed his all-consuming life’s work, a multi-volume history, *The Spanish Adventurers in North America*. It is highly acclaimed, becoming the gold standard of study and earns him a considerable sum of money. St. Peter’s wife uses the money to build a new house for the family but the Professor defiantly lingers in the old house, in an upper room he has occupied as his study. He spends increasingly more time alone reflecting on the past and vicariously living through his memories of a beloved brilliant student, Tom Outland. While sequestered in his upper room study, he falls asleep and is almost killed by gas fumes. Subconsciously he knows what is happening but he makes no effort to save himself. Fate intervenes, however, and he is saved by the family’s faithful seamstress.

Clement Sebastian is “another of Cather’s unhappily married husbands,” (Woodress 459) approaching fifty and weary of life. Although he is very busy with prestigious concert engagements, he is preoccupied with thoughts of regret, aging and death. His vigor is sparked, however, when his regular accompanist must leave for a season and he hires the young Lucy Gayheart, with whom he falls in love. The love affair is intense for both parties but
short-lived. Sebastian is called away to Europe where he drowns in a boating accident. Sebastian’s contemplations on aging and death become an ironic foreshadowing of his fate.

Cather gives careful detail in presenting her successful male protagonists, insisting the reader note these are not ordinary men, but the best and the brightest of their fields. For her architect Cather chooses the epic name of kings and conquerors, Alexander. Bartley Alexander is a big man, "glowing with strength and cordiality and rugged, blond good looks" who "looked as a tamer of rivers ought to look." His head "seemed as hard and powerful as a catapult," with shoulders "strong enough in themselves to support a span of any one of his ten great bridges," (5). Alexander’s charismatic personality exudes a confidence and energy that matches his striking appearance. Others are drawn to his "natural force" (9) and he doesn’t lack for friends. Alexander excels intellectually, as well. His visionary architectural talent inspires him to build ten exceptional bridges that are photographed and admired around the world.

Professor Godfrey St. Peter is a tall, handsome and imposing figure with "hawk like" features and "wicked
looking eyebrows" (PH 5) that evoked fear and awe in his students. His name also projects an omniscient pervading authority. “Professor,” “God,” and “St. Peter” evoke feelings of a critical, judging eye. The statuesque St. Peter’s head is “high, polished and hard as bronze” alluding to his hardened intellectualism. His long brown face, black hair and broad swimmer’s shoulders give him the appearance of a Spaniard, quite similar to the brave Spanish explorers he had given his life in study. For fifteen years St. Peter will teach at the university by day and fiercely work on his Spanish Adventurers in North America by night. He will travel the world in an effort to research his tremendous project and seems to have endless energy while driven to complete it. St. Peter unwaveringly works to accomplish what he calls “this dazzling, this beautiful, this utterly impossible thing” (16), resulting in an eight volume treatise that gains international attention, awards and $5000 (a sizeable amount of money for its time).

Acclaimed international opera singer Clement Sebastian also embodies all that is expected of an artist of his stature. The reader is introduced to him as he exits the Art Museum of Chicago, pausing next to the
brass lion statues as if he too belongs in the large building that houses the immortality of art. He is "a very big man; tall, heavy, broad-shouldered," and "sheathed in a black broadcloth and a white waistcoat" (24). Lucy Gayheart, the female protagonist, commenting upon his appearance states admirably, "Yes, a great artist should look like that" (24). Sebastian's talent is equal to his sophisticated presence. Lucy's music professor tells her Sebastian is "very exceptional" and "a man one couldn't afford to miss" (23). Sebastian sings with remarkable diction and an elevation of style so inspiring it evokes "a kind of enlightenment, like day break" (25). Living above the everyday in his sixth floor apartment, Lucy notes that nothing came near enough to Sebastian to "tarnish his personal elegance" (38).

Although the men appear to have it all and be everything one would expect of great genius, Cather reveals the men are not immutable. Bartley Alexander exudes strength and charisma but lacks the moral fortitude to face middle age courageously and stay true to his wife. Cather alludes to his cowardice when referring to the "yellow light" (60) he works under. Hilda also calls him a coward because he puts the responsibility of ending the
relationship on her (49). Alexander’s strength of presence may be what he exudes on the outside, but it is only a surface façade, as friend Lucius Wilson had feared.

St. Peter’s transgression is not an extramarital affair, but familial neglect. Over the years St. Peter makes it his ritual to withdraw himself to his upper room study and spend hours alone there, away from the domestic scene below. A sad testament to his distance is revealed when he remembers a time when his daughter, Kitty, was stung by a bee and her fingers were “puffed up like wee pink sausages” (PH 73). Although there is no one in the house but him to assist her, St. Peter praises his daughter that she did not bother him for sympathy but waited till he came out of his study several hours later. In another insensitive incident, while alone with his wife at the opera and having a rare intimate conversation, she confides to him “it wasn’t the children that came between us” (78), but her revelation gets no response from St. Peter. He is “deeply ignorant of the private fears and aspirations of others” (Rosowski 131). Like his dilapidated old house that is falling down from disrepair, the professor’s family has suffered from his lack of attention. Mrs. St. Peter is lonely and spends much time
with her sons-in-law, often flirtatiously. St. Peter's daughters are estranged and engaged in a bitter battle in which the wealthy sister mocks the other's modest home and apparel. St. Peter withdraws to his study and does little to remedy his familial problems, even though he is very critical of them. As his name implies, St. Peter, like Saint Peter who resides in heaven to judge the deeds of human kind, sits above his family in his upper room study passing judgment on the people below.

Clement Sebastian chooses to put great physical distance between himself and his wife, continuously traveling while she remains home. He lives alone with his male valet who will do all the tasks of a wife and demand nothing of him, allowing Sebastian to maintain his roving freedom. Sebastian may be "free" from his wife but his lack of close relationships leaves him feeling lonely and isolated. Sebastian, like Thea Kronborg in Cather's Song of the Lark, has sacrificed much for his art, so much so that, like Thea, his artistic life "is more interesting than [his] own life," and the "artistic life is the only one in which [he] is free, or even very real" (SL xxxii). David Stouck asserts that Cather's last four novels (of which Lucy Gayheart is one) reflect a philosophical change
in Cather: "[she] came to view her lifetime dedication to art as placing selfish and consequently tragic limitations on the demands of life itself" (42). This sacrificial quality in the life of an artist is also implied in Clement Sebastian’s name. Clement is a common name for saints and popes (six in all). It is also the name of Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD), the Greek theologian and martyr credited to be the early Father of the Church. Sebastian is the name of a third century Roman Christian, also a martyr, and a favorite subject for Italian painters. Having the name of two martyred saints Cather foreshadows Clement Sebastian’s fate: He will sacrifice much and be a martyr for his art.

Unlike the saints he is named after, Sebastian is not as pious as his name implies. In an effort to restore his youthful vigor he initiates an affair with his young accompanist, Lucy Gayheart. Susan Rosowski argues that Sebastian and Lucy’s relationship echoes that of the gothic novel, Dracula, in which “the dark master of the castle” feeds off Lucy (223), draining her of her youth and life-blood (226). Sebastian admits to himself that “it was dangerous to go for sympathy to a young girl who was in love with one” (LG 67), but “going for sympathy” is
far more benign than the succubus intent Rosowski insists is Sebastian's. If anything noteworthy is to be argued for the gothic analogy it would be that James Mockford, "a sort of personification of death" (Woodress 463), is feeding off Sebastian and Mockford's clamoring leads to Sebastian's death, not Lucy's.

