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THE VOYAGE PERILOUS: WILLA CATHER'S
MYTHIC QUEST.

The University of Oklahoma, Ph.D., 1974
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THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
GRADUATE COLLEGE

THE VOYAGE PERILOUS:
WILLA CATHER'S MYTHIC QUEST

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
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BY
ANN MOSELEY
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THE VOYAGE PERILOUS: WILLA CATHER'S MYTHIC QUEST

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FOREWORD

In the last two or three decades there has been substantial evidence to indicate an increasing critical awareness of the importance of myth to literature. Classical mythological works by James Frazer, Thomas Bulfinch, Charles Mills Gayley, and Edith Hamilton have been re-examined and re-evaluated, and important new works have been added by Richard Chase, Henry Nash Smith, R. W. B. Lewis, Joseph Campbell, and Northrop Frye. The investigations of these scholars have indicated that the study of myth is valuable and relevant not only to such obviously mythic works as those of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, but also to most other literary works as well.

Fitting neatly into the American romantic tradition established by Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and Poe, Willa Cather was herself deeply aware of the importance of myth to literature, and throughout her career she used myth, sometimes in obvious allusions, but more often as an undercurrent of structure and theme. Cather's conscious use of myths in her fiction has been pointed out by such critics as Bernice Slote, John Randall, James Woodress, and L. V. Jacks. However, no critic has made a comprehensive study either of her reliance on mythic quests and conflicts or of her use of particular mythologies--Greek, Roman, Norse, American Indian, and Christian; it is this particular void of Catherian criticism which the present study aspires to fill.

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As always, my very special love and thanks are due to my husband, Fred Moseley, who is always ready to sacrifice himself to give me help and encouragement when I need them, and to my little one-year-old daughter Christie, who was never able to understand why Mommie sometimes had to work instead of playing with her!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
FOREWORD	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
CHAPTER	
I. THE "VOYAGE PERILOUS": CATHER'S LIFE AND ART	1
II. THE PURSUIT OF YOUTH IN <u>ALEXANDER'S BRIDGE</u>	43
III. ALEXANDRA'S QUEST FOR FULFILLMENT IN <u>O PIONEERS!</u>	69
IV. THE QUEST FOR ARTISTIC TRUTH IN <u>THE SONG OF THE LARK</u>	98
V. JIM BURDEN'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN <u>MY ÁNTONIA</u>	127
VI. THE FAILURE OF THE AMERICAN WESTERING MYTH IN <u>ONE OF OURS</u>	163
VII. THE COLLAPSE OF THE WESTERN IDEAL IN <u>A LOST LADY</u>	189
VIII. THE CONFLICT OF THE ARTIST IN <u>THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE</u>	211
IX. THE QUEST FOR IMMORTALITY IN <u>MY MORTAL ENEMY</u>	245
X. THE QUEST OF THE SPIRIT IN <u>DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP</u>	264
XI. THE QUEST FULFILLED IN <u>SHADOWS ON THE ROCK</u>	312
XII. THE WINTER OF LIFE AND LOVE IN <u>LUCY GAYHEART</u>	337
XIII. THE ROLE OF THE SOUTHERN MYTH IN <u>SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL</u>	354
XIV. CONCLUSION: WILLA CATHER AND THE BRIGHT MEDUSA OF ART	382
BIBLIOGRAPHY	399

CHAPTER I

THE "VOYAGE PERILOUS":

CATHER'S LIFE AND ART

Stereotyped by many critics as a weak traditionalist, a romantic escapist, and a squeamish member of the genteel tradition,* Willa Cather is a writer who greatly deserves serious study and reevaluation. In her art as well as her life, she courageously and energetically pursues beauty and truth, believing with Keats that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." This pursuit leads her into a mythic quest in which she delves into the recesses of her own mind and heart as well as into the very roots of civilization itself. In this search she unveils the dual nature of man--the divine and the demoniac--and she reveals his basic and eternal conflicts between order and disorder, reason and passion, Apollonian and Dionysian desires. Her fiction is permeated with such contrasting themes as past and present, flesh and spirit, pagan and Christian, East and West, and because she is such a superb and subtle artist, she is "able to give expression to . . . [both] the bright dream and the dark; to the brief, optimistic morning dream and the foreboding vision of the long uneasy night."¹

*See Granville Hicks, "The Case Against Willa Cather," and Lionel Trilling, "Willa Cather," in Willa Cather and Her Critics, ed. by James Schroeter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 139-55.

¹"The Frontier Dream," Times Literary Supplement, 3152, 27 July 1962, p. 540.

In her early fiction Cather seems to place more importance on her "bright dreams," for here she writes primarily of contemporary society and the practice of art in Eastern America and in Europe. However, her quest eventually brings her back to the West, to the frontier, which is defined by Turner as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization"²; it also leads her into a deeper consideration of the human spirit as found not only in the present, but also in past civilizations. Her ultimate metaphors are those of sunset and harvest, representing the mysteries of death and rebirth as evinced in the everlasting soil and in the eternal human soul.

I

Perhaps the first major conflict that Willa Cather felt was that between her artistic aspirations and her natural desire for a free and joyful life. No doubt it was difficult for her to "sacrifice" herself to art, for the facts of her life indicate that she was naturally a strong-willed, out-going, and fun-loving individual. Being such an energetic person, she could take neither life nor art lightly. She once called true artistic creation the "voyage perilous,"³ and her own artistic career was indeed a perilous journey--from Virginia to Nebraska, from West to East and then finally back to the West, from physical exile to artistic home.

Willa Cather was born on December 7, 1873, in Frederick County

²Frederick Jackson Turner, The Frontier in American History (1920; rpt. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 3.

³Willa Cather, The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-1896, ed. by Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 417.

Virginia,⁴ the first of Charles Fectigue Cather and Mary Boak Cather's seven children. Even as a very young child, she showed a tendency toward the self-reliance and independence which characterized her adult life. For example, Lewis reports that once there were many overnight guests at the Cathers' Willowshade farm, and Willa was asked to sleep with her grandmother so that her little cousin Philip Frederic could sleep in her cradle. To her family's surprise, however, when all the guests had left and Willa was told she could go back to sleep in her cradle, she refused: "'No, no' she kept repeating mournfully. 'My cradle is all Philip Frederic'd up!'" And after having had Peter Parley's Universal History read to her, "she could be kept quiet for long periods by putting one chair upside down on another and seating her in this imaginary chariot. Here she would sit in complete silence, driving the chariot, while an invisible slave ran beside her repeating at intervals, 'Cato, thou art but man!'"⁵ Moreover, Cather herself has recalled that when she was a small child and her parents "would try to assist her in something, she would protest passionately: 'Self-alone, self-alone!'"⁶

This independent nature no doubt helped Cather to survive and profit from her traumatic removal from Virginia to the barren plains of Nebraska when she was nine years old. During the first year the Cathers

⁴E. K. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography, completed by Leon Edel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 17. All general biographical references are found in Brown; Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953); and Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willa Cather: A Memoir (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1953).

⁵Lewis, pp. 9-10.

⁶Lewis, p. 175.

lived in the open country with Willa's paternal grandparents, who were already settled there, but soon the family moved to Red Cloud, where her father opened a business office. No matter where Willa lived, however, she was fascinated by the country itself, riding over it on horseback and visiting the Swedish, Bohemian, Danish and Norwegian settlers whose simple houses and sod caves dotted the countryside. Cather has herself acknowledged the unparalleled importance of this place and time in her life, asserting that the "the years from eight to fifteen are the formative period in a writer's life, when he unconsciously gathers basic material. He may acquire a great many interesting and vivid impressions in his mature years but his thematic material he acquires under fifteen years of age."⁷ Dorothy Van Ghent has analyzed the effect of Nebraska on Cather as follows:

The removal from an old, lush, settled country to a virtual wilderness was undoubtedly the determinative event of Willa Cather's life; occurring when the child was entering puberty and most sensitive to change, the uprooting from the green valley of her [maternal] grandparents' home in Virginia, and the casting out upon a limitless wild prairie, opened her sensibility to primordial images and relationships that were to be the most powerful forces in her art.⁸

Cather was fortunate enough to have known the flat plains country in its youth, during the time in which its own particular myths and legends were being formed.

Growing up in the conventional society of Red Cloud--which was suspicious of new ideas and new people, which approved of church suppers but not dances, and which discouraged its youth from becoming too

⁷Brown, p. 3.

⁸Dorothy Van Ghent, Willa Cather, University of Minnesota Pamphlets, No. 36 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 6.

friendly with the courageous immigrant girls who worked in town to help support their parents--Willa exhibited her extreme individuality by rebelling against standards in dress and attitude: she cropped her hair short like a boy's, wore boy's clothes, and showed an interest in science, signing her name "Willie" or "Wm. Cather, M. D." and listing in her diary her favorite occupation as "Slicing Toads" and her "pet hobbies" as "Snakes and Sheakspear [sic]."⁹ She sought amusement by attending the musical shows that stopped in Red Cloud, by reading, and by visiting the Divide--the high prairie land between the Republican and Little Blue rivers--and its inhabitants. Resentful of the stuffily complacent and conformist townspeople who considered her liberated tastes and attitudes "strange," she also delivered a shocking graduation address entitled "Superstition versus Investigation", in which she displayed her open-minded attitude and unconventional ideas. Significantly, most of the townspeople were much more favorably impressed with the more traditional orations of other students.¹⁰

Having little in common with boys and girls of her own age, Willa--or "Dr. Will"--spent much of her time with the older and more educated people of Red Cloud. She appreciated the culture and intellect of her better teachers, such as Mr. and Mrs. A. K. Goudy, with whom she corresponded for forty years. Her reading tastes in these early years were directed by the Wieners, a cultivated Jewish family, depicted in her fiction as the Rosens of "Old Mrs. Harris," and she learned to like and appreciate music from the Miners, portrayed in My Ántonia as the

⁹Mildred R. Bennett, The World of Willa Cather (1951; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 112-13.

¹⁰Brown, p. 43.

Harlings. From her German music teacher Mr. Shindelmeisser--the basis for Mr. Wunsch in Song of the Lark--she learned not only about music, but also about the European people and places he had known. She was also influenced by Dr. Damerell and Dr. McKeeby, both of whom served as sources for Dr. Archie of My Ántonia. They taught her about science and medicine and took her with them when they went to see patients in the country. But probably the most important single influence on Cather during these years in Red Cloud was William "Uncle Billy" Ducker, a well educated man who clerked in his brother's store and spent his spare time improving his mind. He shared her interest in science, but more importantly, he taught her to appreciate and understand the Latin and Greek classics. Together they read--in the original language--Vergil, Ovid, the Iliad, and some odes of Anacreon. All of this helped to prepare Willa for her college years at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, where she would soon become an exceptional student in literature and literary composition.

In 1890 Cather enrolled in "Second Prep" classes in Lincoln, and from 1891 to 1895, she attended the University itself. At first she was interested in a scientific course of study, but after writing a brilliant essay on Carlyle, which her English professor published in the Nebraska State Journal, she changed her interest and efforts to literature. In recent years it has been discovered that during these Lincoln years, Cather was astonishingly prolific. She edited the Hesperian, a campus paper, and wrote numerous articles, drama reviews, and book reviews for both the State Journal and the Courier. The stories and articles that she wrote and published during this period have recently been collected in Bernice Slote's The Kingdom of Art and in William M.

Curtin's The World and the Parish.

During these years, Willa was always individualistic and independent, but she did make many friends, including Mariel Gere, Dorothy Canfield, the Pound sisters, Herbert Bates, and Mrs. Emma Westerman (Mrs. Erlich of One of Ours). All during this time, she kept up a murderous pace, attending classes by day, going to concerts and plays in the evening, and studying and writing reviews far into the night and in the early morning. As Bennett has observed,

In at least one . . . respect the young Willa Cather seems to be almost the diametric opposite of the formidable, reclusive artist whom the world knew (or rather, was not permitted to know) during the last quarter century of her life. Far from being withdrawn and stand-offish, the young Willa Cather was outgoing and gregarious: she wanted to be in the thick of things, to see for herself and have her say. Back in Red Cloud after her graduation she bewailed her "bitter exile," referred to the town as "Siberia," and urgently appealed to Lincoln friends to help her secure a teaching post at the University [At this time,] her first concern was not writing but escape from stagnation into life: the world of music, drama, art.¹¹

Perhaps Cather sensed that she must live life before she could write about it, and in her youth, she thought the center of life was in the East.

Soon after she graduated from the University, she was offered the editorship of The Home Monthly, a new "family magazine" to be published in Pittsburgh, and was thus given a chance to leave Red Cloud and move to the East. And so, in 1896 Willa left Nebraska--the land and people she had loved as well as the narrow society she had learned to hate--and eagerly began her journey East. When she reached Pittsburgh, the entire burden of the Monthly became hers; she did all of the

¹¹Mildred R. Bennett, ed., "Introduction," in Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, 1882-1917, by Willa Cather (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. xvii.

editing, much of the type-setting, and, under various pseudonyms, most of the writing. However, despite the demands on her time, she managed to attend the theater and concerts and to make friends with people like George Seibel, with whom she read French each week. In 1897, however, because of the dullness and conservatism of the feminine Monthly as well as her excessive responsibilities as editor, she resigned from the magazine and began working for the Pittsburgh Daily Leader, where she edited telegraph news and read copy. In addition to this she also found time to write more drama and music reviews. It was at one of the performances which she was reviewing that she met Isabelle McClung, who became one of her closest friends.

In 1901 Cather resigned from the Leader, and from 1901 to 1906 she taught in the Pittsburgh high schools. Teaching allowed her more time for creative writing, and having accepted Isabelle McClung's invitation to live with her family in the McClung mansion, she now had a quiet atmosphere in which to write. In the summer of 1902 she and Isabelle went to Europe, and she published letters about her trip in the Nebraska State Journal. It was also during these years at the McClung household that she wrote the poetry published in April Twilights (1903) and the stories published in The Troll Garden (1905).

In 1906 Cather made another decisive move comparable to that from Lincoln to Pittsburgh. Having been impressed with the stories in The Troll Garden, S. S. McClure made a trip to Pittsburgh to meet their author and to offer her a position on the staff of McClure's Magazine. She accepted the job and moved to New York, where she worked for six years as an editor of McClure's. While working there, she had many valuable experiences, traveling to Europe often and meeting such

interesting people as Ford Madox Hueffer, W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory. H. G. Wells, Mrs. Louis D. Brandeis, Mrs. James T. Fields, Ferris Greenslet, and most important of all for her art, Sarah Orne Jewett.

It was Miss Jewett who brought to Cather's attention the fact that the gruelling demands of journalism were slowly dulling her creativity, and indeed the stories she had been publishing since she signed with McClure did not equal in power and insight those she had written earlier. Miss Jewett wrote her that in her Nebraska and Virginia backgrounds as well as in her New York life, she had "uncommon equipment for a writer," but that she did not see her material "quite enough from the outside."¹² And she further warned:

I do think that it is impossible for you to work so hard and yet have your gifts mature as they should--when one's first working power has spent itself, nothing ever brings it back just the same If you don't keep and guard and mature your force and, above all, have time and quiet to perfect your work, you will be writing things not much better than you did five years ago. . . . Your vivid, exciting companionship in the office must not be your audience, you must find your own quiet centre of life and write from that to the world that holds offices, and all society. . . in short, you must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up. . . . To work in silence and with all one's heart, that is the writer's lot; he is the only artist who must be solitary, and yet needs the widest outlook upon the world.¹³

In the autumn of 1911 Willa Cather took this advice, obtaining a release from her whirlwind activities at McClure's in order to spend her time writing. As a result of this leave--which was later indefinitely extended until the income from her writing proved to her that she could afford to resign--she finished Alexander's Bridge (1912), and returned

¹²Eleanor M. Smith, "The Literary Relationship of Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Sibert Cather," New England Quarterly, 29 (1956), 477.

¹³Lewis, pp. 66-67.

imaginatively to her native land by writing "The Bohemian Girl" and "Alexandra," the latter being the basis for O Pioneers!

In 1912, after having visited Red Cloud, she went to see her brother Douglas in Arizona, beginning a life-long love affair with the Southwest--its land, its people, and its history. Here she first saw the ancient cliff-dwellings which were to figure prominently in her best fiction; and here she first heard the old Spanish and Indian legends which are so subtly interwoven into The Professor's House and Death Comes for the Archbishop. It was at this time too that Cather began to have a deeper appreciation of the West she had so eagerly left sixteen years earlier. Whereas in the East she had lived life only on the surface, here she let herself go and lived it on a more elemental level. Elizabeth Sergeant has observed that, although she was sure that she had "never, in her most bohemian hour, attended an artist ball in Greenwich Village, . . . it was not hard to imagine Willa's Western self, her youthful, resilient, tough, gay-hearted prairie self, now set free and moving with the current, whirling around a whitewashed dance hall, with small-waisted, red-sashed Mexican partners, who took their pleasures from their roots."¹⁴ But after two months in the Southwest, Willa was ready to return to the East and her writing.

When Cather returned to New York, she and Edith Lewis--who had shared her Washington Place apartment--moved into an apartment at Five Bank Street, where Cather lived and worked for fifteen years, until the building was torn down in 1927. She wrote many of her novels in this apartment, including O Pioneers! (1913), Song of the Lark (1915), My

¹⁴Sergeant, p. 83.

Ántonia (1918), One of Ours (1922), A Lost Lady (1923), The Professor's House (1925), My Mortal Enemy (1926), and Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927). During this productive period she was quite happy and content, being upset only by her friend Isabelle McClung's marrying and moving away to Europe. In most of these books she was working with people and places she knew well. As she had stated in her essay on Jewett, she had by this time come to believe that, "if he [the writer] achieves anything noble, anything enduring, it must be by giving himself absolutely to his material. And this gift of sympathy is his greatest gift; it is the fine thing in him that alone can make his work fine. He fades away into the land and people of his heart, he dies of love only to be born again."¹⁵ The Song of the Lark, for example, is based on her own childhood in Red Cloud and on her knowledge and admiration of the opera singer Olive Fremstad; O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, and A Lost Lady are grounded in her Nebraska memories, the character of Ántonia being taken from that of Annie Sadilek and that of Marian Forrester from that of Mrs. Silas Garber; One of Ours was conceived after the death of one of her cousins in World War I; and The Professor's House and Death Comes for the Archbishop are the results of her Southwest experience.

Soon after the publication of Death Comes for the Archbishop, however, Cather's peaceful and settled life was upset, first by the destruction of the building that had been her home for fifteen years, and second by the illness and death of both her father, in 1928, and her mother, in 1931. Going to visit her ailing mother, who was staying in California with her son Douglas, Willa visited Quebec and received the

¹⁵Willa Cather, Willa Cather on Writing (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 51.

inspiration for Shadows on the Rock (1931). The remaining years of her life were to be even more scarred by death and disappointment, and because of this, as well as because of her own illness, Cather was able to produce only two more full-length novels and two collections of stories. Of these, the stories of Obscure Destinies (1932) and the novel Lucy Gayheart (1935) are both set in her beloved Middle West. However, the writing of Lucy Gayheart was hampered by inflammation and swelling of her wrists, and the progress of her last novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940) was obstructed not only by her continued illness, but also by her concern about World War II and by the deaths of Isabelle McClung and her brother Douglas. Because of the periodic swelling of her hands, especially the right one, Cather was able to do little writing in her last years, but she did manage to finish the stories which were later collected in The Old Beauty (1948), and she was working on a story set in Avignon, France, in the fourteenth century,¹⁶ when she died on April 24, 1947.

Willa Cather has been greatly criticized for the solitary life she lived after she resigned from McClure's and began to spend all her time writing. However, Lewis reports that "She was never a recluse by nature,"¹⁷ and all her life she was pulled between the demands of life and the people she loved and the demands of her art. Acknowledging this personal conflict, Cather once wrote, "One realizes that human relationships are the tragic necessity of human life; that they can never be

¹⁶For comments and projections about this story, see George N. Kates, "Willa Cather's Unfinished Avignon Story," in Five Stories, by Willa Cather (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 200.

¹⁷Lewis, p. 135.

wholly satisfactory, that every ego is half the time greedily seeking, and half the time pulling away from them."¹⁸

In her youth at Red Cloud, Lincoln, Pittsburgh, and McClure's, Cather had lived an exuberant life. When Elizabeth Sergeant first met her at McClure's, she described her as follows:

The only woman I could spy . . . coming in my direction was youngish, buoyant, not tall, rather square. No trace of the reforming feminist in this vital being who smiled at me, her face, open, direct, honest, blooming with warmth and kindness. Her eyes were sailor-blue, her cheeks were rosy, her hair was red-brown, parted in the middle like a child's. As she shook hands, I felt the freshness and brusqueness, too, of an ocean breeze. Her boyish enthusiastic manner was disarming, and as she led me through the jostle of the outer office, I was affected by the resonance of her Western voice, and by the informality of her clothes--it was as if she rebelled against urban conformities.¹⁹

Cather agreed with Jewett that one must "know the world before one could know the parish," and in her early years she did live a rich and active life, an experience which prepared her for years of solitary and devoted writing. She felt that "The talent for writing is largely the talent for living. . . ." And, she continued, "An author must live, live deeply and richly and generously, live not only his own life, but all lives. He must have experiences that cannot be got out of a classical dictionary or even in polite society. He must know the world a good deal as God knows it, in all the pitiable depravity of its evil, in all the measureless sublimity of its good."²⁰

It was because Cather felt she must live "all lives" that she

¹⁸Cather, Willa Cather on Writing, p. 109.

¹⁹Sergeant, p. 33.

²⁰Willa Cather, The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902, Vol. I, ed. by William M. Curtin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), pp. 31-32.

rejected some of the possibilities of her own life, such as marriage. Evidently she admired the institution of marriage very much, however. In an 1895 review she praised the French actress Madame Réjane for being as good a mother as an artist: "She knows," she said, "that no woman who cannot truly be devoted to her husband and her children can be devoted to her art. She possibly also knows that there are other things on earth than art, things higher and more sacred."²¹ Moreover, her favorite character was Antonia, the "mother of races."

However, she had to make a choice between the demands of life and those of art, and she chose the latter. When Elizabeth Sergeant quizzed her about marriage, she answered that, to her, "To be free, to work at her table--that was all in all. What could be more beautiful, if you had it in you, than to be the wife of a farmer and raise a big family in Nebraska? There were fates and fates but one could not live them all. Some would call hers servitude, but she called it liberation."²² No, she could not actually live all lives, but she could and did live many through her fiction.

Deep inside, Cather must have always intended to devote herself fully to her art, for as early as 1891 she stated in her essay on Carlyle, "Art of every kind is an exacting master, more so even than Jehovah. He says only, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.' Art, science, and letters cry, 'Thou shalt have no other gods at all.' They accept only human sacrifices."²³ And in 1894 she declared,

²¹Cather, The World and the Parish, I, 200.

²²Sergeant, pp. 115-16.

²³Cather, The Kingdom of Art, p. 423.

Now the artist, poor fellow, has but one care, one purpose, one hope--his work. That is all God gave him; in place of love, of happiness, of popularity, only that. He is not made to live like other men; his soul is strung differently. He must wander in the streets because the need of his work is with him, he must shun the parlours of his friends and seek strange companions, because the command of his work is upon him.²⁴

Predictably enough, then, when Cather was writing, she not only "shunned the parlours" of her friends, she also "all but barred her [own] front door," "disconnected her own telephone,"²⁵ and was sometimes actually rude to anyone luckless enough to find his way into her apartment.

It was because Cather was such an energetic and generous person, however, giving so much of herself to whatever she was doing or whomever she was with, that these tactics were necessary. Edith Lewis maintains that "It was the completeness of her response to people that made ordinary human contacts more taxing for her than for most."²⁶ She valued her solitude and her freedom, but now that she was a popular novelist and in the public eye, she found both threatened. Moreover, as she grew older and her health failed, she had to become even more withdrawn in order to preserve her ability to create. This withdrawal became even more pronounced as she saw the world around her "breaking in two,"²⁷ lowering its values and turning into a mechanistic, conformist society. As she had foreseen early in her career,

The further the world advances the more it becomes evident that an author's only safe course is to cling close to

²⁴Cather, The World and the Parish, I, 52.

²⁵Sergeant, p. 25.

²⁶Lewis, p. 135.

²⁷Cather, Not Under Forty (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936),

the skirts of his art, forsaking all others, and keep unto her as long as they two shall live. An artist should not be vexed by human hobbies or human follies; he should be able to lift himself up into the clear firmament of creation where the world is not. He should be among men but not one of them, in the world but not of the world.²⁸

Like the archetypal Promethean hero, Willa Cather ultimately stands "quite alone, upon a tower that is only himself. . . ."29

II

Although in her early fiction about Nebraska Willa Cather used many realistic techniques, she is essentially a Romantic. To many critics writing in the thirties and forties, when social realism and social protest were so popular, this meant that her art was weak and out of touch with reality. They resented her frequent use of the past as the setting for her novels, not realizing in their narrow-minded emphasis on the present that all times and all places are legitimate provinces of art. For example, Alfred Kazin says that her treatment of the past is "a frank and even romantic submission,"³⁰ and Granville Hicks dogmatically asserts, "Having turned to the past as a refuge and not because of some perception of the relation of the past to the central issues of the present, she could do nothing but paint pretty pictures."³¹ However, at least one critic of this period did defend

²⁸Cather, The Kingdom of Art, p. 407.

²⁹Harold Bloom, Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1970), p. 9.

³⁰Alfred Kazin, "Elegy and Satire: Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow," in On Native Grounds (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942), p. 250.

³¹Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1933), pp. 225-26.

her right to choose her own themes and subjects regardless of the current style. Edward Wagenknecht declares, "Personally I can see no reason why a fine writer should be required to be in sympathy with the mood of her time. As Auclair tells Saint-Vallier, 'Change is not always progress.' It is much more important to be attuned to what Dorothy Canfield calls 'the rhythm of the permanent,' and sometimes this may even mean to be deliberately out of tune with the time."³² To Cather the past was primarily a background for the depiction of human struggle, but by using distant times and places she was nevertheless able to give the effect of suspended action which makes her fiction--like myths, legends, and parables--applicable to all times and places.

In her early critical writing Cather declared her preference for romanticism over realism, defining romanticism as

. . . the highest form of fiction. . . . [It] will never desert us [she continues]. . . . It will come back to us in all its radiance and eternal freshness in some one of the dawning seasons of Time. Ibsens and Zolas are great, but they are temporary. Children, the sea, the sun, God himself are all romanticists. Clouds cover the sun sometimes, and there is darkness upon the face of the deep, and God hides his face from us. But they come again, and with them Romance. . . .³³

She maintained that "The possibilities of analytical fiction are limited; it can go on until it has lost all poetry, all beauty, until it reaches the ugly skeleton of things, there it must stop. . . . We will all sicken of it some day and go back to romance, to romance whose possibilities are as high and limitless as beauty, as good, as hope."³⁴ In

³²Edward Wagenknecht, "Willa Cather and the Lovely Past," in Cavalcade of the American Novel (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1952), pp. 321-22.

³³Cather, The World and the Parish, I, p. 270.

³⁴Cather, The Kingdom of Art, p. 325.

this statement the young Cather may indeed be over-emphasizing the role of romance in literature, for, although no artist was more particular about fact, detail, and the right word, she always preferred the poetic to the prosaic. However, literary history seems to bear out Cather's belief that romanticism will always return to its own; making a similar observation, Richard Chase has proclaimed that ". . . the history of the American novel is not only the history of the use of realism but also of the repeated rediscovery of the uses of romance, and . . . this will continue to be so."³⁵ Thus, as Chase implies, both romance and realism have an established place in American fiction, and whereas many writers may be arbitrarily classified as Romanticists or Realists, in actuality most good novels contain elements of both romanticism and realism. In the novels of such artists as Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Hemingway, Faulkner, and even Cather, romance--which employs myth, symbol, and allegory--is combined with the realist's respect for detail and accuracy.

With all due respect to realism, however, this study is primarily concerned with myth, which is often a manifestation of romanticism--romanticism being in its truest sense not an escape from reality, but rather an examination of what is often a deeper and a higher reality than that which appears on the surface. The Romantic Quest not only soars high in its pursuit of God, Beauty, and the Ideal, but also digs deep into time and the human soul in its search for complete truth. Cather believes that the true artist is indeed obligated to give such a complex view of life; and she contends that

³⁵Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1957), p. xii.

. . . there is only one sin for which there is no forgiveness in Heaven, no forgetting in Hell. That is the sin against the holy spirit, not the holy spirit of the Trinity, but the holy spirit in man. . . . To every man who has really great talent there are two ways open, the narrow one and the wide, to be great and suffer, or to be clever and comfortable, to bring up white pearls from the deep or to blow iris-hued bubbles from the froth on the surface. The pearls are hard to find and the bubbles are easy to make and they are beautiful enough on a sunny day, but when a man who was made for the deep sea refuses his mission, denies his high birthright, then he has sinned the sin.³⁶

It is in this fuller sense of the term that not only Emerson and Wordsworth are Romantics, but also Cather and Coleridge, Shelley and Keats, Hawthorne and Melville, Poe and Whitman.

Like these greatest of the Romanticists, Cather relies on myth and symbol to project the wide implications of her fiction. That her work often depends on symbols for its meaning has been recognized by some of her more perceptive critics. Connolly has noted that ". . . for all the realistic tone and texture of her stories, Willa Cather is at heart a symbolic writer. She is far more concerned with the foreshortened essential meaning than the lengthy existent fact. . . ." ³⁷ And E. K. Brown has proclaimed,

Her vision is of essences. In her earlier novels the essential subject, a state of mind or of feeling, was enveloped in the massiveness of the conventional modern realist novel. It was there, but it was muffled. Then she saw that if she abandoned the devices of massive realism, if she depended on picture and symbol and style she could disengage her essential subject and make it tell upon the reader with a greater directness and power, help it to remain uncluttered in his mind. The things that pass, the things that merely adhere to states of mind and feeling, she began to use with a severe and rigid economy. Her

³⁶Cather, The Kingdom of Art, p. 391.

³⁷Francis X. Connolly, "Willa Cather: Memory as Muse," in Fifty Years of the American Novel: A Christian Appraisal, ed. by Harold C. Gardiner (New York: Gordian Press, Inc., 1968), p. 73.

fiction became a kind of symbolism with the depths and suggestions that belong to symbolist art. . . .³⁸

Brown's comment that she began to write with "a severe and rigid economy" is a significant one, because as her art matured, she learned--through image, symbol, and myth--to strive for simplification and concentration. She believed that "Art . . . should simplify. That indeed is very nearly the whole of the higher artistic process. . . ."39 Another call for simplification in art was made in her famous essay on "The Novel *Démeuble*":

How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it all the meaningless reiteration concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theater, or as the house into which the glory of the Pentecost descended; leave the scene bare for the play of emotions, great and little--for the nursery tale no less than the tragedy, is killed by tasteless amplitude. The elder Dumas enunciated a great principle when he said that to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls.⁴⁰

This goal of simplicity--of throwing "all the furniture out of the window"--is achieved in Cather's fiction by her use of the universal motifs and elemental passions of archetype.

Cather's use of archetype and symbolism, however, is extremely complex, and although she uses archetypal patterns in many of her novels, her application and interpretation of particular symbols are by no means fixed. She avoids the one-to-one simplicity of allegory by letting the themes and the characters of each novel determine the meaning of her symbols. For example, whereas the garden is usually contrasted with the

³⁸Brown, p. 340.

³⁹Willia Cather, Willia Cather on Writing, p. 10.

⁴⁰Cather, Willia Cather on Writing, p. 43.

wasteland as a positive symbol of physical and spiritual fruitfulness, the artificial and secluded gardens of St. Peter in The Professor's House and of the Cardinals in Death Comes for the Archbishop indicate personal isolation and spiritual sterility. Moreover, the cave and the rock are also ambivalent symbols: the descent into a cave or other underworld substitute brings self-knowledge to the protagonists of O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, My Ántonia, Death Comes for the Archbishop, and Shadows on the Rock, but it also brings fear or death to the heroes of Death Comes for the Archbishop and One of Ours. The rock is a symbol of sanctuary and rebirth in The Song of the Lark, The Professor's House, My Mortal Enemy, and Shadows on the Rock, but in Death Comes for the Archbishop, the Rock of the Ácomas indicates not safety and regeneration, but spiritual and intellectual regression. Perhaps the most ambiguous and contradictory symbols in Cather's writings, however, are the sun and the moon. The sun, like the garden and the rock, is usually a positive symbol, indicative of Apollonian reason and order, warmth and fruitfulness, aspiration and spirituality, but in Alexander's Bridge, One of Ours, and My Mortal Enemy, it represents coldness, isolation, and sterility. The symbol of the moon is even more contradictory than that of the sun. The moon indicates Dionysian passion and the desire of the flesh in such novels as Alexander's Bridge, O Pioneers, One of Ours, A Lost Lady, and, to some extent, in My Mortal Enemy and Death Comes for the Archbishop; in The Song of the Lark, One of Ours, The Professor's House, Shadows on the Rock, Lucy Gayheart, and one episode of Death Comes for the Archbishop, however, it symbolizes spiritual and artistic aspirations which are often accompanied by coldness and loneliness. Thus, while there is

definitely a subtle pattern of mythic symbols intermingled throughout Cather's novels, it would be extremely dangerous for a critic to attempt to impose any sort of symbolic formula on her work.

Cather's fiction has the quality of endurance because both its themes and its plots are based on the universal and timeless human problems, actions, and emotions dealt with in the myths of the various peoples. As Fawcett says,

The myths are never trivial because they are concerned with the meaning of human existence at the deepest possible level. They speak of man's confrontation with the elements of nature, his struggle for survival and the most intimate events which take place within the human soul. With one voice the myths declare that the meaning of the superb joy and the disastrous despair which man can experience is not to be found in a simple empirical observation. They are suffused with emotion because they arise out of the depths of human experience. . . .⁴¹

In her fiction, Cather--like most good artists--uses many of the same subjects and images as do myths: love and death, the cycle of life and of the seasons, the elements of the sky--the sun, the moon, the stars--and the fertile land itself.

Also like the myths, Cather's novels are particularized by time, place, and character, but the themes are the timeless ones of life and art, love and hate, order and disorder, sowing and reaping, birth and death. To Cather there is nothing wrong with this thematic repetition because she believes that ". . . the themes of true poetry, of great poetry, will be the same until all the values of human life have changed and all the strongest emotional responses become different--which can hardly occur until the physical body itself has fundamentally changed."⁴²

⁴¹Thomas Fawcett, The Symbolic Language of Religion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1971), p. 101.

⁴²Cather, Willa Cather on Writing, p. 28.

Being well aware of the psychological and emotional effect that the myths--which in themselves embody all the great themes of life and literature--have upon man, she therefore felt that new stories and themes could not have the same forceful effect: "What we most love," she alleges, "is not bizarre inventions, but to have the old story brought home to us closer than ever before, enriched by all that the right man could draw from it and, by sympathetic insight, put into it. Shakespeare knew this fact very well, and the Greek dramatists long before him."⁴³ This familiarity with the "old stories"--in other words, her mythic awareness--lay submerged but ever-present in her subconscious mind. Consequently, Sergeant can accurately report that "she carried with her a creative force of which she was aware, yet largely uninformed. As in an iceberg, the greater part of the load was submerged."⁴⁴

Myths, which can be used to enrich both the form and content of fiction, are the "submerged" thematic power behind Cather's fiction. She began very early to see life in this mythic perspective, which Thomas Mann contends is itself a sign of artistic and psychological maturity: "Certainly," he says, "when a writer has acquired the habit of regarding life as mythical and typical there comes a curious heightening of his artistic temper, a new refreshment to his perceiving and shaping powers, which otherwise occurs much later in life, for while in the life of the human race the mythical is an early and primitive stage,

⁴³Cather, Not Under Forty, p. 119.

⁴⁴Sergeant, p. 108.

in the life of the individual it is a late and mature one."⁴⁵ Besides enhancing the thematic and psychological perceptivity of a work of fiction, a controlling myth can also give strength to its form and structure. As Northrop Frye has observed, the myth is "an abstract story pattern. . . . It presents him [the writer] with a ready made framework, hoary with antiquity, and allows him to devote all his energies to elaborating the design. . . ."⁴⁶ Chase also believes that myth is important to the writer; he asserts that "The poet needs an incandescent focus around which to consolidate and realize his discursive thoughts and more or less random emotions. In short, he needs a myth."⁴⁷

Cather seems to have been aware of the inherent value of myth for the artist, for mythic allusions are interwoven throughout the fabric of her fiction. In her early short stories and criticism there are many perceptive allusions, especially to classical mythology. In the beginning these allusions were used simply to enhance the surface of the work, but as Cather matured as an artist she learned to use myth not just for ornamentation, but as the very warp of the piece itself. In fact, Slote maintains that in her mature work, mythic allusions are "so smoothly integrated that The Waste Land, by comparison, is indeed rough terrain."⁴⁸

Cather's use of established mythologies may be divided into

⁴⁵Thomas Mann, "Freud and the Future," in Myth and Myth-making, ed. by Henry A. Murray (1960; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 371.

⁴⁶Northrop Frye, Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology (New York: Harcourt Brace, and World, 1963), p. 31.

⁴⁷Richard Chase, Quest for Myth (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), p. 120.

⁴⁸Sergeant, p. 93.

four categories: classical, Northern, American Indian, and Christian. One of the first bodies of myths that she became interested in was that of the Greeks and Romans. L. V. Jacks reports that in early childhood, she and her brothers and sisters were often read stories of the historical and mythical heroes of Greece and Rome, for the Cather family believed in the traditional "classical education."⁴⁹ Later, of course, she read Greek and Latin with her friend William Ducker, continuing her reading at the University. She was particularly fond of Vergil--of the Georgics and the Aeneid and in the summers she often read Vergil with her brother Roscoe. Jacks believes that Cather not only admired Vergil, but that she also identified with him. He himself sees several parallels in their lives:

Like Vergil she came from a small town and a community of farmers; like him she had only an indirect interest in agriculture and a deep and abiding interest in literature. Like Vergil, Miss Cather was single; like him she detested noisy crowds and pushing individuals who intruded upon her privacy. Both writers had a strong streak of aloofness; both had the capacity to feel pity for persons who deserved it; both were quiet and reserved and temperate in their personal habits; and both developed into consummate artists.⁵⁰

And, as she implies in My Ántonia, like Vergil, she was "the first . . . to bring the Muse into [her] country"⁵¹--the rich and wild plains of Nebraska.

In her early writings Cather relied more on classical myths than on any other, the University of Nebraska's emphasis on the classics

⁴⁹L. V. Jacks, "The Classics and Willa Cather," Prairie Schooner, 35 (1961), 289.

⁵⁰Jacks, p. 293.

⁵¹Willa Cather, My Ántonia, vol. 4 of The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather, lib. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1937), p. 264.

perhaps having given her the feeling that they were the most "proper" and "literary" sources. Surface allusion may be found in many of her early stories and reviews, and in her first novels--Alexander's Bridge, O Pioneers!, and Song of the Lark--the basic situations are taken from classical mythology. In addition, one may find throughout the body of her fiction the elemental conflict between order and disorder, reason and passion, that is symbolized by the mythic figures Apollo and Dionysus.

A second source of mythical allusions for Cather is Northern mythology--Norse, Celtic, and Slavic. These myths were also a part of her childhood, for she heard them first from the Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Bohemian settlers who lived near her on the Divide. It is in her books about these immigrant settlers--O Pioneers! and My Ántonia--that she makes the most extensive use of the Northern myths.

A third mythology utilized in Cather's fiction is that of the American Indian. Since she had grown up in the Middle West, she was probably familiar with the basic myths of the Plains Indians; and during her visits to the Southwest she learned from the Indian Tony Luhan about the myths of the Pueblos and about the legends of the Indians and the Spanish missionaries. Two of Cather's best novels--The Professor's House and Death Comes for the Archbishop--are permeated with this material.

A final source for Cather's allusions is the great body of stories in the Christian Bible. Slote declares that "From the beginning, as if by inheritance, Willa Cather absorbed the Bible and Pilgrim's Progress. Their presence in her writing is constant, insistent, pervasive. Indeed they made allegory familiar and natural to her,

so that she thought allegorically. . . ."⁵² In her essay on Thomas Mann's Joseph and His Brothers, Cather herself commented on the influence of the Bible:

The Bible countries along the Mediterranean shore were very familiar to most of us in our childhood. Whether we were born in New Hampshire or Virginia or California, Palestine lay behind us. We took it in unconsciously and unthinkingly perhaps, but we could not escape it. It was all about us, in the pictures on the walls, in the songs we sang in Sunday school, in the "opening exercises" at day school, in the talk of the old people, wherever we lived. And it was in our language--fixed indelibly. The effect of the King James translation of the Bible upon English prose has been repeated down through the generations, leaving its mark on the minds of all children. . . .⁵³

She further believes that "The Book of Genesis lies like a faded tapestry deep in the consciousness of almost every individual who is more than forty years of age. Moreover, . . . it is the background of nearly all the art of Western Europe."⁵⁴ Biblical allusions--especially to Genesis--are indeed prevalent in Cather's fiction, the most prominent being that of the exodus of Moses and the Israelites and their subsequent search for the Promised Land, and the story of the fall in the Garden of Eden. Both of these myths are used as the bases for the peculiarly American myths of the "Garden of the World" and the "Great American Desert"⁵⁵ or Wilderness.

By using myths as the foundations for her novels and stories,

⁵²Slote, "The Kingdom of Art," in The Kingdom of Art, by Willa Cather, p. 35.

⁵³Cather, Not Under Forty, pp. 101-2.

⁵⁴Cather, Not Under Forty, p. 102.

⁵⁵These terms are employed by Henry Nash Smith in Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (1950; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1957), pp. 138; 202. Further discussion is given to these terms below, pp. 36-39.

Cather is able to give an important extra dimension to her fiction. Myth facilitates her desire to bring "into being . . . something beyond the situation or the character of a story, something beyond the story itself--the unseen vision, the unheard echo which altered all experience."⁵⁶ This unseen, mystical vision brings echoes of past and future; and her use of settings and situations analogous to myth elevates her characters to heroic proportions and her themes to cosmic importance.

III

According to Northrop Frye, every great literary artist also has his own "private mythology, his own spectroscopic band or peculiar formation of symbols, of much of which he is quite unconscious."⁵⁷ Willa Cather's private myth--which will be illustrated throughout this study--is built around the conflicting values of the East and the West, the flesh and the spirit, life and art, art and religion. To her, the East--symbolized by the garden, flowers, music, and the moon--comes to represent art and the physical beauty of Greece; the West--symbolized by the sun, the desert, the wilderness, rocks, mountains, and the fruitful land itself--represents religion and the spiritual beauty of Israel. Cather first begins her life-long mythic quest by journeying toward the East in search of beauty; she ends it by returning to the West to seek truth. Her entire life, then, may be viewed as a symbolic pilgrimage from the human to the divine, from man to God.

Cather struggled all of her life to synthesize the polar

⁵⁶Lewis, p. 138.

⁵⁷Frye, p. 11.

attractions of the East and the West, Dionysus and Apollo, and in her art as well as her life this struggle takes the form of a quest for truth. Moreover, most of her protagonists--Alexander, Alexandra, Thea, Jim, Claude, Niel, St. Peter, Myra, Latour, Cecile, Lucy, and Henry--are engaged in a personal quest for truth and beauty. Cather's novels, therefore, seem to support Northrop Frye's assertion that the quest is the "central myth of [all great] literature,"⁵⁸ and whereas this statement may not always be true, it must be admitted that a substantial number of Western literary masterpieces--the Odyssey, the Aeneid, Beowulf, Piers Plowman, Morte 'd Artur, Don Quixote, Tom Jones, Moby Dick, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Grapes of Wrath, The Great Gatsby, The Old Man and the Sea, and Ulysses--are based on a heroic quest, sometimes physical, sometimes psychological or spiritual.

Willa Cather's quest is a divided one, leading her first in one direction and then in another. As a young artist she was attracted to the literary centers of the East, but as she matured she began to rely more and more on her western origins. However, she was always conscious of the basic duality of man and his desires, a duality which has often been symbolized in American literature by the contrasting values of East and West, city and country. Miller has commented upon this fundamental mythical and American conflict as follows:

Central to the work of Willa Cather is the basic American mythic drama, the conflict of East and West, the collision of Civilization and Frontier. In this myth Europe functions as symbol of the lost past, of a cultural Garden from which the American has been excluded by his eating of the Apple of the Innocent West. In its recurrence in American literature, the myth takes the form of the quest, a quest that heads significantly toward the East or the West, and which has as

⁵⁸Frye, p. 18.

its goal the discovery of the old Garden or the creation of a new. And the myth is played out in real life as well as in art. Henry James and T. S. Eliot, for example, traveled East permanently under the belief or the illusion that they could return to the Garden by their singular act of renunciation: theirs was salvation through faith. Cooper, Whitman, and Twain, on the other hand, made their commitment, at least imaginatively, to the West: they recreated the Garden in the western wilderness, achieving their salvation through good works. . . . There is no need to judge one deficient, the other superior: each expresses a truth of the American experience.⁵⁹

Although Cather ultimately made her commitment to the West rather than to the East, her life and art were a battleground between the two. Initially, she felt this basic opposition in the contrasting cultures of the Old World and the New which she first witnessed on the Divide in the encounter the European immigrants had with the prairie land and its people. Her early childhood, therefore, set the stage for her mature concern with European and American values.

Like James, Cather began her career as a novelist by portraying the American in Europe. However, she quickly became dissatisfied with this theme, which had by this time become somewhat conventional. She continued to write about the European-American theme, but her attitude gradually changed so that she began to have more respect for the New World in all its innocent promise and primitive passion and less for the Old World with its surface amenities and hidden corruption. Cather felt that she had found the best of both worlds in the European immigrants who settled in the Divide, growing to admire and respect them for their intense capacity for joy and love as well as for their strength and endurance. In her essay on "Nebraska," she states that when "Colonies

⁵⁹James E. Miller, Jr., "Wharton and Cather: The Quest for Culture," in Quests Surd and Absurd: Essays in American Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 91-92.

of European people, Slavonic, Germanic, Scandinavian, Latin, spread across our bronze prairies like the daubs of color on a painter's palette," they "brought with them something that this neutral new world needed even more than the immigrants needed land."⁶⁰ Here then is the source for Cather's particular "international theme," and her subsequent novels portray how "the Old World . . . advanced into the New, settled it, fought its recalcitrance, tutored it, and eventually reduced it to neatly classical squares, triangles, and rectangles of fertile soil."⁶¹ She analyzes how life in the Old World prepared or did not prepare the European settlers for that in America, and she considers the effect that both European and American cultures have on her characters, no matter what their ethnic origin. Consequently, Thorp seems justified when he asserts that "no modern American writer has made so much of the cultural continuity between the Old World and the New."⁶²

The East--not only Europe, but also the eastern United States--was the direction which Cather's quest first took. Trilling has perceived this early trend in her work, proclaiming that although "Her forbears had marched westward to the new horizon," "her own work is a march back toward the spiritual East. . . ."⁶³ This Eastern quest parallels her early faith in art as the key to beauty and truth; in 1898, for

⁶⁰Willia Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," Nation, 117 (5 September 1923), 237.

⁶¹Frederick J. Hoffman, "Willia Cather's Two Worlds," in The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade (New York: The Viking Press, 1955), p. 154.

⁶²Willard Thorp, "New Voices," in American Writing in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 55.

⁶³Cather, The World and the Parish, I., p. 480.

example, she had declared in the Lincoln Courier that "Art vanquishes by means of truth."⁶⁴ Consequently, she believed that the true artist should be fully dedicated to his purpose. She once referred to this true artistic devotion as "the lifelong madness of Endymion," and she agreed with Stevenson that although "Endymion may marry Audrey and settle down and tend pigs all his life, . . . he will always be a better man for having once loved the moon."⁶⁵ This initial interest in art is significant for her later work too, for, in its inherent emphasis on the spirit, it foreshadows her later interest in religion. Moreover, although the East--associated with light and the sunrise--has traditionally symbolized spiritual light and mystical truth, and the West--the seat of the sunset and darkness--has traditionally represented ignorance and barbarism, Cather reverses these symbols. In her works, the East represents the beauty of art and of the body, while the West represents the deeper truths of God and man, of the Divine spirit and the human mind.

The young Cather, however, was perhaps afraid of the darker human truths symbolized by the West, for she sought to escape from the bleak Western prairies by going East. After graduating from the University of Nebraska, she was dissatisfied with Red Cloud and longed for the artistic and cultural excitement of the East. Mildred Bennett declares that in accepting the editorship of the Home Monthly, she was "overjoyed at her deliverance;"⁶⁶ and Sergeant reports that intermingled

⁶⁴Cather, The World and the Parish, I., p. 202.

⁶⁵Lionel Trilling, "Willa Cather," New Republic, 90 (1937), 11.

⁶⁶Bennett, Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, p. xviii.

with Cather's homesickness for the plains, there was also fear: she feared "dying in a cornfield," and she felt that there was "no place to hide in Nebraska. You can't hide under a windmill."⁶⁷ This fear and resentment of the West, and of Nebraska in particular, is shown in much of her early fiction, notably in "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "A Wagner Matinee."

Nevertheless, even at this time her feelings about the West were curiously ambivalent. Bennett has observed that

Her mixed feelings toward this world of bleak, wild prairie, where she lived from 1883 to 1896, her love and hatred of it, were the feelings of a sensitive child to a parent: she blessed what it gave her in life-long friendships, in emotional release, and in a more material sense, in subject matter for her greatest writing; she hated it for the hold it had on her, for the acute longing she felt for it wherever in the world she happened to find herself. Employ it she did, magnificently; overcome it, never!⁶⁸

Cather had to leave the West in order to learn how important it really was to her. During her early years in the East she made frequent trips home, but perhaps she became most homesick on her first trip to Europe, where the wheat country reminded her of Nebraska:

I hung and hung about the wheat country in central France, [she says,] sniffing when I observed a little French girl riding on the box between her father's feet on an American mowing machine, until it occurred to me that maybe if I went home to my own wheat country and my own father, I might be less lachrymose. It's a queer thing about the flat country--it takes hold of you, or it leaves you perfectly cold. A great many people find it dull and monotonous; they like a church steeple, an old mill, a waterfall, country all touched up and furnished like a German Christmas card. I go everywhere, I admire all kinds of country. I tried to live in France. But when I strike the open plains, something happens. I'm home. I breathe differently. That love of great spaces, of rolling open country like the sea,--it's the

⁶⁷Sergeant, p. 49.

⁶⁸Bennett, The World of Willa Cather, p. xii.

grand passion of my life. I tried for years to get over it. I've stopped trying. It's incurable.⁶⁹

Obviously, the plains country had a very strong hold on Cather. Once, in fact, unable to decide which was the "real" and which the "fake" Cather, she even considered abandoning her writing and settling down on the prairie, because, she said, "My deepest affection was not for the other people and other places I had been writing about. I loved the country where I had been a kid, where they still called me Willie Cather."⁷⁰

It was only after Cather began to recognize and accept this innate love for her prairie homeland--and subsequently for the entire Middle and Southwest--that she was able to create her greatest fiction. Her friend Elizabeth Sergeant has observed that "Her restless doubling back and forth across our vast continent . . . did not assure integration and tranquility until she turned the Nebraska of her childhood into a world of the imagination that she could share with her readers. Then she began to seem and be all of a piece."⁷¹ She needed the East to give her perspective, but the West was her essential subject. Ironically, then, her career "started in protest against and flight from the very world she ended by idealizing and mourning." To Zabel, this fact fits Cather into the mainline of American fiction because it "recapitulates a characteristic American pattern of rebellion and return, censure and surrender."⁷²

⁶⁹Willa Cather: A Biographical Sketch, An English Opinion, and an Abridged Bibliography, anonymous pamphlet (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, n. d.), p. 3.

⁷⁰Bennett, The World of Willa Cather, p. 138.

⁷¹Sergeant, p. 54.

⁷²Morton Dauwen Zabel, "Willa Cather: The Tone of Time," in Craft and Character (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), p. 267.

When Cather did return imaginatively to her homeland in such novels as O Pioneers! and My Ántonia, she returned a conqueror. As E. K. Brown has alleged, "Of American artists she was the first who wooed the muse in her particular wild land, and because it was an authentic muse, the art is authentic and pure, almost classical in form, built of the rocklike materials that endure."⁷³ Like Vergil, she wrote about the people and country of her own patria, her own fatherland. In 1921 she had told Latrobe Carroll that her first desire to write came from "an enthusiasm for a kind of country and a kind of people, rather than ambition,"⁷⁴ and as early as 1898 she had perceived that "The artist is bound to his native soil more closely than the serf who plods the furrow,"⁷⁵ though for many years she valiantly fought against this bond.

Cather's treatment of both the land and its people has mythic overtones. Her characters, described by Carl Van Doren as "primitive and epic in their dispositions,"⁷⁶ indeed take on almost god-like characteristics in their relationship with the land. And the land itself, to which she ascribes "not only spaciousness and beauty but endurance and serenity and strength"⁷⁷ as well, is often personified with both human and superhuman characteristics. Edward and Lillian Bloom assert that,

⁷³Brown, p. 341.

⁷⁴Latrobe Carroll, "Willa Sibert Cather," Bookman, 53 (1921), 212.

⁷⁵Cather, The World and the Parish, II, p. 582.

⁷⁶Carl Van Doren, "Contemporary American Novelists," Nation, 113 (27 June 1921), 92.

⁷⁷Henry Steele Commager, "Traditionalism in American Literature," Nineteenth Century, 146 (November 1949), 315.

As a place of communion for idealistic pioneers, Miss Cather exalts the land. It is the consecrated, tangible evidence of a superior authority and is imbued with the might of that force. . . . The pioneer's chief awareness is based on the original unity of the earth. He sees the earth, the spirit of a stern but not necessarily orthodox deity, jealously protecting its harmony which he must associate with his own well-being. Jealously, as Miss Cather describes it, and at any cost, the dominance of the deity with its fierce and overwhelming strength must be retained.⁷⁸

For the most part, Cather's characters start out by struggling against the land, the result of which is always defeat. Ironically, it is only after they learn to surrender to the demands of the land, to become spiritually integrated with it, that they are able to make it yield for them.

Although Cather uses material from several established mythologies, perhaps her most important mythic contribution to her fiction is that of her own personal Western myth and that of the associated American myth of the Wilderness vs. the Garden, the Desert vs. the Promised Land. In this, she is truly an American writer, for as Chase has pointed out, no nation can "simply 'receive' a mythology from an earlier people,"⁷⁹ for each nation has its own mores and values.

America is a country particularly rich in mythic possibilities, many of which rely on the Bible for their terminology and fundamental values. For example, the early English settlers looked upon the forested interior as symbolic of a wilderness of sins, and they aspired to tame that wilderness and turn it into a productive garden. As settlers continued to move West and to "tame" the "wilderness" by turning forests

⁷⁸Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, "Willa Cather's Novels of the Frontier: A Study in Thematic Symbolism," American Literature, 21 (1949), 82.

⁷⁹Chase, Quest for Myth, p. 35.

and plains into cropland and pastureland, the symbol of the wilderness was gradually replaced by that of the desert or the wasteland. The mythic importance of the desert has been pointed out by Walter Prescott Webb, who states that "Desert countries have always been fertile sources of inspiration for literature. They have contributed a mysticism and a spiritual quality which have found expression in the lofty and simple teachings of Jesus and Mohammed, both of whom lived in a region . . . like the Great Plains. . . ." ⁸⁰ Along with the desert myth, there also grew up in the plains country of the Middle West and in the true desert country of the Southwest the parallel myth of the Promised Land. Both European immigrants and Americans dissatisfied with their lives eagerly took advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862, and the mass immigration to the plains country in the 1870's almost equals the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan.

It was many years, however, before the new settlers of the plains country were able to get a glimpse of the "promised land" of milk and honey, and they needed another and stronger myth to sustain them in the "battle with drought and dust and wind and grasshoppers;" they found this myth in the "westward extension of the myth of the garden." ⁸¹ This garden myth manifested itself in two ways: in the American agrarian myth, and in the ancient myth of the Garden of Eden. Moreover, this Eden myth corresponds to Lewis' thesis of the true American hero as Adam. He says that,

. . . the American myth saw life and history as just beginning. It described the world as starting up again under

⁸⁰Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1931), p. 514.

⁸¹Smith, p. 202.

fresh initiative, in a divinely granted second chance for the human race, after the first chance had been so disastrously fumbled in the darkening Old World. It introduced a new kind of hero, the heroic embodiment of a new set of ideal human attributes. . . . [This new hero was] an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero . . . was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall.⁸²

This Adamic myth as defined by Lewis is not completely enacted, however, until the innocent hero does fall. Richard Chase identifies this characteristic fall from innocence to experience with the mythic archetype of the death and rebirth of a god, and then classifies this fall as the classic American myth.⁸³ Significantly, many of Cather's major characters--Alexander, Emil, Alexandra, Ántonia, Jim Niels, Claude, Latour, Tom Outland, and Cecile--do undergo just such an initiation experience.

A second garden myth which grew up in America is the agrarian myth discussed by Henry Nash Smith. This myth asserted "that all real production is from the soil, and that land possesses some mysterious quality which guarantees to its occupants a more certain abundant and permanent support than other employments."⁸⁴ Cather was herself a product of this myth, which is reflected in her prairie fictions. However, this agrarian myth was destined for an unavoidable collision with the most powerful economic force of the nineteenth century: the

⁸²R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 4-5.

⁸³Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition, p. 244.

⁸⁴Smith, p. 163.

industrial revolution. People like Cather who adhered to this myth were often unable to adjust to the catalytic effect this revolution had on man and society, and they fought a doomed and desperate battle against the wasteland of the impending machine age. Many of America's best thinkers and writers--Emerson, Melville, Whitman, Faulkner, Frost, and Cather--have written about this rural-industrial conflict, symbolized by the images of the Garden and the Machine. Leo Marx asserts that "Again and again they [American writers] invoke the image of a green landscape--a terrain either wild or, if cultivated, rural--as a symbolic repository of meaning and value. But at the same time, they acknowledge the power of a counter-force, a machine or some other symbol of the forces which have stripped the old ideal of most, if not all of its meaning."⁸⁵ Cather was particularly bitter about the effect that technological "progress" had on her beloved Nebraska, and in her fiction there is no sympathy for the selfish and the materialistic--the Bayliss Wheelers and Ivy Peters of the world. Therefore, as she looked nostalgically back to her childhood, she felt even more admiration for the early settlers to whom "the attainment of material prosperity was a moral victory, because it was wrung from hard conditions, was the result of a struggle that tested character."⁸⁶

Predictably, then, a major theme of Cather's fiction is the conflict of material and spiritual values. Moreover, as her interest in these spiritual matters grows, her early faith in art gradually gives

⁸⁵ Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 362-63.

⁸⁶ Cather, "Nebraska," p. 238.

way to a reliance on religion. Gradually, her true frontier becomes "the locale of idealistic quests, spiritual struggles, and religious awareness. Her frontier is as much a philosophical concept as it is a physical actuality."⁸⁷ Cather is thus interested not only in pioneers of the land, but also in pioneers of the spirit. She declared in 1894 that "Whole nations have died from spiritual famine as well as from a famine of corn. The world must have ideals and emotions and it cannot always make them for itself. It will pay any price for them, risk any peril for them."⁸⁸

Cather's interest in religion is closely associated with her mythic technique, for as Fawcett argues, "The myths embody a religious outlook on the world."⁸⁹ Her portrayal of the seasons--moving from winter to autumn, planting to reaping, death to rebirth--is essentially mythic, and her novels are filled with ceremonials and ritual, both secular and religious. Moreover, the journey or quest motif is often both mythic and religious. As Bloom proclaims, "Like the ancient wandering tribes of Israel, Willa Cather's pioneers have gone forth into the wilderness, searching for an ideal and a sanctuary from a troubled existence. And there in the wilderness they often find their sanctuary."⁹⁰

The recognition of this "troubled spirit," the angoisse of the modern soul, is also a significant aspect of Cather's fiction. She

⁸⁷ Edward and Lillian Bloom, p. 77.

⁸⁸ Cather, The Kingdom of Art, p. 116.

⁸⁹ Fawcett, p. 98.

⁹⁰ Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1962), p. 29.

contended that,

When the new Semitic religion came into the West, its ardors burned away the serene beauty from the classic face, and mayhap, too, something of its earthiness. Sometimes I have thought that Christ's face as it appeared in early Italian art was the first modern face ever painted. At any rate the world has been slowly approximating toward the spiritual type of beauty ever since, and the perfect physical radiance of the childhood of the nations is left us no more.⁹¹

As she implies here, Cather believes the most fundamental human conflict to be that of the flesh and the spirit, and quite obviously, she was not exempt from the struggle. Although "Preeminently a chronicler of affairs of the spirit, her eyes wandered after the lustier life of her Lena Lingards."⁹² She realized that a proper integration between the flesh and spirit was necessary to a healthy life. Consequently, although many critics have accused her of being squeamish toward sex, her fiction abounds in animal and sexual imagery associated both with her characters and with the personified land. As indicated in her above statement, she also dramatizes the conflict of the flesh and the spirit through the contrasting and symbolic cultures of Greece and Israel. Eventually, she acquires the platonic view that physical beauty is a key to spiritual beauty.

Cather's mythic treatment of the human soul ultimately leads her to a confrontation with the human subconscious, for, in the twentieth century, "No longer are the meanings of the myths writ large in external, visible nature, but rather they are sunk deep in man's unfathomed inner nature."⁹³ When she says that a true artist "comes to depend more and

⁹¹Cather, The World and the Parish, I, p. 412.

⁹²Connolly, p. 72.

⁹³Richard M. Dorson, "Theories of Myth and the Folklorist," in Myth and Mythmaking, ed. by Henry A. Murray (1960; rpt., Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 80.

more on . . . the thing by which our feet find the road home on a dark night, accounting of themselves for roots and stones which we had never noticed by day,"⁹⁴ she is implying the role that subconscious memory and motivation play in artistic creation. Therefore, Rebecca West underestimates her when she says that her only task is "to move on the sunlit face of the earth, with the gracious amplitude of Ceres, bidding the soil yield richly, that the other kind of artist, who is like Persephone and must spend half of his days in the world under the world, may be refreshed on emergence."⁹⁵

Admittedly, Cather applauds the beauty, love, and happiness this world has to offer, but she also recognizes that, Janus-like, the world has another side. In her early essay on Carlyle she praises him as a true artist because he "was always down in the chamber of the fates, at the roots of Ygdrasil, the tree of life, which the Norns water day and night, one with honey and two with gall."⁹⁶ Acknowledging here that there is usually more gall than honey in the world, Cather is well aware of the existence of evil as well as good, hatred as well as love, death as well as life. This dual nature of man and the universe--symbolized by the East and the West, represented in the parallel callings of art and religion, and mythically personified in the figures of Apollo and Dionysus--and man's subsequent quest to find understanding and truth by achieving the proper balance between his polar desires are Cather's most powerful and enduring themes.

⁹⁴Lewis, p. 78.

⁹⁵Rebecca West, "The Classic Artist," in The Strange Necessity (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1928), p. 248.

⁹⁶Cather, The Kingdom of Art, p. 424.

CHAPTER II

THE PURSUIT OF YOUTH IN ALEXANDER'S BRIDGE

Although Willa Cather later deprecated Alexander's Bridge as being too artificial and literary, it marks her first sustained effort to portray her themes of quest and conflict. Therefore, although there are some definite weaknesses in plot structure in the book, her harsh criticism of it is not entirely justified. After she began to feel that the West was her true subject, she rejected Alexander's Bridge thus:

My first novel, Alexander's Bridge, was very like what painters call a studio picture. It was the result of meeting some interesting people in London. Like most young writers, I thought a book should be made out of "interesting material," and at that time I found the new more exciting than the familiar. The impressions I tried to communicate on paper were genuine, but they were very shallow. I still find people who like that book because it follows the most conventional pattern, and because it is more or less laid in London. London is supposed to be more engaging than, let us say, Gopher Prairie; even if the writer knows Gopher Prairie very well and London very casually. Soon after the book was published I went for six months to Arizona and New Mexico. The longer I stayed in a country I really did care about, and among people who were a part of the country, the more unnecessary and superficial a book like Alexander's Bridge seemed to me.¹

In fact, as she moved further and further from Jamesian imitation in style and setting, she reached the point where she even refused to discuss the book with her friends.

¹Willa Cather, Willa Cather on Writing (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), pp. 91-92.

It is true that Alexander's Bridge does not have the naked power and immediacy of most of her later fiction, but if it does not equal these later novels in tone and atmosphere, it does foreshadow their major themes of the dual nature of man, his subsequent inner conflict, and his ultimate quest for beauty, truth and the ideal, which to Alexander is represented by youth. This latent thematic power has been noted by Edith Lewis, who admitted

For many years I accepted her [Cather's] estimate of Alexander's Bridge. But in reading it over again, after her death, I felt that she had never altogether done it justice. It is true that it is a contrived novel, and one feels a slightness and an artificiality of structure in the earlier parts. But when it at last moves into its true theme, the mortal division in a man's nature, it gathers an intensity and power which come from some deeper level of feeling, and which overflow whatever is "shallow" or artificial in the story. It is as if her true voice, submerged before in conventional speech, had broken through, and were speaking in irrepressible accents of passion and authority.²

This inner division of man's nature may be seen in mythic terms as the conflict of East vs. West, Dionysus vs. Apollo, flesh vs. spirit, youth vs. age.

Bartley Alexander's double personality becomes obvious in the first few pages of the novel. When Lucius Wilson comes to visit his old student and his wife Winifred, he finds Bartley in the apparent security of a peaceful marriage, an established social structure, and a successful career as a designer and engineer of bridges. Like his namesake Alexander the Great, Bartley Alexander is also a conqueror, a "tamer of rivers."³ However, under the facade of complacent middle-age, Bartley

²Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 78.

³Willa Cather, Alexander's Bridge & April Twilights, vol. 3 of The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather, lib. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935), p. 10. Future references to this source will be paginated within the text.

hides another personality: the boy he was in his youth, the young man he would like to be again. It is this boy that Bartley's old friends remember, and when Wilson tells Winifred about him, she admits, "It is always as if they were talking of someone I had never met" (p. 8).

Early in the novel, Alexander himself confides to Wilson, "I sometimes wonder what sort of chap I'd have been if I hadn't been this sort; I want to go and live out his potentialities too" (p. 14). It is this desire to realize the life of his second self that leads Bartley to London and his old lover Hilda Burgoyne in a desperate quest for his lost youth.

Alexander's mythic search for his true identity parallels that of Cather, for both begin with a pilgrimage to the East. As Zabel has pointed out, "her frontier in those [early] days was not the West; it was the East and the world of art, with desire the goal of her heroes and heroines and the running theme of her stories, as much as it was of Dreiser's"⁴ Alexander's desire manifests itself in several ways, each being linked to one of the two women in his life: Winifred, his wife, or Hilda, his mistress. With Winifred, he associates his need for a secure and ordered life, material success, classical music, moral responsibility, and spiritual beauty; with Hilda, he associates his desires for spontaneous action, warm and impulsive music, sexual fulfillment, physical beauty, and most important of all, the joy and power of youth. According to Friedrich Nietzsche's definition of man's basic personality drives, Winifred represents the calm and ordered Apollonian personality, while Hilda represents the impulsive, passionate Dionysian

⁴Morton Dauwen Zabel, "Willa Cather: The Tone of Time," in Craft and Character (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), p. 267.

nature.⁵

Cather indicates the contrasting natures of these two women with her initial description of each. Lucius Wilson, in the role of the typical Jamesian observer, observes Winifred as she enters her home and describes her as follows:

She was a person of distinction he saw at once, and moreover, very handsome. She was tall, carried her beautiful head proudly, and moved with ease and certainty. One immediately took for granted the costly privileges and fine spaces that must lie in the background from which such a figure could emerge with this rapid and elegant gait. Wilson noted her dress, too--for, in his way, he had an eye for such things--particularly her brown furs and her hat. He got a blurred impression of her fine colour, the violets she wore, her white gloves, and curiously enough, of her veil, as she turned up a flight of steps in front of him and disappeared (pp. 4-5).

Taking for granted her own worth, Winifred has obviously grown up in a cultured society, and the atmosphere she creates for herself is one of serenity, distinction, refinement, and elegance. The veil indicates a certain delicacy, even spirituality, and her colors--brown, white, and violet--are subdued and somewhat cold.

The figure of Hilda, on the other hand, exudes youth, spontaneity, warmth, and vitality. When Alexander sees her at a party in London,

She was sitting on the edge of her chair, as if she had alighted there for a moment only. Her primrose [yellow] satin gown seemed like a soft sheath for her slender supple figure, and its delicate colour suited her white Irish skin and brown hair. Whatever she wore, people felt the charm of her active, girlish body with its slender hips and quick, eager shoulders (p. 41).

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy or Hellenism and Pessimism, trans. by Wm. A. Haussmann, vol. I of The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. by Oscar Levy (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), pp. 24-26.

Whereas in Winifred, the mind and spirit are uppermost, in Hilda it is the body which dominates. Her Irish background implies a passionate nature, and her animated pose indicates her impulsive personality. In contrast to Winifred's quiet, patterned Apollonian life, which to a great extent has been predetermined, Hilda's Dionysian life--defined by Nietzsche as one full of "excessive energy"⁶--has been active, independent, and primarily self-determined.

Alexander's dichotomous nature is therefore represented by these two women and by the various symbols associated with each. Like Winifred, Bartley's Boston home is well-ordered, serene, and cool; here the river is "silver-coloured" (p. 6), and the sky is "pale coloured" (p. 4). Having known Bartley in his ungoverned youth, Wilson is surprised to see how much at home he is in this atmosphere. When he entered Alexander's study,

Wilson felt at once the harmony of beautiful things that have lived long together without obtrusions of ugliness or change. It was none of Alexander's doing, of course; those warm consonances of colour had been blending and mellowing before he was born. But the wonder was that he was not out of place there--that it all seemed to glow like the inevitable background for his vigour and vehemence (p. 11).

That Alexander is at home in Boston with Winifred is shown by his wearing a "purple velvet smoking-coat" (p. 16), the color being associated with Winifred.

The cultivated and conventional way of life led by Alexander, Winifred, and all Boston society is symbolized by Winifred's classical

⁶Friedrich Nietzsche, The Twilight of the Idols, trans. by Anthony M. Ludovici, vol. 16 of The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. by Oscar Levy (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), p. 117.

taste in music. When she comes into the study to play for Bartley and Wilson, it is significant that she plays Schumann rather than a modern American composer. Also, she admits that, although she does not "practice a great many hours . . . [she is] very methodical" (p. 15).

After listening to her play, Wilson observes,

She played with great musical feeling. Wilson could not imagine her permitting herself to do anything badly, but he was surprised at the cleanness of her execution. He wondered how a woman with so many duties had managed to keep herself up to a standard really professional. It must take a great deal of time, certainly, and Bartley must take a great deal of time. Wilson reflected that he had never before known a woman who had been able, for any considerable while, to support both a personal and an intellectual passion (pp. 15-16).