David Stouck makes the dubious assertion that "Clement Sebastian's love for the heroine is presented as the most positive relationship in the novel" (47), but he has forgotten Sebastian keeps Lucy at his beck and call, certainly not a position one hopes for in a positive relationship. Sebastian entertains his affections for Lucy only when he acknowledges she is not one to manipulate or take advantage of him. Sebastian cares for Lucy because her love for him "seemed complete in itself, not putting out tentacles all the while... He didn’t believe she would ever be guilty of those uncatalogued, faint treacheries" (67). Sebastian's reticence in relationships reflects what Cather believed to be the problem with romantic love: "that the misery of failure in human relationships could only be transcended by relinquishing the desire for power and possessions in both human and material terms" (Stouck 47). In her innocence,
Lucy is able to love Sebastian with no strings attached—thus she embodies the most positive aspect of love.

Even though the men seek emotional fulfillment at the expense of others, Cather is careful in portraying her characters as complex entities and lets us in on the emotional angst of her protagonist men. At the height of their success, Alexander, St. Peter and Sebastian have similar feelings — the road to success was much more fulfilling than achieving it. These feelings were true of Cather as well. Leon Edel, in his speech of 1960 titled, "Willa Cather: The Paradox of Success," notes the connection Cather has with her successful characters:

"For her the past was splendid; the present was dull . . . the only thing that had possessed fundamental meaning for Willa Cather were her striving years" (261). As we can see in Alexander, St. Peter and Sebastian, "when the struggle ceases, there seems to go with it all reason for pursuing anything new" (262). They would echo what Cather said herself, "success is never so interesting as struggle—not even to the successful" (256). This "paradox of success" brings disillusion and regret for the many sacrifices made in the pursuit of it. It also brings what Linda Chown calls "the trauma of self confrontation" (120) that can be
debilitatingly painful. By revealing the inner turmoil of the men, Cather helps to maintain the reader's sympathy, if only partially, for her protagonists and their bad choices.

Bartley Alexander's "trauma of self confrontation" comes in the form of a "shadowy companion," which is the presence of his invigorated young self that his affair with Hilda has reawakened. Alexander is exuberant at being reunited with his care-free and youthful individual self, which he calls "his own continuous identity...the feeling of one's self in one's own breast," (22). It is this revived young self and its invigorating presence that Alexander cannot refuse, although he certainly does try.

At first, Alexander does not give himself over to his hedonistic other self and vacillates on his decision to see Hilda again. The mature Alexander knows the visit comes with significant risk but the impetuous and ever strengthening shadowy companion presses him on. Alexander will attempt to subdue his pleasure-driven other self engaging in a battle of survival where only one can win. Much like the stormy voyages Alexander takes across the Atlantic in transition from one shore to another, the raw, dark and beating weather at sea is analogous to what is
taking place in Alexander's psyche. In order to quiet his thrashing mind he allows himself to sink into the vast grayness on deck and push all thought away as he "lay in a blessed gray oblivion" (42). In this state Alexander is finally able to sleep as the storm outside and within him continues on.

Unlike Alexander, Professor St. Peter doesn't want to relive the past, but wants to be left alone to remember it. While his family is away in Europe St. Peter has the luxury of a summer alone in his old house where he spends time in mental dissipation reminiscing of his boyhood days on Lake Michigan. Much like Alexander, St. Peter is reunited with a "vivid consciousness" of early self (240) which he believes to be his uncompromised real self on which the professional, married one was grafted in. St. Peter never considered that this original self could return to him and now he must make a decision. Scott, St. Peter's son-in-law, playfully teases the hermit-like behavior of his father-in-law, poignantly asking the literal and figurative question that centers the novel, "where are you going to live?" (247). Echoing Alexander's plight, the Professor cannot maintain a double life forever; eventually there must be a choice. Also
paralleling Alexander’s struggle is the storm imagery Cather employs while the warring selves of St. Peter battle it out through the night. Prior to falling asleep he comes to the conclusion that at his core he is destined to be solitary and regards death as “eternal solitude . . . release from every obligation,” and is grateful it is so (248). Although St. Peter says he never gave a thought to suicide, he prefers death over living in his new house with his wife.

Guy Reynolds argues that “the melancholy felt by St. Peter, [and I would add Alexander], results in part from a massive historical dislocation as they move from the small town. . . to the modernity of Progressivism” (24). Alexander often affectionately refers to his young days on the western prairie and for St. Peter his youth on Lake Michigan. As successful adults they feel pressed and stifled in a life where “a million details drink you dry” (AB 7), and their days are now spent “fighting bureaucratic battles” (Reynolds 24) that produce very little of any importance. Their idealism is at odds with an increasingly cynical world in which they “seek to recover a sense of value in a world where value is increasingly scorned” (Reynolds 31). Much like many
Americans in the early 20th century, the men come to realize the happiness promised to the self-made man of the modern age rings hollow, or as St. Peter puts it, is “insupportable.”

Perhaps Alexander, St. Peter and Sebastian idealized the past because their creator did also. Cather lamented the loss of the American pioneer and the changes the modern world had brought. This is most apparent in her novel, *The Lost Lady*, where the young male protagonist, Niel Herbert, lives in a time of transition, witnessing the death of the pioneer and the emergence of the ruthless entrepreneur. The modern age produced new inventions which made life easier but it also brought the ideas of Darwin, Marx and Freud whose theories threatened the Judeo Christian foundations of the country. In St. Peter’s lecture to his students Cather artfully gives voice to the transition and instability felt in the early 20th century:

I don’t think much of science as a phase of human development. It has given us a lot of ingenious toys; they take our attention away from the real problems, of course, and since the problems are insoluble, I suppose we ought to be grateful for the distraction . . . Science
hasn’t given us any new amazements . . . It hasn’t given us any richer pleasures, as the Renaissance did, nor any new sins—not one! Indeed, it takes our old ones away. It’s the laboratory, not the Lamb of God. (55)

St. Peter asserts that the problems encountered in the new industrial modern age are insoluble and arguably the internal struggle within himself is equally so. The idealized past of pioneer America cannot be relieved and neither can the springtime of individual youth. America cannot return to the old lost coherence just as St. Peter cannot return to his early days of writing his grand history or the days when his young family was unified and loved each other.

There is little internal dialog used to reveal Sebastian’s feelings; however, when Cather does inform us she does so very darkly and the information is often given through the eyes of young Lucy. Sebastian’s bleak outlook mirrors Cather’s for she had experienced several recent losses just prior to writing the novel. Cather began writing *Lucy Gayheart* in the Spring of 1933, after the loss of both parents and the sale of her childhood Red Cloud home (Rosowski 223). In a letter to friend Zoe
Akins, Cather confides to her friend how deeply she felt the loss of so many loved ones: “After one is forty-five it rains death. After fifty the storm grows fiercer” (O’Brien 147). Susan Rosowski believes that “Cather gave to Sebastian her weariness,” (231) and we can detect her care-worn demeanor in his outlook on life—a life he feels is too full of good-byes.

When Lucy secretively observes Sebastian in the city she notes he is always by himself, and that he has few, if any, friends. In the studio he is kind and professional, but outside he seems to her stern and indifferent, walking about with a pervading melancholy that lies under the surface. Lucy feels he seems “disappointed in something—or in everything” (LG 44), and she is understatedly correct. Sebastian, on a rare Sunday afternoon with no pressing obligations to block out his emotional emptiness, reflects on the whole of his life but can bring up nothing worth remembering. On another occasion, after attending the funeral of a singer who suddenly died he again retreats into deep reflection, concluding that “everything seemed to have gone wrong” in his life. Although Sally Peltier Harvey asserts that Sebastian finds solace “in the larger community of human kind to which he feels
connected” (126) this is contrary to what Sebastian, himself concludes: “Life had so turned out so that now, when he was nearing fifty, he was without a country, without a home, without a family, and very nearly without friends” (65).

Along with Lucy’s observations of Sebastian, Cather also uses juxtaposition to convey his feelings of disappointment and regret. Sebastian’s remorseful backward glance is in contrast to Lucy’s expectant look forward to the rich life offered in serving art. Also in contrast is Sebastian’s loss of vitality to Lucy’s fresh, ever-moving energy (Chown 123). For Sebastian, it is Lucy’s optimism, expectant potentiality for the future and the zeal to take on the day that Sebastian misses most in himself. Similar to what Hilda brings to Alexander, Lucy’s presence ignites a “revival of interest” in life for him, and he exclaims “something good has come back to me” (102). The “something” is not his youthful self, but a renewed desire for life.

Unlike Alexander and St. Peter, Sebastian is never reunited with his old self and laments that his youth, like a volatile essence, was gone into thin air and he was left “staring into the empty jar.” He had always
entertained the disillusioned belief that some day "he would waken some morning and step out of bed the man he used to be" (65), but as he stares out the window at the storm outside he reluctantly embraces the fact that his youth is irrevocably gone. His "empty jar" metaphor implies that there is nothing of Sebastian’s original self left, and like an evaporating gas, once the lid is off it cannot be brought back. Although embracing this fact may be a sad epiphany, Sebastain is able to “face himself truthfully and courageously” (Harvey 127), a brave leap the other men have difficulty making.

The emotional state of the three male characters reflects feelings of isolation and loneliness, but many of the circumstances that produce these feelings are self imposed as they further distance themselves from the women they once passionately loved. The men maintain an affectionate regard for the early days with their spouses, but later in life feel little sentiment for or obligation to them. As Cather wrote in her essay, "Katherine Mansfield," each of the men “is trying to escape and break free of the affections about him,” (NUF 136) and are willing to emotionally dismiss their wives from their future. This is not a new theme for Cather, as she often
portrays romantic love as waning and disappointing. James Woodress points this out in her biography: Cather "regarded romantic love as an over-indulgence of emotion" (386) which often ends disastrously in her novels.

Even though each of the men acknowledges their wives had a significant impact on establishing their polished careers, they want to escape the domestic ties that bind them. Although the early memories of their wives are pleasant and beautiful, the men have a souring of their affections toward them after witnessing what they believe to be an insurmountable flaw. The men no longer think as highly of the women in their lives as they had prior. In the case of St. Peter and Sebastian, they are openly resistant, even hostile, to the demands of their spouses, but Alexander is able to maintain civility and sentiment toward his wife, even if he no longer wants to be with her.

Reflecting on their twelve years together, Alexander believes their married life had been beautiful. Upon meeting Winifred Pemberton Alexander is captivated by the woman who regally embodies beauty, intelligence, and ability. In Winifred, Alexander finds the moral strength and resolve he lacks in himself, but the steady,
stabilizing force Winifred personifies is also what Alexander wants to escape. There is little frivolity in his wife and she lacks the "energy of youth" that Hilda embodies. Alexander is willing to turn his back on the strong woman that held him up above his own limitations, the one he called upon when overwhelmed with pressing tribulations. Winifred’s empowerment of Alexander follows a frequent theme in Cather’s novels—no great person gets there all by him or her self. Ironically, Alexander will find escape from Winifred through the woman he painfully jilted, the woman he wrongly perceives to offer a romantic relationship without obligation.

Sebastian chooses for his wife the daughter of Sir Robert Lester, a famous international conductor of significant wealth and reputation. Sebastian recalls pleasant memories of the early days with his wife, speaking of her animatedly (LG 44), but he is evasive about their current relationship and uses his agent to address her concerns. He pinpoints the souring of his affections toward his wife to be rooted in her harsh treatment of an orphan boy they took in after the boy’s parents were suddenly killed. Sebastian was quite fond of the boy but his wife’s cruel actions toward him force
Sebastian to send him away to boarding school. Sebastian now feels his relationship with his wife is best with the Atlantic Ocean between them. When Lucy asks him if he ever got any pleasure out of being in love, "He shook his head slowly, frowned with his brows and smiled with his lips. 'N-n-no, not much'" (58).

Neither Alexander nor Sebastian treasure their young lovers as much as the feelings of restored vigor and excitement they ignite in them. When Alexander makes the decision to leave Winifred it is not Hilda that beckons him, but his awakened "old sense of power" (68). When anticipating his trips away Alexander makes no reference to Hilda, but looks forward to being reunited with his young self of energy and promise who is most strongly manifested when away from his life in Boston. Sebastian is also reinvigorated by his affair with Lucy, but his attachment to her is not nearly as strong as hers to him. Susan Rosowski counters this opinion arguing, "Sebastian clings to Lucy as desperately as his accompanist Mockford will later cling to him" (223), but Rosowski overlooks his quick departure from Lucy. Sebastian thanks Lucy for restoring his zeal for life and acknowledges she has even sparked a desire to do another ambitious operatic tour.
Before Lucy can fully take it in, Sebastian announces he has accepted a last minute offer to sing in Europe and will be leaving her. Sebastian quickly leaves for France with his moveable, all-male pseudo household. Alexander and Sebastian may appreciate the passion that can be ignited by romantic interludes, but they continue to assert themselves as solitary beings, just as Professor Godfrey St. Peter will also vehemently argue is to be his future existence.

St. Peter would also like to be free from the tentacles of his wife and daughters. As Margaret Doane points out in her article, “In Defense of Lillian St. Peter,” the novel’s strong anti-female bias is glaringly apparent: For St. Peter, the dressing forms of his wife and daughters evoke memories of “disappointments” and “cruel biological necessities” (13), he cannot fathom that Augusta would have any aspirations other than being a seamstress, and he perceives his wife’s efforts on behalf of their sons-in-law as a “game” of manipulation that women feel they must play (37). The Professor’s comments on the dressing forms in the room are symbolic of his feelings about women, particularly those of his wife: “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... It presented the most unsympathetic surface imaginable" (8). The description conveys feelings of deception and betrayal, that what he had expected of the ample form (his wife) was anything but the soft and sympathetic breast he anticipated. Much like Sebastian’s circumstances, it is Lillian’s harsh treatment of an orphaned young man under their care that turns St. Peter affections away from his wife. Also annoying to St. Peter, who has always liked to “impose his order on the things about him” (Maxfield 75), is his lack of control as his wife builds a new house where she is the one dictating when and what goes where.