Wilson's observation foreshadows Bartley's later affair with Hilda, for, no matter how much Bartley loves and respects her, Winifred, with her proper Bostonian manners and attitudes, cannot support all of his physical and emotional needs. This fact has been pointed out by Richard Giannone, who maintains that

. . . Cather portrays a woman remarkable enough to be Alexander's wife, but not remarkable enough to provide him complete marital happiness. Given her education and careful manners (she is never haughty, though always gently reserved), Winifred is almost exemplary. Her absorption in music is not preclusive. She balances interest in music with her husband's emotional demands. The point Cather makes is that Alexander is emotionally larger than Winifred. There remains something more elemental in him than her classical music accommodates, though he finds deep satisfaction in that too.

Indeed, Bartley's original interest in Winifred had been connected with her musical taste and talent, for when he visited her and her aunt on his first bridge site in Canada, she often played for him. But it is significant that, while he was being a "wild, ill-governed youth" (p. 19) in London, Winifred was seriously studying music in Vienna, the cities

⁷Richard Giannone, Music in Willa Cather's Fiction (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 62.

themselves symbolizing the differences in their essential natures. Her aunt voices an ominous prophecy when she tells Winifred that MacKeller, her old friend and Bartley's employer, "'found him sowing wild oats in London, I believe. I hope he didn't stop him too soon'" (p. 20).

After his marriage to Winifred, Bartley soon becomes settled into a routine, not only in his marriage, but also in his social and professional responsibilities. In the early years of his marriage, this repetition did not bother him, but now that he is forty-three--on the brink of middle age--he is becoming dissatisfied. He tells Wilson, "After all, life doesn't offer a man much. You work like the devil and think you're getting on, and suddenly you discover that you have only been getting yourself tied up. A million details drink you dry. Your life keeps on going for things you don't want, and all the while you are being built alive into a social structure you don't care a rap about" (p. 14). This conformist existence makes Alexander restless, and he develops an inner longing for independence and freedom. He feels smothered by his various obligations, and consequently he gradually loses interest in his work, which he feels has never been less rewarding than at present.

He was paying for success, too, [he thought] in the demands made on his time by boards of civic enterprise and committees of public welfare. The obligations imposed by his wife's fortune and position were sometimes distracting to a man who followed his profession, and he was expected to be interested in a great many worthy endeavours on her account as well as on his own. His existence was becoming a network of great and little details. He had expected that success would bring him freedom and power; but it had brought only power that was in itself another kind of restraint. . . . (p. 37).

Therefore, part of Bartley's unhappiness derives from the conflict of his responsibilities and his desire for freedom, of his "loyalty to the

code of the society of which he is a part and [his] loyalty to the fullest possible development of himself."⁸ Although Cather believed profoundly in the importance of ethical and moral responsibility, she too--especially in her youth--was resentful of the restrictions imposed upon her by social conventions. Therefore, as Stuart Sherman proclaims, "All her deepest sympathies . . . were with, not against, Bartley in his revolt against the prison-house of respectability, in which he felt that the primal energies of his nature were being progressively fettered and wasted."⁹

In addition to Bartley's irritation with the demands of society, he is also anxious about his own advancing age and the independent life and opportunities which he feels he has lost: "He found himself living exactly the kind of life he had determined to escape. What, he asked himself, did he want with these genial honours and substantial comforts? Hardships and difficulties he had carried lightly; overwork had not exhausted him; but this dead calm of middle life which confronted him--of this he was afraid" (pp. 37-38). Fearing the approach of middle age and desperately longing for his retreating youth, Bartley is already at a critical point in his life when he sails for England, the haunt of his younger days.

Therefore, it is logical that when he first sees Hilda (whom he had known and loved when he was a young and carefree student), he will become even more preoccupied with himself and his past. In subsequent

⁸ John H. Randall, III., The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960), p. 41.

⁹ Stuart Sherman, "Willa Cather," in Critical Woodcuts (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), p. 39.

nights he takes long solitary walks, which E. K. Brown believes contain the "finest psychological probing in the novel. . . . In [these] long, introspective walks Alexander tries to pick his way from the cramping years of his middle life to his uncommitted childhood and youth."¹⁰ As he passes the museum where he and Hilda used to meet, he contemplates the immortality of art, as symbolized by the Elgin marbles, and the transience of life, as symbolized by the mummies. Knowing that art is more lasting than physical life, he is nevertheless ready to sacrifice his career as a talented bridge designer in his frantic pursuit of his vanished youth. Years ago, he "hid his youth under his coat and hugged it," happy "to know that the warm and vital thing within him was still here and had not been snatched away" (p. 33). Now he thinks of "how glorious it had been, and how quickly it had passed; and when it had passed, how little worth while anything was" (p. 36).

In these thoughtful walks, "it was always Miss Burgoyne whom he started out to find" (p. 39), but at this point, he identifies Hilda with his own youth, which is what he is really seeking. He discovers that in his solitary walks, he is not lonely, ". . . for he walked shoulder to shoulder with a shadowy companion--not little Hilda Burgoyne, by any means, but someone vastly dearer to him than she had ever been--his own young self, the youth who had waited for him upon the steps of the British Museum that night, and who, though he had tried to pass so quietly, had known him and come down and linked an arm in his" (p. 40). Bartley is obviously developing a narcissistic infatuation for his younger self. As Jones says, "He is the victim of the Dionysian

¹⁰E. K. Brown, Willa Cather (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 155.

fascination, the Bacchic appeal, the illusion of youth, which creates in him a new and overwhelming feeling of self, sensed in a series of mystical insights superior to his normal self and eventually controlling it."¹¹ As this "shadowy companion" gradually becomes more powerful in Bartley's life, he himself becomes more and more selfish in his relationships with his workers, his wife, and even Hilda.

In Bartley's new-found quest for his young self, he loses sight of the realities of his life and lives under the dangerous illusion of youth, in which Hilda symbolizes all his unaccomplished hopes and dreams. It is significant that when Alexander sees Hilda again after so many years, she is acting in a play, which in itself is an illusion. Moreover, the play, which is entitled Bog Lights, is set in rural Ireland where the people still superstitiously believe in ancient legends and myths. Indeed, one of Hilda's dances is intended to show "the gossoons what she had seen in the fairy rings at night" (p. 25), and Mainhall, Alexander's host, declares that the play is successful because Hilda "makes the whole thing a fairy tale" (p. 24). For Bartley, Hilda makes not only the play a fairy tale, but also life itself. Like the lotus-eaters, when he is with her, he forgets all about his other duties and responsibilities.

In contrast to his wife, Hilda is able to awake in Bartley all his latent desire and passion. Bartley's marriage to Winifred--who is Apollonian in her "submission to rule and concept" and in her regard for form, for "beautiful appearance," cannot give him complete fulfillment. Their proper, somewhat Victorian marriage is based on affection

¹¹Howard Mumford Jones, The Bright Medusa (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1952), pp. 22-23.

and respect, but there is no place in it for passionate sexual love. For this Bartley must turn to Hilda, who, with her Irish warmth and her Dionysian "instinct of life,"¹² can feel and satisfy physical desire.

When Alexander dines with Hilda, their conversation recalls many passionate memories. For example, once when they were walking in Paris, an old woman, in "a voice of [ironic] prophecy," told them "'God give you a happy love.' . . . Until she spoke, Bartley had not realized that he was in love. The strange woman and her passionate sentence that rang out so sharply had frightened them both" (p. 56). Later, "When they reached the house where Hilda lodged, Bartley went across the court with her and up the dark old stairs to the third landing; and there he had kissed her for the first time. He had shut his eyes to give him the courage, he remembered, and she had trembled so--" (p. 56).

In order to break his reverie, Hilda calls her maid to take away the dishes and suggests that she sing some of the songs from her new play. However, these simple and emotional songs only accentuate her warm, passionate nature and point out even more clearly the difference between her personality and that of Winifred. Whereas Winifred is a formally trained classical pianist, Hilda's vocal music is natural, informal, and warm. Not being a trained singer, Hilda's singing is imperfect. She acknowledges, "Of course I really can't sing, except the way my mother and grandmother did before me. Most actresses nowadays learn to sing properly, so I tried a master; but he confused me, just" (p. 57). The way Cather uses music to characterize the role these two

¹²Friedrich Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. by Anthony M. Ludovici, vol. 15 of The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. by Oscar Levy (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), p. 417, and Nietzsche, The Twilight of the Idols, p. 119.

women play in Bartley's life has been discussed by Giannone as follows:

Winifred's formal music is one strain within Alexander's double nature. The other, more elemental side is echoed by Hilda Burgoyne's. The sharp contrast between their talents shows the acuteness of Bartley's conflict. In Boston music is deliberate, reserved, and refined; but in London music is impulsive, simple, and direct. Significantly, Winifred's expression takes the form of a piano piece which is less personal than Hilda's songs. The added measure of warmth which is provided by voice corresponds to the general openness of Hilda's nature and the force of her femininity. . . . [Whereas Winifred's music is accomplished and precise,] Her voice has power. . . . The simple rhythm of her music accords with the rhythm of his [Bartley's] "base" nature.¹³

Therefore, the powerful and erotic effect that Hilda and Bartley have on each other is only increased by her singing. This tension mounts even higher when he asks her to sing "The Harp That Once," a request which Hilda refuses because of the dangerously romantic associations it has for them.¹⁴ However, since both are already sharply aroused, her refusal does no good. Even her last attempt to change the subject by complaining that the room is too warm and asking Bartley to open the window only hastens the inevitable for, being afraid that she will catch cold from the draft, "He slipped the corners [of his handkerchief] carefully under her shoulder-strap." Earlier, he had "felt the energy in every line" (p. 57) of her slender figure, and now he has to steady himself as, standing behind her, he also senses her excitement: "For a long time neither Hilda nor Bartley spoke. They stood close together, looking out into the wan, watery sky, breathing always more quickly and lightly, and it seemed as if all the clocks in the world had stopped.

¹³Giannone, p. 63.

¹⁴To Giannone, this song by Thomas Moore "obliquely suggests the brevity and fatality of their love renewed." Giannone, p. 64. Therefore, it is both a sad reminder and an ominous foreshadowing of their tragic love affair.

Suddenly he moved the clenched hand he held behind him and dropped it violently at his side. He felt a tremor run through the slender yellow figure in front of him" (p. 58). Each has tried to suppress the desire for the other, but before Bartley leaves, they are in each other's arms, and the affair has begun.

The fact that Hilda wears a yellow dress in the above scene is significant, for, just as violet is associated with Winifred, yellow is associated with Hilda. When Winifred is first introduced, she is wearing violets, and during Wilson's visit, Alexander--now in Winifred's psychological and social domain--wears a purple velvet smoking coat. On the other hand, when Hilda is first introduced, she is wearing a "primrose" or yellow satin gown and slippers. Moreover, when Alexander dines with her, she has yellow irises in the room, she serves Bartley a "yellow Rhone wine of which [he] had always been very fond" (p. 52), they look at each other across the "yellow light of the candles" (p. 54), and she is again wearing the yellow gown. Violet connotes the coolness of Winifred's reserved, aristocratic way of life; yellow connotes the warmth of Hilda's spontaneous personality.¹⁵

Cather also uses this color symbolism to portray the struggle Bartley undergoes between the opposing sides of his psyche while he is on the ship sailing from Boston to London. Torn between his need for Winifred and his desire for Hilda, "he [had] intended during the voyage

¹⁵Cather's use of color symbolism is not consistent throughout her novels, and her application of it in this first novel differs from that in later ones. For example, although here yellow symbolizes Dionysian passion and purple indicates position, wealth and coldness, later in The Professor's House and My Mortal Enemy, purple implies Dionysian passions and earthly materialism, while yellow indicates the ideals of unselfish warmth and spiritual love. Therefore, interpretation of such symbols must be based on how they are used in each novel, and not on a general pattern.

to decide upon a course of action, but he held all this away from him for the present and lay in a blessed grey oblivion. Deep down in him somewhere his resolution [to call off his affair with Hilda] was weakening and strengthening, ebbing and flowing" (p. 73). The next day, however, he does make a subconscious decision to continue his affair with Hilda and, symbolically, with his own youthful self, this decision being indicated by the color symbolism in the passage below:

In the afternoon he wrote a long letter to Winifred. Later, as he walked the deck through a splendid golden sunset, his spirits rose continually. It was agreeable to come to himself again after several days of numbness and torpor. He stayed out until the last tinge of violet had faded from the water. There was literally a taste of life on his lips as he sat down to dinner and ordered a bottle of champagne (p. 74).

By writing the letter to his wife, Bartley is able to absolve his conscience for pushing her aside again. He dutifully stays out until the last of the violet--Winifred's color--fades from the water, but it is the yellow gold of the sunset that he gets pleasure from. Significantly, after he makes this subconscious decision, he is able to enjoy the voyage as he has not before, and Dionysian-like, he feels "a taste of life on his lips." Moreover, as the voyage ends and he is closer to Hilda, the embodiment of youth, he feels "a sudden painful delight at being nearer another shore. Sometimes, when he was most despondent, when he thought himself worn out with this struggle, in a flash he was free of it and leaped into an overwhelming consciousness of himself." Almost at once, "he felt that marvelous return of the impetuosity, the intense excitement, the increasing expectancy of youth" (p. 76).

The fact that the sun is setting in the above quote is also a symbolic indication that Bartley has not decided to end his affair with Hilda, because throughout the novel, Cather symbolically connects the

sun with Winifred. Earlier in Bartley's life, when he was happy and successful in both his marriage and his career, he had been awarded the Japanese Order of the Rising Sun. However, now that he is dissatisfied with both and is gradually moving away from the realities of his middle-aged life toward Hilda and his dreams of youth, it is noteworthy that the sun is setting. The symbolism of the sunset in the above incident is strengthened by several other instances in the novel. For example, when Winifred is first introduced, the time is sunset, and "the evening star quivered in the misty air" (p. 6); Winifred and Wilson have tea "under the declining sun" (p. 17); Bartley watches "the trails of smoke behind the Houses of Parliament catch fire with the sunset" (p. 35); and on the train which takes him to his death, he again watches the sun set.

On the other hand, Hilda, representative of Bartley's aspiration for the unattainable Ideal--whether it be art, love, or his beloved youth--is symbolically related to the moon. Moreover, this moon imagery elevates Bartley's quest to mythic status because it makes quite clear the fact that Cather intended his quest of Hilda to be reminiscent of Endymion's quest of Diana (Cynthia), goddess of the moon. Cather's first allusion to this myth is Hilda's song, "The Rising of the Moon." Significantly, it is only after Bartley sees Hilda and hears her song that his vague dissatisfaction takes the definite form of a quest. Slote has declared that,

As Endymion yearned for the moon, so Bartley Alexander desired the magic of youth and its representative in Hilda Burgoyne, who thus becomes Diana (or Cynthia). The scene in which Bartley Alexander watches Hilda on the theatre stage is a brilliant example of Willa Cather's skill in compact allusion--in part, perhaps, a kind of magical game. Hilda like Diana is in another world, the stage and the play. She is performing in Bog Lights, a fairy story.

Like a goddess disguised, she is playing a part, is a country girl. . . .¹⁶

Like the moon goddess, Hilda seems far away and unattainable not only in the play where he first sees her, but also at Lady Walford's party, where he first speaks with her. Moreover, when she asks him what he has been doing, he tells her that he has been "mooning about here" (p. 42).

Besides the specific allusion to the Endymion-Cynthia myth mentioned above, there are several other basic parallels to the story. Like Endymion, who was either a shepherd or a hunter, the young Bartley had lived in the open, rural country, where he had hunted jackrabbits and camped out under the sky. Thus he associates his western boyhood home with youth, which, also like Endymion, he yearns to recapture. On the train to his Canadian bridge site, he sees some boys sitting around a fire. He looks "back wistfully at the boys, camped on the edge of a little marsh, crouching under their shelter and looking gravely at their fire. They took his mind back a long way, to a campfire on a sandbar in a Western river, and he wished he could go back and sit down with them. He could remember exactly how the world had looked then" (pp. 114-15). Bartley longs for the eternal youth which his mythic prototype was granted, and he thinks that, through Hilda and her love, he can attain it. Standing close beside her in her apartment, it seems to him "as if all the clocks in the world had stopped" (p. 58). Indeed, his frantic quest for youth and beauty as personified in Hilda does cause time to stop for him, for it causes him to forget about his present responsibilities and it eventually leads to his death. This defeat is inevitable for Bartley, however, for unlike Endymion, his "goddess" does not have

¹⁶Bernice Slote, ed., "The Kingdom of Art," in The Kingdom of Art, by Willa Cather (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 100.

the power to give him youth and immortality, even though Diana's boon of "perpetual youth united with perpetual sleep"¹⁷ is a questionable one.

Although in many of her later novels--The Song of the Lark, One of Ours, and Lucy Gayheart--the Endymion quest is associated with a spiritual or an artistic quest, in Alexander's Bridge--and later in A Lost Lady--this quest seems to be a contradictory one, associated not only with the spiritual goals of art or beauty, but also with youthful irresponsibility and sexual passion. As a young man, Bartley had had dreams of being a great bridge builder, and after he had built his first bridge in Canada, he "used to walk that bridge at night, promising such things to himself and to the stars. . . . [H]e could remember it so well: the quiet bridge reaching out into the river. . ." (p. 115). Here the moonlight symbolizes his youthful hopes and aspirations, and the bridge indicates that at this time they are connected with his career--which, because of its essential creative nature, can be considered an art.

Having already received wide acclaim for his talent as a designer and an engineer, Bartley is on his way to being a truly superior bridge builder when his quest for "artistic" perfection becomes side-tracked by his personal pursuit of youth. The fact that Hilda represents a false ideal--the flesh rather than the spirit, the passion of art without the order and discipline that is also necessary--is indicated when she admits that Mac "says I ought to be minding the pigs at home, and I suppose I ought" (p. 57). Alexander is infatuated by Hilda, who, like Diana, is beautiful but implicitly dangerous, but his true responsibility lies

¹⁷Charles Mills Gayley, The Classic Myths in English Literature and in Art, rev. ed. (New York: Blaisdell Publishing Company, 1911), p. 395.

with his wife and his profession.

The latent danger of his relationship with Hilda is denoted not only by the Endymion myth, in which Diana destroys Endymion's humanity in order to give him youth and immortality, but also by Alexander's allusion to the Actean-Diana myth. He tells Hilda that he is like the "little boy [who] drank of the prettiest brook in the forest and . . . became a stag" (p. 101). This allusion to the Actean myth also shows the implicit danger of a total reliance on the flesh, for it will be remembered that it was because Actean had seen her naked body that the goddess Diana became so angry that she turned him into a stag, thus indirectly causing his death. Moreover, the ambiguous effect of Alexander's love for Hilda, the symbolical embodiment of the moon, is implied in the multiple nature of the ancient moon goddess herself, for not only did she appear as Diana, the youthful but vengeful huntress, but also as the serene and peaceful Selene and the cruel and dangerous Hecate, goddess of the dark of the moon.

In his struggle to resolve his conflicting desires for Winifred and Hilda, reality and illusion, humanity and deity, Bartley resembles Keats' Endymion. Like Bartley, Endymion is psychologically troubled by an inner division, and both gradually lose hold of reality and responsibility. Endymion has "A lurking trouble in his nether lip," and "often-times the reins would slip/Through his forgotten hands" (I, pp. 178-79).¹⁸ Similarly, Bartley gradually loses control of the men who are working for him, some of them going on strike and others mis-applying his

¹⁸John Keats, Keats: Poems and Selected Letters, ed. and int. by Carlos Baker (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 102. The book and line numbers for other references from this source are given in the text.

principles by not warning him of faulty construction in time to prevent disaster. In addition, both men are fascinated by and long for a woman symbolized by the moon. Endymion says,

. . . tis no prize
 That toiling years would put within my grasp,
 That I have sighed for: with so deadly gasp
 No man e'er panted for a mortal love.
 (I., pp. 523-26).

Bartley, too, longs for more than his wealth and the "mortal love" of his wife, and he thinks that he can find it in Hilda. Indeed, Bartley's inner conflict between the two women he loves could be voiced by Endymion, who says,

I have a triple soul! O fond pretence--
 For both, for both my love is so immense,
 I feel my heart is cut for them in twain.
 (IV., pp. 95-97).

In the beginning of both Endymion and Alexander's Bridge, the heroes desert reality, leaving both their responsibilities and families in order to pursue the illusions of youth and beauty. Also both are near the ocean when they make their commitment to these values symbolized by the moon, Endymion being under water when he sees Cynthia, and Bartley being on an ocean voyage when he forgets his resolve to end his affair with Hilda.

There is also another similarity between Bartley and Keats' Endymion in the fact that both ultimately try to return to reality and responsibility. Endymion symbolically accepts reality when he commits himself to his "sweetest Indian," who represents not only reality, but also humanity. Of his love for Cynthia and the moon, he says,

I have clung
 To nothing, lov'd a nothing, nothing seen
 Or felt but a great dream! O I have been
 Presumptuous against love, against the sky,
 Against all elements, against the tie

Of mortals each to each, against the blooms
 Of flowers, rush of rivers, and the tombs
 Of heroes gone! Against his proper glory
 Has my own soul conspired: so my story
 Will I to children utter, and repent.
 There never liv'd a mortal man, who bent
 His appetite beyond his natural sphere,
 But starv'd and died.

(III., pp. 636-48)

Bartley, too, has bent his "appetite beyond his natural sphere," because he has longed for the unattainable illusion of youth; and since it is impossible to regain lost youth and beauty, he has also "lov'd a nothing, nothing seen/Or felt but a great dream!" However, although Bartley realizes the danger of his illusion and admits that this is "not the reality of his life" (p. 119), he does not have the courage that Endymion has to reject it. Therefore, knowing that he would have returned to Hilda and would have continued to live a divided life crippled by illusions, he falls to his death from the bridge which his own irresponsibility has destroyed.

In addition to the myth of Endymion and Cynthia, Cather also uses that of Paris, Helen, and Oenone to portray Alexander's inner division and romantic quest. The use of this myth as a basis for the novel's triangular structure has been recognized by several critics,¹⁹ but L. V. Jacks gives what is probably the completest discussion of the role the ancient story plays in the novel. He first points out that Paris was also known as "Alexander", and then goes on to say:

The parallel with the classic tale becomes apparent when it is recalled that Paris-Alexander was wed to the river nymph Oenone before his voyage to Greece and his meeting with Helen. Like Paris, Bartley Alexander voyages across the sea and meets a woman with a fatal attraction for him; like Paris, he is unfaithful. Disaster befalls both men,

¹⁹Slote, p. 100, and James Woodress, Willa Cather: Her Life and Art (New York: Western Publishing Company, 1970), p. 142.

and at the hour of their death each recalls his deserted wife. Paris, mortally wounded in the fighting before Troy, yearns for Oenone to heal him; the drowning Alexander thinks if only he could return to his wife things would somehow be put aright. In both the ancient and the modern stories, there is a scene in which the deserted wife mourns by the body of her husband.²⁰

In view of these basic parallels, it is significant that Winifred's house looks out upon a garden reminiscent of the pastoral setting where Paris and Oenone lived and shepherded their flocks, that it is always filled with flowers, and that it borders upon a river.

Moreover, whereas Hilda has the kind of physical beauty connected with Helen and "The face that launched a thousand ships," Winifred's beauty is of a more subdued, ethereal nymph-like type. That she wears a veil indicates a certain spirituality, a quality that Bartley has always associated with her. On his way to Canada he reflects that

His wife was the woman who had made his life, gratified his pride, given direction to his tastes and habits. The life they led together seemed to him beautiful. Winifred still was, as she had always been, Romance for him, and whenever he was deeply stirred he turned to her. When the grandeur and beauty of the world challenged him--as it challenges even the most self-absorbed people--he always answered with her name. That was his reply to the questions put by the mountains and the stars; to all the spiritual aspects of life (p. 113).

Winifred's basic spiritual nature is also symbolized by her association with the wind. Whereas the sexual Hilda shys away from the wind because she is afraid it will impair her voice, Winifred is often described in terms of the wind. For example, when Wilson first meets her, he notices her eyes, which "when she looked at one directly for a moment, . . . were like a glimpse of a fine windy sky that may bring all sorts of weather" (p. 7). Like Oenone, Winifred is capable of intense love as well as

²⁰L. V. Jacks, "The Classics and Willa Cather," Prairie Schooner, 35 (1961), 292.

intense hate, and also like Oenone, she is largely responsible for her husband's early success. As Lucius says, "Bartley caught the wind [Winifred] early and it has sung in his sails ever since" (p. 8). It is only after Bartley leaves Winifred that the breeze of life and success deserts him.

Bartley himself is very much aware of Winifred's power and strength. He admits to Wilson, "It's not I you feel sure of; it's Winifred. People often make that mistake" (p. 13). He also knows that Winifred is "very, very proud, and just a little hard" (p. 68). Moreover, like the proud Oenone, she "was not a woman who could bear disappointment. She demanded a great deal of herself and of the people she loved; and she never failed herself" (p. 112). Therefore, Bartley knows that if he tells her about his affair with Hilda he will lose her.

However, although Bartley knows that he needs Winifred, he does develop an overwhelming desire for something more. Like Paris, whose fate was determined by chance when he was asked to judge which goddess should be awarded the golden apple, Bartley's future is also decided by his being asked by a friend to attend a play which, coincidentally, stars his old sweetheart, Hilda Burgoyne. Subsequently, just as Paris rejected Juno's offer of power and riches and Minerva's offer of glory and renown in favor of Venus' gift of the love of the beautiful Helen, so does Bartley reject material success and professional fame for the illusion of youth and beauty as personified in Hilda.

Like Helen, Hilda has had numerous suitors whom she has rejected, and her closest friend and most ardent suitor, her writer Hugh MacConnell, is, like Menelaus, several years older.²¹ Bartley's

²¹Note the similarity of the names with their classic counterparts; both Hilda and Helen begin with an H, and both MacConnell and Menelaus begin with an M.

characterization of Hilda as having that combination of "something homely and sensible, and something utterly wild and daft" (p. 30) also seems appropriate for Helen, who deserted her husband in order to run away with Paris, and yet was capable both of carrying out calmly her household duties while the Greeks were storming her home in Troy and of proudly returning to Greece with her husband and welcoming guests as if nothing had happened. Like the immortal Helen, daughter of Zeus, Hilda feels "too powerful" (p. 93) to die, and also like Helen, she is described as a queen. When she threatens to marry someone else in order to end their affair, Bartley tells her, "'You see, you are different, Hilda. Don't you know you are?' His voice grew softer, his touch more and more tender. 'Some women can do that sort of thing, but you--you can love as queens did, in the old time'" (p. 109).

The theme of broken hospitality also links Cather's novel with the classic story of Paris and Helen. In the classical story, Paris breaks the ancient and sacred Greek law of hospitality when he seduces and carries away the wife of his host Menelaus. Similarly, Bartley does not respect Hilda's hospitality and faith in him when she invites him to an afternoon social gathering and later to an informal dinner. She points out coldly that she is "not accustomed to inquiring into the motives of [her] guests" (p. 44); and after Bartley takes advantage of her love for him by recalling their romantic youth and by exciting her physically, she charges, "This isn't fair, you know" (p. 58).

In addition to the parallels of Alexander and Paris, Winifred and Oenone, Hilda and Helen, there is one other figure in the novel who recalls the ancient Greek myth. Lucius Wilson does not parallel any particular character; instead, like the Greek chorus, he serves as a

commentator on the characters and events, appearing both in the opening and closing scenes. His friendly and advisory role could be compared to Priam's, however, and his prophetic role could be compared to that of Cassandra. As his name Lucius, or "light", indicates, he does have the power to foretell the future, but even though he has a vision of Bartley's death and destruction, no one really believes him--and indeed he does not even believe himself. He tells Bartley,

" . . . I always used to feel that there was a weak spot where some day strain would tell. Even after you began to climb, I stood down in the crowd and watched you with--well not with confidence. The more dazzling the front you presented, the higher your facade rose, the more I expected to see a big crack zigzagging from top to bottom"--he indicated its course in the air with his forefinger--"then a crash and clouds of dust. It was curious. I had such a clear picture of it" (p. 13).

This weakness, Cather implies, is Bartley's moral cowardice, which keeps him vacillating between his need for Winifred and a productive career, and his desire for Hilda, her beauty, and his own long lost youth. Like Paris, who presented a glorious surface but who cowardly ran away from his dual combat with Menelaus, Bartley flees from his responsibility for ending the affair with Hilda. Unable to control himself, he begs Hilda to refuse to see him, but, just as Helen chides Paris for running away, Hilda angrily tells him that he is cowardly. However, also like Helen, when he admits his cowardice and asks for her again, she forgives and loves him.

In the mythic structure of the novel, Bartley's Moorlock Bridge project becomes analagous to the Trojan War. Whereas Paris' abduction of Helen instigates a literal war between nations, Bartley's love affair with Hilda causes a metaphorical war within himself which, nevertheless, culminates in death and defeat not only for himself, but also for

most of his workers. Moreover, just as Winifred knew when she married Bartley that his "paths were not to be paths of peace" (p. 71), Helen too must have known that her flight would cause hostilities. Both the war and the bridge are undertakings of unusual size and length, and ironically, both end with the death of their originator.

The bridge itself functions as a symbol of death in the novel because, for Bartley, it connects the present and the future, life and death. The universal nature of this symbol is implied when Winifred says that Bartley "builds the bridges into the future, over which the feet of every one of us will go" (p. 18). Her description of his first bridge as being "as delicate as a cobweb hanging in the sky" (p. 19) is also significant because it foreshadows both his moral weakness and the physical weakness of the Moorlock Bridge. Bartley is unable to resolve his emotional and moral conflict between East and West, the flesh and the spirit, Dionysus and Apollo, as symbolized in the two women he loves. Although he does come back to America--the West when compared to Europe--to his bridge and his wife, he knows that he will return to London and Hilda, irresponsibility and youth. He is unable to find a way to synthesize his dual needs, and he does not have the moral courage to commit himself to either extreme. Only at the time of his death, when it is too late, does he make a spiritual commitment to his wife. Thus, in his last desperate moments, just as Paris had turned to Oenone to heal him, Bartley turns to Winifred:

When he sank, his wife seemed to be there in the water beside him, telling him to keep his head, that if he could hold out the men [who were holding him down] would drown and release him. There was something he wanted to tell his wife, but he could not think clearly for the roaring in his ears. Suddenly he remembered what it was. He caught his breath, and then she let him go (pp. 124-25).

Significantly, it is when Bartley remembers his own unfaithfulness and guilt that he swallows water and drowns. He knows that, just as Oenone would not forgive Paris for leaving her, the proud Winifred would not forgive him for his deceitfulness and disloyalty. However, just as Oenone mourned for Paris' body, Winifred mourns for Bartley, doing all the necessary preparations for the burial herself. And finally, while Oenone kills herself after her husband's death, Winifred becomes dead to the life around her. Wilson says that she is "Cold for everything but him" (p. 136).

In Alexander's Bridge, then, Cather has made extensive use of mythic allusions and situations as well as her own East-West myth. However, her use of myth in this novel is not as successful as in later ones because it is somewhat strained and overdone, tending to dominate the novel's meaning rather than simply reinforcing and vivifying it. In this novel, for example, the characters and the details of the plot seem to be deliberately equated with the classical myths of Endymion and Diana, Paris and Helen, whereas in such novels as O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, The Song of the Lark, Death Comes for the Archbishop, and Shadows on the Rock, the underlying myths simply provide a loosely archetypal structure upon which Cather builds her own themes and creates her own unique characters. Nevertheless, Alexander's Bridge is an important novel because it introduces Cather's concern with the mythic and elemental nature of man, with the psychological conflict between his Apollonian and his Dionysian personalities, and with his eternal quest for beauty and truth. To Cather, Alexander's search for these values is in itself admirable; his tragedy is that he terminates his search too soon, selfishly making an idol of his own youth instead of realizing his full spiritual and Promethean potential.

CHAPTER III

ALEXANDRA'S QUEST FOR FULFILLMENT

IN O PIONEERS!

With the writing of O Pioneers!, Willa Cather truly moved into her own country, not only geographically, but psychologically and mythologically as well. In contrast to her somewhat strained and artificial use of myth as the structural basis of Alexander's Bridge, she is now able to use it organically in order to portray her contrasting themes of creation and destruction, themes which never quite materialized in Alexander's Bridge, but which will appear prominently in her later fiction.

In her early fiction Cather had been drawn away from her own material by the false gods of the East, but after her dissatisfaction with her first novel, she returned to capture the essence of her own wild prairie country. In 1921 she avowed,

I never abandoned trying to make a compromise between the kind of matter that my experience had given me and the manner of writing which I admired, until I began my second novel, O Pioneers! And from the first chapter, I decided not to "write" at all--simply to give myself up to the pleasure of recapturing in memory people and places I had believed forgotten. This was what my friend Sarah Orne Jewett had advised me to do. She said to me that if my life had lain in a part of the world that was without a literature, and I couldn't tell it truthfully in the form I most admired, I'd have to make a kind of writing that would tell it, no matter what I lost in the process.¹

¹Latrobe Carroll, "Willa Sibert Cather," Bookman, 53 (1921), 214.

In writing O Pioneers! Cather followed Miss Jewett's advice, creating a literature and a kind of writing all her own. The literature is that of the land and people of the Middle West, and its creation filled an intellectual and emotional void which Cather had long felt in American literature. In fact, she once declared, "I had searched for books telling about the beauty of the country I loved, its romance, the heroism and strength and courage of its people that had been plowed into the very furrows of its soil and I did not find them. And so I wrote O Pioneers!"² Having found the subject matter for her own unique literature, she now needed a style, a "kind of writing" that would best suit her stories of the frontier. The style that she ultimately established for her writing is that of mythic memory, enriched by intuitive mystical and psychological insight. In O Pioneers! Cather not only uses established myths, but more importantly, for the first time she creates a myth that, while analogous to many ancient fertility and vegetation myths, is uniquely her own in conception and expression.

Cather's mythic view of the land also determines the basic structure of the novel. Elizabeth Sergeant has reported that when she complained to Cather that the book "had no sharp skeleton, she swiftly replied, true enough I had named a weakness. But the land has no sculptured lines or features. The soil is soft, light, fluent, black, for the grass of the plains creates the type of soil as it decays. This influences the mind and memory of the author and so the composition of the story."³ The Nebraskan plain, then, is "new country;" the soil is

²Mildred Bennett, The World of Willa Cather (1951; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 139.

³Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willa Cather (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1953), p. 97.

"soft and light," ready to be molded and worked into the cropland that is the very foundation of civilization. Significantly, it is usually in young countries like this that myths are formed; as Gayley says, myths "are born in the infancy of a people."⁴ Just as the forested groves and mountains of Greece, the deserts and rivers of Israel, and the vast forests and seas of Old Britain and Scandinavia formed the bases for the myths of these countries, so do the limitless prairies and the waving wheat serve as the foundations for the myths of the wild country of Cather's youth.

The creation and construction of O Pioneers! was itself based on the intuitive insight that lies behind the creation of myth. Having rejected the artificial structure that underlay Alexander's Bridge, and submitting herself totally to her psychic and mythic perceptions, she maintained that when a writer is using his own material, he is another being:

He has less and less power of choice about the moulding of it. It seems to be there of itself, already moulded. If he tries to meddle with its vague outline, to twist it into some kind of categorical shape, above all if he tries to adapt or modify its mood, he destroys its value. In working with this material he finds that he need have little to do with literary devices; he comes to depend more and more on something else--the thing by which our feet find the road home on a dark night, accounting of themselves for roots and stones which we had never noticed by day.⁵

This artistic theory explains the organic construction of O Pioneers! as well as My Ántonia. Like Coleridge, Keats, and Poe, Cather came to believe that psychological truth is revealed to man through the workings

⁴Charles Mills Gayley, The Classic Myths, rev. ed. (New York: Blaisdell Publishing Company, 1911), p. 2.

⁵Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. 77-78.

of his own subconscious, and spiritual truth through the face of nature. Like them, also, she learned to submit to the voice of this higher truth rather than attempting to dominate her fiction with her partial truths. Thus, although in Alexander's Bridge she had grafted a myth into the structure of the novel, imposing her own intellectual will on the work, in later novels she learns to let herself be guided by mythic intuition and subconscious instinct, and the result is universal truth, not just personal truth.