Unlike the other men, St. Peter does not seek the company of another but chooses the solitude of his old study as his refuge. He bitterly laments his attachment to an all female household and makes every effort to avoid “that perilous journey down through the human house” (PH 18), which could suck the life and enthusiasm from him. For St. Peter, “women are representative of a mundane world that destroys artistic capabilities” (Doane 299). Prior to being reunited with his young, original self, St.
Peter considered their presence a necessity requiring tolerance, but now he sees no place for himself in that feminine world. Although there is much blame to be left at the feet of St. Peter, there is also a substantial reason for his emotional departure.

Several years ago when his daughters were young, a rugged, tall and fine-looking young man suddenly introduced himself while the Professor was working in his garden (an image that will repeat itself in St. Peter’s dreams). His tan face and manly, mature voice was quite different from the college boys he taught at the university. Little did the Professor know that the young Tom Outland would become his most intelligent student, closest friend, and his “romance” of the imagination (PH 234). Tom will also make his daughter, Rosamond, a millionaire by leaving his ground-breaking patent with her prior to his being killed in the war.

Although the Professor enjoys nice things, he cannot stomach his daughter’s materialistic “orgy of acquisition” (PH 135) and the commercial enterprises of her husband done in Tom’s name. Lillian, the Professor’s wife, also benefits from the travel and expensive gifts the couple give her, making her complicit in St. Peter’s eyes,
especially since the money has destroyed his daughters' once close relationship with each other. St. Peter feels betrayed by his family's corruption of Tom's memory, becoming resentful and angry at what he perceives to be their "convert[ing] his bones into a personal asset" (PH 36). He cannot bear to hear his family speak of Tom Outland or their claims on his memory spoken in their grasping "vulgar tongue" (PH 50). In Rosamond and Louie, Cather portrays the new materialists of the modern age who give little consideration to an item's intrinsic value, cheapening its history and significance. Louie holds Tom's precious Indian blanket up to his chest and tells St. Peter it would make a lovely house coat for himself. The stunned Professor reminds Louie that it was a treasured item of Tom's. Tom cherished the artifacts he brought out of the cliff dwellings of the Southwest, so much so that instead of selling them, he'd rather give his precious clay pots and turquoises away to someone who would appreciate them. In contrast, Rosamond and Louie convert the treasured items into the monument of materialism they are building as their future residence, being so bold as to call it "Outland." Like St. Peter, Cather "railed against the consumerism that she saw as taking over
society in the 1920’s” and felt it denigrated the standards of quality on all fronts (Stout 3). The Professor is deeply hurt by his family’s actions and concludes, “If his apathy hurt them, they could not possibly be so much hurt as he had been already” (258).

John Swift offers a different perspective on the widely held view of Cather as an anti-materialist. He asserts that The Professor’s House is not so anti-materialist as it is anti-contract, “and particularly of possessive contract” (179). St. Peter’s anxiety is not with the owned goods themselves but to ownership: “Ownership may be a pinching and grasping state, but fine things themselves, given freely can be ennobling” (179). Swift makes a good point as evident in St. Peter’s use of the adjective “princely” when referring to gifts both humble and extravagant. In Willa Cather and Material Culture, Janis Stout reminds us that Cather had a special affection for selected things that were important to her for various reasons. Cather’s treasured items were primarily utilitarian but she did not shy away from luxury as it apparent in her purchases of a satin down comforter and a fur coat which made a New York winter more bearable (7). The Professor had similar extravagances. Although
his study is primitive and sparse, it holds treasured items from Tom and his stash of imported sherry. It seems Cather, as is St. Peter, was most annoyed with vulgar spending and flashy materialism that cheapened the value of things.

Bartley Alexander will also experience and resent the pressures of a materialist culture that values money more than human life. Alexander feels “cramped in every way by [the] niggardly commission” (AB 21) that he has been given in which to build his latest project. Cramped on all sides and having to build with miserly materials, he fears the bridge will not hold up due to the compromises he had to make in building it. Strikes and delays resulting from the industrial unrest, typical of those which plagued the early 20th century, made the Moorlock bridge project “a continual anxiety” (38) for him. His fear of the bridge’s collapse foreshadows Alexander’s fate, only he never considered the collapse would take him with it. Indeed the bridge does violently collapse and Alexander takes a deep plunge into the river. A strong swimmer, he struggles to the surface and begins swimming to the river’s edge, only to be taken under by the clamoring of drowning men who claw at him for safety. As Harvey
asserts, Alexander “cannot escape his commitment to others”— It is the unfortunate by-product of success (31).

The grasping of others will also bring the watery end for Clement Sebastian. His long-time accompanist, James Mockford, takes many inappropriate liberties when discussing Sebastian with others and seems to know no boundaries when it comes to the use of his property. Cather conveys Mockford’s envy of Sebastian, pointing out Mockford’s “green glance” and his attire of green silk shirt with matching green neck tie. He is also in a dispute with Sebastian over his “rights,” insisting his name should also be printed on Sebastian’s promotional materials. There is no appreciation or acknowledgement by Mockford that his success is directly attributed to Sebastian’s interest in the lame piano player. Sebastian decides he will dismiss Mockford after his European tour but doesn’t get the chance. The two men are in a boating accident where Mockford panics and clings to Sebastian, drowning them both. In the tragic end of Alexander and Sebastian, Cather conveys the destructive element intrinsic in the clawing and grasping of others which often accompanies success.
Bored, miserable and aimless, each of the men strains to comprehend what went wrong. How did a life of such potential and promise come to this? Georg Lukacs, in his 1954 article, "The Ideology of Modernism," argues that potentiality itself is the problem: "Potentiality—seen abstractly or subjectively—is richer than actual life. Innumerable possibilities for man's development are imaginable, only a small percentage of which will be realized" (Richter 1129). When the complexities of life interfere with the idealistic dreams from youth, feelings of melancholy "tinged with contempt" are experienced. Ironically, much of Alexander's, St. Peter's and Sebastian's potentiality has been reached in terms of success, but their emotional and relational potentialities fall short of attainment. On the surface they have everything a man could want but psychologically are distraught and broken. The success and marriage they had spent their young years acquiring brought no lasting happiness or contentment. The men had expected success to bring freedom and power, but, as Alexander bemoans, "it had brought only power that was in itself another kind of restraint" (AB 21). Entrenched in regret, Cather's male
protagonists look backward and inward to determine where they made their error.

Bartley Alexander’s mistake is revealed in his conversation with friend, Lucius Wilson. Wilson perceives Alexander to have achieved peace and contentment but Alexander contradicts him, “I haven’t forgotten that there are birds in the bushes,” and confesses his desire to pursue those potentialities also (AB 7). Alexander wants all the birds in the bushes, or to put it another way, to have his cake and eat it too. Alexander’s discontentment centers on the fact he cannot have it all. Professor St. Peter identifies his problem similarly but concludes with a dark epiphany: he had “never learned to live without delight...it never occurred to him he’d have to live like that” (PH 257). Alexander is irritated that he must choose between having the cake and eating it, but St. Peter sadly believes he is facing life where all the cake is gone. With his life’s work completed, Tom dead and his family divided he perceives his life ahead to be a joyless drudge.

Clement Sebastian’s contemplations on life are the bleakest as he attempts to identify his misstep. Perceiving everything in his life to have gone wrong, he
chooses to renounce it and often expresses his feelings of futility to young Lucy. Upon leaving Lucy for the last time he asks her, “Don’t you sometimes feel it’s a waste, living your life out?” (80). Sebastian has seen many more years than Lucy and even though he is brought back to life by her presence he knows his renewed vitality and her devotion will not last. Because of his experience with pain and loss Sebastian struggles to find meaning and significance in life. For Sebastian, as for Cather, the human condition is defined by mortality and Sebastian’s singing “is filled with the tragic conviction that all human effort is doomed to oblivion” (Stouck 216).

In a melancholy state of deep reflection he is able to surmise where he went wrong—continuous travel, self-imposed isolation and emotional distance from others has extracted a costly toll: “He had missed the deepest of all companionships, a relation to the earth itself, with a countryside and a people” (LG 65). Throughout his life Sebastian had been “very careful never to come too close to people” (42) and now finds himself without any friends, which he regretfully acknowledges is “the most satisfying tie men can have” (66). Perhaps this new realization is in part the reason he is quick to leave Lucy and return to
Europe where he might still have someone who remembers him as a person. Philip Gerber writes that throughout Cather’s career she warned against those things gained “at the expense of the human spirit or at the cost of man’s healthy relationship with the earth” (162) It appears, however, to be too late for Sebastian as he admits to himself: “That relationship, he knew, cannot be gone after and found; it must be long and deliberate, unconscious. It must, indeed, be a way of living. Well, he had missed it” (65).

In these times of deep introspection the men enter into what Mary Chinery calls a state of liminality: “a state or moment ‘betwixt and between’” where “the past is momentarily negated, suspended or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun” (58). Such experiences are temporary and transformative, representing moments that “include a before and after from which one will never be the same” (Chinery 58). For Alexander this state of liminality is when he wanders London in the late evening just prior to, and including, his personal visit to Hilda. It also takes place on his voyages across the Atlantic where he “retreats in and out of this internal liminal space, suspended from his cares” (59), lost in the
grayness of the ship’s deck. Edith Lewis and Susan Rosowski also note Cather’s careful prose when portraying Alexander’s warring duality. Rosowski asserts it is what saves *Alexander’s Bridge* from its shallow love-triangle plot (37).

While in Chicago Sebastian dwells in a perpetual liminal state in which he cannot go backward or forward. Perceiving his best years behind him and nothing to move forward to he lingers in Chicago “betwixt and between.” A single moment of liminality is most apparent on his rare free Sunday afternoon where he stares vacantly through the window at the storm raging outside – that moment when he considers turning to Lucy for sympathy. It is a pivotal moment for both of them.

The complex St. Peter has several moments of liminality but as Chinery points out, two are most notable. The first occurs on a visit to France where he first had the idea to write his history on the Spanish explores. He sails immediately for Spain and as he watches the approaching coastline “the design of his book unfolded in the air above him . . . And the design was sound. He had accepted it as inevitable, had never meddled with it, and it had seen him through” (89). The
second, and arguably the most significant, liminal moment occurs while St. Peter is sequestered in his old study on that fateful stormy evening when he is almost killed. When St. Peter finally awakes to a black room full of choking gas he vacillates, “suppose he did not get up --? How far was a man required to exert himself against accident?” (252).

Adding further light as to why the men are so melancholy, Merrill Maguire Skaggs (as does Sharon O’Brien) points out a theme in Cather’s later novels: Her characters must “come to terms with the lifetime of pain that survivors – such as she was – can suffer” (163). Sebastian is deeply moved at a funeral for a fellow singer and is distraught while reading an obituary of an estranged close friend who had died. Sebastian admits he is primarily feeling sorry for himself, an understandable emotion of those who must face life without a loved one. Sebastian considers his friend to have escaped the gloom of living life to its bitter end: “Gowan had slipped out of all this; grey skies, falling rain, chilled affections” (65). St. Peter also perceives death to be an escape, “a release from every obligation, from every form of effort” (248). When reflecting on Tom’s early death, St. Peter’s
conclusion echoes Sebastian’s, "He had escaped all that [required duties of worldly success]. He had made something new in the world - and the rewards, the meaningless conventional gestures, he had left to others" (237). Although St. Peter’s near death experience is packed with ambiguity, it can be argued that he longed for a similar escape.

After all the introspection, each of the men makes decisions for their future but only one will live to carry them out. Alexander decides to leave Winifred and move to London in the summer, a decision he is not proud of and an event he believes will end disastrously. Ironically, Alexander is not afraid for Winifred because she “was a woman who could bear disappointment . . . and she never failed herself” (AB 64). Because Alexander’s decision will alienate him from all he has worked for and values, he perceives his future to be “a restless existence on the Continent . . . among smartly dressed, disabled men of every nationality; forever going on journeys that lead nowhere; hurrying to catch trains that he might just as well miss” (AB 64-65). Unfortunately for Alexander, his hedonistic self has been overindulged and now cannot be denied regardless of the result. It appears the crashing
of the façade which Professor Wilson feared will indeed happen, but fate interferes again for Alexander. In drowning with his bridge, and taking any evidence (the letter) of his decision with him, he has saved himself from the disaster of humiliation.

Before departing for his European operatic tour Sebastian scrambles to make arrangements that will ensure Lucy’s availability to him when he returns. He has arranged for her to spend the winter in New York studying music and then in the spring possibly going to Vienna with her music teacher’s family. Sebastian plans to take up his relationship with Lucy when he returns. Neither Sebastian nor Lucy seems to recognize the implications of his decision. His insistence to have Lucy with him implies the relationship is not-so-professional and the suspected love affair would be condemned. Arguably fate intervenes for them. Like Alexander, Sebastian also drowns before his plans can come to fruition, preserving his prestigious reputation. Lucy also drowns while ice skating on the lake. In death they have escaped shame and disgrace, but what an expense indeed.

Professor St. Peter also has a close call with death but since Cather allows him to live and experience an
epiphany in the event, there must be something significant about his revival. Just prior to his near death experience, St. Peter receives a letter from his family informing him of their plans to prematurely return home in preparation for his new grandchild’s arrival. He absolutely dreads their coming and the changes (living in the new house alone with his wife) their return will bring. The Professor desperately searches for a way out, “some way in which a man who had always tried to live up to his responsibilities could, when the hour of desperation came, avoid meeting his own family” (PH 250). The Professor lies down to rest his weary mind and falls asleep. As foreshadowed in the beginning of the novel, while asleep his old gas stove is blown out and gas fills the small room, nearly asphyxiating him. Subconsciously the Professor knows what is happening but makes little effort to save himself; instead it is the family’s simple seamstress who does.

The Professor’s near death experience impacts him strongly and he reflects, “His temporary release from consciousness seemed to have been beneficial. He had let something go – and it was gone: something very precious, that he couldn’t consciously have relinquished, probably”
(PH 258). James Maxfield believes what the Professor let go of “is merely the delusion that he wants to die” (85), but for an author who puts much weight on the material left out, I believe this “something” not defined is much more important. Merrill Maguire Skaggs argues that what St. Peter lets go of is “the youthful image Tom represents.” He must do so in order “to stay in the game of living” (82), which would certainly be something “very precious” and heartbreaking for St. Peter to relinquish. Skaggs furthers her argument stating that letting go of Tom parallels the letting go St. Peter must do of his young self: “To cut his losses and stay in the game, St. Peter must allow that primitive youth he once was to die within him if he is to reattach his heart to some possibility in the present” (82). Although St. Peter’s “reattachment of the heart” is debatable, Skaggs makes an insightful interpretation of the novel’s highly ambiguous end. She also asserts that Cather’s ambiguous end is typical of her as “Cather hated finality, to base a somewhat final conclusion on all signs,” (64) and has left the interpretation of the event for the reader to discern.