This intuitive literary philosophy is directly responsible for the creation of O Pioneers!, because the novel grew from the seeds of two separate stories, "Alexandra" and "The White Mulberry Tree." In a flash of intuitive, creative genius, Cather saw how the two stories would enrich and complement each other both thematically and structurally, so she combined them into the novel we now know. According to Elizabeth Sergeant,

She [Cather] said she could only describe this coming together of the two elements that made the book as a sudden inner explosion and enlightenment. She had experienced it before only in the conception of a poem. Now she would hope always for a similar experience in creating a novel, for the explosion seemed to bring with it the inevitable shape that is not plotted but designs itself. She now believed that the least possible tinkering with the form--revealed from within, the better.⁶

The first story contains the plot of Alexandra Bergson's struggle with the land and with her dim-sighted brothers; the second story portrays the passionate and volatile love of Emil Bergson and Marie Shabata.

By combining these two plots, Cather is able to emphasize the complex struggle between the forces of creativity and destruction, order and disorder, reason and passion, as found both in her characters and in

⁶Sergeant, p. 116.

the land itself. This conflict is well illustrated in the introductory poem "Prairie Spring," which juxtaposes the land with the wild roses of Youth, the "growing wheat" with the "growing weeds."⁷ For the most part, Alexandra--who brings forth rich crops from the fertile land--represents the power of creation, while Emil and Marie--whose love is as transient as the roses and as fruitless as the weeds--represent the force of destruction. However, just as these forces are confused and intermingled in life, so are they in the novel.

Nevertheless, Alexandra is the most affirmative character in the novel, her very name meaning "helper and defender of mankind." It is this daughter to whom the dying John Bergson gives the responsibility for his family and his land, a responsibility which she carries out with unswerving devotion. Mr. Bergson realized that his sons, Lou and Oscar, "were industrious, but he could never teach them to use their heads about their work" (p. 20). Alexandra, however, is intelligent. Like Cather's ideal pioneer, she has both strength and imagination; she is "able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves" (p. 42). It is this ability to look into and have faith in the future that prompts Alexandra to cling to her home in the high land when all her neighbors evacuate, even her childhood friend Carl Linstrum.

Like an ancient earth goddess, Alexandra is able to create life and order out of death and chaos. Visiting her farm sixteen years after John Bergson's death, a stranger would feel an Apollonian "order and fine arrangement" manifest there. She is indeed an artist of the land: "You feel that properly Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and

⁷Willia Cather, *O Pioneers!*, vol. I of *The Novels and Stories of Willia Cather* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937), ix. Future references to this source will be paginated within the text.

that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best" (p. 73). It is in this sense that Bruce Baker can assert that "Alexandra's triumph is not so much a material as an artistic one. In a very real and significant way, Alexandra is a creator, one who has shaped out of often unwieldy material an orderly and beautiful work. The 'Wild Land' has become a lovely field through the affectionate, intelligent, and artistic shaping of one who is both dreamer and doer."⁸

Alexandra's struggle with the stubborn soil recalls the Israelites' trials in the wilderness, and like them she too eventually gains the Promised Land in all its fertility and abundance. Alexandra's story also has affinities with the Biblical story of Joseph and his brothers, which, according to her essay on Thomas Mann's novel, is one of her favorites. Like Joseph, Alexandra is the only child in the family who has dreams and ambitions; like him, too, she is envied by her greedy brothers. Moreover, the Divide, like Canaan, is blessed with years of plenty, followed by an equal number of drought or "famine" years: "For the first three years after John Bergson's death, the affairs of his family prospered. Then came the hard times that brought everyone on the Divide to the brink of despair; three years of drought and failure, the last struggle of a wild soil against the encroaching ploughshare" (p. 41). Also like Joseph, Alexandra is not only strong enough and farsighted enough to survive these years, but also to profit from them. It is during this time that she buys more land and introduces new and successful farming practices to the Divide.

The land is associated not only with Alexandra, but also with

⁸Bruce Baker, II, "Nebraska Regionalism in Selected Works of Willa Cather," Western American Literature, 3 (1968-1969), 29.

Crazy Ivar. Like her, he sympathizes and identifies with nature; ". . . you could have walked over the roof of Ivar's dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation. Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done" (p. 32). This identification with nature has given Ivar a peculiar visionary power. Alexandra comments that "Some days his mind is cloudy, like. But if you can get him on a clear day, you can learn a great deal from him" (p. 29). As Randall has observed, then, while he is ". . . represented as being somewhat deranged mentally and given to cloudy spells," this is, "as in the case of the traditional clairvoyant fool . . . not only no drawback but actually gives him a deeper insight into fundamental mysteries than that possessed by other people."⁹ He points out to Alexandra that the people of the Divide are afraid of him because he is "different":

"You know [he tells her] that my spells come from God, and that I would not harm any living creature. You believe that everyone should worship God in the way revealed to him. But that is not the way of this country. The way here is for all to do alike. I am despised because I do not wear shoes, because I do not cut my hair, and because I have visions. At home, in the old country, there were many like me, who had been touched by God, or who had seen things in the graveyard at night and were different afterward. We thought nothing of it, and let them alone. But here, if a man is different in his feet or in his head, they put him in the asylum" (p. 80).

Ivar, who has an uncanny ability not only to see, but also to heal, is thus the archetypal prophet who serves Alexandra in her symbolic role as creator or earth goddess or, as Daiches says, a "kind of Earth Mother or Corn Goddess, a Ceres who presides over the fruitful land."¹⁰

⁹John H. Randall, III, The Landscape and the Looking Glass (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 82.

¹⁰David Daiches, Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction (1951; rpt. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971), p. 28.

Significantly, it is Ivar who brings her the news of the lovers' death, and it is he who will later seek her in the land of the dead, the Norwegian graveyard, and bring her back to an awareness of the living.

Like Anteus, Alexandra and Ivar obtain their strength from the land. In contrast the other characters who are alienated from the land (either physically or spiritually) have a corresponding weakness and dependence. Carl shares Alexandra's interest in beauty and creativity, but compared to hers, his role in life is mediocre. While both are essentially artists, Carl has been making pictures and engravings that are trivial, transient, and in the long run, according to Cather, unimportant. He acknowledges this to Alexandra when he points out to her that while he has "been away engraving other men's pictures, . . . you've stayed at home and made your own.' He pointed with his cigar toward the sleeping landscape" (p. 99). Alexandra, then, is obviously a cosmic creator whose love and effort have made the prairie an ordered and productive garden.

Although Carl is weak and has moved away from the lifegiving earth, he nevertheless does retain some insight into the land, for he can appreciate intellectually its power and beauty. However, for Alexandra's older brothers Lou and Oscar, the opposite is true. They have remained physically close to the land, but have never undergone a spiritual union with it. Having no deep love for either man or nature, they have no creative instincts. Therefore, the land does not produce as much for them as for their sister, and in turn they become more envious of her, and also of young Emil, whose intellect and imagination make him Alexandra's favorite.

The land is therefore the source of life and fertility in the

novel. To Cather, then, love which, like Emil and Marie's, is not sanctioned by the natural and moral order of nature is sterile, destructive, and wrong. Cather implies this moral principle when she points out that Emil has grown away from the land. Ironically, however, Alexandra does not grasp this fact, for she seems proud that he is not "tied to the plough," that he has a "personality apart from the soil" (p. 181).

Because of his great potential and his violent and early death, Emil's story attains near tragic proportions. He loves the beautiful things of the world--the land itself, the spirit of music, and the beauty of Marie. Moreover, he appreciates the Dionysian life-instinct, and in another situation, he would have complemented Alexandra's productive love of the land with a fruitful human love. However, since the love that he feels for Marie, Frank Shabata's wife, is immoral, it cannot lead to fulfillment, but only to death and destruction.

Marie Shabata also has a natural and fervent love of life. Cather says that she "was incapable of being lukewarm about anything that pleased her. She simply did not know how to give a half-hearted response. When she was delighted, she was as likely as not to stand on her tiptoes and clap her hands. If people laughed at her, she laughed with them" (p. 184). Even when she is torn inwardly between her duty to her husband and her love for Emil, she thinks affirmatively. "Yes," she muses, "there would be a dirty way out of life, if one chose to take it. But she did not want to die. She wanted to live and dream--a hundred years, forever! As long as this sweetness welled up in her heart, as long as her breast could hold this treasure of pain" (p. 211). Ultimately, then, she accepts the Dionysian paradox that pain is closely intertwined with the joy of life.

Unlike Alexandra, whose Apollonian life is determined by reason and order, Emil and Marie live Dionysian lives based on emotion, impulse, and passion. Both are emotionally affected by music, and both are skillful dancers, having a natural rhythm that is indicative of their passionate and violent natures. For example, when Marie stops by the graveyard to talk to Emil and watch him mow, she "watches the rhythmical movement of the young man's long arms, swinging her foot as if in time to some air that was going through her mind" (p. 70). The climactic disaster is foreshadowed, then, by the facts that Emil is "violent in his feelings" (p. 100), that Frank, Marie's husband, is a "rash and violent man" (p. 120), and that Marie seems "so easily excited, to kindle with a fierce flame if you but breathed on her" (p. 116).

In opposition to their desires, Emil and Marie do try to suppress their feelings in order to live by the code of religion and society. Marie simply refuses for a long while to recognize their love, and Emil tries to run away from it by going to Mexico. But in his absence, their love only deepens, and as Rapin says, he returns "more madly in love than ever, handsomer, more dangerously fascinating, for the South has given him more abandon and fire and a touch of exotic beauty."¹¹ They first see each other again at a French bazaar where Emil gives her a handful of turquoise stones, the primitive Indian symbol of love and beauty. There, just as Amédée, Emil's closest friend, turns out the lights,

Marie started up--directly into Emil's arms. In the same instant she felt his lips. The veil that had hung uncertainly between them for so long was dissolved. Before she knew what she was doing, she had committed herself to that kiss that was at once a boy's and a man's, as timid as it was tender; so like Emil and so unlike anyone else in the

¹¹René Rapin, Willa Cather, Modern American Writers Series (New York: Robert M. McBride and Co., 1930), p. 24.

world. Not until it was over did she realize what it meant. And Emil who had so often imagined the shock of this first kiss, was surprised at its gentleness and naturalness. It was like a sigh which they had breathed together; almost sorrowful, as if each were afraid of wakening something in the other (p. 190).

After this disturbing experience, Marie tries to avoid Emil because she realizes that she is not free to love him. However, Emil is still tormented by his desire and wants at least a verbal acknowledgement from her about her feelings, a confession which he finally extracts from her by promising that he will go away afterwards.

The conflict between the spirit and the flesh in the lives of these young lovers intensifies as they draw closer to their tragic death. Earlier, Emil had felt his spirit as it "went out of his body and crossed the fields to Marie Shabata" (p. 152), and just before she admits that she loves Emil, Marie seems "like a troubled spirit, like some shadow out of the earth, clinging to him and entreating him to give her peace" while behind her the fireflies, symbols of the spirit and of ephemerality, are "weaving in and out over the wheat" (p. 197). Both agree that Emil will go away and they will try to forget their love, but Emil finds this hard to do. The next day, therefore, he attends the Catholic confirmation service, where he reaches a height of spiritual rapture that belies his underlying physical desire:

He felt as if a clear light broke upon his mind, and with it a conviction that good was, after all, stronger than evil, and that good was possible to men. He seemed to discover that there was a kind of rapture in which he could live forever without faltering and without sin. He looked across the heads of the people at Frank Shabata with calmness. That rapture was for those who could feel it; for people who could not, it was non-existent. He coveted nothing that was Frank Shabata's. The spirit he had met in music was his own (p. 216).

Emil's mistake here is that, like Milton's Eve, he convinces himself

that there is nothing wrong with his desire.

Later that afternoon when Emil goes to tell Marie goodbye, or so he believes, he finds her in the orchard, "lying on her side under the white mulberry tree, her face half-hidden in the grass, her eyes closed, her hands lying limply where they had happened to fall" (p. 219). Seeing her like this, all Emil's spiritual ecstasy and moral resolve give way to physical desire; he "threw himself down beside her and took her in his arms. The blood came back to her cheeks, her amber eyes opened slowly, and in them Emil saw his own face, and the orchard and the sun. 'I was dreaming this,' she whispered, hiding her face against him; 'don't take my dream away'" (p. 219). But tragically, the physical fulfillment of their love leads not to life, but rather to death, for when Frank Shabata returns that evening and finds them together in the orchard, he instinctively kills them with his shotgun.

This entire episode of Emil and Marie's love also gains an added significance through its mythic implications. Perhaps the most obvious allusion in the narrative is to the Greek myth of Pyramus and Thisbe. The parallels between these two stories were first recognized by L. V. Jacks, who pointed out that

The very title, "The White Mulberry Tree," which Miss Cather gave to this part of her novel is a clue to her indebtedness. The white mulberry tree shining with its fruit, the ground strewn with the white berries, the moonlit darkness of the summer night, the excessive spattering of blood which reddened the fruit, the flutter of a dying limb, all are details present in both stories. The reactions of the two heroines--the bitter agony, the despair, and the acceptance of fate--are identical. In each story, also, it was the man who died first. Thisbe threw herself upon the body of her lover, weeping over his injuries, and kissing him. Marie, after dragging herself to Emil, died embracing him and clasping his hand covered with blood where she had kissed it. Lovers sundered in life were joined in death.¹²

¹²L. V. Jacks, "The Classics and Willa Cather," Prairie Schooner, 35 (1961), 297.

In the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe the force that separates the lovers is physical: the wall that stands between the homes of their parents; in O Pioneers!, however, the wall is the symbolic one of convention and law, both moral and social.

The setting for Emil and Marie's love and death also recalls another myth, and one even more basic to American culture: the Biblical myth of the Garden of Eden. Like the original garden, as visualized by Milton, Marie's orchard is a "neglected wilderness" (p. 129) when it is not pruned and cared for. Moreover, in both instances, the garden is symbolic of the troubled and disordered souls of its inhabitants. Apricots, cherries, and wild roses--sensual images in themselves--grow in the orchard, as do apple trees planted years ago by Carl. And in addition, just in case someone should miss the parallel, Cather has Marie call to Emil, "'Good-bye. I'll call you if I see a snake,'" (p. 128) when she leaves him in order to go pick cherries. Just before the consummation of their love under the mulberry tree, Emil passes "through the apple branches as through a net" and "between the cherry trees" (p. 219). And finally, like those first lovers in Eden, Emil and Marie first know sin and death under a tree and in a lush garden.

Implications of pagan myth also permeate the story of Emil and Marie. The mulberry tree recalls not only the Tree of Knowledge, but also ancient European practices of tree worship. Marie herself admits to Emil that her ancestors "'The Bohemians . . . were tree-worshippers before the missionaries came'" (p. 129). And she continues, "I'm a good Catholic, but I think I could get along with caring for trees, if I hadn't anything else'" (p. 130). Furthermore, as the story progresses, she clings closer and closer to her favorite mulberry tree, which she

looks upon as possessing a sympathetic spirit. "'I feel as if this tree knows everything I ever think of when I sit here,'" she tells Emil. "'When I come back to it, I never have to remind it of anything; I begin just where I left off'" (p. 130).

Not only the trees, but also birds are thought to be spiritually animated. Ivar respects the bird spirits, saying that "'these wild things are God's birds. He watches over them and counts them, as we do our cattle'" (pp. 35-36). Ancient Norsemen believed that birds and other animals were often the souls of men which had become separated from them, and which reappeared to them before their death.¹³ Perhaps this is one implication of the episode where, at Marie's request, Emil kills the ducks as they fly up from the pond; these wild birds appear to the lovers before their death and in their joyful living and their early death seem to represent human spirits.

The Emil-Marie episode is also related to the fertility theme of the novel, their love and death both having affinities with ancient fertility cults. Significantly, when Emil goes to see Marie for the last time, it is harvest time:

Everywhere the grain stood ripe and the hot afternoon was full of the smell of the ripe wheat, like the smell of bread baking in an oven. The breath of the wheat and the sweet clover passed him like pleasant things in a dream. He could feel nothing but the sense of diminishing distance. It seemed to him that his mare was flying, or running on wheels, like a railway train. The sunlight, flashing on the window-glass of the big red barns, drove him wild with joy. He was like an arrow shot from the bow. His life poured itself out along the road before him as he rode to the Shabata farm (p. 218).

Emil's death is thus foreshadowed by Cather's comment that his life

¹³John Arnott MacCulloch, Eddic, vol. II of The Mythology of All Races, ed. by John Arnott MacCulloch (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1930), p. 232.

"poured itself out" on the road, for he is soon to have his blood spilled in the Shabata's orchard in a manner that is almost sacrificial. According to many fertility myths, however, such a sacrifice would be appropriate, for primitive races believed that the sexual union of human beings was related to the fertility of the earth, and "that illicit love tends directly or indirectly to mar that fertility and to blight the crops." Also, Frazer further comments that in many societies there was an annual sacrifice of corn spirits and tree spirits, a fact which seems applicable in light of Marie's association with the mulberry tree.¹⁴ Furthermore, in the Teutonic countries from which Emil and Marie's ancestors came, trees and groves were traditional sites of sacrifice. Therefore, it seems obvious that Emil and Marie are associated with the tree spirit--which Marie says sympathizes with and understands her--and that their death has not only personal, but also mythic significance.

In the vegetation cycle of the novel, Alexandra's role is just the opposite of that of her brother and his young friend. Whereas they are sacrificially associated with the annual death of the seeds, Alexandra is associated with their germination, growth, and harvest. As Emil observes, "from two ears that had grown side by side, the grains of one shot up joyfully into the light, projecting themselves in to the future, and the grains from the other lay still in the earth and rotted; and nobody knew why" (p. 139). Like the rotten seeds, Emil and Marie's human love, though sincere and beautiful in its own way, is corrupt and barren, while Alexandra's mythic love for the land is productive and creative.

¹⁴James George Frazer, The New Golden Bough, ed. by Theodore H. Gaston (New York: S. G. Phillips, Inc., 1959), p. 90.

The entire novel may be viewed mythically in terms of the annual cycle of the seasons. It is significant, for example, that John Bergson dies in the winter, the season which represents the death of the year, the period of dormancy that precedes the rebirth of spring and the fruition of later summer and autumn. In the novel, this cycle of the seasons comes to be a symbolic representation of the cycle of human life, for just as the year moves from sowing to reaping, so does man progress from birth to maturity to death to eventual rebirth.

Alexandra is herself associated both with the seasons and with the land. Several critics have recognized the fact that she resembles a mythic earth goddess. For example, Hoffman maintains that in O Pioneers! Cather has created "a land myth and a land goddess to rule it: a noble creature, strong, patient, robust, sensitive, and enduring. . . ."15 Like a fertility goddess, her coloring is golden. When she is first introduced, for example, she is wearing "two thick braids, pinned about her head in the German way, with a fringe of reddish-yellow curls blowing out from under her cap" (p. 7). Reddish yellow is the color of corn, linking Alexandra with the Corn Goddess of Indian lore as well as the earth and vegetation goddesses of oriental and Greek mythology. Moreover, in her initial relationship with the wild land, Alexandra recalls the Greek Earth Mother Gaea, from whom all things proceed. Just as Gaea produces order out of Chaos, so does Alexandra bring order and productivity to the wild and barren land of the Divide.

Most of the other inhabitants of the plains have been intimidated by the vastness and power of the land. Carl, for instance, knew that on

¹⁵Frederick J. Hoffman, "The Text: Willa Cather's Two Worlds," in The Twenties (New York: The Viking Press, 1955), p. 155.

the Divide, the important thing was not the people, but

. . . the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy's mouth had become so bitter; because he felt that men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be let alone to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness (p. 13).

So far, the land has been victorious in its struggle with the intruding settlers, for "the record of the plough was insignificant, like the feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric races. . . ." (p. 17). In response to these people who came to conquer and dominate it, the land "was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods; and no one knew when they were likely to come, or why" (p. 18).

Ironically, however, Alexandra is able to conquer the land not by dominating it, but by loving it and identifying with it. Her father was defeated by the land--which he compared to "a horse that no one knows how to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces" (p. 19)--because, as the Blooms have observed, he has been "unable to identify himself with the land, to understand that to survive he must bend his own will and derive joy from the act of submission."¹⁶ Alexandra succeeds because she is able to love and submit to the "desirable" land in a way that is almost sexual. After she has visited the river farms, she returns to her own high land:

For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great free spirit which breathes

¹⁶Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 28.

across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman (pp. 56-57).

By her treatment of the land here and elsewhere, Cather makes quite clear that it is to be considered as a living, godlike being with emotions and power all its own. It will not yield to the demands of the early settlers, but to Alexandra's love and reverence, it gives all. She tells Carl, "We hadn't any of us much to do with it. . . . The land did it. It had its little joke. It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still" (pp. 99-100). The land has transformed itself from a barren desert plain into peaceful and productive fields; the Wilderness has become the Promised Land. This change is immediately noticed by Carl, who nevertheless admits that in the midst of "all this milk and honey " (p. 101), he misses the old wild land.

As Hoffman says, under Alexandra's management, the land becomes "metaphorically 'polite,' civilized, classically ordered, and religiously fertile. It acquires a 'manner,' and the result is a noble, creative, and productive unity of man and nature."¹⁷ Indeed, Alexandra does establish order not only on her own farm, but indirectly on the entire Divide, which comes to look like "a vast chequer-board, marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light" (p. 65). However, the ultimate source of this order is not an authoritarian will of her own, but rather the greater and larger harmony of the gods and of nature. Significantly, she first identifies this universal order

¹⁷Hoffman, p. 155.

right after she commits herself to the Spirit of the Divide. That night she looked "at the stars which glittered so keenly through the frosty autumn air. She had always loved to watch them, to think of their vastness and distance, and of their ordered march. It fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of Nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security" (p. 61).

The fact that Alexandra symbolizes order in nature and reason in man is further emphasized by Cather's association of her with Apollo, the sun god whom Nietzsche associates with rule and pattern. The number and force of Cather's allusions to the sun are unmistakable. Early in the novel, when Carl tells Alexandra of his decision to return East, she is described as having thick reddish braids, twisted about her head, [which] fairly burned in the sunlight" (pp. 43-43). Their sitting down to rest on "the warm, sun-baked earth" (p. 45) also indicates her closeness both to the sun and to the earth. While Carl is away from her, he is always reminded of her by the rising sun: "Even as a boy he used to feel, when he saw her coming [across the Divide to milk the cows] with her free step, her upright head and calm shoulders, that she looked as if she had walked straight out of the morning itself. Since then, when he had happened to see the sun come up in the country or on the water, he had often remembered the young Swedish girl and her milking pails" (p. 108). And finally, when Carl first sees her on his return, she is characterized by abundant sun imagery:

She seems sunnier and more vigorous than she did as a young girl. But she still has the same calmness and deliberation of manner, the same clear eyes, and she still wears her hair in two braids wound round her head. It is so curly that fiery ends escape from the braids and make her head look like one of the big double sunflowers that fringe her vegetable garden. Her face is always tanned in summer, for her sunbonnet is oftener on her arm than on her head (p. 76).

Her "calmness and deliberation" are basic Apollonian virtues, and the fact that her head looks like a big double sunflower unmistakably recalls the myth of Clytie and Apollo, in which, it will be remembered, Clytie pines so for love of Apollo that she is turned into the sunflower, her gaze forever after being fixed on the object of her love.

Although Apollo himself is not considered a fertility god, as the sun god, he is unavoidably associated with growth and life. Therefore, in her role as goddess of the earth and its vegetation, Alexandra's association with the sun is a natural and inevitable one. Even more important than her relationship to the sun, however, is her relationship to the greater powers of the Sky itself, which rules not only the sun, but also the rain and the wind--each of these being important factors in the growth of the crops. This association with the sky is implied in Alexandra's recurrent dream:

There was one fancy, indeed, which had persisted through her girlhood. It most often came to her on Sunday morning, the one day in the week when she lay late abed listening to the familiar morning sounds. . . . Sometimes, as she lay there luxuriously idle, her eyes closed, she used to have the illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by someone very strong. It was a man, certainly, who carried her, but he was like no man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat. She never saw him, but, with eyes closed, she could feel that he was yellow like the sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him (pp. 175-76).

This figure is the mythic Genius of the Divide, its god of love and growth, life and death. He is described as a strong figure, his yellow color and the smell of corn pointing out his function as a fertility god, and his description as "the great, free spirit" (p. 56) pointing out his power over the air and sky. The imminent union of the forces of the sky and the earth, represented here by the Spirit of the Divide

and Alexandra herself, is reminiscent of at least two major fertility cults: the Hako of the Pawnees and the Eleusinian Mysteries of the Greeks.

The Pawnee Indians of the Great Plains visualized in the union of Father Heaven and Mother Earth the beginning of all life, and they celebrated this mystery in the Hako ritual, which is

. . . a dramatic prayer for life and children, for health and posterity. It is directed to the universal powers, to Father Heaven and the celestial powers, and to Mother Earth and the terrestrial powers, with the beautiful imagery of birds as the intermediaries between earth and heaven. The central symbols of the mystery--for mystery it is in the full classical sense--are the winged wands which represent the Eagle, the highest of the bird messengers; a plume of white featherdown, typifying the fleecy clouds of heaven, and hence the winds and the breath of life, . . . and an ear of maize, symbol of "Mother Corn," daughter of Heaven and earth.¹⁸

J. Russell Reaves has pointed out that the "white cloak" (p. 239) of Alexandra's mythic hero links him with this myth, the white of the featherdown symbolizing the "mantle of dawn."¹⁹ Moreover, O Pioneers! is filled with images of birds, which according to this rite are the proper intermediaries between Heaven and Earth, or in terms of the novel, between the Genius of the Divide and Alexandra. Many different birds--ducks, a crane, and a seagull--have come to the pond of Ivar, who serves as a sort of prophet for Alexandra; she herself follows a hawk, the bird of Apollo, "up and up, into the blazing blue depths of the sky" (p. 43), and she and Emil watch a wild duck soar away from the river into the freedom of the sky.

¹⁸Hartley Burr Alexander, North American Mythology, vol. X of The Mythology of All Races, ed. by Louis Herbert Gray (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1916), p. 92.

¹⁹J. Russell Reaves, "Mythic Motivation in Willa Cather's O Pioneers!," Western Folklore, 27 (1968), 23.

These Pawnee fertility rites, as well as those of most other peoples, closely link sex with religion. An Indian priest explained the significance of the ear of corn in the ritual thus,

"The ear of corn . . . represents the supernatural power that dwells in H'Uraru, the earth which brings forth the food that sustains life; so we speak of the ear as h'Atira, mother breathing forth life. The power in the earth which enables it to bring forth comes from above; for that reason we paint the ear of corn blue. . . . The life of man depends upon Earth. Tirawa-atius works through it. The kernel is planted within Mother Earth and she brings forth the ear of corn, even as children are begotten and born of women. . . ."20

As mentioned earlier, the dream figure represents not only a god of the sky, but also, as Van Ghent says, like "Adonis, Attis, and Thammuz, this Eros of the corn and sunlight is a life principle,"21 a god of fertility. He comes to Alexandra in the night with the purpose of consummating their love, the mythic love of the Earth and Sky. As symbolized by the purifying bath she takes after the dream, her human self rejects this sexual love. However, she has a mythic, subconscious self which overpowers her conscious being: "Her personal life, her own realization of herself was almost a subconscious existence; like an underground river that came to the surface only here and there, at intervals months apart, and then sank again to flow on under her own fields" (p. 173).

Paradoxically, Alexandra represents both the plough, the masculine, human force which rapes the land, and the mythic, life-giving land itself, which represents the feminine force. It is in this latter role that Alexandra symbolically achieves sexual fulfillment, for she

²⁰Alexander, p. 92.

²¹Dorothy Van Ghent, Willa Cather, University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 36 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 17.

is identified with the land itself, which, with "such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plough; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness of the metal, with a soft, deep sigh of happiness" (p. 66). The country is "frank and joyous and young," and "it gives itself ungrudgingly to the moods of the season, holding nothing back. Like the plains of Lombardy, it seems to rise a little to meet the sun. The air and the earth are curiously mated and intermingled, as if one were the breath of the other" (p. 66). Here the union of the earth and sky, Alexandra and her mythic lover, is clearly visualized.

Moreover, this union is a fruitful one, for later, "There were certain days in her life, outwardly uneventful, which Alexandra remembered as peculiarly happy; days when she was close to the flat, fallow world about her, and felt, as it were, in her own body the joyous germination in the soil" (p. 173). Thus, as Carl Jung has observed, her dream functions "to try to restore psychological balance by producing dream material that re-establishes in a subtle way, the total psychic equilibrium."²² Forced by the harsh circumstances of her life and environment to accept the responsibilities of a man, she is able to fulfill her feminine instincts only in dreams.

The fact that the fertility god of the Divide appears to Alexandra in a dream has not only psychological implications, but also mythical import. Richard Chase has reported that in primitive societies, dreams and myths "influence and reinforce each other,"²³ and Whittock

²²Carl Jung, "Approaching the Unconscious," in Man and His Symbols (1964; rpt. New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1968), p. 34.

²³Richard Chase, Quest for Myth (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), p. 96.

has quoted Jung's belief that "the material of dreams . . . is similar to that of the primitive thoughts of mankind among the earliest races, when thought was more often of a dreamy associative type than of a purposeful logical type."²⁴ Many primitive cultures associated the sexual union of the gods or of human beings with the fertility of the landscape and the growth of the crops. Moreover, the mythic basis for O Pioneers!, the figures of a great Mother Goddess and a youthful vegetation god, often her lover, who dies and must be sought in another world (in Alexandra's case, the world of the subconscious as well as the graveyard) is prevalent in many ancient mythologies: In Babylonian myths Ishtar seeks her lover Tammuz throughout the vast infernal regions; in Greek and Syrian mythology, Aphrodite mourns the loss of Adonis; in Western Asia the great Cybele laments the death of Attis; in ancient Egypt Isis searches for her brother and husband Osiris; and in Greek mythology, Demeter seeks her lost daughter Persephone. According to Frazer, each of these gods represents, through his death and resurrection, the annual death and rebirth of the year, which is exhibited through the changing seasons.²⁵

Although many of these vegetation and rebirth myths are analogous to the myth of O Pioneers!, the myth of Demeter and Persephone is of particular symbolic importance. This narrative, the source for the sacred Eleusinian Mysteries, is also a mythic explanation for the cycle of the seasons, for the earth's alternative periods of fruitfulness and barrenness. Persephone, it is said, was picking flowers in a Mysian meadow when Hades, god of the underworld, suddenly leapt up and abducted

²⁴Arnold Whittock, Symbols, Signs, and Their Meaning (London: Lionard Hill Limited, 1960), pp. 305-6.

²⁵Frazer, pp. 283-84.

her. For nine days and nine nights, Demeter mournfully sought her daughter, until finally the Sun told her where she was. After this, Demeter made all the land barren, until Zeus forced Hades to allow Persephone to return to earth for two parts of each year. However, although Demeter and Persephone are usually visualized, as in the above myth, as mother and daughter, Fox reports that they are actually duplicate goddesses, representing only separate functions of nature. To him, "the mother and daughter represented two phases of the vegetative power of the soil, the first standing for the entire power, latent or active at all seasons of the year; and the second typifying rather the potency of its youthful aspect, manifested chiefly in the renewed growth of spring."²⁶

With her reddish yellow coloring, then, Alexandra is unmistakably related to "yellow" Demeter, the Corn Goddess of the Greeks. Like Demeter, she rules over the farmland of the Divide, and it is her strength and ingenuity that cause its abundant productivity. Also, she is loved by a fertility god, a god associated with the sun and the sky, just as Demeter was loved by Zeus, whose dual functions as god of the heavens and god of fertility²⁷ make him the appropriate father for Persephone. Moreover, in the novel, as in the myth, the cycle of the seasons coincides with the cycle of human life. Symbolically, winter is the time of death and dormancy. It is significant, then, not only that John Bergson dies in winter, but also that it is in the winter that both Emil and Carl temporarily leave the Divide, for during this time

²⁶William Sherwood Fox, Greek and Roman, vol. I. of The Mythology of All Races, ed. by Louis Herbert Gray (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1916), p. 231.

²⁷Fox, p. 160.

all love and joy are absent from the lives of both Alexandra and Marie.

Also like the Demeter-Persephone figure, Alexandra is allied not only with life and growth, but also with death and decay. This basic conflict between life and death has been recognized by Sister Peter Damian Charles, who defines these opposing drives with the Freudian concepts of Eros and Thanatos. As she says,

Alexandra Bergson . . . is almost a personification of the great power of the positive, the strong urge toward life in the large. Yet her life is not without its fierce battles with the principle of destruction . . . as well as . . . the tensions that tell upon Alexandra herself, almost overpowering her in moments of total surrender to her love: the mythic Land-Death image that comes in her dreams.²⁸

As Sister Charles concludes, "Truly complex is the love-death struggle so basic to the human condition,"²⁹ for while Alexandra is primarily identified with the autumn, the time of abundant life and growth, she is, paradoxically, also drawn to the dark, unknown recesses of winter and death. For example, when the novel opens, her father's illness and the gloom of winter prompt her to voice a tentative death wish: "I wish," she says, "we could all go with him and let the grass grow back over everything" (p. 14); and after she leaves Carl on the road, she goes "deeper and deeper into the dark country" (p. 16), which represents not only her subconscious being, but also the darkness of death. Moreover, just as Demeter sadly seeks her daughter, so too does Alexandra haunt the graveyard, the land of the dead, in a futile attempt to recover Emil, who was like her own child.

²⁸Sister Peter Damian Charles, O. P., "Love and Death in Willa Cather's O Pioneers!," College Language Association Journal, 9 (1965), 141.

²⁹Charles, p. 147.

In her subconscious longing for death, Alexandra is really more like Persephone than Demeter, for Persephone, having eaten the pomegranate seed given her by Hades, willingly lives in the world of the dead for a third of the year, coming forth into the upper world only with the annual rebirth of spring. Just as Persephone voluntarily remains in Hades all winter, so does Alexandra spend most of her time in the Norwegian graveyard during the winter following Emil's death. Once, after she has been caught there in a rainstorm, she tells Ivar,

". . . I think it has done me good to get cold clear through like this, once. I don't believe I shall suffer so much any more. When you get so near the dead, they seem more real than the living. Worldly thoughts leave one. Ever since Emil died, I've suffered so when it rained. Now that I've been out in it with him, I shan't dread it. After you get cold clear through, the feeling of the rain on you is sweet. It seems to bring back feelings you had when you were a baby. It carries you back into the dark, before you were born; you can't see things, but they come to you, somehow, and you know them and aren't afraid of them. Maybe it's like that with the dead. If they feel anything at all, it's the old things, before they were born" (p. 238).

Having once entered the land of the dead, Alexandra, like Persephone, longs to remain. After she returns home and goes to bed in the dark, "it occurred to her for the first time that perhaps she was actually tired of life. All the physical operations of life seemed difficult and painful. She longed to be free from her own body, which ached and was so heavy. And longing itself was heavy: she yearned to be free of them" (p. 239). As she lies there, she has again her old dream of the vegetation god, but this time her lover is quite obviously associated with death:

He was with her a long while this time, and carried her very far, and in his arms she felt free from pain. When he laid her down on her bed again she opened her eyes, and, for the first time in her life, she saw him, saw him clearly, though the room was dark, and his face covered. He was standing in the doorway of her room. His white cloak was thrown over his

face, and his head was bent a little forward. His shoulders seemed as strong as the foundations of the world. His right arm, bared from the elbow, was dark and gleaming, like bronze, and she knew at once that it was the arm of the mightiest of all lovers. She knew at last for whom it was that she waited and where he would carry her. That, she told herself, was very well. Then she went to sleep (pp. 239-40).