In his confrontation of self, St. Peter had withdrawn from the human race and come very close to paying for it
as Tom had foreshadowed for himself: “Anyone who requites faith and friendship as I did will have to pay for it... I’ll be called to account when I least expect it” (229). For St. Peter the way out of his malaise is in letting go—letting go of Tom, letting go of his youth, and letting go of the unalloyed solitary existence in which he had indulged. Now he is salvageable, and the ever practical Augusta’s rescue of him brings him back to life, both physically and emotionally— for the first time in months, St. Peter feels lonely.

Although St. Peter still perceives life after the fire of youth to be lackluster, he decides that it is still livable, “may be even pleasant, without joy, without passionate griefs” (257). This is a life-restoring breakthrough for St. Peter, and he is finally ready to join the living again. He reaches out for help and asks the down-to-earth and ever humble Augusta to stay with him. The family seamstress had always represented to him “the bloomless side of life that he had always run away from,” (256) but now that he has had to face it, “he found that it wasn’t altogether repugnant.” Augusta inspires St. Peter to look at life matter-of-factly, and less selfishly which enables him to again feel “the ground
under his feet" (258), both physically and consciously.
Augusta helps the professor find his way back to solid
earth where he is able to find something real, "And when
you admitted that a thing was real, that was enough—now"
(257).

Cather’s own identification with the striving,
successful men is what makes these characters so fully
realized (Woodress 463). The problems confronting
Alexander, St. Peter and Sebastian parallel those that
pressed in upon Cather—public demands threatened her
privacy, familial obligations hindered her writing at
times, and gross materialism offended her. Facing the
later years of her life, after losing her parents and
brother, took courage. Cather scholar Richard Millington
points out that these intense moments of introspection
within Cather’s characters is her “version of the climax
of a novel, the coming together of character and action to
produce a moment of insight. Yet this coming together
yields no self-defining decision, no lucid and
authoritative moral truth” (62). True, when we come to
the end of the Alexander’s Bridge, The Professor’s House,
and Lucy Gayheart we are left wanting just a bit more,
some kind of clean finish, but there is not one.
Millington also asserts that Cather's "anti-novelistic" behavior is evidence of her unique form of modernism, a point which will be addressed in the next chapter; however, the denouement also parallels the feelings of Cather's men as they struggle to understand themselves and modern life. As in the endings of the novels, Alexander, St. Peter and Sebastian draw no definitive conclusions.

Cather's modernist men find little solace in award-winning accomplishments, charming and intelligent wives, and material success. What does one do when middle age leaves you numb and you perceive the future to offer little to live for? What now? Cather's underlying charge is one must face life to find out. One must embrace change in order to live, no matter how painful that change may be. She also admonishes us to maintain a sense of community, of family, in order to be fully human. It may be easier to live unto oneself, but it is a very lonely existence which often ends bitterly.
Throughout her writing career, Willa Cather maintained a nostalgic backward glance which reflected upon an idyllic time in the formation of the American West. She also sustained an apprehensive eye toward the future, lamenting the rapid changes brought about by vulgar capitalism and industrialization. Although Cather "was one of the last in a long line of commentators and elegists of American innocence and romantic heroism" (Zabel 217), she was not a complete pessimist about the future. She believed that through the art of fiction she could preserve the idyllic era of the pioneer (pioneers in various forms), capturing in art what it was like to live in that era, but more importantly, how it felt. Cather incorporates in her novels a Romanticist's nostalgia for the past and a Modernist's lament over the loss of community and quality of life. While doing so, she plays upon the literary movements of Regionalism, Realism and Naturalism in the presentation of her settings and characters. Cather's elasticity makes her a difficult
writer to classify within one literary movement, although
certainly many have tried.

The challenge of Cather’s classification is apparent
even in the most general literary compilations. In
American literary anthologies Cather is most often
included with the Regionalists or Realists, but even the
anthology editors have trouble determining a singular
category for her. The *Norton Anthology of American
Literature: Between the Wars 1914–1945*, situates Cather
within “mythic regionalism” (1083), but also adds that
because of the “spareness and clarity of her fiction”
(1113) her writing is of the modernist tradition. Ann
Charters, in her compilation of short stories *The Story
and Its Writer*, notes Cather’s talent at creating
“realistic fiction” but stresses she does so by
representing a particular region of her own experience.
Richard Gray, author of *The History of American
Literature*, also finds it difficult to relegate Cather to
a single movement. Although he mentions Cather’s
regionalist/realist tendencies, he does not include her
name in his recognized author lists, apparently excluding
her because she emerged at an inconvenient time “standing
on the cusp between Victorianism and Modernism” (299).
When comparing Cather’s writing to the definitions of these movements, it is easy to understand why editors are uncomfortable relegating her to just one. Literary historian, Richard Gray, identifies a “Realist” as one writing in or about the centers of power, but a “Regionalist” focuses on the supposed periphery (257). He also asserts that Realism “resists the romantic and sentimental, the contrived and the melodramatic, and [seeks] to register as accurately as possible the way Americans were living” (282), whereas Regionalism reflects a sentimental nostalgia. As consistent with Regionalist writers, Cather’s subject and setting for her fiction is most frequently of a particular region, the making of the American West, but she has been criticized for an overly idealized portrayal of it. Barry Chabot, in his book Writers for the Nation, points out that Cather nostalgically elaborates the past to point out the inadequacies of the present, which creates “a past that never quite existed” (63). For Cather, her version of the past is the standard by which the modern era is compared and the latter is always found lacking. This would appear to situate Cather with the regionalists; however, she never allows the reader to get too comfortable with her
beloved prairie. She incorporates naturalistic, disturbing vignettes that reveal "just how small, plain and mean life in the West could sometimes be" (Gray 352). Cather maintains a careful balance of bitter and sweet that deflects being singularly relegated to either Regionalism or Realism.

Perhaps anthologies declare Cather a Regionalist because early criticism of her did also. In 1955 Curtis Dahl examined Virgil’s influence on Cather and her "elegiac tone" (43). He cites several critics who have pointed out her use of "Virgilian references" where Cather incorporates a similar "spiritual significance" to the prairies of Nebraska as Virgil did with his "vineyard plains of Latium." Dahl points out that in doing so she portrays a romantic regionalism that Clifton Fadiman, in 1935, identifies as "ancestor worship, moral idealism, gentle stoicism. . . and a sense, touching rather than tragic, of the tears which lie in mortal things" (43). In 1931, prior to Fadiman, Louis Kronenberger noted the same; that Cather presents her material "not with straightforward vigor, but with a peculiar nostalgia and humaneness and sense of retrospection," which Edward and Lilian Bloom (in 1949) call "Roman stoicism" (Dahl 43).
In conclusion Dahl states, “Willa Cather is interpreting Virgil, it appears, in light of early twentieth-century American regionalism” (49), creating her own unique, almost spiritual form of it (51).

Perhaps Cather’s own words written in the “Knopf Pamphlet” of 1925 also contributed to her classification as a regionalist: “It’s a queer thing about the flat country – it takes hold of you, or it leaves you perfectly cold. . . But when I strike the open plains something happens. . . That love of great spaces, of rolling open country like the sea – it’s the grand passion of my life” (Footman 136). The grand plains had captured her heart and they would be the subject, setting or even a featured character in her writing. In this regard, Cather transcends regionalism; a point contemporary Cather scholar, Loretta Wasserman, makes: “For her sketch, the local scene, local color for its own sake, were not enough. She was always angered by being placed with the regional realists” (300). Cather set a higher standard for herself as best explained in her essay, “The Novel De’muble”': “If the novel is a form of imaginative art, it cannot be at the same time a vivid and brilliant form of journalism. . . it must. . . interpret imaginatively
the material and social investiture of [its] characters; to present their scene by suggestion rather than by enumeration" (NUF 48). She believed that the contemporary novel was cluttered with too much detail and she strove to "throw all the furniture out of the window" in presenting "the scene bare for the play of emotions, great and little" (51).

Playing upon those emotions, Cather often surprises her readers by inserting horrific Naturalistic events into her pastoral portrayals. The sudden and often grisly deaths, such as the bridal party being ripped to pieces by wolves and the transient jumping into the thresher, are shocking vignettes typical of naturalism, but they are used sparingly and strategically. Phillip Gerber, in his 1975 biography on Willa Cather, also perceives her regional affinities to be nuanced with a naturalist tone but never with a pessimistic finality. Cather idealized the strength, devotion and vigor of her pioneers and believed they embodied the abilities to defy fate: "The universe was one in which many fell while few rose, just as the naturalists believed; but for Cather the causes were not to be found wholly in the stars" (75). Yes, life can deal you a harsh hand but those conditions are not
always impenetrable, "they are hurdles that an able
individual can clear" (75). Alexandra Bergson (O
Pioneers!) and A'ntonia Shimerda (My A'ntonia) put up an
epic fight in turning a harsh landscape into a successful
American farm. Thea Krongborg (Song of the Lark) fiercely
battles her small town trappings to become a famous opera
singer. Father Latour, in Death Comes for the Archbishop,
must learn to navigate and travel over the primitive
Southwest in order to minister to the Indians in his
parish. The obstacles these characters face had taken the
life of others, but because these epic heroes refuse to
give up their devotion to their purpose, they succeed.

Gerber uses a quote from Henry Seidel Canby in his
conclusion: "Willa Cather’s art is ‘essentially a
representation of the reaction between the soul of man and
his environment’" (163), a reaction that transcends a
movement and an era as it is part of the human condition.

From the Darwinistic foreboding of Naturalism it is
easy to make the leap to the Modernist literary movement.
Jo Ann Middleton, in her book Willa Cather’s Modernism,
notes the link: "Cather bridges a gap between nineteenth
century Naturalism and twentieth-century Modernism, not
because she practices both, but because she identifies the
processes by which each operates" (49). Both literary movements function as a corrective to the opulent, overwritten novels Cather criticized. Georg Lukacs, in his essay "The Ideology of Modernism" explains the transition from Naturalism to Modernism: "there is a continuity from Naturalism to the Modernism of our day [1956]. . . what at first was no more than a dim anticipation of approaching catastrophe developed, after 1914, into an all-pervading obsession" (Richter 1133). The morbid tendencies of Naturalism ceased to have a decorative function and had become "a moral protest against capitalism" (1133). No doubt the First World War, the stock market crash and The Depression helped to create Modernism’s lament of cultural despair but also apparent were "the baleful effects of rampant industrialism on the American landscape" (Berber 163), of which Cather was very critical. She felt it lowered the quality of life for all and that vulgar consumerism cheapened the value of treasured items. Quality, not quantity, was what mattered to her, and not just the quality of things, but the quality of life which she felt was eroding away. These pervading feelings of trepidation are at the center of the Modernist tradition.
Baym and Holland identify the modernist aesthetic as "the conviction that the previously sustaining structures of human life, whether social, political, religious, or artistic, had been either destroyed or shown up as falsehoods or fantasies" (1078). As studied in the previous chapter, this is often the experience of Cather’s characters, and most strongly represented in Neil Herbert of A Lost Lady, who is young enough to witness the austerity of the railroad pioneers but also old enough to understand, “The people, the very country itself, were changing so fast that there would be nothing to come back to. He had seen the end of an era, the sunset of the pioneer” (144). Cather often incorporates this "violent break with the past" (Middleton 10) in her stories and often couples it with her lament on materialism. This can be seen from her first novel, Alexander’s Bridge, but Cather has only been seriously considered a Modernist writer for the previous 20 years (Williams 37). Contemporary scholarly opinion is that Willa Cather is a modernist writer, but as Janis Stout asserts, “a modernist with a difference” (2).

Guy Reynolds also notes Cather’s uniqueness and argues she made a major contribution "to a distinctively
American formation of modernism" (2), although she was not appreciated for doing so at the time. She employed the modernist aesthetics of minimalism, juxtaposition and experimental structure but her writing was not hard to read, a quality the modernist elite demanded. They heralded complexity and difficulty that can be appreciated by only a highly selective and learned audience (Contor 48). She was discounted by critics who made "a fetish of the experimental" and used her success and public appeal as their reasoning. Wallace Stevens did step up to defend Cather’s artistry, pointing out, "She takes so much pains to conceal her sophistication that it is easy to miss her quality" (Chabot 48). Perhaps Cather’s use of minimalism contributes to this—a reader often misses what is said or implied by what is not on the page. Jo Ann Middleton echoes Stevens’ praise of her concealed complexity: She is "so deceptively simple to read and so exasperatingly difficult to explain" (21). Perhaps Michael Leddy has the best summation—Cather is a "crypto modernist, a modernist in nineteenth century clothing" (182). She is so careful in the use of her modernist techniques that the reader must be astute enough to detect them.
She was also discounted by the elitist modernist writers who insisted that Cather was an escapist, "unwilling to face the harshness of our world" (Swift 177). She had an ongoing feud with Marxist critic, Granville Hicks, who thought Cather was "dodging social responsibility" and she did not appreciate his western liberal thought (177). She believed that art is what made life livable and shot back at her critics, "what has art ever been but escape?" (Tennant 18). Cather's work was a breath of fresh air among the disparaging Modernists who heralded negativity and had little positive to say. Phillip Berber argues that by avoiding "the methods of many writers who created reputations by more directly confronting the immediate moment," she maintained the staying power to survive her forgotten modernists (163). They may have benefited from her words in a letter written in 1936: "Give us a new work of genius of any kind and if it is alive, and fired with some more vital feeling than contempt, you will see how automatically the old and false makes itself air before the new and true" (Tennant 26). For Cather, it was not enough to be critical of the changes brought about by the modern age. She desired to create something lasting; something with vital feeling
that would inspire and remain. She resisted openly criticizing Victorian moral traditions, although she was happy to leave its literary ones behind.