This figure, who appears in her illness, wearing an ominous white cloak and able to support the world above him, is obviously Death himself, quite possibly the Roman Pluto or Plouteus, Demeter's son who not only rules the Kingdom of Death, but also "enriches men with the abundance of the field and the fecundity of the flocks."³⁰ Paradoxically, then, life stems from death and decay.

Although Alexandra is resigned to the winter and even to her own death, the ever-revolving cycle of the seasons moves on, and, as she tells Carl, her dream does not come true in the way she thought it would. After her subconscious visit into the world of dead, she is reborn into a more fulfilling life than ever. Magnanimously, she visits Frank to assure him of her forgiveness, and she makes plans to marry Carl. Carl can never compete with the power and fascination of her mythic lover, but by marrying him Alexandra completes her symbolic return to human life and love and proves her acceptance of the eternal cycle of life and nature. Whereas in the winter it had been easy to "believe that in the dead landscape the germs of life and fruitfulness were extinct forever" (p. 160), she now realizes that they were only sleeping and will awaken again to new life and beauty. She can now accept life in its entirety, being aware of the meaning and value of both life and death. As Cather concludes, the country is fortunate "one day to receive hearts like

³⁰Fox, p. 234.

Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!" (p. 262). While the somewhat sentimental wording of this conclusion weakens its force, its central message is vivid and essential: in the eternal cycle of existence, both human and vegetative, death is the well-spring of new life.

In her novel O Pioneers!, then, Cather has used a universal fertility myth to show the conflict between the forces of creation and destruction, order and disorder, Apollo and Dionysus. Like most of Cather's other major characters, Alexandra too has a quest, a quest for fulfillment and productivity, not simply in her own personal life, but more importantly, for her entire family and for the vast land itself. In her relationship with the land, Alexandra is herself a mythic figure, her life sharing many similarities with the lives of ancient fertility goddesses. As Carl says, "there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before. . ." (p. 102). It is precisely because Alexandra's story is not new that it carries such profound implications.

CHAPTER IV

THE QUEST FOR ARTISTIC TRUTH

IN THE SONG OF THE LARK

The conflict between the East and the West, art and nature, passion and control, Dionysus and Apollo, which is felt so strongly in Alexander's Bridge and O Pioneers! is continued in Cather's third novel, The Song of the Lark, which was published in 1915. However, whereas in Alexander's Bridge the emphasis seems to be on the Dionysian values of desire and passion and in O Pioneers! on the Apollonian virtues of creativity and order, in The Song of the Lark, there is a basic tension between the two value systems which continues throughout the novel and is resolved only tentatively, if at all.

The Song of the Lark is the longest and most autobiographical of Cather's novels. Its conception was inspired by the life of the great opera singer Olive Fremstad, but the knowledge and understanding of the young artist's desires, ambitions, and fears stem from Cather's own experience. It is possibly for this reason that the novel lacks the structural tightness that characterizes most of Cather's work. As Edith Lewis has observed, "Perhaps the faults she found in this book came in part from working too directly from immediate emotions and impressions."¹ After having consulted with the publisher, William Heinemann, Cather

¹Edith Lewis, Willia Cather Living (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 93.

decided that the book's major fault was that it relied upon "the full-blooded method, which told everything about everybody, and was not natural to me. . . ." ² Excessive reliance on coincidence and obvious plot manipulation, especially in the romantic episode with Fred Ottenburg, also weaken the book, but, in spite of these faults, its treatment of Cather's major themes as reflected in the life of a great artist and its introduction of the Southwestern cliff dwellings as an important intellectual and emotional catalyst make it an indispensable part of the canon of her work.

This third Catherian novel is indeed too bulky, but Willa's friend Elizabeth Sergeant was mistaken when she asserted that it was "naturalistic rather than suggestive or allusive." ³ Sergeant must have taken Cather too seriously when she stated in the Preface that what she "cared about . . . was the girl's [Thea's] escape; the play of blind chance, the way in which commonplace occurrences fell together to liberate her from commonness." ⁴ It is true that the book is excessively detailed and somewhat deterministic, but the richness of the book derives from the very qualities of suggestiveness and allusiveness which Sergeant denies. Indeed, the entire book is permeated with names, symbols, and events which attest to its mythic background. As Bernice Slote has proclaimed, "From the beginning, The Song of the Lark has a

²Willia Cather, Willia Cather on Writing (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 96.

³Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willia Cather (New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1953), p. 134.

⁴Willia Cather, The Song of the Lark, vol. 2 of The Novels and Stories of Willia Cather, lib. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937), p. ix. Additional references to this source will be paginated within the text.

mythic aura, as if to make us at least look toward the gods. . . ."⁵

The most obvious mythic allusions are found in some of the names Cather has chosen. The name Thea Kronburg, for example, suggests the power, wisdom, and talent of a goddess. Kronburg is reminiscent of the Greek god Kronus, who ruled the earth before Zeus, and Thea recalls both Rhea, Kronus' sister-queen and goddess of the earth, and, even more specifically, Thea, the ancient goddess of the moon and wife of Hyperion, ancient God of the sun. Thea Kronburg's stature is increased even further by the fact that she is attended by a little brother who is named for the great Norse god Thor and by a poor and broken physician Wunsch, whose name, according to Bernice Slote, recalls the Teutonic god Wish or Desire.⁶

Thea's identification with the ancient Titanic race suggests both her primitive consciousness and her powerful artistic creativity, for according to Greek mythology, the Titans were the children of Heaven and Earth and were the mighty personifications of the physical world. Thea herself, like Alexandra, although not to the same extent, is identified with nature. Even as a child, she is drawn to the Turquoise Hills which lie behind the town of Moonstone: "To the west one could see range after range of blue mountains, and at last the snowy range, with its white, windy peaks, the clouds caught here and there on their spurs. Again and again Thea had to hide her face from the cold for a moment. The wind never slept on this plain. . . . Every little while eagles flew over." To Thea, these eagles represent the "spirit of human courage" (p. 69), of the artistic aspiration which she feels so strongly and which, according to Cather, sets her apart from her own time and

⁶Slote, p. 86.

place and puts her into the mythic realm of truth which encompasses all times, all places, and all peoples.

Thea's entire life may be viewed in terms of this artistic quest for truth and beauty. As a child, she is confined by the narrow attitudes and limited perceptions of Moonstone society, the town's very name suggesting its cold, hard attitude toward any serious artistic effort. No one in Thea's family--except possibly her mother--understands Thea's needs or respects her talent. However, she does have some sympathetic friends: Dr. Archie, who saves her from dying of pneumonia; Ray Kennedy, who carries her to the sand hills, who stimulates her interest in the land and people of the Southwest by showing her Indian turquoises and telling her about the cliff dwellings, and who dreams of marrying her someday; Johnny Tellamantez, whose passionate Spanish music awakens an answering vibration in her own body; and finally Professor Wunsch, a defeated, derelict music teacher who is nevertheless able to recall enough of his former brilliance to awaken Thea's own talent and desire.

Indeed, it is Professor Wunsch who reveals the basic myth of the novel; in one of her lessons, he introduces Thea to Gluck's opera Orpheus, and in the novel, Orpheus' quest for the lost Eurydice serves as a metaphor for Thea's quest for artistic truth and beauty. Also, the fact that Wunsch praises the great alto who sang Eurydice looks forward to Thea's interest in voice, and the fact that Wunsch is himself old and defeated foreshadows the tragic fact that, like Orpheus, no artist can retain his talent forever. As Giannone has pointed out, the opera serves to enrich the novel in two ways: "Myth holds the old human stories; music the old feelings. In this novel it is the legend behind Gluck's opera that Willa Cather uses, but her thematic sense frequently calls

for a particular tonal emphasis which music supplies."⁷ The sad refrain "Ach, ich habe sie verloren (p. 89)" not only suits the melancholy Wunsch, but it also foreshadows Thea's lifelong struggle for her art.

After Wunsch sees Thea's excited reaction to Orpheus, he realizes that her artistic aspirations are serious, and he encourages her by telling her, "Nothing is far and nothing is near, if one desires. The world is little, people are little, human life is little. There is only one big thing--desire. And before it, when it is big, all is little" (p. 95). Like the German God Wish, then, the "'god of bliss and love, who wishes, wills, and brings good to men,'"⁸ Wunsch attempts to give Thea the courage to accomplish her desire. However, he recognizes that desire alone will not assure success, for the great artist must not only be willing to work, she must also have "something inside from the beginning (p. 98)"; she must know "the secret--what make the rose to red, the sky to blue, the man to love" (p. 99). This secret is artistic genius, which Cather seems to believe has a "divine or miraculous"⁹ origin and which she feels sets artists apart from other men. It is the secret knowledge which until now Thea has hidden from everyone, at times even from herself. But now,

She was shaken by a passionate excitement. She did not altogether understand what Wunsch was talking about; and yet, in a way she knew. She knew, of course, that there was something about her that was different. But it was more like a friendly spirit than like anything that was a part

⁷Richard Giannone, Music in Willa Cather's Fiction (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 89.

⁸Jacob Grimm, Teutonic Mythology, translated from the fourth edition by James Steven Stallybrass, 4 vols., IV (London: George Bell and Sons, 1883), 1328, 1330, quoted in Slote, p. 86.

⁹Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, "Willa Cather's Portrait of the Artist," University of Toronto Quarterly, 27 (1958), 275.

of herself. She brought everything to it, and it answered her; happiness consisted of that backward and forward movement of herself. The something came and went, she never knew how. Sometimes she hunted for it and could not find it; again, she lifted her eyes from a book, or stepped out-of-doors, or awakened in the morning, and it was there--under her cheek, it usually seemed to be, or over her breast--a kind of warm sureness (pp. 99-100).

As Woodress points out, Herr Wunsch has introduced Thea to his "favorite piece of music, and his battered score [of Orpheus] is his legacy to his talented pupil. As he drifts downward to an alcoholic oblivion, to be torn by the Thracian women and cast into Hebrus, Thea [will go] on toward her destiny with his cherished gift."¹⁰ He has given her not only a basic knowledge of the piano and of art, but what is even more important, a knowledge of herself and the desire to develop her talents to the fullest.

Thea's artistic quest is based on the myth of Orpheus, but it is also enriched by the myths of Dionysus, Endymion, and Apollo. Here, as in the earlier novels, there is a conflict between the symbolic powers of Dionysus and Apollo. In Alexander's Bridge, Bartley is torn between Dionysian passion as exemplified in Hilda and Apollonian discipline as practiced by Winifred; at the time of his death, he is temporarily returning to his wife, but his conflict is actually unresolved. In O Pioneers! the conflict between the two forces is not a tense one because the novel seems to have two major characters, Emil representing Dionysian desire and Alexandra representing Apollonian order and accomplishment; the emphasis, however, is on Alexandra's Apollonian virtues, for, unlike Emil and Marie who bring death and destruction, she is associated with life and creativity. In The Song of the Lark,

¹⁰James Woodress, Willa Cather (New York: Western Publishing Company, Inc., 1970), p. 68.

however, the conflict between these two extremes is felt within one personality, that of Thea herself. Throughout the novel, she is torn between the forces symbolized by Dionysus and Apollo, between the moon and the sun, dark and light, the artificial and the natural, the East and the West.

In her youth Thea is drawn more toward the Dionysian values of desire and freedom. In fact, her childhood mentor Wunsch is himself reminiscent of the dual-natured Dionysus. Like the ancient worshippers of this god, Wunsch drank freely of wine, and under its influence, he frequently lost his reason. One night, for example, after having drunk himself into a stupor, he awoke and reacted in true, wild Bacchanite fashion: "His face was snarling and savage, and his eyes were crazy. He had risen to avenge himself, to wipe out his shame, to destroy his enemy" (pp. 115-16). Unaware of what he is doing, Wunsch storms outside, chops down the dove house, and must be held by a rope to prevent further damage.

In addition to being the God of the Vine, though, Dionysus is also a God of Joy. Edith Hamilton reports that "The reason that Dionysus was so different at one time from another was because of this double nature of wine and so of the god of wine. He was man's benefactor and he was man's destroyer." Wine gives men a sense of power and accomplishment which is "like being possessed by a power greater than themselves." In time, this power became associated with artistic inspiration, and Dionysus was transformed from "the god who freed men for a moment through drunkenness to the god who freed them through inspiration."¹¹ Like the Dionysus who ultimately became the God of the

¹¹Edith Hamilton, Mythology (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942), pp. 72-73.

Greek Theater and the inspiration for much of the world's greatest art, then, Wunsch is not only a destroyer, but also a benefactor. He may have destroyed himself, but his talent and desire serve as an inspiration for Thea.

As a young girl Thea is also characterized by the energy, passion, and desire which, according to Nietzsche is indigenous to the Dionysian personality. At one point in the novel, in fact, she is directly and symbolically associated with the Dionysian drink, for she reminds Wunsch of a "thin glass full of sweet-smelling, sparkling Moselle wine. He seemed to see such a glass before him in the arbour, to watch the bubbles rising and breaking, like the silent discharge of energy in the nerves and brain, the rapid florescence in young blood. . ." (p. 38). However, Wunsch also recognizes her association with Apollo, and it is this combination of order with passion, reason with desire that will help Thea to succeed where the totally Dionysian Wunsch failed. When Thea comes to bid Wunsch good-bye as he leaves town, she is framed by bright "sunflowers." As Wunsch looks down at her, he sees "a face full of light and energy, of the unquestioning hopefulness of first youth. Yes, she was like a flower full of sun. . ." (p. 122). Obviously, Thea's Dionysian nature has been symbolized by the wine, her Apollonian nature by the sun.

Thea's choice of Wunsch and "Spanish Johnny" Tellamantez for friends also indicates her Dionysian sympathies, for both are not only perpetual drunkards, but also artists. Like Wunsch, Johnny becomes crazy when he drinks, and he often runs away from home for months at a time. Thea's sympathy is with Johnny, however, and she feels that Mrs. Tellamantez's patience and resignation only aggravate Johnny's problems.

"People had no right to be so passive and resigned," she thought. "She would like to roll over and over in the sand and screech at Mrs. Tellamantez" (pp. 55-56). Mrs. Tellamantez says that Johnny runs away because he has no judgment, because "'a little thing is big to him'" (p. 57). To illustrate this, she picks up a white shell and gives it to Thea. Thea "took it up softly and pressed it to her own ear. The sound in it startled her; it was like something calling one. So that was why Johnny ran away" (p. 57). The sound in the shell is the unknown, like the beautiful ideal for which Wunsch, Johnny, and Thea are each searching but which Mrs. Tellamantez and the people of Moonstone cannot understand.

Thea's desire to discover this unknown, to explore life in its dark aspects as well as its bright ones, is representative of the Dionysian aspect of her nature, for according to Joseph L. Henderson, "The Dionysian participant looks back to the origin of things, to the 'storm-birth' of the god who is blasted from the resistant womb of Mother Earth. . . ." This Dionysian nature, taken in conjunction with her Apollonian one, produces Thea's questing or Orphic nature, Orpheus being, according to Henderson, the "god who remembers Dionysus but looks forward to Christ,"¹² who, like the mythic Apollo, was both a healer and a bringer of order.

Like Orpheus, Dionysus, and Christ, each of whom made a journey to the underworld, Thea also makes a symbolical journey to another world. At the beginning of the book, Thea's extreme illness (pneumonia) and near death parallel a visit to the Underworld, but, even more importantly,

¹²Joseph L. Henderson, "Ancient Myths and Modern Man," in Man and His Symbols, ed. by Carl G. Jung (1964; rpt. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1968), pp. 139-40.

her later visit to Panther Canyon brings her in touch with another age and another civilization, with the ancient Pueblo culture. Her descent into the canyon is an Orphic journey, a successful "voyage perilous," for it is there that she discovers--as will be later illustrated--her Eurydice, the secret of her art, which is that art should express the needs and emotions of all peoples and all times, that it should express life itself.

Thea's mature Orphic journey will lead her into the dark recesses of time and truth, but as a young girl, she cannot comprehend the deeper implications of the artistic quest. For her, as for the young Endymion, art is primarily a source for beauty and enjoyment. Like Endymion, she is at first a passive worshipper of the moon. She receives life and beauty, but she does not yet realize that she is capable of returning it to the world. Cather says,

Life rushed in upon her through that window--or so it seemed. In reality, of course, life rushes from within, not from without. There is no work of art so big or so beautiful that it was not once all contained in some youthful body, like this one which lay in the floor in the moonlight, pulsing with ardour and anticipation (p. 177).

Here, Thea's fascination for the moon recalls not only the above-mentioned Endymion myth, but also the origin of her name as Thea, goddess of the moon. Also, the fact that Thea was married to Hyperion is symbolically significant, because whereas the moon, like the immature Thea, can only reflect life and beauty, the sun, like the mature artist, can create these things.

Thea's artistic development, however, is stifled in Moonstone, where most of the citizens either resented or denied the talent which set this young girl apart. As the name indicates, the town is hardened

toward the beauty and creativity which are symbolized for Thea at this time by the moon. Again like Endymion, Thea is subconsciously searching for the ideal, for "the rare, the beautiful, the splendid thing that is [always] a little beyond the ordinary reach," and like the young Cather, she thinks this is to be found "only as one reached the climates nearer to the established sources of art. . . ." ¹³ Therefore, she yearns to escape from her drab environment into the bright lights of the East. Her opportunity does eventually come, but not in a manner she would have wished, for the money comes from a life insurance policy left her by her friend Ray Kennedy, who is killed in a railroad accident.

Ray has specified that the money be used to send Thea to Chicago to study music, so, like the young Cather, Thea eagerly leaves her home town to go East, expecting that her artistic dreams will be quickly fulfilled. After arriving in Chicago and getting settled in her lodgings, she begins to study under the brilliant piano teacher Andor Harsanyi, but she soon realizes that becoming an artist is not so easy:

She almost never worked now with the sunny, happy contentment that had filled the hours when she worked with Wunsch--"like a fat horse turning a sorghum mill," she said bitterly to herself. Then, by sticking to it, she could always do what she set out to do. Now, everything that she really wanted was impossible; a cantabile like Harsanyi's, for instance, instead of her own cloudy tone. No use telling her she might have it in ten years. She wanted it now. She wondered how she had ever found other things interesting: books, "Anna Karenina"--all that seemed so unreal and on the outside of things. She was not born a musician, she decided; there was no other way of explaining it (p. 223).

Thea is now consciously searching for perfection, for the ideal symbolized earlier for her by the moon, and she becomes unhappy because it seems so far away from her: "The thing that used to lie under her cheek,

¹³Slote, pp. 356-60.

that sat so warmly over her heart when she glided away from the sand hills that autumn morning, was far from her. She had come to Chicago to be with it, and it had deserted her, leaving in its place a painful longing, an unresigned despair" (pp. 223-24).

Harsanyi soon realizes that Thea's early training has not been sufficient to prepare her to be the accomplished concert pianist that she thinks she wants to be. However, he does recognize that she is intelligent and has a great deal of musical feeling--if he could only find the proper key to release it. As he works with her, Harsanyi searches for this key, but it is only when he hears her sing that he realizes what it is. One evening when Thea is dining with the Harsanyis, she reveals that in order to earn some extra money, she is singing as a soprano in a church choir. His interest immediately aroused, Harsanyi asks her to sing something for them. She begins with some church hymns, and then she remembers the aria from Orpheus that Wunsch had taught her. The refrain "Ach, ich habe sie verloren," comes back to her like an old friend.

This aria from Orpheus is particularly appropriate at this point because it is here that Thea begins to discover her true artistic vocation. Her natural talent is for voice, not the piano, and her singing is natural and beautiful. To Harsanyi,

It was like a wild bird that had flown into his studio on Middleton Street from goodness knew how far! No one knew that it had come, or even that it existed; least of all the strange, crude girl in whose throat it beat its passionate wings. What a simple thing it was, he reflected; why had he never guessed it before? Everything about her indicated it--the big mouth, the wide jaw and chin, the strong white teeth, the deep laugh. The machine was so simple and strong, seemed to be so easily operated. She sang from the bottom of herself (p. 237).

Harsanyi now realizes where Thea's true power lies; he knows that her

"true medium is the voice, the instrument through which she can unlock the strong, intimate spirit inside her. [To her] The conversion from piano to voice, like the larger artistic and intellectual ripening, is from the artificial to the natural."¹⁴

The transition from piano to voice, however, is for a while extremely difficult for Thea. When she was only a girl, she had prided herself on her voice, but since she has studied with Wunsch and Harsanyi, she has directed all her energies to the piano. Now, Harsanyi's evident interest in her voice again increases her own interest and enjoyment. Moreover, under his guidance, her perception and execution actually improve. Harsanyi "had often noticed that she could not think a thing out in passages. Until she saw it as a whole, she wandered like a blind man surrounded by torments. After she once had her 'revelation,' after she got the idea that to her--not always to him--explained everything, then she went forward rapidly" (p. 241). Harsanyi does not find her easy to help, but he considers that her final success will be worth all his efforts and sacrifices.

For Thea, the two winters she spends in Chicago serve as the gestation period that precedes her birth as a true artist. As Cather observed, "Every artist makes himself born," and this birth "is much harder than the other time and longer."¹⁵ This spiritual birth, like the physical one, is preceded by intense desire, the desire which Thea has felt since her childhood and which is symbolized for her by the painting "The Song of the Lark," in which Millet has captured for her the "flat country, the early morning light, the wet fields, the look in the girl's

¹⁴Giannone, pp. 90-91.

¹⁵Bloom, p. 276.

heavy face" (p. 249). Like the girl in the painting, Thea grew up in a country which she felt limited her; like her, she wanted the something extra out of life that is symbolized by the singing lark, a "motif that recurs many times in Willa Cather's life and fiction and always," according to Woodress, "symbolizes desire, aspiration, and longing."¹⁶

Thea's subconscious artistic growth continues as she explores the other artistic media of the city, and the first time she attends a symphony concert marks a turning point in this development. The program includes Dvorak's New World Symphony, which reminds her of the western plains and thus subconsciously takes her back to her physical and artistic origins. She waits expectantly and excitedly and is then rewarded by the orchestra:

Here were the sand hills, the grasshoppers and locusts, all the things that wakened and chirped in the early morning; the reaching and reaching of high plains, the immeasurable yearning of all flat lands. There was home in it, too; first memories, first mornings long ago; the amazement of a new soul in a new world; a soul new and yet old, that had dreamed something despairing, something glorious, in the dark before it was born; a soul obsessed by what it did not know, under the cloud of a past it could not recall (p. 251).

Thea's artistic, Dionysian soul is also in "the dark before it was born," but on this night Thea makes a passionate commitment to her art. Having experienced this intense ecstasy of the soul, she fearfully rejects the repugnant physical advances she receives from some old men on the street, just as she will always put aside her personal physical life for the more eternal life of the spirit. She vows, "As long as she lived that ecstasy [of art, of the spirit] was going to be hers. She would live for it, work for it, die for it; but she was going to have it, time after time, height after height" (p. 254).

Soon after this critical experience at the symphony, Harsanyi

¹⁶Woodress, p. 169.

advises Thea to spend all her time and effort training her voice, and he recommends Madison Bowers for her instructor. "'I think,'" he tells her, that "'Nature herself did for you what it would take you many years to do at the piano. Perhaps you were not born in the wrong place after all'" (p. 264). Living in a small prairie town has limited her opportunities to learn piano, but her voice has developed the power and freedom of the vast high plains that she had sensed during the New World concert. When Thea returns to voice, it is like returning home. Harsanyi makes her realize that this is, and always has been, her true medium. She has been studying piano with him, but, he tells her,

". . . all the while you have been working with such good will, something has been struggling against me. See, here we were, you and I and this instrument"--he tapped the piano--"three good friends, working so hard. But all the while there was something fighting us! your gift, and the woman you were meant to be. When you find your way to that gift and to that woman, you will be at peace. In the beginning it was an artist that you wanted to be; well you may be an artist, always" (p. 265).

Since, as Harsanyi has recognized, the western plains have played a vital part in developing Thea's voice, it is significant that soon after she completes her studies with Harsanyi and commits herself to studying voice, she returns home to Moonstone for a visit. On the train going home, she thinks about this artistic, more spiritual part of herself. She had always taken it "for granted that some day, when she was older, she would know a great deal more about it. It was as if she had an appointment to meet the rest of herself sometime, somewhere. It was moving to meet her and she was moving to meet it" (p. 272). This side of Thea's nature is associated with the freedom and power of the West, with the land itself--the sunlit plains, mountains, and streams of her home.

As this more mature Thea nears her home, images of the sun become

more prominent in contrast to the more prominent moon images of her youth. As the train crosses the Platte River, the sunlight is very intense, and Thea ". . . felt that she was coming back to her own land. . . . It was over flat lands like this, stretching out to drink the sun, that the larks sang--and one's heart sang there, too" (pp. 276-77). Back in her own house, which is like a "sunny cave" (p. 280). Thea feels relaxed. She awakes the next morning "in her own room up under the eaves and lay watching the sunlight shine on the roses of her wall-paper" (p. 279). This change of emphasis from the moon to the sun symbolizes Thea's disillusion with the East and new understanding of her Western home as well as her change of interest from the piano to voice. For her, the voice is the powerful and natural medium of her art, the piano having been only a weak reflection of it just as the moon is only a weak reflection of the beauty and power of the sun.

Now that Thea has come to recognize the natural power of her voice and its relationship to the vast lands of the West, she is also able to recognize the narrowness and superficiality of "Moonstone" society, which is as frigid and artificial as the reflected light from the moon and as cold and hard as a stone. Therefore, when she comes home, it is not the townspeople, but rather the Mexican Community to which she turns for understanding, companionship, and musical enjoyment. She attends one of their dances, where there "was an atmosphere of ease and friendly pleasure in the low, dimly lit room, and Thea could not help wondering whether the Mexicans had no jealousies or neighbourly grudges as the people in Moonstone had" (p. 289). In their company, she is able to release both her voice and her emotions.

However, her family resents her friendship with the Mexicans.

They reveal their prejudices, and, in the process, they also reveal their innate hostility toward Thea and her ambitions. Thea has always realized that the town itself resented her, but not until this visit does she also perceive the animosity of her own family. In the past,

She had done them the honour, she told herself bitterly, to believe that though they had no particular endowments, they were of her kind, and not of the Moonstone kind. Now they had all grown up and become persons. They faced each other as individuals, and she saw that Anna and Gus and Charley were among the people whom she had always recognized as her natural enemies. . . . Nothing that she would ever do in the world would seem important to them, and nothing they would ever do would seem important to her (pp. 301-2).

Thea has come back to her western home, only to discover that she has no home to come to because her family and the town do not understand or sympathize with her. Therefore, when she leaves Moonstone this second time, "Something pulled in her--and broke" (p. 310). She cried for a long time, but afterwards, she was stronger and harder, and better prepared to face the struggle ahead of her. At this point, Thea is alienated both from the city and the country as she now perceives them, but, as Brown has observed, "What Thea had yet to perceive with the proper clarity was the difference between the West of which her voice was an organ and the West of the narrow ugly minds of Moonstone. Her West was an older and broader West on which towns were blotches."¹⁷

When Thea returns to Chicago, she resumes her voice lessons with Madison Bowers. From him she learns the necessary skills for her vocation, and she also learns to hate a cheap imitation of art, but she does not recover the positive joy and power of her music. In fact, until she meets Frederick Ottenburg, an old friend of Bowers, her life is rather

¹⁷E. K. Brown, "Willa Cather and the West," University of Toronto Quarterly, 5 (1936), 555.

barren and empty. Fred takes her out to dinner several times, introduces her to some rich friends for whom she sings, and, when he notices her unhappiness, suggests that she take a private vacation at his Arizona ranch.

Thea accepts Fred's invitation, and the resultant visit to Panther Canyon marks an important turning point in her life. In Chicago she has become stale and sluggish, but the bracing air and clear skies of Arizona relax and release her from her lethargy. In effect, her trip West becomes a redemptive journey, a replaying of what Leo Marx calls the "classic American fable." Such a journey "offers the chance of a temporary return to first things. Here, as in a dream, the superfluties and defenses of everyday life are stripped away, and men regain contact with essentials."¹⁸ As she rides toward the ranch, Thea feels this respite and freedom; she "seemed to be taking very little through the wood with her. The personality of which she was so tired seemed to let go of her" (p. 368). Moreover, as she leaves the city, she has a sense of returning not only to nature, but also to the enthusiasm and confidence of her youth: "She was getting back to the earliest sources of gladness that she could remember. She had loved the sun, and the brilliant solitudes of sand and sky, long before these other things had come along to fasten themselves upon her and torment her" (p. 369).

The fact that Thea loves the sun indicates afresh that she is a lover and even a worshipper of art, and especially of music, for both are linked together by the figure of Apollo, the Greek god who reigns over not only the sun, but also music. In her perceptive introduction

¹⁸Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 69.

to Willa Cather's book of poetry April Twilights, Bernice Slote has noted what an important role Apollo plays in Cather's fiction and has pointed out that in her work, the "music of Apollo (or Orpheus, or Marsyas) is the pure and traditional symbol of art."¹⁹ Thus, Cather employs not only Dionysus, but also Apollo as a metaphor for art. Whereas Dionysus stands for energy and desire in the pursuit of art, however, Apollo will come to symbolize order and accomplishment, for it is in this sun filled canyon and among the uniform and integrated cliff dwellings that Thea discovers the ancient secret of all artists, the important fact that art is not isolated from life, but is rather a universal expression of life.

From now on, Apollonian values will gradually assume a more prominent place in Thea's life. Earlier, when she was visiting the museum in Chicago, she had "told herself over and over that she did not think the Apollo Belvedere 'at all handsome'" (p. 249), but now that she is on the Ottenburg ranch, she cannot, and does not want to escape the sun, the traditional symbol of Apollo and his powers. The days are "full of light," and she awakes each morning "when the first fierce shafts of sunlight darted through the curtainless windows of her rooms" (p. 369). Each day she visits the old Indian ruins, built of "yellowish stone and mortar," which line each side of Panther Canyon:

All the houses in the cañon were clean with the cleanliness of sun-baked, wind swept places, and they all smelled of the tough little cedars that twisted themselves into the very doorways. One of these rock-rooms Thea took for her own. Fred had told her how to make it comfortable. The day after she came, old Henry brought over on one of the pack-ponies a roll of Navajo blankets that belonged to Fred, and Thea lined her cave with them. The room was not more than eight by ten feet, and she could touch the stone roof with her finger-tips. This was her old idea: a nest

¹⁹Bernice Slote, ed., April Twilights: Poems, by Willa Cather (1903; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1962), p. xxxvii.

in a high cliff, full of sun. All morning long the sun beat upon her cliff, while the ruins on the opposite side of the cañon were in shadow. In the afternoon, when she had the shade of two hundred feet of rock wall, the ruin on the other side of the gulf stood out in blazing sunlight (p. 371).

The conflict between light and dark, reason and passion, order and disorder, discipline and freedom, accomplishment and desire, Apollo and Dionysus, is still present here, but the emphasis is definitely on the sun god and his values.

The ascendance of Apollo is also indicated by the reduction of Thea's Dionysian energy. After her bath each morning, she fell asleep on the woolly blankets of her cave, blankets that

were saturated with sunlight. . . . She used to wonder at her own inactivity. She could lie there hour after hour in the sun and listen to the strident whirr of the big locusts, and to the light, ironical laughter of the quaking aspens. All her life she had been hurrying and sputtering, as if she had been born behind time and had been trying to catch up. Now, she reflected, as she drew herself out long upon the rugs, it was as if she were waiting for something to catch up with her. She had got to a place where she was out of the stream of meaningless activity and undirected effort (pp. 372-73).

As in Alexandra's relationship to the land, Thea can succeed only when she quits struggling against the mythic powers, whether of the land or of music. She must give up her own selfish personal desires for her talent in order to accomplish the greater ones dictated to her by the god of art. Moreover, when Thea does allow herself to be the passive receiver of Apollo's favors, she is richly rewarded with feelings that are almost sexual in their intensity. She sings little now, but she keeps a song in her head which is like "a pleasant sensation indefinitely prolonged. . . .

Music had never before come to her in that sensuous form. It had always been a thing to be struggled with, had always brought anxiety and exaltation and chagrin--

never content and indolence. . . . She had always been a little drudge, hurrying from one task to another--as if it mattered! And now her power to think seemed converted into a power of sustained sensation. She could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a colour, like the bright lizards that darted about on the hot stones outside her door; or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas (p. 373).

Thea has become integrated with nature, and in future, she will be able to express in her voice the cosmic perceptions and timeless emotions that she has felt here.

Her experience in Panther Canyon deepens her understanding both of herself and of universal man. Here, as symbolized by the cave, she examines her subconscious self, "her mind and personality. In Chicago she had got almost nothing that went into her subconscious self and took root there. But here, in Panther Cañon, there were again things which seemed destined for her" (p. 374). She examines her own personal needs and desires and discovers that they are identical to those of all people, that the present inevitably merges with the past and the future. Subconsciously, she actually goes back to the time that the Indians walked the paths and inhabited the cliff houses of Panther Canyon. Reaching up to the ceiling of her new abode, she "could dislodge flakes of carbon from the rock-roof--the cooking-smoke of the Ancient People. They were that near!" (p. 375). As she climbs the steep paths, she imagines herself carrying water as the Indian women did, and "She could feel the weight of an Indian baby hanging to her back as she climbed" (p. 376). She visualizes how Indian boys used to hunt eagles from a high tower, and "Sometimes for a whole morning Thea could see the coppery breast and shoulders of an Indian youth there against the sky; see him throw the net, and watch the struggle with the eagle" (pp. 376-77). After these vicarious experiences, Thea now realizes that all people,

both the modern man and the ancient Indian, have their burdens and responsibilities, their hopes and desires.

Willa Cather also realizes that the need for beauty is a vital aspect of all cultures and that all cultures have found some means of expressing that need. In the ancient Pueblo culture of Panther Canyon, the expression of beauty and joy is closely intertwined with the necessity of water; in their pottery, then, the Indian women satisfied both their utilitarian and their aesthetic needs: "Their pottery was their most direct appeal to water, the envelope and sheath of the precious element itself. The strongest Indian need was expressed in those graceful jars, fashioned slowly by hand, without the aid of a wheel" (p. 377). Even in prehistoric times, then, "that painful thing [which is art] was already stirring; the seed of sorrow, and of so much delight" (p. 379).

Thea's recognition of the universal need for artistic expression is the most crucial and climactic step in her development as an artist. Afterwards, Thea understands that her responsibility as an artist is not only to create beauty, although that is important too, but to create a form in which life can be best expressed and understood. She muses thus:

The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself-- life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose? The Indian women held it in their jars. In the sculpture she had seen in the Art Institute, it had been caught in a flash of arrested motion. In singing, one made a vessel of one's throat and nostrils and held it on one's breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals (p. 278).

To Thea, then, the pottery is the form, the art, whereas the water is the traditional symbol of life; also, as Brinton has pointed out, "The vase or the gourd as a symbol of water, the source and preserver of life,

is a conspicuous figure in the myths of ancient America."²⁰ The importance of this symbol is further emphasized by the fact that Thea is at this time performing with "ceremonial gravity" (p. 378) a ritualistic bath. Obviously, it is at this point that Cather's heroine experiences her second birth, her birth as an artist, which is much harder and longer than the first physical birth.

Thea's new-found knowledge of the ancient cliff-dwellers has broadened and deepened her perception of life, just as a similar discovery deepened Willa Cather's understanding of herself, her past, and her art. Edith Lewis reports that when Willa Cather began to make excursions to the Southwest, "a whole new landscape--not only a physical landscape, but a landscape of the mind, peopled with wonderful imaginings, opened out before her."²¹ Like Thea, she discovered the ancient cliff dwellings and became aware of the myths surrounding them. Also, it is possible that Cather perceived in this ancient culture a duality similar to that which she had felt all her life. It is interesting to note, at any rate, that the Pueblo Indians divided their worship between the Sun Father and the Moon Mother,²² just as the young Thea has been drawn to the forces symbolized by both the sun and the moon.