Norman Cantor explains that "Above all, modernism was a revolt against Victorianism" (7) and its affinities toward the finished and harmonious (46). Cather felt the anti-Victorian modernists "made a career of destroying the past" (Tennant 26) and their efforts caused her considerable angst. She celebrated the perseverance and vision of the pioneers who were responsible for transforming the open prairies into a country. As pointed out previously, the problem in Cather's writings, however, is she often presents a highly idealized version of the past taken from memory, and when put down on the page it seems romanticized. James Schroeter argues that when Cather was pressed to leave Victorian traditions behind to embrace Modernist ones she was "forced to go her own way [which] permitted her to become both a bridge between the best and a counter-irritant against the worst aspects of both periods" (205). She romantically maintains her nostalgic backward glance while moving forward to the modern age.
Susan Rosowski asserts that although Cather may have employed stylistic techniques from many movements, her affinity for romanticism never wavered (ix). Rosowski’s assertion is more than plausible considering her definition of romanticism: “Romanticism concerns a mode of perception by which the imagination is used in its synthesizing or creative powers to transform and give meaning to an alien or meaningless material world” (x). Cather’s criticism of vulgar materialism and western liberal thought is much noted but to counter it, and preserve those precious ideals she felt slipping away, she applies creative imagination to her memories of the past, capturing in art what the reader may not be able to experience for his or her self. Cather “took up the romantic challenge to vindicate imaginative thought” in a joyless culture that seemed bent on devaluing it (xi).

Cather wanted to rescue the novel from its “form of amusement” and restore it to “a form of art” (NUF 44). Much like Percy Shelley’s, “A Defence of Poetry,” which heralded the power of the imagination in poetry, Cather believed the imaginative use of language could restore the novel to its higher artistic form:
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 feeling or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself. (NUF 50)

Cather’s desire to create that which is divined but not heard parallels the Romantic writer’s celebrated category of the sublime. Cather’s position on the novel echoes that of Samuel Coleridge who believed that the power of poetry lies in its ability to “compel the imagination to produce the picture. . . and in the production of such pictures the power of genius consists” (Perkins 10). One such striking picture is the iconic image of the plow at sunset that Cather incorporates in O Pioneers!

Sharon O’Brien and Cather biographer, James Woodress, also insist that Cather “was a romantic and a primitive from the start,” pointing out her romantic affinities were apparent in the writing of her first short stories. Cather’s post-pioneer childhood “became the epic material
of her romances” (Woodress xvi), as is most apparent in *O Pioneers!, My Antonia, Song of the Lark,* and *A Lost Lady,* where her characters cling to idealistic versions of their heroes, heroines and the landscape. Cather’s writing suggests affinities to Wordsworth in its “love of nature, sympathetic interest in the past, exaltation of youth and the superior individual” (Rosowski x): Alexandra Bergson (*O Pioneers!*) falls in love with the Nebraska prairie and nurtures it into submission. Jim Burden (*My Antonia*) will wait twenty years to see his dear childhood friend, Antonia, fearing that seeing her will destroy the illusions of her he wants to maintain. Neil Herbert (*A Lost Lady*) can hardly bear the moments he finds the beautiful and charming Mrs. Forrester to be painfully human. Stephen Tennant and John Swift also note that Cather’s epic themes lend themselves to Romanticism—Swift goes so far as to assert Cather never tried to hide “her unabashed romantic aesthetic” (188).

If Cather’s Romantic affinities are so apparent, why is current scholarly opinion of her as a Modernist prevailing? Susan Rosowski believes that critics are unwilling to saddle her with the Romantic label, as if being one was not as credible as being a Modernist (ix).
Perhaps this is because Modernism was the darling of the intellectual elite; therefore it is more prestigious to be considered one of them. Joseph Urgo believes the push to place Cather with Modernists is partly because of the desire to label her a feminist or lesbian writer, of whom the Modernists were much more sympathetic. Cather never claimed to be either a feminist or a lesbian, but instead fiercely guarded her privacy and stayed away from such arguments. Urgo points out Cather’s sexuality is the subject of ongoing debate and asserts that she “preferred the company of women, or, perhaps, given the two main sexes, could tolerate only one domestically” (327). Urgo offers a stern rebuke to those who label her a lesbian writer: “Readers are being trained to interpret queerly” (328). Given the patriarchal system Cather grew up in, it is not hard to understand why a strong, assertive female would resist succumbing to it in marriage. She had much more freedom as a single woman than she would have had as a married one.

Are these labels of Modernist, Feminist, and Lesbian writer really important? Richard Millington brings the argument to a close insisting, “The question on whether or not Cather was really a modernist scarcely matters.” It
is more important to ask "What is the specific relation between a writer's artistic practice and her historical movement . . . How does Cather write her engagement with her era?" (52). It would seem Millington has a point as many scholars have noted the unique time in history in which Cather establishes herself as a significant writer. James Schroeter reveals what was taking place: Randolf Bourne, H.L. Mencken, Van Wyck Brooks, Ezra Pound and Waldo Frank were calling for "a new kind of literature . . . reflecting the realities of contemporary life and speech," and "No American novelist, except possibly Dreiser, better answered the hopes of these new critics than Willa Cather" (4). Unfortunately, not everyone agreed. She was dismissed by the "revolutionaries" of the modernist movement who felt her writing lacked courage and they did not hide their disdain for the "literary darling of the right" (138). Because of their elitist biases, these critics missed the complexity of Cather's writing and were blinded to her unique use of minimalism, experimental structure and juxtaposition.

George Schloss points out Cather's predicament: "She came at a bad time. Younger than Sarah Orne Jewett, James and Henry Adams, she was still more than a literary
generation away from Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner. Her only real contemporaries in prose fiction were Stephen Crane (who died young), Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow” (Tennant 205). Cather had no choice but to make her own way creating a bridge between two strong literary movements that brought us Regionalism, Realism, Naturalism, Romanticism and Modernism. David Stouck points out that “Willa Cather, unlike many of her American contemporaries, traveled the full road,” and those efforts are seldom recognized (Stouck 53). Because Cather does "travel the full road" creatively incorporating aesthetics of several movements in her writing, she is indeed a writer that defies placement. Perhaps Deborah Carlin, in her book Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading, sums it up the best:

Whether viewed as an American icon, a woman writer, a lesbian, a cosmopolitan Midwesterner, a conservative Republican, a scathing journalist, an anti-modernist, or an embittered elegist, Cather remains an anomaly in American literature and her fiction is peculiarly hard to place (6).
Joseph Urgo agrees, "Adjectives such as lesbian or feminist, when placed before the word 'writer,' seem to slip off Cather when scrutinized," (333) but so do other labels such as Regionalist, Realist and Naturalist. At best, there are only two categories that have any kind of staying power: Modernist or Romantic, and even those demarcations are blurred. Cather experimented with structure, minimalism and juxtaposition before other more recognized American Modernist writers had done so. She also stayed true to the Romantic aesthetics of idyllic imagery and nostalgia for the past. In her novels she is never solely writes as a Modernist or Romantic, but incorporates the exact amount of each ingredient, sometimes less, sometimes more, to get the desired affect. Cather "maintained that single-minded devotion to her own muse" (Middleton 37) which gives her writing the staying power which eludes other writers and makes her a particularly difficult one to pin down to any one literary movement. For this reader, Cather writes of a particular region with a romantic nostalgia for the past and a modernist's lament for the future. In doing so, she is indeed a romantic Modernist writer.
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