The experiences with the ancient cliff dwellers, therefore, have proved to be of lasting value to both Cather and Thea:

Not only did the world seem older and richer to Thea now, but she herself seemed older. She had never been alone for so long before, or thought so much. Nothing had ever

²⁰Daniel G. Brinton, The Myths of the New World (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), p. 136.

²¹Lewis, pp. 80-81.

²²Charles F. Lummis, The Land of Poco Tiempo (1893; rpt. Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1952), pp. 33-34.

engrossed her so deeply as the daily contemplation of that line of pale-yellow houses tucked into the wrinkle of the cliff. Moonstone and Chicago had become vague. Here everything was simple and definite, as things had been in childhood. Her mind was like a ragbag into which she had been frantically thrusting whatever she could grab. And here she must throw this lumber away. The things that were really hers separated themselves from the rest. Her ideas were simplified, became sharper and clearer. She felt united and strong (p. 380).

Thea has come face to face with the elemental aspects of life, and her physical strength and talent have increased in proportion to her mental and emotional understanding. She has come to understand herself and her position in time: "The Cliff-Dwellers had lengthened her past. She had older and higher obligations" (p. 383). She feels that she has a responsibility not only to herself, but also to her artistic precursors and posterity; therefore, she "at last made up her mind what she was going to try to do in the world," deciding "that she was going to Germany to study without further loss of time" (p. 382).

However, after she makes this decision, her determination is temporarily interrupted by Fred Ottenburg's arrival on the ranch. Again, she feels the duality of her nature, for she is torn between her growing love for Fred and her determination to develop her voice. Fred himself also has dual desires for Thea, for, although he has deepening personal feelings for her, he is also concerned about her career and has, in fact, been a kind of artistic mentor to her. He has introduced her to distinguished people and, what is even more important, he has discovered that she was stagnating in Chicago and has sent her to Panther Canyon, where she has experienced not only full recuperation, but also artistic rebirth. This dual role as lover and artistic advisor is made obvious when he tells her, "I've had my time thinking it would not bore me to be the Apollo of a homey flat, and I've paid out a trifle to learn

better. All those things get very tedious unless they are hooked up with an idea of some sort. It's because we don't come out here only to look at each other and drink coffee that it's so pleasant to--look at each other" (p. 383).

Thea and Fred spend nearly all their time exploring the cliff dwellings of the canyon. And as they explore the past, they also explore their own inner beings and desires, which are like the "voice of the stream [at night] at the bottom of the gorge, . . . hollow and threatening, much louder and deeper than it ever was by day. . ." (p. 388). Whereas the night symbolizes their growing personal desire, the days they spend in the canyon, the light, and the sun continue to symbolize their artistic desires for Thea's voice:

Long, thin streaks of light began to reach quiveringly down into the gorge. The red sun rose rapidly above the tops of the blazing pines, and its glow burst into the gulf, about the very doorstep on which Thea sat. It bored into the wet, dark underbrush. The dripping cherry bushes, the pale aspens, and the frosty pinons were glittering and trembling, swimming in liquid gold. All the pale, dusty little herbs of the bean family, never seen by anyone but a botanist, became for a moment individual and important, their silky leaves quite beautiful with dew and light (pp. 389-90).

The juxtaposition of dark and light here recalls Thea's perennial conflict between desire and accomplishment, between her personal life and her artistic life, between Dionysus and Apollo. However, the light does seem to be dominant, and it beautifies ordinary objects just as Thea's art will beautify her life and the lives of all who hear her.

Thea's imminent artistic ascent is beautifully symbolized by an eagle, "tawny and of great size," (p. 398) which "sailed over the cleft in which she lay, across the arch of sky. He dropped for a moment into the gulf between the walls, then wheeled, and mounted until his plumage was so steeped in light that he looked like a golden bird" (p. 298).

Thea watches him excitedly, "straining her eyes after that strong, tawny flight," and she thinks, "O eagle of eagles! Endeavour, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art! From a cleft in the heart of the world she saluted it. . . . It had come all the way; when men lived in caves, it was there. A vanished race; but along the trails, in the streams, under the spreading cactus, there still glittered in the sun the bits of their frail clay vessels, fragments of their desires" (p. 399). The ancient cliff dwellers have left an indispensable heritage to Thea, the knowledge of which strengthens and beautifies her own art.

During her quiet, lazy days in the canyon, Thea has made her decision to commit herself totally to her art, a fact which is indicated, both symbolically and literally, throughout the entire episode. Therefore, one would expect that the novel, which has reached its emotional and artistic climax, would now move to a swift dénouement. However, Cather prolongs the book for another one hundred and fifty pages, doing so partly through elaboration and partly through coincidence and plot manipulation. Even though she has made her decision to go immediately to Germany to study voice, she suddenly decides to marry Fred and go away with him. However, after they are "married," Fred reveals that he is already married to a selfish woman who will not release him. Thea remains with Fred in this melodramatic situation for a short time, but when she decides to leave him to go to Germany, she will not allow him to finance the trip. Instead, she calls on Dr. Archie, who represents the Moonstone values that will not allow Thea to continue to live with Fred and who comes to New York and loans her the money. When Thea looked back in the canyon and went with Fred, she almost lost her

Eurydice--her art--but when she rejects him, she again has a chance of finding it. As she prepares to leave for Germany, she recalls "the old man [Wunsch] playing in the snowstorm, 'Ach, ich habe sie verloren!' That melody was released in her like a passion of longing. Every nerve in her body thrilled to it" (p. 466). Thea's energy and desire are now centered on a single love: her music.

Thea remains abroad for ten years studying opera, and when she returns, she returns a conqueror. She has been a brilliant success in German opera houses, and she also triumphs in New York. Ultimately, she has sacrificed everything to her art; she not only gave up Fred's love, but she also decided not to return home when her mother was sick and dying. Fred justifies her conduct to Archie as follows:

"She couldn't [return] Archie, she positively couldn't. I felt you never understood that, but I was in Dresden at the time, and though I wasn't seeing much of her, I could size up the situation for myself. It was by just a lucky chance that she got to sing Elizabeth that time at the Dresden Opera, a complication of circumstances. If she'd run away, for any reason, she might have waited years for such a chance to come again. She gave a wonderful performance and made a great impression. They offered her certain terms; she had to take them and follow it up then and there. In that game you can't lose a single trick. She was ill herself, but she sang. No, you musn't hold that against her, Archie. She did the right thing there" (p. 485).

In a similar situation, Willa Cather had chosen to go to her own mother, but she does not blame Thea for her decision. She firmly believed that one has a sacred responsibility to one's art, and that "Art of every kind is an exacting master, more so even than Jehovah--He says only 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me.' Art, Science and Letters cry 'Thou shalt have no other gods at all.' They accept only human sacrifices."²³

²³Willa Cather, The Kingdom of Art, p. 423.

Thea has devoted herself so completely to her art that, as she tells Dr. Archie in New York, she has no personal life. "Your work becomes your personal life," she says. "You are not much good until it does" (p. 546). A true artist like Thea is not willing to settle for a second rate imitation; she says, "'If you love the good thing vitally, enough to give up for it all that one must give up, then you must hate the cheap thing just as much'" (p. 551). In her work, then, Thea searches for the Ideal, for perfect beauty and perfect truth. She tells Archie that "'what one really strives for in art is not the sort of thing you are likely to find when you drop in for a performance at the opera. What one strives for is so far away, so beautiful. . . that there's nothing one can say about it!'" (p. 551).

As Dr. Archie, Fred, Harsanyi, and even Johnny Tellamantez, watch, Thea does achieve for a few brief moments the perfection she has been striving for, and her singing reflects the absolute truth and beauty of accomplished and inspired art. On this night, "she entered into the inheritance that she herself had laid up, into the fullness of the faith she had kept before she knew its name or its meaning" (p. 571). On this night, Thea has a sensational triumph; her sun is at its zenith, but time will come for her just as it came for the cliff dwellers and for old Wunsch, a fact that is symbolized by the sun's setting just as Thea leaves the theater.

Thea began her artistic career by looking East toward Chicago, but she could not come into the full expression of her voice until her return to the West where she gained the emotional perception and intellectual understanding necessary for it. Her artistic inheritance is based on the land, on myth, and on history. Like the mythic Orpheus,

she has searched deep into the past and into her own soul. She has had the desire of Dionysus and the talent of Orpheus, and after her visit to the cliff dwellings, the discipline and control of Apollo. She has behind her, then, the artistic heritage not only of Europe, but also of the early American Indians. In her mature voice, she has combined the passion of Dionysus with the discipline of Apollo, for passion without control is chaotic and order without emotion is cold. Just as in ancient Greece, it took both Thea, the moon, and Hyperion, the sun, to give light to the entire day, so does it take both elements of Thea's nature to express the full beauty and meaning of her art.

CHAPTER V

JIM BURDEN'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

IN MY ÁNTONIA

Cather's treatment of the creative Apollonian powers inherent in man and nature reaches its climax in My Ántonia. Whereas O Pioneers! discusses the development of the Mid-west as farmland and The Song of the Lark examines the growth of a creative artist, My Ántonia is concerned with the physical and spiritual birth and growth of man as well as with the mythic creation of a new and glorious country. The book not only traces the development of Jim Burden and Ántonia Shimerda from childhood to adulthood but also follows the growth of the mid-western prairies from "the material out of which countries are made"¹ to an established and productive farmland, from a barren Wilderness to a luxuriant Promised Land.

Many of the events in My Ántonia came directly from Cather's own experiences and memories of her life on the Divide, and in writing it, she is obviously taking the advice of her friend Sarah Orne Jewett, who told her that "The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper--whether little or great, it belongs to Literature."² As Elizabeth Sergeant has reported,

¹Willia Cather, My Ántonia, vol. 4 of The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather, lib. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937), p. 7. Future references to this text will be paginated within the text.

²Willia Cather, Not Under Forty (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), p. 76.

one such image that "teased" Cather for years was that of Annie Pavelka Sadilek, the Bohemian woman who is the basis for *Ántonia*. Cather saw Annie one summer when she visited her family in Red Cloud, and in the spring of 1916, after placing a "Sicilian apothecary jar . . . , filled with orange-brown flowers of scented stock, in the middle of a bare round antique table," she told her friend, "'I want my new heroine [*Ántonia*] to be like this--like a rare object in the middle of a table, which one may examine from all sides.'"³

Cather wanted *Ántonia* herself to be the story, and most critics have interpreted the book in light of this intention. For example, Thorp says that "Though Jim is the narrator . . . , the story belongs to *Ántonia*. . . ." ⁴ Loggins, however, recognizes that the story does not belong completely to *Ántonia*, although he seems to believe it should. "The point of view," he says, "is unfortunate. . . . Using Jim's point of view, she [Cather] was obliged to make too much of him."⁵ These comments raise the vital question, "Whose story is My *Ántonia*?" *Ántonia*'s? or Jim's? John Randall gives the two equal importance; he believes that the novel is "best understood as the story of parallel lives." Furthermore, he contends that the "double protagonist consists of [both] Jim Burden and *Ántonia*, who, true to the best traditions of romantic movement, stand for head [contemplation] and heart [action], respectively."⁶ This interpretation seems more valid than those which

³Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willa Cather (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1953), p. 139.

⁴Willard Thorp, "New Voices," in American Writing in the Twentieth Century (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 58.

⁵Vernon Loggins, "Willa Cather," in I Hear America . . . (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1937), pp. 213-14.

⁶John H. Randall III, The Landscape and the Looking Glass (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), p. 107.

see *Ántonia* as the sole protagonist and Jim as a detached observer, important only as he reveals *Ántonia*. However, even this interpretation does not seem to explain the facts that after the first section, *Ántonia* recedes further and further into the background and that she completely disappears during the third section, to reappear in her full importance only at the end of the novel.

If one judges the novel by the intention Cather expressed in 1916, the prominence of Jim and the subsequent recession of *Ántonia* would seem to be a fault. However, if one reads the novel as Jim's story and not *Ántonia*'s, all these apparent contradictions and problems in construction immediately disappear. Perhaps Cather was conscious of a change in intention; perhaps she was not. Maybe she had an instinctive feeling or revelation similar to that which preceded the writing of O Pioneers! At any rate, however, the title itself--My Ántonia--comes to indicate that the novel is not just about *Ántonia*, but rather about the effect *Ántonia* has on Jim's life.

Thus, Jim becomes the protagonist and *Ántonia* becomes the most important symbol in the novel. This essential symbolic quality of *Ántonia* has been noticed by Daiches, who maintains that

A character who is constantly talked about, described, and discussed but who never reveals herself fully and directly to the reader tends to become the kind of symbol the observer wants to make of her, an objectification of the observer's emotions, and this in large measure does happen to *Ántonia*. Her growth, development, and final adjustment is a vast symbolic progress interesting less for what it is than for what it can be made to mean.⁷

Ántonia comes to mean to Jim, and to Cather, as she states in the introduction, "the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our

⁷David Daiches, Willa Cather (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971), p. 44 (1951).

childhood" (p. x). By using the mature Jim as narrator, Cather is able to use the technique of mythic memory that she has previously used in her novels, especially in O Pioneers! As Woodress says, "Jim Burden's impressions, . . . like Willa Cather's memories, are recorded years after the fact. By then the ugliness of the western prairies had been filtered out of the picture, leaving only a retouched mythic landscape."⁸ Jim remembers only the essential elements of his experience, the elements which led to his maturity and to the maturity of the country itself. As the years have passed, these events have themselves become symbolical and mythical in their import. As Fawcett has said, myths

. . . are born out of the common life of man, out of his confrontation with the world which speaks to him in the symbols it creates. In this lies the explanation for the fact that the themes of the myths are both timeless and universal. They have local form and colour provided by the imagery appropriate to a particular time and place, but they emerge from the universal rather than the individual consciousness.⁹

Ántonia's life, therefore, comes to symbolize the pioneering experience everywhere.

My Ántonia is a mythical novel in both its structure and its themes. In addition to Cather's basic themes of the conflict between the East and West and the struggle between the Apollonian and Dionysian natures of man, she also uses at least three other important myths in the novel. These myths are (1) the peculiarly American myth of the Adamic hero and his search for identity, (2) the universal myth of exiled man and his search for a home, and (3) the ancient myth of the seasons and the corresponding cycle of human life.

⁸James Woodress, Willa Cather (New York: Western Publishing Company, 1970), p. 35.

⁹Thomas Fawcett, The Symbolic Language of Religion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1971), p. 101.

The basic myth in American literature from the time of Hawthorne and Melville to Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Robert Penn Warren has been that of the American Adam. As defined by R. W. B. Lewis, this Adamic figure is an "individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources."¹⁰ A close examination of Jim Burden reveals him to fit squarely in this tradition. His parents are both dead. Thus, exiled and homeless, he is en route from his old Virginia home to live with his grandparents in Nebraska; as Stegner phrases it, he is the archetypal "American orphan or exile, struggling to find a place between an old world left behind and a new world not yet created."¹¹ As he bumps over the rough prairie, young Jim senses this isolation:

I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction. I had never before looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it. I did not believe that my dead father and mother were watching me from up there; they would still be looking for me at the sheep-fold down by the creek, or along the white road that led to the mountain pastures. I had left even their spirits behind me. The wagon jolted on, carrying me I knew not whither. I don't think I was homesick. If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be (pp. 7-8).

Having been transplanted at such an early age, Jim has no roots, no established identity. As a romantic child, he learns to look up to Otto Fuchs, who looks like a desperado who had just "stepped out of the

¹¹Wallace Stegner, ed., "My Ántonia," in The American Novel (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1965), p. 144.

pages of Jesse James" (p. 6) and who tells him exciting stories about the Old West. He also learns to respect the kindness, customs, and beliefs of his grandparents, but as his life in town later shows, he does not unquestioningly accept their ways as his own.

The most important early influence on Jim's character, however, is not his own family but the Shimerda family. Old Mr. Shimerda himself forms a suggestive parallel to Jim. Like Jim, he has come to this new country not because he wanted to, but because circumstances forced him to do so. Also like Jim, he feels isolated, but unlike him he has a stronger past which he can neither escape nor retain. In the old country, he had been a weaver by trade, but he is a gentleman by descent, and he retains a dignified manner and refined tastes. When the Burdens first meet him, he bends over Mrs. Burden's hand, and Jim observes that "Everything about this old man was in keeping with his dignified manner. He was neatly dressed. Under his coat he wore a knitted grey vest, and, instead of a collar, a silk scarf of a dark bronze-green, carefully crossed and held together by a red coral pin" (pp. 24-25).

Mr. Shimerda is a kind man and a talented musician, but the harsh winter climate and the alienation from his friends and society take away all his instinct for life. Antonia tells Jim,

"My papa sad for the old country. He not look good. He never make music any more. At home he play violin all the time; for weddings and for dance. Here never. When I beg him for play, he shake his head no. Some days he take his violin out of his box and make with his fingers on the strings, like this, but never he make the music. He don't like this kawntree" (p. 89).

The Shimerdas were happy in Bohemia, but even more than Jim, they feel alienated in the wild prairie country. Mrs. Shimerda does not have the talent to establish order and comfort in their dwelling, and Mr.

Shimerda cannot adjust to life without it. Jim observes how contented the old man is when he visits their warm, comfortable home on Christmas day. "I suppose," he reflects, "in the crowded clutter of their cave, the old man had come to believe that peace and order had vanished from the earth" (p. 86). Before he leaves, Mr. Shimerda bows down devoutly before the Christmas tree which combines both Christian and Scandinavian myths, the tree itself representing not only the cross and, as Grandmother observes, the Tree of Knowledge, but also, according to Bernice Slote, the Ygdrasill, the ancient tree of Norse mythology.¹²

Just a few days after Mr. Shimerda's visit to the Burdens, the countryside is assaulted with the worst blizzard of the year. This harsh weather must have drained all the hope out of Mr. Shimerda, for on the following night, after meticulous preparations, he goes into the barn and shoots himself. As soon as the Burdens hear of the tragedy, they all go to help, leaving Jim alone in the house, where he imagines that he feels Mr. Shimerda's tired, unhappy spirit. Jim's understanding of Mr. Shimerda's spirit has an almost mystic quality about it, but closer examination of the novel reveals that even before the old man's death, they seemed to have a natural sympathy for each other. For example, when Mr. Shimerda left on Christmas evening, he had made the cross over Jim, and later Jim will assure Antonia that he will never forget her father. As Daiches has perceived, "Mr. Shimerda's mantle does not fall on Antonia, but rather on Jim, who responds to the suggestion of a rich European culture lying behind his melancholy."¹³

¹²Bernice Slote, ed., "The Kingdom of Art," in The Kingdom of Art by Willa Cather (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 36.

¹³Daiches, p. 48.

Jim is affected not only by Mr. Shimerda, representative of the old world, but also by Ántonia, the Shimerdas' young daughter who will be able to combine the best qualities of both worlds. When Jim first meets Ántonia, he is immediately drawn to her. They develop a close friendship, and they explore the countryside together throughout the brisk, carefree days of autumn. One afternoon they have an important symbolic adventure which corresponds to a major requirement of the Adamic myth. The adventure itself occurs in prairie dog town, which in its natural order reminds one of the original order in the Garden of Eden. Both children are innocent and ignorant, and both, as in the Eden myth, are confronted with danger and evil. Also, as in the Garden, it is the woman who precipitates the experience, because it is Ántonia who suggests stopping at the village, and it is she who warns Jim of the huge snake behind him. Using the spade they have borrowed from Russian Peter, he strikes at the reptile from fear and hate, and afterwards, Ántonia congratulates him by telling him, "You is just like big mans" (p. 46).

Cather makes the parallel of this episode with the Eden myth even clearer when she says that as Jim examines his prize, he begins "to feel proud of him, to have a kind of respect for his age and size. He seemed like the ancient, eldest Evil. Certainly, his kind have left horrible unconscious memories in all warm blooded life" (p. 47). Evil is thus introduced early in the novel, and this episode, which symbolically initiates the innocent children into the presence of evil, prepares the way for the evil that is found later in the book--for the savagery of the wolf episode, the greed and lechery of Wick Cutter, the duplicity of Larry Donovan, the hypocrisy of the town, and even the temporary resentment and unconcern of Jim. This episode also foreshadows the fact

that later in the book, both Jim and *Ántonia* will, in the Adamic sense, suffer a fall from innocence.

Throughout the book, Jim is "used constantly as a suggestive parallel to *Ántonia*"¹⁴ and vice versa. Moreover, as Cather compares and contrasts Jim and *Ántonia*, by implication she also compares and contrasts the cultures of America and Europe. Both children are basically innocent in the Adamic sense, but whereas Jim--the American--is a romantic, idealistic young boy, *Ántonia*--the European--is sensible, realistic, and energetic. The personalities of both children, Cather implies, have been largely formed from the kind of life they have lived; as *Ántonia* tells Jim, "If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us" (p. 140).

In addition, whereas Jim and the other native American citizens are cautious and conservative, Mr. Shimerda, *Ántonia*, and the other immigrant girls are impulsive and generous. When Jim first meets *Ántonia*, she tries to give him a ring, and Mr. Shimerda plans to give him his gun. "There never were such people as the Shimerdas for wanting to give away everything they had," (p. 42) Jim reflects. The Americans, on the other hand, are more careful and business like, and they are also more conscious of reputation, of what other people think. As a result, Jim reports, the immigrant girls worked out in order to improve their financial status, whereas the town girls always "kept up a front," no matter what their financial situation. The Black Hawk boys were attracted by the country girls, but "anxious mothers need have felt no alarm. They mistook the mettle of their sons. The respect for respectability

¹⁴Stegner, pp. 146-47.

was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth" (pp. 201-2). Ironically, Jim is not free from this fear of respectability himself, for although he dances with and kisses *Ántonia* and *Lena*, he never seriously entertains the prospect of marrying either.

Cather's comparison and contrast of Jim and *Ántonia* extend throughout the novel and enrich its major themes. As stated earlier, Jim is "lost" and basically unstable, and in his quest for identity and self-knowledge, he is pulled in opposite directions. On the one hand, he is drawn to the city, but on the other, he is pulled back to the country. One side of him yearns for the excitement and culture of the East, while the other side longs to return to the vital and essential life of the West. As in her earlier novels, Cather uses the images of the moon and sun to symbolize these two facets of life--the Dionysian and Apollonian, but from the very beginning the sun, representing Apollo and the West, predominates.

Ántonia has come from Europe--from the East--but from the first she becomes associated with the land and spirit of the West. The bright sun and clear sky are identified with her and become symbolic of the free and open spirit of the West and of the girl herself. Her eyes are "big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools of wood" (p. 23). One afternoon while Jim is giving Tony her reading lesson, "she shivered in her cotton dress and was comfortable only when we were in the full blaze of the sun" (p. 38). And again, when Jim takes *Ántonia* and *Yulka* for a sleighride one afternoon, "The sky was brilliantly blue, and the sunlight on the glittering white stretches of prairie almost blinding" (p. 62). As this sun imagery indicates, *Ántonia* becomes, in Hazard's words, a "true child of the soil,"¹⁵ representative of the vast

¹⁵Lucy Lockwood Hazard, "Willa Cather," in The Frontier in American Literature (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1941), p. 272.

Mid-western countryside. As such, she fits not only into Lewis' definition of the American innocent, but also into the general romantic tradition as discussed by Fairchild. As Fairchild defines it, she is a typical Wordsworthian heroine, a "child of nature . . . [who] grows up in some rustic or sylvan region more or less uncorrupted by civilization. From a spirit of goodness immanent in the scenery she draws beauty, innocence, an instinctive moral sense, and often an intuitive insight into the heart of things."¹⁶

As a result of *Ántonia's* spiritual affinity with the country, she seems out of place in town. Soon after the Burdens move to Black Hawk, they persuade their next door neighbors, the Harlings, to hire *Ántonia* to help them with their housework. Thus *Ántonia* moves to town, where she gains independence and good manners, but where she almost loses her happiness, her identity, and her reputation. She feels at home in Black Hawk only because of the Burdens and the Harlings; Mrs. Harling loves and protects her like her own children, and, significantly, the Harlings are also country people. Jim reports that they "had been farming people, like ourselves, and their place was like a little farm, with a big barn and a garden, and an orchard and grazing lots--even a windmill" (p. 147). However, after *Ántonia* begins seeing the other hired girls and going with them to the Saturday night dances, she becomes more and more rebellious and resentful of authority, so much so that she quits rather than give in to Mr. Harling's demand that she stay away from them.

After *Ántonia* leaves the Harlings and begins working for the moneylender Wick Cutter, she and Jim share another encounter with evil.

¹⁶Hoxie Neale Fairchild, The Romantic Quest (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1965), p. 158.

When the Cutters leave town for a few days, *Ántonia* is disturbed by Mr. Cutter's repeated admonition to watch the house closely. She shares her anxiety with the Burdens, and they decide that she will stay with them and Jim will sleep in her room at the Cutters' house until their return. One night while Jim is asleep there, Wick Cutter returns and, thinking *Ántonia* is in the bed, makes an attempted assault on him. Brought face to face with the old man's sinful lechery, the personification of the Evil that has been symbolized earlier in the snake, Jim is disillusioned and sickened with life. He recognizes the evil, but he is not adult enough to accept it. After he gets to his grandmother's, he "heard *Ántonia* sobbing outside . . . [the] door," he says, "but I asked grandmother to send her away. I felt that I never wanted to see her again. I hated her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness" (p. 250). Jim's innocence being threatened, he cannot retain his faith in that of *Ántonia*.

The Cutter episode shows Jim's innocence to be naive, petulant, and childish; *Ántonia*'s innocence, however, is simple, trusting, and childlike. When Lena visits Jim in Lincoln and reports on *Ántonia*'s romance with Larry Donovan, the foppish railroad conductor, she hints of *Ántonia*'s ingenuousness and credulity: "Tony talks about him like he was president of the railroad. Everybody laughs about it, because she was never a girl to be soft. She won't hear a word against him. She's so sort of innocent." This innocent, trusting attitude of Tony's leads directly to her seduction and fall in the Adamic tradition. As Lewis has noted, "The helplessness of mere innocence has been a primary theme of novelists in almost every decade."¹⁷

¹⁷Lewis, p. 9.

To this theme of innocence, Cather adds the theme of the corruption of the city. Living in town, *Ántonia* let herself and her values become disoriented. In the country she seemed to have an instinctive knowledge of what was morally right, but in town, she is fooled by sharp appearances. *Ántonia* herself seems to sense that she will be out of place in the city. When Larry writes her that they will get married and live in Denver, she seems troubled. "I'm a country girl," she says, "and I doubt if I'll be able to manage so well for him in a city" (p. 309). When he writes her to come to him, she goes, full of hope and dreams, but three months later, after being deceived by Larry, who has lost his job and left without marrying her, she returns home to the country, dejected, deserted, and pregnant.

As soon as she returns, *Ántonia* washes all her white underclothes, symbolically trying to wash away the corruption of the city. The Widow Steavens tells Jim that she "seemed to take pride in their whiteness--she said she'd been living in a brick block, where she didn't have proper conveniences to wash them" (p. 314). As indicated here, Cather seems to feel that cities are often wicked and immoral. As Curtis Dahl asserts, to Cather, "The cities and little towns have, like the people in them, become cheapened and meaningless; only by a return to the Saturnian simplicity of the rural past can man find peace. Like Virgil, Cather seems to hint a Golden Age that can be restored by a return to agricultural or pastoral life."¹⁸ *Ántonia* regains her strength and happiness only when she returns to the country. "I'd always be miserable in a city," she says. "I'd die of lonesomeness. I like to

¹⁸Curtis Dahl, "An American Georgic: Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*," Comparative Literature, 7 (1955), 47.

be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly. I want to live and die here" (p. 320).

Ántonia does remain on the soil, and there, after marrying Anton Cuzak, she raises a large and happy family. Moreover, as Randall points out, the "human fertility of the Cuzak homestead is matched by the fertility of the soil." The farm is fruitful and prosperous, and Ántonia has been able to create orchards and a grape arbor, based on the European beer gardens which her father and husband have loved. The rich grainfields and the civilized gardens surrounding the Cuzak house are, according to Randall, the realization of the American myth of the Garden of the World. He continues,

In the middle of this earthly paradise stands its Eve, the now victorious Ántonia. She has triumphed over adversity and over nature; she has wrestled with life and imposed an order on it, her order, just as she has imposed order on the wilderness of Nebraska by converting part of it into a fruitful farm with a garden at its center. In her double role as founder of a prosperous farm and progenitor of a thriving family she becomes the very symbol of fertility, and reminds us of Demeter or Ceres of old, the ancients' goddess of agriculture.¹⁹

Ántonia's role as a new Eve, first implied in the youthful encounter she and Jim have with the old snake, is further indicated by the apple orchards which surround the grape arbor, and her role as fertility goddess is clarified by the luxuriant vegetation surrounding her home and by the prominence of sun imagery in the garden. As Ántonia and Jim sit in the arbor, "The afternoon sun poured down . . . through the drying grape leaves. The orchard seemed full of sun, like a cup, and [they] could smell the ripe apples on the trees" (p. 341). The simultaneous occurrence of the symbols of the sun and grape arbour indicates the

¹⁹Randall, pp. 141-42.

equilibrium of Antonia's life, its balance between Apollonian and Dionysian forces. She has achieved a personal and a mythic synthesis between order and passion, and the fruitfulness of her marriage and her farm is the result. Moreover, her mythic stature as an earth goddess, whose dual nature encompasses both the brightness of Demeter and the darkness of Persephone, is further established when Cather characterizes her as "a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (p. 353).

Antonia has obviously found her place in this world, her identity as a person. She has become a representative of the rural West, of a West that is not limited to narrow Anglo attitudes, but which also embraces her own European heritage. This dual heritage has also been passed on to her children, Leo in particular having inherited both his grandfather's musical talent and his mother's independence. Jim, however, has not yet found his identity, which, tragically, he persists in seeking only in his own limited past.

In looking back to the past, Jim fulfills the romantic tendencies he has portrayed as a boy. According to Blanche Gelfant, even his adventure with the snake is a romance, only a "pseudo-initiation." She maintains that

The episode--typically ignored or misunderstood--combines elements of myth and dream. As a dragon-slaying, it conforms to the monomyth of initiation. It has a characteristic "call to adventure" (Antonia's impulsive suggestion); a magic weapon (Peter's spade); a descent into a land of unearthly creatures (prairie-dog-town); the perilous battle (killing the snake); the protective tutelary spirit (Antonia); and the passage through the rites to manhood ("You now a big mans"). As a test of courage, Jim's ordeal seems authentic. . . . But even Jim realizes that his initiation, like his romance later, is specious and his accolade unearned: "it was a mock adventure; the game . . . fixed . . . by chance, as . . . for many a dragon slayer."²⁰

²⁰Blanche H. Gelfant, "The Forgotten Reaping Hook: Sex in My Antonia," American Literature, 43 (1971), 69-70.

That this episode does not initiate Jim into a deeper awareness of life's realities is shown by the fact that in the weeks that follow, while Antonia and her family are struggling for survival in a cold, damp cave, with little or no food, Jim lazily spends his days in the comfort of a warm house, eating popcorn or taffy and listening to the hired hands sing ballads and tell stories.

Jim's mystical, romantic disposition allows him to understand and sympathize with Mr. Shimerda's weakness and unhappiness, and it helps him to take the measure of the narrow minded society of Black Hawk, but nevertheless, it keeps him insulated and protected from all the harsher realities of life. After he moves to Black Hawk, he alienates himself from the respected families of the town in order to remain loyal to the girls from the country, over whom, Frances Harling tells him, he puts "a kind of glamour." ("The trouble with you Jim," she says, "is that you're romantic" [p. 229].) However, although he remains close friends with all the hired girls and declares himself to be free from the small town prejudices of Black Hawk, he is unable to make a thorough commitment to any of the girls, although he is deeply drawn--in different ways--to both Antonia and Lena.

To Jim, and to Cather, Antonia represents the ordered, spiritual, Apollonian aspect of life, while Lena represents the disordered, passionate, Dionysian side of life, just as in previous novels Winifred and Alexandra have represented the spirit and Hilda and Marie the flesh. Moreover, like Alexander and Emil before him, Jim suffers an inner conflict between these two needs of his nature. As Geismar says, Jim "is captivated alike by the physical charms of Lena Lingard and the moral

stature of *Ántonia Shimerda*.²¹ One evening when he is taking *Ántonia* home, he gives her a passionate kiss, only to be rebuffed: "A moment later she drew her face away and whispered indignantly, 'Why, Jim! You know you ain't right to kiss me like that. I'll tell your grandmother on you!'" (p. 224). Jim protests that Lena allows him to kiss her this way, but nevertheless, he proclaims, "If she was proud of me, I was so proud of her that I carried my head high as I emerged from the dark cedars and shut the Cutters' gate softly behind me. Her warm, sweet face, her kind arms, and the true heart in her; she was, oh, she was still my *Ántonia*!" (p. 225).

The dreams Jim has are also reliable indices to his attitudes toward the two girls. He has an innocent dream about sliding down straw stacks with *Ántonia*, but he has an entirely different kind of dream about Lena:

One dream I dreamed a great many times, and it was always the same. I was in a harvest-field full of shocks, and I was lying against one of them. Lena Lingard came across the stubble barefoot, in a short skirt, with a curved reaping-hook in her hand, and she was flushed like the dawn, with a kind of luminous rosiness all about her. She sat down beside me, turned to me with a soft sigh, and said, "Now they are all gone, and I can kiss you as much as I like" (pp. 225-26).

This dream symbolizes Jim's suppressed sexual desires, wishes which, according to Freud, are censored by the conscious mind, but which reveal themselves subconsciously through dreams.²² This dream, however, has a peculiarly ambivalent quality, for erotic images are intermingled with

²¹Maxwell Geismar, "*Willa Cather: Lady in the Wilderness*," *The Last of the Provincials: The American Novel, 1915-1925* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1947), p. 165.

²²Benjamin B. Wolman, *The Unconscious Mind* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 14.

images of death and destruction, indicating, perhaps, that Jim's desire for sex is mixed with fear. Blanche Gelfant, who considers Jim a typical wasteland figure, has made this perceptive comment about the dream:

Lena advances against an ordinary but ominous landscape. Background and fore-figure first contrast and then coalesce in meaning. Lena's voluptuous aspects--her luminous glow of sexual arousal, her flesh bared by a short skirt, her soft sighs and kisses--are displayed against shocks and stubbles, a barren field when the reaping-hook has done its work. This landscape of harvest and desolation is not unfamiliar; nor is the apparitional woman who moves across it, sighing and making soft moan; nor the supine young man whom she kisses and transports. It is the archetypal landscape of ballad, myth, and drama, setting for la belle dame sans merci who enchants and satisfies, but then lulls and destroys.²³

The mythic implication here is one of harvest, fertility, and sexual sacrifice--the sacrifice of Jim's body which Lena will coyly demand and receive when they meet in Lincoln.

Jim spends the summer before he goes to the University studying and dreaming about Lena, but that fall, just as he had left the country for the town, he leaves behind the small town to go to Lincoln, moving one step closer to his eventual commitment to the Eastern cities. For a while he devotes himself completely to his studies, but this established routine is upset by a surprise visit from Lena Lingard, who is now a dressmaker in Lincoln. Lena's visit reawakens in him a subconscious desire, and he remembers his old dream. Her visit also makes him aware of the "relationship between girls like those and the poetry of Vergil. If there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry" (p. 270). Ironically, then, Jim comes to appreciate the country only after he moves away from it.

After Lena's first visit, Jim spends most of his time during the

²³Gelfant, p. 65.

next few months with her instead of with his studies. His romantic nature again surfaces in the plays they attend and in his attitudes toward them. They prefer romantic productions, like "Rip Van Winkle," "Shenandoah," "Robin Hood," and "Camille," and both over-react to them. Jim says that he liked "to watch a play with Lena; everything was wonderful to her, and everything was true. It was like going to revival meetings with someone who was always being converted. She handed her feelings over to the actors with a kind of fatalistic resignation" (p. 271). Moreover, not only Lena, but also Jim, cries at the sentimental "Camille."

Jim spends an enjoyable spring with Lena, but, even though he probably has an affair with her, he establishes no ties or obligations because when his teacher Gaston Cleric suggests that moving to an Eastern college would be advantageous to him, he acquiesces willingly. The affair with Lena may have been a physical initiation, but it fails as a psychological one.

Jim remains at Harvard for two years, where he hears about *Ántonia's* desertion and pregnancy. However, he feels ashamed of her and does not decide to go see her until after he sees a picture of her baby in the photographer's shop one summer. One afternoon he rides out to inquire about her from the Widow Steavens, who has rented the old Burden place near the Shimerdas. He spends the night with Mrs. Steavens, and the next afternoon he walks over to the Shimerdas. He and *Ántonia* talk about the past and the future as well as about the relative merits of the city and country. *Ántonia* declares that she would "always be miserable in the city," but when she asks Jim if he has "learned to like the big cities" (p. 320), his only answer is silence. Jim's quest for

identity has led him East, but it has not brought him happiness.

Wallace Stegner makes the following comment about this inner frustration:

As for Jim Burden, we understand at last that the name Willa Cather chose for him was not picked by accident. For Jim not only, as narrator, carries the "burden" or tone of the novel; he carries also the cultural burden that Willa Cather herself carried, the quintessentially American burden of remaking in the terms of a new place everything that makes life graceful and civilized. To become a European or an easterner is only to reverse and double the exile. The education that lured Jim Burden away from Nebraska had divided him against himself, as Willa Cather was divided.²⁴

Throughout the book, Jim vacillates between town and country, East and West. His conscious commitment is for the East, but his subconscious yearning is for the West.

Jim and *Ántonia's* relative commitments for the Eastern cities or the Western countryside are symbolized by the moon and the sun:

As we walked homeward across the fields, the sun dropped and lay like a great golden globe in the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose in the east, as big as a cart-wheel, pale silver and streaked with rose colour, thin as a bubble or a ghost-moon. For five, perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world (pp. 321-22).

The sun--the "great golden globe," symbol of Apollonian order and creativity--represents the power, courage, and magnanimity of *Ántonia* and the West in general, whereas the moon--"thin as a bubble or ghost-moon," symbol of Dionysian disorder and destruction--represents the weakness, aimlessness, and confusion of Jim's unfulfilled life in the East.

Cather's final judgment of these two lives occurs in the final book of the novel, "Cuzak's boys," which describes Jim's next visit to *Ántonia*--twenty years later. In the intervening years, Jim has regressed even more into himself and his past. He lives in a world of illusion

²⁴Stegner, p. 152.

rather than reality, admitting himself that "in the course of twenty crowded years one parts with many illusions. I did not wish to lose the early ones. Some memories are better than realities" (p. 328).

However, if Jim has still not found himself, there is no doubt about *Ántonia*. Jim reports that as he "confronted her, the changes grew less apparent to me, her identity stronger. She was there, in the full vigour of her personality, battered but not diminished, looking at me, speaking to me in the husky, breathy voice I remembered so well" (pp. 331-32). She feels perfectly at home in the fertile fields and among her many children, both of which extend and strengthen her identity. Her life has been fruitful and creative, whereas that of Jim, who has no children, has been barren, sterile.

Being unhappy in his present life, tied to a meaningless job which adds to his confusion by buffetting him back and forth from the East to the West, married to a vapid wife who is characterized in the introduction as "handsome, energetic, executive, but . . . unimpressible and temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm," Jim romantically seeks escape in his childhood and his past. As Robert Scholes phrases it,

So it is that *Ántonia*, who is always conscious of the [far] past, is nevertheless free of it, and capable of concern for the future. . . . Whereas Jim, who has no such connection with the past, who came to Nebraska without a family and rode on a wagon into a new life which he felt was beyond even the attention of God, is still bound by the recent past, by what has happened to him in his own youth, and he lives in both the present and future only vicariously through the plans and lives of others.²⁵

Jim sees his childhood in that of *Ántonia*'s boys, and pathetically, he

²⁵Robert E. Scholes, "Hope and Memory in *My Ántonia*," *Shenandoah*, 14 (1962), 27-28.

tries to recapture it by "playing with them" in the years to come.

As Jim waits for the train to take him back to his vacuous life in the East, he walks over the old road that had first brought him to Nebraska and feels "the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is" (pp. 371-72). On a cosmic scale, this statement refers to the eternal cycle of life as found in the novel, but on a personal level, it tells us that Jim's life lived outside the country, the West, has been meaningless for him. He believes that he and Ántonia possess "together the precious, the incommunicable past" (p. 372), but the past exists only in his own mind. Jim's growth was retarded when he moved away from the country, and therefore, while he is physically a man, he is emotionally a child. His whole life has been a search for self-knowledge, for an identity which he has lost in the city. His tragedy is that he remains the Adamic innocent to the last.

In addition to Jim's mythic quest for his identity, My Ántonia also encompasses the American westering myth of the development of a rural nation. Moreover, Cather gives this beloved Mid-west universal stature by comparing it to the Israelites' settlement of the Promised Land of Canaan, to Odysseus' recovery of his homeland of Ithaca, and to Aeneas' founding of the Italian nation.

The parallel between the lives of Jim and Ántonia and those of the wandering Israelites has been recognized by Edward and Lillian Bloom. They state that "The pervasive religious temper of the land manifest throughout the frontier novels grows out of Miss Cather's deliberate attempt to parallel the pioneers' mission with the introspective search of the Old Testament. . . . Like the ancient wandering

tribes of Israel, Willa Cather's pioneers have gone forth into the wilderness, searching for an ideal and a sanctuary from a troubled existence."²⁶ The fact that the pioneer generations associated the barren western plains with the Biblical wilderness is also pointed out by Henry Nash Smith, who repeated the belief that the "vast treeless plains were a sterile waste like the sandy deserts of Africa."²⁷

Indeed, when Jim Burden arrived in Nebraska, he felt the emptiness and loneliness which one associates with a barren desert or wilderness: "There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made" (p. 7). Cather's association of this harsh plains country with the wilderness of the Israelites is made even clearer by the religious atmosphere at Jim's grandparents' home; each night Grandfather reads from the Bible, and it seems significant that he usually chooses chapters from the Old Testament.

In addition, Cather makes several allusions to the story of Moses and to the great Exodus of God's people. She describes the vast grasslands surrounding the Burdens' home in terms of the Red Sea of Egypt. Jim remembers, "As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole

²⁶Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 29.

²⁷Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), p. 202.

country seemed, somehow, to be running" (p. 15). Having come from the East--whether Europe, or the coastal cities, or Southern states like Virginia--Cather's pioneers have left the bondage of established traditions and are now free to make their own lives, just as the Israelites had escaped bondage in Egypt to establish their own country. Establishing this new life, however, is no easier for the Nebraska pioneers than it was for the Israelites. They both have to struggle not only with the forces of nature, but also with the forces of evil within the hearts of their own people. Whereas the Israelites worshipped the golden calf, people like Krajiek and Wick Cutter worship the symbolical idol of money. Evil in My Ántonia, as in the Bible, is most obviously symbolized by the snake. Grandmother warns Jim never to go to the garden--the traditional site of conflict between innocence and evil--without taking her rattlesnake cane, a stout hickory cane which reminds one of Aaron's rod which was itself turned into a snake for the glorification of God.

For these early pioneers, the Nebraska plains were both a Wilderness and a Promised Land. In the first months and years, life was very hard. Settlers lived in sod caves and battled the elements for survival. The land was covered with tough red grass and was hard to cultivate, and the cold winters were long and hard. Some people, like old Mr. Shimerda, were defeated by the harshness of the land and never saw it fulfill its implicit potential, but for others, for strong and generous spirits like Ántonia, the land held a promise of richness and success. This sacred promise is implied in the following allusion to Moses' first encounter with God:

All those fall afternoons were the same, but I never got used to them. As far as we [Jim and Ántonia] could see, the

miles of copper-red grass were drenched in sunlight that was stronger and fiercer than at any other time of the day. The blond cornfields were red gold, the haystacks turned rosy and threw long shadows. The whole prairie was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed. That hour always had the exultation of victory, of triumphant ending. . . . It was a sudden transfiguration, a lifting-up of day (p. 40).

When Moses beheld the burning bush, God promised that his people would someday live in a land of milk and honey, and someday, Cather implies here, this vast prairie wasteland will also fulfill its promise as a fertile farmland, a modern-day Canaan.

The idea of the vast plains country as a Promised Land is not limited to Cather, however, but is an established myth in our country's history. Smith comments on this mythic belief in the Mid-west as a Promised Land and on the establishment of the related myth of the area as the "Garden of the World":

With each surge of westward movement a new community came into being. These communities devoted themselves not to searching onward but to cultivating the earth. They plowed the virgin land and put in crops, and the great Interior Valley was transformed into a garden: for the imagination, the Garden of the World. The image of this vast and constantly growing agricultural society in the interior of the continent became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth century American society. . . .²⁸

In My Ántonia, Cather perpetuates this myth so prevalent in her childhood, for after the first hard winter, Jim records that

July came on with that breathless, brilliant heat which makes the plains of Kansas and Nebraska the best corn country in the world. It seemed as if we could hear the corn growing in the night. . . . The cornfields were far apart in those times, with miles of wild grazing land between. It took a clear, meditative eye like my grandfather's to foresee that they would enlarge and multiply until they would be, not the Shimerda's cornfields, or Mr. Bushy's, but the world's cornfields; that their yield would be one of the great economic facts, like the wheat

²⁸Smith, pp. 138-39.

crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war (p. 137).

Cather loves the prairie farmland itself, but as she points out in both O Pioneers! and My Ántonia, she also respects it for the important place it holds in relation to the nation and the world. Randall explains the almost religious devotion that Cather and others have felt toward this land by saying that "The settlement of America was considered to be part of a divine plan. When the great basin of the Mississippi Valley was completely populated, it was to become not only an earthly paradise for the inhabitants, who would thus live in a latter-day Garden of Eden, but also the whole earth's granary; by means of its immense fertility it would feed the people of Europe and Asia as well."²⁹

In the novel, Cather uses three major images to symbolize the spirit of this great American westering myth. The first symbol that she introduces is that of the sunflower, about which Jim repeats the following legend:

Sometimes I followed the sunflower-bordered roads. Fuch told me that the sunflowers were introduced into that country by the Mormons; that at the time of the persecution, when they left Missouri and struck out into the wilderness to find a place where they could worship God in their own way, the members of the first exploring party, crossing the plains to Utah, scattered sunflower seed as they went. The next summer, when the long trains of wagons came through with all the women and children, they had the sunflower trail to follow. I believe that botanists do not confirm Fuch's story, but insist that the sunflower was native to those plains. Nevertheless, that legend has stuck in my mind, and sunflower-bordered roads always seem to me the roads to freedom (pp. 28-29).

The sunflower itself is, of course, a symbolic extension of the sun, which, we have already seen, represents Apollonian order and creativity and is therefore associated with the country and with the western

²⁹Randall, p. 139.

Promised Land.

The second major symbol in the Mid-western movement is that of the plough, which has been given mythic status by Henry Nash Smith, who declares that "The master symbol of the garden embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth, all centering about the heroic figure of the idealized frontier farmer armed with that supreme agrarian weapon, the sacred plough."³⁰ Indeed, it is the vision that Jim and the hired girls have of a plough in the sun which forms the symbolic climax of the novel. As they are relaxing after a picnic, Jim relates that

Presently we saw a curious thing: There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disk rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share--black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun (p. 245).

In this climactic scene, the sun represents the eternal power of nature, of the land and the elements, whereas the plough represents the heroic effort and courage of, not only the western farmer, but of all farmers and all men in all times when pitted against the unpredictable forces of nature and climate. Like the plough, which achieves a transitory prominence in the sun, man too can achieve temporary triumphs in his struggle with the land and with life, but in the eternal cycle of time, this achievement is at best a transient one, for, even while the young people whisper about their vision, the sun sinks, and the "forgotten

³⁰Smith, p. 138.

plough," symbolic of all human endeavor, "had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie" (p. 245).

The final symbol in the novel associated with the American westering myth is that of *Ántonia* herself. Cather's reverential treatment of her throughout the book gives her symbolic status, and her struggle and achievement finally comes to be representative of that of all American pioneers. Comparing *Ántonia* to Cather's earlier heroines, James Woodress says that she "is the mother of races. She is the most heroic figure of them all, both the Madonna of the Wheat Fields and the embodiment of the American westering myth."³¹

In *My Ántonia*, the myths continue to enrich each other in an ever-widening ripple. The westering myth extends the myth of Jim's quest for personal identity, and its meaning is in turn expanded by Cather's use of the Christian myth of the quest of the Promised Land as well as the classic myths of man's perennial search for a home. The novel recalls the long journeys of both Aeneas and Odysseus, although the parallel with the *Aeneid* is more clearly indicated. Jim mentions several times that he is studying Vergil, a poet whom he obviously associates with the country and with the basic and elemental aspects of life. And one night, while studying in his room, he recalls Cleric's quoting Dante who had declared, "'I was famous on earth with the name which endures longest and honours most. The seeds of my ardour were the sparks from that divine flame whereby more than a thousand have kindled; I speak of the 'Aeneid,' mother to me and nurse to me in poetry'" (p. 261-62).

From these very obvious allusions, it seems valid to believe that Cather was thinking of Vergil as she wrote the novel, and indeed,

³¹Woodress, pp. 79-80.

the myth of the Aeneid--the story of Aeneas' search not only for a physical home, but also for knowledge of his own identity as willed him by the gods--parallels Jim's quest in the novel. Furthermore, as L. V. Jacks has perceived, there is also a parallel between the wandering Trojans and the immigrant pioneers:

Reading Miss Cather's novel evokes the same sense of suffering as does the Aeneid, of people hard driven by fate, pushed upon an inhospitable shore and forced to live like burrowing animals while they labor to build stable homes. Although the farm girls' lot seems to improve with the passage of time, when one realizes how little they received, how long they suffered, how fleeting were their moments of pleasure, he is moved to reflect with Vergil on the brutality of fate.³²

In addition to the obvious parallel of the difficult settlement of a new country, there is one other scene in the novel which closely recalls the great Roman epic. Near the end of the book, Jim and Antonia, accompanied by her children, make a visit to the new fruit cave, a descent which reminds one of a visit to the underworld. Like Aeneas, who found his past there in the ghosts of Dido and his father, Jim recaptures for a brief time his past childhood with Antonia through the memories they share and through the young lives of her children. They talk about the effect that Antonia's father and his European culture has had on both of them, but the scene emphasizes that the important thing is not the darkness of the past, but the brightness of the future; Antonia's children "all came running up the steps together, big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight" (pp. 338-39). In spite of what he believes, Jim cannot retain

³²L. V. Jacks, "The Classics and Willa Cather," Prairie Schooner, 35 (1961), 293.

the past except in images and memories. Moreover, his life is a failure because he only looks backward, whereas *Ántonia*, Apollonian symbol of life and, like Aeneas, creator of a race, looks forward to the future of her family, her land, and her country.

In addition to these allusions to the Aeneid, there is also a significant parallel between some of the characters in the novel and those in the *Odyssey*. Lena, for example, has the Dionysian qualities of the enchantress Circe, whereas *Ántonia* is reminiscent of the faithful, Apollonian Penelope. As Terence Martin says, "If she [Lena] does not literally turn her admirers into swine, she cannot prevent their appetites from giving them at times hardly less graceful postures."³³ Like Circe, Lena is able to make men forget their responsibilities. When she was just a young girl, Jim hears the story about how "Chris Lingard's oldest girl had put Ole Benson out of his head." He "used to get discouraged in the field, tie up his team, and wander off to wherever Lena Lingard was herding. There he would sit down on the draw-side and help her watch her cattle" (p. 167). This situation went on until Crazy Mary, Ole's wife, threatened to kill Lena with her corn knife.

After Lena moved to town, she quickly captured the hearts and eyes of the young men of Black Hawk. These boys would marry town girls, but "sometimes a young fellow would look up from his ledger or out through the grating of his father's bank, and let his eyes follow Lena Lingard, as she passed the window with her slow, undulating walk. . . ." (p. 201). Sylvester Lovett, the banker's son, was particularly fascinated with her, even driving out to the farm to visit her. The

³³Terence Martin, "The Drama of Memory in My Ántonia," PMLA, 84 (1969), 309.

Circean magic at work, he "dallied about Lena until he began to make mistakes in his work; had to stay at the bank until after dark to make his books balance. He was daft about her, and everyone knew it" (p. 204).

But like her prototype, although Lena is able to make men lose their minds over her, she does not lose her head over them. Declaring her intention of never marrying, she moves to Lincoln to open a dress shop, where she captivates not only her landlord and an old Polish violin teacher, but also Jim Burden himself. Jim attends plays with her, takes her and her dog walking, and visits her apartment. He himself admits, "All this time, of course, I was drifting. Lena had broken up my serious mood. I wasn't interested in my classes" (p. 288). He too has been enchanted by her physical charms, so much so that he forgets everything else, even *Ántonia*, and only by leaving Lena can he concentrate on anything else.

Just as Odysseus forgot Penelope while he was in Circe's arms, so too does Jim desert *Ántonia*, and at a time when, under the evil influence of Larry Donovan, she most needs him. However, although he never commits himself to her enough to marry her, he does eventually return to *Ántonia* after twenty years of wandering, just as Odysseus returns to Penelope. Also like Penelope, *Ántonia* does not at first recognize Jim, but when she does, she welcomes him graciously into her home. She is an excellent hostess, homemaker, and wife, just as the mythic Penelope was, and even more, she is a modern representative of an ancient Earth Mother: "She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. . . .

She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (p. 353).

The myths of man's search for his identity and a people's search for a home are basic to the novel, but there is one other myth inherent in My Ántonia which leads to even more universal implications. This myth, which also forms a basis for both theme and structure in the novel, is that of the eternal cycle of the seasons and, symbolically, of life and time itself. In a very perceptive article, James Miller has recognized in the novel three levels of time: "The sense of cyclic fate," he says, "finds expression first in an obsessive engagement with the colorful, somber and varied seasons of the year, next in an unfolding realization of the immutable and successive phases of human life, and finally, in an engrossing but bewildering encounter with the hierarchic stages of civilization, from the primitive culture to the sophisticated."³⁴ The first book of the novel, entitled "The Shimerdas," captures in capsule form the seasonal structure of the entire novel. Jim and the Shimerdas arrive in Nebraska in the late autumn, and he and Ántonia share a few golden sunlit days before the harsh advent of winter. They ride over the prairie grassland, visit Russian Peter and Pavel, and explore the natural wonders of prairie dog town. Late one autumn afternoon, however, while reading out on the prairie, they discover the ominous fact that all "the little buzzing things that lived in the grass were all dead--all but one" (p. 39). The weakness of this little insect--christened Old Hata--in the face of winter foreshadows that of Mr. Shimerda.

In the cycle of the seasons, winter is the most depressing time because, being the literal death of the year, it is also symbolic of

³⁴James E. Miller, Jr., "My Ántonia: A Frontier Drama of Time," American Quarterly, 10 (1958), 478.

death in nature and mankind. The tragic story that the Russians tell Jim and the Shimerdas one night when, significantly, the weather has just become colder, indicates the cruelty of the winter cold as well as the selfishness of mankind. In the old country, during the dead of winter, Pavel and Peter had been asked to be groomsmen for a friend of theirs who was getting married in a neighboring village. On the way back, however, their sledges were beset with wolves, and Pavel, in order to save himself, forced the bride and groom out of the sledge and left them to the hungry wolves. The wolves here may symbolize intense sexual desire, because according to ancient Slavic legend, a person could be magically transformed into a wolf, "this happening most frequently to bride and bridegroom as they go to church to be married;"³⁵ however, quite obviously, they also symbolize the cruelty and death of winter.

It seems no accident that the next chapter after this story introduces the arrival of winter: "The first snowfall came early in December," Jim reports to us. The winter is only a temporary setback for the Burdens, but for the Shimerdas it is a major disaster, so much so that on the night after the big blizzard of the year begins, Mr. Shimerda goes out into the barn and shoots himself, fulfilling the symbolic implication of the season as the harbinger of death. As Randall explains,

According to the old vegetation myth winter is the death of the year, because all crops have died down in the fall, and are not to be reborn until spring. The meaning of the myth is that death is not final; one year's crop dies, but next year's crop takes its place; in human terms, the individual dies but the community lives on. This is just what happens in My Ántonia; the chapter following the one

³⁵John Arnott MacCulloch and Jan Machal, Celtic-Slavic, vol. III of The Mythology of All Races, ed. by Louis Herbert Gray (rpt. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 229.

describing the burial of Mr. Shimerda and dealing with the further fortunes of his family begins with a description of the coming spring.³⁶

Mr. Shimerda, representative of the old European civilization, can't survive in this hard new country, but his daughter *Ántonia* bounces back in the spring with renewed energy and optimism, and by helping Ambrosch to till the soil that spring, she assures them of a bountiful harvest in the late summer. Just as the seed must symbolically die and be buried in the ground before it is reborn and grows to maturity, so must one generation give way to another.

The section on "The Hired Girls" spans two full years, so the actual cycle of the seasons is not as prominent, although the same attitudes are expressed toward each of the seasons as in the earlier book. By now, however, Jim has experienced the reality of death, so he is able to proclaim, "The pale, cold light of the winter sunset did not beautify-- it was like the light of truth itself" (p. 178). The season of fulfillment is still the summer, but whereas the fulfillment in "The Shimerdas" is that of harvesting the land, in this section it is Jim's intellectual and emotional fulfillment, the awareness he gains from the plough image of man's relationship to time.

The next two sections, "Lena Lingard" and "The Pioneer Woman's Story" cover the time of *Ántonia*'s conception and the delivery of her illegitimate child. Significantly, the child is conceived in the spring, the time of the planting of the fields, but it is born in winter, *Ántonia* being symbolically associated with the death of the year before she experiences a rebirth through the birth of her child. If one recalls the ancient fertility rite in which a woman was expected to have a child

³⁶Randall, p. 127.

before she married in order to prove that she was not barren, then the episode of the illegitimate child also attains mythic status as well as foreshadowing *Ántonia's* later fruitfulness. In terms of the vegetation myth, then, the mature *Ántonia*, who is seen standing in her orchard surrounded by her large family and the lush vegetation of her farm, is the fertility goddess of the American West, the prototype of Demeter and Persephone, who must descend into the darkness of death before she can bring life to the world.

The seasonal cycle of the book, therefore, symbolizes the cycle of Jim and *Ántonia's* lives as well as the national and cultural evolution of the prairie land. From a barren plain, the Nebraska grassland turns into a luxuriant and productive farmland; the Wilderness becomes the Promised Land. Moreover, as Miller points out, Jim's progression in the book is toward another kind of "promised land", from the country to the small town, from there to the larger cultural center of Lincoln, and finally to the great cultural centers of the East.³⁷ Ironically, however, the novel shows this progression to have been, in many ways, a regression, for as Jim gets further away from the country, he gets further from himself and his identity and from the lasting values of life and love, birth and death. He cannot resolve his conflict between town and country, East and West, the flesh and the spirit, the Dionysian and Apollonian aspects of life; and he now lives a barren, empty life. Only when he returns to the country does he again see meaning to life, although by this time, it is too late for him to change his own life style. The seasonal cycle of the novel illustrates an essential paradox of

³⁷Miller, pp. 481-83.

existence: life is both transient and eternal; individuals die, but the race lives on.

CHAPTER VI

THE FAILURE OF THE AMERICAN

WESTERING MYTH

IN ONE OF OURS

The novels which Cather wrote before the 1920's--with the possible exception of Alexander's Bridge--all reveal a basically positive attitude toward life, each of them recounting the growth of either an individual or a country. However, to many people, and especially to Cather, the world seemed to change, to become disoriented during or immediately after World War I. This was the era of Hemingway's "lost generation," the age of Eliot's "wasteland," the period of Lewis's bourgeois anti-heroes, and the time during which Willa Cather declared that "The world broke in two. . . ." ¹ The 1920's saw many old values give way to new ones, and many writers indignantly voiced their protest:

They saw, angrily, a machine-made materialism sheltering behind and perverting the Protestant-Christian code, turning it into a religion of success; and they satirized the victims of low objectives, and a generation which seemed to be losing the spiritual force and the virility of its ancestors. Both men and women, when the end of the war released energy for literature, were prepared to capture the imagination of a public much more ready to become self-conscious than in the confident years before the war. It was a classic moment, the end and summation of an era, a moment also when criticism and creation were equal in power. It was a brief pause to define and distill American

¹Willa Cather, Not Under Forty (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), p. v.

values before new and sharper changes in our mores and our philosophy began.²

This difficult era of changing ideas and changing values was the atmosphere in which One of Ours (1922) was written.

Having observed not only the physical destruction, but also the intellectual, emotional, and moral devastation of World War I, Cather could not continue to write in the vein of My Ántonia and O Pioneers!, but One of Ours, which is a fictional chronicle of the life and death of one of her cousins who was killed in the war, suffers both from the foreignness of her material and from its closeness to her in time. She can describe and sympathize with Claude Wheeler's search for lasting values in a mechanistic, conformist society, but her attitudes toward war are conventional and romantic. She recognizes the sterility of Claude's home town, but, paradoxically, in spite of her detailed accounts of the carnage and destruction of battle, she does not see the futility of war. Whereas her previous novels have created a modern American myth about the agricultural West, One of Ours rejects that myth and recoils from the West, seeking meaning in the older cultures of the East, and of Europe in particular.

In O Pioneers! and My Ántonia, Cather has personified, romanticized, and mythicized the land and the people of the Great American West, reflecting in these novels not only her own reverence for this region, but also that of many of her fellow Americans. Henry Nash Smith comments as follows on the development and decline of this Western myth:

²Henry Seidel Canby, "Fiction Sums Up a Century," in Literary History of the United States, 3rd ed., rev., ed. by Robert E. Spiller and others (London: The MacMillan Company, Collier-Macmillan Limited, 1963), p. 1208.

From the time of Franklin down to the end of the frontier period almost a century and a half later, the West had been a constant reminder of the importance of agriculture in American society. It had nourished an agrarian philosophy and an agrarian myth that purported to set forth the character and destinies of the nation. The philosophy and the myth affirmed an admirable set of values, but they ceased very early to be useful in interpreting American society as a whole because they offered no intellectual apparatus for taking account of the industrial revolution. A system which revolved about a half-mystical conception of nature and held up as an ideal a rudimentary type of agriculture was powerless to confront issues arising from the advance of technology. Agrarian theory encouraged men to ignore the industrial revolution altogether, or [as Cather does] to regard it as an unfortunate and anomalous violation of the natural order of things.³

As One of Ours illustrates, neither Cather nor her hero Claude Wheeler can adjust to the new technology or to the changes it initiates in man and society.

Of the three Wheeler boys, Claude is the only one who has any ideals or visions beyond the ordinary routine of day to day living. In Bayliss and Ralph respectively, Cather illustrates the triumph of money and machinery as the new values of society. As Brown asserts, Bayliss's only "interests were to make money, having made it to save it, and to make life disagreeable for anyone who had other interests. He suspected all forms of pleasure that did not relate to money-getting and was prone to suspect all other forms of activity."⁴ Cather describes him as "thin and dyspeptic, and a virulent Prohibitionist" who "would have liked to regulate everybody's diet by his own feeble constitution."⁵ He reproaches his mother for drinking coffee, which he dismisses as a stimulant,

³Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), p. 303.

⁴E. K. Brown, Willa Cather (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 218.

⁵Willa Cather, One of Ours, vol. 5 of The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather, lib. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1937), p. 11. Future references to this source will be paginated within the text.

and is himself perfectly satisfied with Enid Royce's vegetarian dinners. He is anti-everything--anti-saloon, anti-meat, anti-war. Being suspicious and afraid of anything new or different, he cannot understand Claude's desire to go to college, and he criticizes the State University because of their successful football team, football being a pastime which he thinks frivolous and conducive to sin.

Bayliss is proud and acquisitive. He would wrangle with a customer over a single penny, but he will spend a small fortune to try to build his prestige in town, as when he buys the beautiful old Trevor place. He has no respect at all for the past or for tradition; of the lovely old Trevor mansion, he says, "Of course, if I decide to live there, I'll pull down that old trap and put up something modern" (p. 129). Bayliss puts efficiency before beauty, and his values will always be utilitarian rather than humanitarian. A petty and despicable character, Bayliss is nevertheless a potential danger to the world. As Claude perceives toward the end of the novel, "No battlefield or shattered country he had seen was as ugly as this world would be if men like his brother Bayliss controlled it altogether" (p. 469).

Ralph, Claude's younger brother, represents modern society's idolotry of the machine:

He was the chief mechanic of the Wheeler farm, and when the farm implements and the automobiles did not give him enough to do, he went to town and bought machines for the house. As soon as Mahailey got used to a washing-machine or a churn, Ralph, to keep up with the bristling march of invention, brought home a still newer one. The mechanical dishwasher she had never been able to use, and patent flat-irons and oil stoves drove her wild (p. 24).

He buys a separator because "Nobody ever thinks of skimming milk nowadays. Every up-to-date farmer uses a separator" (p. 23). However, to the great chagrin of Mrs. Wheeler and Mahailey, it takes longer to wash

and fit together the machine than it had to skim the milk the old-fashioned way. Moreover, Ralph's passion for machinery is a wasteful one. When Claude goes into the cellar,

Mysterious objects stood about him in the grey twilight; electric batteries, old bicycles and typewriters, a machine for making cement fence-posts, a vulcanizer, a stereoptican with a broken lens. The mechanical toys Ralph could not operate successfully, as well as those he had got tired of, were stored away here. . . . Nearly every time Claude went into the cellar, he made a desperate resolve to clear the place out some day, reflecting bitterly that the money this wreckage cost would have put a boy through college decently (pp. 25-26).

Thus Ralph, too, puts practical--or, in many cases, impractical--values above human values. Both Ralph and Bayliss are products of the new conformist, "mechanically determined society which has greater regard for the robot-like offerings of the age than for positive creative accomplishment. The nearly deified machine has been given a central position to be [only] passively questioned and vainly opposed by Claude Wheeler."⁶

For the characters of One of Ours, therefore, the old westering myth is dead; the Promised Land has been turned into a mechanistic, materialistic wasteland. Claude observes that,

The farmer raised and took to market things with an intrinsic value; wheat and corn as good as could be grown anywhere in the world, hogs and cattle that were the best of their kind. In return he got manufactured articles of poor quality; showy furniture that went to pieces, carpets and draperies that faded, clothes that made a handsome man look like a clown. Most of his money was paid out for machinery--and that, too, went to pieces. A steam thresher didn't last long; a horse outlived three automobiles (p. 117).

The old pioneering spirit which had made life meaningful for Claude's forefathers has been replaced by ease, security, and complacency.

⁶Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), pp. 75-76.

Claude's family and neighbors are satisfied with their dull life, but to him it is stifling: "To be assured, at his age, of three meals a day and plenty of sleep, was like being assured of a decent burial. Safety, security; if you followed that reasoning out, then the unborn, those who would never be born, were the safest of all; nothing could happen to them" (p. 119).

Dissatisfied with his life on the farm, Claude seeks fulfillment through the world of ideas, but even here he is frustrated. His parents send him to college in Lincoln, but to a narrow-minded denominational college rather than the more advanced State University. Bayliss thinks any sort of education unnecessary, his father believes the smaller college is cheaper, and his mother is convinced that the State University is evil. According to Mrs. Wheeler's "conception of education, one should learn, not think; and above all, one must not enquire. The history of the human race, as it lay behind one, was already explained; and so was its destiny, which lay before. The mind should remain obediently within the theological concept of history" (p. 31).

Claude therefore returns to Temple College in the fall, but he does take one course from State, a course in European history, a "subject which seemed to him vital, which had to do with events and ideas instead of lexicons and grammars" (p. 44). Also, he meets some very interesting people, the Erlich family. He soon learns that the Erlichs, unlike his own family, enjoy living and conversing with each other, without being under the conviction that fun is evil. He also finds questioned the American characteristic of stating one's opinion emphatically and definitely without support. The German Erlichs air their opinions freely, but they demand reasons and explanations for any assertion.

Claude's education is also enriched at the Erlichs' home because Mrs. Erlich introduces him to good manners, good books, and good music.

Returning home for the summer, however, Claude discovers that all his future plans for an education are useless, for Mr. Wheeler has bought some more ranch land and plans for Claude to remain on the old farm and supervise the work there. All his plans and desires having been destroyed, Claude throws himself into his work with a fervour that is almost sexual, giving his life and energy to the land itself: "The new field he ploughed and drilled himself. He put a great deal of young energy into it, and buried a great deal of discontent in its dark furrows. Day after day he flung himself upon the land and planted it with what was fermenting in him, glad to be so tired at night that he could not think" (p. 91). Claude gives of himself to the land, but he does so reluctantly, and, unlike Alexandra, he gets no return from it, either spiritual or physical. As Ernest tells him, he must look outside himself for something to "warm" him up" (p. 63).

The fact that the name Claude means "crippled" or "lame" emphasizes this incompleteness. He is psychologically, emotionally, and physically crippled by his environment. Ernest reflects that Claude is "big and strong, and he's got an education and all that fine land, but he don't seem to fit in right" (p. 158). And after Enid decides to go to China, Claude himself thinks that "His life was choking him, and he hadn't the courage to break with it. Let her go! Let her go when she would! . . . What a hideous world to be born into! Or was it hideous only for him? Everything he touched went wrong under his hand--always had" (p. 248).

Claude's symbolic lameness as well as the over-powering sense of

fate in the novel recall the Greek myth of Oedipus, as does the specific allusion to the Hippolytus myth (p. 67), which also concerns a mother-son love. The name Oedipus, like that of Claude, indicates lameness, the parallel becoming even clearer later in the novel when Claude's foot is injured in battle and becomes so swollen that he cannot wear a shoe, just as Oedipus' feet were swollen after he had been hung by them from a tree. Moreover, just as the mythic Oedipus was rejected by his parents, so does Claude feel out of place with his family. And Claude also seems to have a mild Oedipus complex; he feels hostility toward his father and a more than normal attachment to his mother. Claude resents his father when he makes him drive the mules to town to see the circus instead of taking the car, and as a child, he had displayed an even greater hostility to his father after one of his cruel practical jokes. After Mrs. Wheeler had complained to her husband that she could not reach the cherries to gather them, he cut down the cherry tree and then told his unsuspecting wife to go pick them. Claude remembers that "The beautiful, round-topped cherry tree, full of green leaves and red fruit-- his father had sawed it through! It lay on the ground beside its bleeding stump. With one scream Claude became a little demon. He threw away his tin pail, jumped about howling and kicking the loose earth with his copper-toed shoes until his mother was much more concerned for him than for the tree" (p. 34). When his mother protests that his father has the right to do what he wants with the tree, Claude screams, "'Tain't so! He's a damn fool, damn fool!' . . . still hopping and kicking, almost choking with rage and hate" (p. 34).

The resentment Claude feels for his father, however, is more than balanced by the extreme love he feels for his mother. When he comes home from college, he "ran halfway up to meet her, putting his arm about her

with the almost painful tenderness he always felt, but seldom was at liberty to show" (p. 56). And in an even more obvious allusion to the Oedipal myth, Mrs. Wheeler tells him that keeping house "just for him," while Mr. Wheeler and Ralph are gone to the ranch, is "almost like being a bride" (p. 92). In addition to his real mother, Claude also develops a special feeling for Mrs. Erlich, who is also old enough to be his mother. Claude takes a very special interest in her, coming to dinner as her guest, and even sending her roses. Mrs. Erlich's cousin senses the implicit nature of their relationship because she tells Mrs. Erlich, "if you were but a few years younger, it might not yet be too late. . . . Such things have happened, and will happen again" (p. 72).

Claude's quick temper, troublesome pride, and strong body also form parallels to the Oedipus figure. (Oedipus, it will be remembered, displayed all these characteristics when, unknown to him, he met his father in the road and, since neither one of them would give way, killed him and three of his attendants.) In addition to the incident of the cherry tree, Claude displays his temper when he feels that he ought to fight Leonard Dawson because he has slapped Bayliss, the brother that, ironically, he himself most detests. Furthermore, in his lack of perception, he displays a figurative blindness about people which often leads to wrong decisions, the most destructive one being his choice of a wife.

Because of his psychic lameness, Claude desperately needs someone to give him both physical love and spiritual sympathy, and his mother and Mrs. Erlich can only give him the latter. Therefore, he seeks emotional and sexual fulfillment in a girl of his own age, but, tragically, he chooses the wrong girl. Gladys Farmer is the girl Claude should have

chosen, their natural sympathy for one another being indicated by the similarity of their names. Gladys is the Welsh form of Claudia,⁷ and the name indicates that she, like Claude, is crippled by society.

However, because Claude misunderstands Gladys's acceptance of his brother Bayliss's friendship and because of an unfortunate accident, he comes to believe that Enid Royce, whose given name means "spotless purity,"⁸ and thus indicates her coldness, is the girl for him.

In Cather's description of these two girls, she again juxtaposes the values of order and disorder, reason and passion, and acceptance and desire that represent the Apollonian and Dionysian ways of life. However, in this novel, for the first time, the Apollonian way of life as represented in Enid is considered inferior to the Dionysian life found in Gladys and Claude. Only in the coldness inherent in Winifred in Alexander's Bridge has Cather ever recognized the dangers of Apollonian order, each of the intervening novels having praised order and criticized Dionysian disorder and passion as found in Marie, Emil, Wunsch, and Lena.

Enid is associated with the sun and with Apollonian order from the very beginning of Claude's friendship with her. He remembers that as a child he had played with her "down in the bright sun among the cattails" (p. 139). He also remembers that she has always been a very pretty girl:

She was slender, with a small, well shaped head, a smooth, pale skin, and large dark, opaque eyes with heavy lashes. The long line from the lobe of her ear to the tip of her chin gave her face a certain rigidity, but to the old ladies, who are the best critics in such matters, this meant firmness and dignity. She moved quickly and

⁷Eric Partridge, Name This Child (New York: British Book Center, 1959), p. 58.

⁸Partridge, p. 47.

gracefully, just brushing things rather than touching them, so that there was a suggestion of flight about her slim figure, of gliding away from her surroundings. . . . The pallor of her skin, the submissive inclination of her forehead, and her dark unchanging eyes made one think of something "early Christian" (pp. 141-42).

Her rigidity here indicates the strength and methodical discipline of her Apollonian nature, her quick movements foreshadow her later flight to China, and her pallor indicates her anti-Dionysian rejection of life.

Claude's courtship of Enid is expedited by a farm accident he has, an accident which, ironically, is caused by the very forces of modern conformity and technology which he hates and which Enid comes to represent. While trying to calm his mules, which have been spooked by a loud truck, Claude is caught in the lines and dragged into a barbed wire fence. In his stubbornness, he makes the situation even worse by working in the hot sun the next day, thus causing his face to swell and contracting erysipelas. Hearing about the accident, Enid comes to see him, disregarding both his swollen face and his embarrassment. Significantly, the first thing she does upon entering the room is to open the blinds and let in the sunshine.

In retrospect Enid's visits are physically disturbing to Claude's sexual Dionysian nature: "His blood seemed to grow strong while his body was still weak, so that the inrush of vitality shook him. The desire to live again sang in his veins while his frame was unsteady. Waves of youth swept over him and left him exhausted" (p. 165). Paradoxically, Enid's actual presence calms him, but he lies awake at night thinking and longing for her; the thought of her "would start up like a sweet, burning pain, and he would drift out into the darkness upon sensations he could neither prevent nor control" (p. 166). During this long period of inactivity, he grows to love and desire the girl who has

brightened his dark days. He believes that

Enid was meant for him and she had come for him; he would never let her go. She should never know how much he longed for her. She would be slow to feel even a little of what he was feeling; he knew that. It would take a long while. But he would be infinitely patient, infinitely tender of her. It should be he who suffered, not she. Even in his dreams he never wakened her, but loved her while she was still and unconscious like a statue. He would shed love upon her until she warmed and changed without knowing why (p. 166).

Sadly, however, Claude's dreams will never be realized because Enid's cold nature is incapable of response to his passionate one. She reacts coolly to his first proposal, her mind being far away in China with her missionary sister, and even her first kiss is cold and unencouraging:

She let him kiss her soft cool mouth, and her long lashes. In the pale, dusty dusk, lit only by a few white stars, and with the chill of the creek already in the air, she seemed to Claude like a shivering little ghost come up from the rushes where the old mill dam used to be. A terrible melancholy clutched the boy's heart. He hadn't thought it would be like this. He drove home feeling weak and broken. Was there nothing in the world outside to answer to his own feelings, and was every turn to be fresh disappointment? (p. 175)

Enid's response here prepares the reader for the coldness, thoughtlessness, and even cruelty she will exhibit to Claude throughout their future marriage.

Claude should have taken warning from this first kiss, but, like Oedipus, he seems blind to the truth, and he soon forgets his disappointment in dreams for the future. Since it is now harvest time, he only has a few minutes to spend with Enid each evening, but at night he has erotic dreams about her:

He dreamed, for instance, that it was evening, and he had gone to see Enid as usual. While she was coming down the path from the house, he discovered that he had no clothes on at all! Then, with wonderful agility, he jumped over the picket fence into a clump of castor beans, and stood in the dusk, trying to cover himself with the leaves, like

Adam in the garden, talking commonplaces to Enid through chattering teeth, afraid lest at any moment she might discover his plight (p. 180).

This passage not only shows Claude's intense desire, but also his repressed sense of guilt, stemming from that desire and from the fact that Enid responds to him only with a cold, Puritan withdrawal.

Enid's basically cold nature, however, is somewhat camouflaged by her superficial actions. Just as her visiting in Claude's sick room indicates a warmth she does not feel, so does her habit of sewing on her new lace underclothes in front of Claude and the carpenters at the site of their new house indicate a sexual eagerness she does not have. The sight of these garments, however, is extremely exciting to Claude, who lingers beside her to watch. Once when an unexpected whirlwind blows some of the garments out of her bag, he even hides "one little lace thing" in his pocket. Claude's state of expectant bliss continues until the wedding night itself, but whatever hopes and dreams he has felt about his marriage are irrevocably shattered when, in a "casual, indifferent, uninterested tone" (p. 222), his new wife sends him away from the bridal chamber because "the dressing on the chicken salad must have been too rich" (p. 220)!

By the next morning the pattern for their marriage is set. Enid's attitude is cool, but polite, and it is clear that she will anticipate all of Claude's needs--with the exception of the one which is most important to him. She cannot fully respond to his love either spiritually or physically, for their natures are too different. Claude's nature is one of Dionysian vitality and energy, whereas hers is one of Apollonian order and appearance. Her wifely concern for him in having "neatly arranged on the plush seat . . . [his] shirt, collar, tie,

brushes, even a handkerchief" (p. 223) is in marked contrast to her unwifely rejection of him the night before.

After the wedding trip, Claude continues to be tormented by the Apollonian-Dionysian conflict in his marriage. Enid leaves him at home alone to attend an Anti-Saloon League meeting, but her kitchen is "full of the afternoon sun," "the table was neatly set for one" (p. 227), and his cold supper is neatly arranged in the icebox. Her house is always pleasant and well ordered: "The doors and windows were always open, the vines and the long petunias in the window-boxes waved in the breeze, and the rooms were full of sunlight and in perfect order. Enid wore white dresses about her work, and white shoes and stockings. She managed a house easily and systematically" (p. 236). Not only is her house full of the Apollonian sun, but she also wears white, the traditional symbol of coldness and sexual purity.

Enid is a modern, liberated socially conformist wife, a fact that is symbolized by her little black electric car that takes her away from her husband to political and religious meetings. Alone in the house, Claude rationalizes that "If his wife didn't love him, it was because love meant one thing to him and quite another to her. She was proud of him, was glad to see him when he came in from the fields, and was solicitous for his comfort. Everything about a man's embrace was distasteful to Enid; something inflicted upon women, like the pain of childbirth--for Eve's transgression, perhaps" (p. 237). Nevertheless, Claude continues to desire her person, and he cannot explain the paradox that "she had no shades of feeling to correspond to her natural grace and lightness of movement, to the gentle, almost wistful attitudes of body in which he sometimes surprised her" (p. 238). Enid's frigidity, however, just grows

stronger until she eventually leaves him to go to China to nurse her missionary sister who has become ill.

In contrast to Enid, Gladys Farmer has a Dionysian personality--warm, sympathetic, and perceptive. She is poor, but, like Claude, she has ideals and desires. Like him also, she feels separated from the town itself. She is an individualist, and although in order to keep her job as school teacher, she has to keep her actions and expenditures within accepted limits, she nevertheless keeps her mind free from the conformity and limitations of her surroundings. Whereas Enid values objects and organizations, Gladys is interested in people. Enid admits herself that she has refrained from making personal ties, whereas Gladys "has the kind of magnetism that draws people to her" (p. 150).

Cather hints, too, that Gladys is capable of responding to Claude's sexual desires. The only time that Claude ever takes Enid for a ride in the moonlight--symbol of Dionysian desire--is the night that Gladys is also along. Moreover, she responds to Claude's feeling for the room he has built for him and his wife, whereas Enid plans to save it for the sanctimonious preacher Brother Weldon. As Gladys and Claude leave his new house,

She hung back while he led her through confusing doorways and helped her over the piles of laths that littered the floors. At the edge of the gaping cellar entrance, she stopped and leaned wearily on his arm for a moment. She did not speak, but he understood that his new house made her sad, that she, too, had come to the place where she must turn out of the old path. He long to whisper to her and beg her not to marry his brother. He lingered and hesitated, fumbling in the dark. She had his own cursed kind of sensibility; she would expect too much from life and be disappointed. He was reluctant to lead her out into the chilly evening without some word of entreaty. He would willingly have prolonged their passage, through many rooms and corridors. Perhaps, had that been possible, the strength in him would have found what it was seeking; even in this short interval it had stirred and made itself felt, had uttered a confused appeal (pp. 205-6).

Claude is surprised and confused at the powerful emotions that arise in his own body, but he represses his feelings. It is not until just before he leaves for the war, when he finally does ask her not to marry Bayliss, that he learns that she cares for him. In a flash, he sees what a mistake he has made. He "took her hands and they stood looking searchingly at each other in the swimming golden light that made everything transparent" (p. 292), and then he is irretrievably gone.

In previous novels, Cather has praised the American Mid-west, but in One of Ours she has reversed her theme, criticizing the shallow, conventional West and idealizing Europe and the East, the seats of ancient culture and civilization. In the part of the novel that is set in the Mid-west, only Gladys, Ernest, and the Erlichs have Claude's superior values and character--the marks of the Old West, or in their case, of Europe. As Claude contemplates the statue of Kit Carson on the Capitol steps in Denver, he realizes that "there was no West, in that sense, any more" (p. 137). As Brown has stated,

The life of the Western towns is the antithesis of that essential West for which Miss Cather cares so deeply, the West of the land, of the cliff-dwellers' villages, of Antonia's heart and Thea Kronberg's voice. The tragedy of her vision of America is in the destruction of the true West by the false; and it is to this destruction that the last of the pioneer novels, One of Ours (1922) and A Lost Lady, are devoted.⁹

Gladys Farmer regrets Claude's marriage because she fears he will become "one of those dead people that moved about the streets of Frankfort; everything that was Claude would perish, and the shell of him would come and go and eat and sleep for fifty years. Gladys had taught the children of many such dead men" (p. 176). As Monroe has proclaimed, Cather is

⁹E. K. Brown, Willa Cather and the West," University of Toronto Quarterly, 5 (1936), 558.

"concerned with the problem of personality in an environment that makes for disillusionment and dissociation, with the tyranny of opinion and convention, and with the dead level of mediocrity to which American life is prone to conform, with the false progress and false gods that Americans strive after, and with their loss of spiritual anchorage."¹⁰ The conformity and materialism of the town, therefore, have an enervating effect on its people--even on Gladys, who is afraid to go to Omaha to the opera for fear of how the town would react to her extravagance. All those in Frankfort who have any "imagination and generous impulses" (p. 177) are failures, as is Claude as long as he remains within the influence of the town.

The coincidence of the war, however, gives Claude a second chance in life. He cannot find what he is seeking in the shallow and superficial Mid-west, so he journeys East in quest of the pioneer experience of the mind and spirit that he has never had. As in earlier Catherian novels, this juxtaposition of Eastern and Western values is symbolized by the moon and the sun, although in this novel, it is the Eastern moon and not the Western sun which has the most positive connotation.

With the beginning of the war--Claude's key to escape and temporary fulfillment--the moon becomes a prominent symbol. As Claude waits on the road to discuss the war news with his friend Ernest Havel,

The sun was already low. It hung above the stubble, all milky and rosy with the heat, like the image of a sun reflected in grey water. In the east the full moon had just risen, and its thin, silver surface was flushed with pink until it looked exactly like the setting sun. Except for the place each occupied in the heavens, Claude could not have told which was which. They rested upon opposite rims

¹⁰N. Elizabeth Monroe, "Trends of the Future in Willa Cather," in The Novel and Society: A Critical Study of the Modern Novel (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1965), p. 243.

the world, two bright shields, and regarded each other-- as if they, too, had met by appointment (p. 185).

Symbolically, as Claude, a native American, and Ernest, an Austrian immigrant, meet in the road, so do the cultures of America and Europe meet. As they become more engrossed in their discussion about the European war, "the sun disappeared, the moon contracted, solidified, and slowly climbed the pale sky" (p. 186), indicating the subordinate place America and the West are taking in their minds in relation to the war-torn Eastern continent of Europe. Before the friends separate that night, they have made their commitments to the war in the East, and "the low glimmer in the fields had imperceptibly changed to full, pure moonlight" (p. 187).

One night while Claude is alone in his new house, the symbolic meaning of the moon is expanded even further:

The moon swam up over the bare wheatfields, big and magical, like a great flower. Presently he got some bath-towels, went across the yard to the windmill, took off his clothes, and stepped into the tin horse-tank. . . . He stretched himself out in it, and, resting his head on the metal rim, lay on his back, looking up at the moon. The sky was a midnight blue, like warm, deep, blue water, and the moon seemed to lie on it, like a water-lily, floating forward with an invisible current. One expected to see its great petals open.

For some reason, Claude began to think about the far-off times and countries it had shone upon. He never thought of the sun as coming from distant lands, or as having taken part in human life in other ages. To him, the sun rotated about the wheat fields. But the moon, somehow, came out of the historic past, and made him think of Egypt and Pharoahs, Babylon and the hanging gardens. She seemed particularly to have looked down upon the follies and disappointments of men; into the slaves' quarters of old times, into prison windows, and into fortresses where captives languished.

Inside of living people, too, captives languished. Yes, inside of people who walked and worked in the broad sun, there were captives dwelling in darkness--never seen from birth to death. Into those prisons the moon shone, and the prisoners crept to the windows and looked out with mournful eyes at the white globe which betrayed no secrets and comprehended all (pp. 233-34).

Under the moonlight, Claude sheds his societal inhibitions just as he sheds his clothes, and spiritually, he becomes an integrated part of the universe. Under the Dionysian influence of the moon, he feels an inexplicable nearness to primeval man and ancient civilizations. He becomes aware of the integrity and aspiration of man in all countries and all ages, and he thus perceives the catholicity of the human experience. He realizes that, like the mythic Endymion, man has always had dreams and desires as personified in the beautiful and shadowy but distant moon. And, he thinks, "these children of the moon [like him and Gladys], with their unappeased longings and futile dreams, were a finer race than the children of the sun. This conception flooded the boy's heart like a second moonrise, flowed through him indefinite and strong, while he lay deathly still for fear of losing it" (p. 235).

Soon after Enid leaves for China, Claude makes the decision that will change his life forever. He joins the army and prepares to go overseas to fight for the dying country of France and for the ideals she symbolizes. Cather sees this transportation of American soldiers to Europe in epic terms, a fact that is indicated by the various allusions she makes to classical literature. Like Aeneas and Odysseus, Claude is leaving a defeated country--the dead, materialistic West--in order to search for a home (The parallel between Troy and Frankfurt is further indicated by the name of one of Frankfurt's immigrant settlers: Troilus Oberlies (p. 271)). Cather also implies the epic nature of Claude's mission by saying that on the train home, he, "Like the hero of the Odyssey upon his homeward journey, . . . had often to tell what his country was, and who were the parents that begot him" (p. 275). The most obvious allusion to epic myth, however, is the allusion to the

Aeneid found in the name of the old English liner that will take Claude and his men to their new country: the Anchises. As Mildred Bennett has observed, the boat is "named for the father of Aeneas. In the sixth book of the Aeneid, Vergil has Anchises telling his son the fates that are to attend him. In the use of the name Anchises Cather hints at the fates that await Claude and his companions."¹¹

The Anchises' departure from New York harbor also has mythic implications. To Cather, "the scene was ageless; youths were sailing away to die for an idea, a sentiment, for the mere sound of a phrase . . . and on their departure they were making vows to a bronze image [the Statue of Liberty] in the sea" (p. 307). As Claude watches "the broad purple sun go down into a violet-coloured sea" (p. 315) and then sees the yellow sky coming down, "like a gold curtain" (p. 317), he symbolically bids good-bye to the security and conventionality of his Western home, the future that awaits him being one of insecurity and danger, vast ideas and epic events.

As in the Aeneid, this epic struggle begins with the voyage itself. Juno seems to have loosened the malevolent winds again, because after a few days out, "The whole ocean seemed suddenly to have come to life, the waves had a malignant, graceful, muscular energy, were animated by a kind of mocking cruelty" (p. 328). As in that ancient voyage, the Anchises is one of a fleet of ships, but just as Aeneas became separated from the others, the "old Anchises floundered from one grey ridge to another, quite alone" (p. 329) in the storm. The stormy sea and resultant sea sickness, however, are the least of the ship's problems,

¹¹Mildred R. Bennett, "How Willa Cather Chose her Names," Names, 10 (1962), 33.

for an epidemic of influenza breaks out on board the ship, and many boys die before they ever reach the shore of France.

The day does finally come, though, when Claude and the others reach their destination. Here in the East--in France--Claude sees a young couple walking in the moonlight who have found the love and happiness which was denied him in the bright, sunlit West, and he begins to see the truth of his friend Victor Morse's prediction that "Some of you Americans are likely to discover the world this trip" (p. 370). And indeed Claude is enlightened and fascinated by "flowery France" (p. 379), a metaphor which, significantly, recalls his earlier image of the petals of the moon. He had expected to see only battlefields and destruction, but instead he is met with beautiful fields of wheat, oats, rye, and poppies, and sees a joyful and rewarding life being lived under the threat of, and even in the midst of, the destruction of war.

On their way to their training camp, Claude's company spends one night in Rouen. Rouen, it will be remembered, is the place where Joan of Arc was martyred, and therefore the town holds a special significance for Claude; he had written a history thesis on Joan when he was at Lincoln. The theme of martyrdom is also important to an understanding of Claude's character, for he himself has some of the characteristics of a martyr. As a child he had deliberately inflicted punishment on himself by continuing to hold his hand over the fire after he had burned it and by refusing to wear a coat on the coldest days. As boys he and Ernest had even talked about the subject. Engrossed in his search for meaning and significance in life, Claude comments that "'The martyrs must have found something outside themselves. Otherwise they could have made themselves comfortable with little things'" (p. 63). Ernest's answer to

this is that the martyrs "were the ones who had nothing but their idea! It would be ridiculous to get burned at the stake for the sensation. Sometimes I think the martyrs had a good deal of vanity to help them along, too'" (p. 63). A close look at Claude shows that he fits both definitions; he cannot be happy with little things; he too has a great deal of vanity; and he has come all the way to France to fight for an idea, for freedom, culture, and civilization. Claude's martyrdom is also foreshadowed by the fact that on the ship he enjoys the challenge of the epidemic so much that he seems almost insensitive to death and by the fact that he is so romantically dedicated to the war itself--to the "Big Show"--that the wreckage of the war is actually "reassuring" (p. 400) to him.

In the training camp Claude finds another mother-figure in Mme. Joubert with whom he boards, and he also finds a symbolic representative of the superior East in David Gerhardt, a cultured violinist and brave soldier who "did not look like the rest of them. Though he was young, he did not look boyish. He seemed experienced; a finished product, rather than something on the way. He was handsome, and his face like his manner and his walk, had something distinguished about it" (p. 387). Claude cannot help envying David, but he soon grows to like and admire him as well, and they enjoy several happy evenings eating their dinner on the plank table under Madame Joubert's cherry tree--alive and thriving in the midst of war in marked contrast to the cherry tree of Claude's "peaceful" childhood.

Finally Claude and his company are sent to the battlefield, which consists of underground trenches, death holes reminiscent of the mythic Underworld. Indeed, because her treatment of the war is so superficial

and idealistic, Jacks asserts that "one may be forgiven for wondering if the great war of three thousand years before that ended in the fall of Troy was not, in fact, more real to her in the events and personages."¹² Evidently, Cather associates Claude's war not only with the Trojan war, but also with Aeneas' battle for his homeland of Italy. This theory is given credence by the fact that Claude works with Barclay Owens, an engineer who "had discovered the ruins of one of Julius Caesar's fortified camps" (p. 413), a coincidence which links their struggles with those of the ancient civilization founded by Aeneas. Owens felt as if he had given "birth to Caesar." The men call Owens "Julius Caesar," and they "never knew whether he was explaining the Roman general's operations in Spain, or Joffre's at the Marne, he jumped so from one to the other" (p. 414).

Obviously, then, Cather sees World War I as a mythic war similar to that which Aeneas fought for Italy. This attitude lends the book certain epic dimensions, but it also permits her to idealize a cruel and destructive war and to romanticize the part of the American soldier in that war. She refers to the war itself as the "Big Show" and has a young French girl declare that the American soldiers were the "last miracle of this war. . . . Such heads they had, so fine there behind the ears. Such discipline and purpose. Our people laughed and called to them and threw them flowers, but they never turned to look . . . eyes straight before. They passed like men of destiny" (p. 437). This sentimental and unrealistic treatment of the war earned Hemingway's scorn,¹³ and it

¹²L. V. Jacks, "The Classics and Willa Cather," Prairie Schooner, 35 (1961), 294.

¹³Stanley Cooperman, "Willa Cather and the Bright Face of Death," Literature and Psychology, 13 (1963), 87.

forced even her friend Elizabeth Sergeant to declare that the novel "seemed out of key."¹⁴

Claude goes to battle eagerly, minimizing the discomforts, and commenting that "it's likely the only one [war] I'll ever be in, so I may as well take an interest" (p. 409). Indeed Claude's reaction to the war--which he views both as an escape from the mediocrity of his dull life in America and as the fulfillment of his long quest for meaning in life--is an over eager one. One night as Claude waits to return to battle the following day, he contentedly listens to the distant artillery fire:

The sound of the guns had from the first been pleasant to him, had given him a feeling of confidence and safety; tonight he knew why. What they said was, that men could still die for an idea; and would burn all they had made to keep their dreams. He knew the future of the world was safe. . . . Ideals were not archaic things, beautiful and impotent; they were the real sources of power among men. As long as that was true, and now he knew it was true--he had come all the way to find out--he had no quarrel with Destiny. . . . He would give his own adventure for no man's. On the edge of sleep it seemed to glimmer, like the clear column of the fountain, like the new moon--alluring, half-averted, the bright face of danger (p. 470).

The ideal is admirable here, but when one compares this speech to that of Hemingway's war-haggard Frederic Henry, its impracticality becomes disturbingly clear.

Cather and her hero do not perceive the reality of war itself, but as Stanley Cooperman states, she does perceive another kind of reality--the psychological reality of Claude's motivation as a "war lover." Cooperman believes that Cather "intuits what the later writer [John Hersey, The War Lover] deliberately describes. . . ." For Claude,

¹⁴Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willa Cather (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1953), p. 171.

the war is "a personal rather than a political necessity. Still searching for his own virility, Claude finds it with a phantom; the goddess who walks not in beauty alone, but in blood. She, ultimately, is the only wife he can embrace. And all the political rhetoric, the ideology of the Crusade itself, becomes a veneer applied to a deeper and far more urgent need than any external cause."¹⁵ At the European front, Claude has a fatal appointment with this War-Death Goddess, whether she be Athena, Persephone, or, as is indicated by the "bright face" of the moon, Diana the lovely huntress. In the Boar's Snout, the grave-like, underground front trench, a Hades "full of dead and dying men" (p. 506), Claude proves to himself that he is a man. Standing on the exposed parapet and directing his men,

The blood dripped down his coat, but he felt no weakness. He felt only one thing: that he commanded wonderful men. When David came up with the supports he might find them dead, but he would find them all there. They were there to stay until they were carried out to be buried. They were mortal, but they were unconquerable (p. 507).

Claude meets his death in this battle, but he has no regrets. He has, for a brief moment, found his identity as a man and as a member of a team; he has traded his Apollonian "individuation"¹⁶ for Dionysian integration and unity.

Claude has found the answer to his dilemma only in death. Like Oedipus, he has been crippled all his life, but his lameness has been psychological and emotional rather than physical. He has been suffocated by the mechanism, conformism, and materialism of his small Mid-western

¹⁵Cooperman, p. 81.

¹⁶Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, vol. 1 of The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. by Oscar Levy and trans. by William A. Houssmann (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), p. 168.

home town, where the Promised Land has been transformed by selfishness and greed into a moral wasteland. Therefore, Claude's quest takes the opposite direction to that of Cather's former heroines, for he seeks his fulfillment in the history and ideals of Europe and the East, and like Aeneas, he discovers a culture and a civilization heretofore unknown to him. Structurally, the book may be divided according to its setting in either the West or the East, the pessimistic mood of the early Western half contrasting sharply--almost too sharply--with the naively optimistic and somewhat sentimental mood of the later Eastern section, a fact that impairs the tonal unity of the novel. Not only does Cather invert the East-West pattern in One of Ours, however; she also reverses the terms of the Dionysian-Apollonian conflict. Whereas earlier the Apollonian values of reason and order symbolized by the sun have been positive ones, in this novel they are only steps toward conformity and conventionality; and whereas the Dionysian values symbolized by the moon have usually been negative ones indicative of disorder, here they symbolize positive passions, desires, and ideals.

CHAPTER VII

THE COLLAPSE OF THE WESTERN IDEAL

IN A LOST LADY

A Lost Lady (1923) follows closely upon the heels of One of Ours and is also concerned with the dying frontier, but it is artistically much more satisfying, even though, ironically, One of Ours had won the Pulitzer Prize for 1923. A Lost Lady is an excellent piece of craftsmanship, almost everything in it being not only essential to its theme and structure, but also universally and mythically suggestive. H. M. Jones has praised Cather's achievement, proclaiming that just "as in The Scarlet Letter everything exists only as it enriches the story of Hester, so in A Lost Lady (1923) everything exists only as it enriches the story of Mrs. Forrester. The result is something timeless and not topical. . . ." ¹ In A Lost Lady, then, Cather avoids the confusion of protagonists which had marred My Ántonia, for although Niel Herbert, the Jamesian observer, is an important character in the novel and one who himself undergoes an initiation experience in the tradition of the Adamic innocent, the focus of the novel is always on Marian Forrester, the "lost lady" herself.

Like most of Cather's earlier novels, A Lost Lady is set in the American West, but it is not the early pioneer West of O Pioneers! and

¹Howard Mumford Jones, "Novels of Willa Cather," Saturday Review of Literature, 18 (1938), 4.

My Antonia, but rather the decaying West which preceded the materialistic wasteland of One of Ours. Cather lamented this decline of the West not only in her novels, but also in an article entitled "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," in which she contended that

In Nebraska, as in so many other States, we must face the fact that the splendid story of the pioneer is finished, and that no new story worthy to take its place has yet begun. The generation that subdued the wild land and broke up the virgin prairie is passing, but it is still there, a group of rugged figures in the background which inspire respect, compel admiration.²

In One of Ours, Cather had sought to escape the decadence of the West and the deterioration of its values by sending Claude to the East, but now, as she indicates above, she is ready to face the facts bravely and honestly, and the result is one of the most starkly realistic novels she ever wrote. Throughout the novel, she remains somewhat detached from her characters, revealing them primarily in terms of action and symbol, the positive outcome being, in Randall's words, that she treats Marion--unlike Claude--"sympathetically but without sentimentality."³

In A Lost Lady Cather is concerned with the collapse of the social, moral, and aesthetic ideal of the old West as found in the declining frontier towns. Captain Daniel Forrester represents the spirit of the Old West, in sharp contrast to Ivy Peters, who represents the new materialism and thus the decline in moral values. Marion Forrester, the heroine of the novel, who is twenty-five years younger than her husband and several years older than Peters, is caught in an intense personal

²Willia Cather, "Nebraska," in America is West: An Anthology of Middle Western Life and Literature, ed. by John T. Flanagan (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1945),

³John H. Randall, III, The Landscape and the Looking Glass (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 176.

and moral dilemma between the old order and the new. In her lifetime, she sees the defeat of her husband's ideals, and in giving way to the new ethos of immorality and materialism, she herself comes to symbolize the decay of those ideals. In her particular moral quandary, Marian Forrester foreshadows the dilemmas of such future characters as Godfrey St. Peter and Myra Henshawe. As Edward and Lillian Bloom have observed, when one of these protagonists "begins to lose sight of spiritual ideals and to give precedence to material gains, he negates his spiritual advance. . . . In recording his adventures she [Cather] constantly emphasizes his inner strength and weakness and the decay that results once he permits himself the luxury of material desire."⁴

The novel contrasts the two opposing ways of life that are found in Daniel and Marian Forrester, the conflict--as symbolized by the mythic figures of Apollo and Dionysus--being between order and disorder, tranquility and passion. The Western frontier--the meeting point of the primitive and the civilized--is the ideal setting for the conflict because, as Henry Steele Commager says, it is the place which most "simplified, clarified, and dramatized universal moral problems."⁵

Simplification is indeed the distinguishing characteristic of A Lost Lady, the novel in which Cather first successfully illustrates the theory of art she had formulated in her essay "The Novel D meubl ." In the essay, she proclaimed that "The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification. The novelist must learn to write, and then

⁴Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, "Willa Cather's Novels of the Frontier: A Study in Thematic Symbolism," American Literature, 21 (1949), 79.

⁵Henry Steele Commager, "Traditionalism in American Literature," Nineteenth Century, 146 (1949), 315.

he must unlearn it; just as the modern painter learns to draw, and then learns when utterly to disregard it to a higher and truer effect." This conscious simplification--the throwing away of the furniture--makes the mythic implications of A Lost Lady stand out quite clearly; the mythic allusions, then, give the novel that quality which, according to Cather, "is felt upon the page without being specifically named there."⁶ Having thrown out all extraneous detail, Cather leaves only the essential images and symbols which form the mythic structure of the novel. This conflict between the moral and spiritual values of the Old West and the materialism and moral decadence of the New West is portrayed through three basic myths: (1) the myth of the marriage of Aphrodite (Venus) and Hephaestus (Vulcan); (2) the mythic conflict symbolized by the Dionysian moon and the Apollonian sun; and (3) the myth of the serpent's intrusion upon Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

In writing A Lost Lady, Cather seems to have looked upon her setting as, to use Bernice Slote's phrase, the time of "the twilight of the gods."⁷ The declining "gods" in the story are the wealthy old pioneers who stand out above the common townspeople. Niel reports that "There were then two distinct social strata in the prairie States: the homesteaders and hand-workers who were there to make a living, and the bankers and gentlemen ranchers who came from the Atlantic seaboard to invest money and to 'develop our great West,' as they used to tell us."⁸

⁶Willia Cather, Willia Cather on Writing (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 40.

⁷Bernice Slote, "Willia Cather as a Regional Writer," Kansas Quarterly, 2 (1969-70), 14.

⁸Willia Cather, A Lost Lady, vol. 7 of The Novels and Stories of Willia Cather, lib. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1938), pp. 3-4. Future references to this source will be paginated within the text.

As a member of the railroad aristocracy, Captain Daniel Forrester fits into the latter category, as does his beautiful young wife, Marian. Niel recalls that when he first saw Mrs. Forrester, "he had recognized her as belonging to a different world from any he had ever known" (p. 38). Like the Greek gods of old, this royal couple hold court for their wealthy and influential friends in a charming house, which, like Olympus, is "placed on a hill" (p. 5) and separated from the common people of Sweet Water by a wide creek.⁹

Marian and Daniel Forrester recall in particular the mythic figures of Aphrodite and her husband Hephaestus. Forman states that Cather presents Marian, "who had all the charms and graces, excepting morality, as a sort of modern Venus, or, at least, as one endowed with most of the Cyprian's gifts."¹⁰ Indeed, Edith Hamilton's description of Venus--the "Goddess of Love and Beauty, who beguiled all, gods and men alike; the laughter-loving goddess, who laughed sweetly or mockingly at those her wiles had conquered; the irresistible goddess who stole away even the wits of the wise"¹¹--seems to fit Marian perfectly. The women of Sweet Water are jealous and do not like her, but she enchants all men, from the elite like Cyrus Dalzell, president of the Colorado and Utah railroad, and Frank Ellinger, Denver's most popular bachelor, to the young boys of the town, such as Niel and George Adams and the poor

⁹According to Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 124, the characters of Daniel and Marian Forrester are based on the Governor and Mrs. Garber, who like the fictional Forresters, had owned and entertained in a lovely house set apart from the adjoining town of Red Cloud (Sweet Water).

¹⁰Henry James Forman, "Willa Cather: A Voice from the Prairie," Southwest Review, 47 (1962), 248.

¹¹Edith Hamilton, Mythology (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1942), p. 33.

Blum brothers, down to the cruel and corrupt Ivy Peters. Niel describes her as "bewitching. . . . There could be no negative encounter, however, slight, with Mrs. Forrester. If she merely bowed to you, merely looked at you, it constituted a personal relation. Something about her took hold of one in a flash; one became acutely conscious of her, of her fragility and grace, of her mouth which could say so much without words; of her eyes, lively, laughing, intimate, nearly always a little mocking" (p. 31). A few pages later, Niel continues his awed contemplation of this goddess-like being:

How strange that she should be here [in Sweet Water] at all, a woman like her among common people! Not even in Denver had he ever seen another woman so elegant. He had sat in the dining-room of the Brown Palace Hotel and watched them as they came down to dinner--fashionable women from "the East," on their way to California. But he had never found one so attractive and distinguished as Mrs. Forrester. Compared with her, other women were heavy and dull; even the pretty ones seemed lifeless--they had not that something in their glance that made one's blood tingle. And never elsewhere had he heard anything like her inviting, musical laugh, that was like the distant measures of dance music, heard through opening and shutting doors (p. 37).

The memory of this Venus-like laughter remains with Niel and comes to symbolize for him beauty and gaiety; years after he last saw her, he "used to think that if he could hear that long lost lady laugh again, he could be gay" (p. 67).

Marian Forrester is beautiful and charming, but, like her counterpart, she is also resentful and jealous of any possible rivals. Niel recalls that she had a gift for mimicry, often gently caricaturing people to their faces, and he also notices "that in describing the charms of other women, Mrs. Forrester always made fun of them a little" (p. 33). In telling him about her young dinner guest Constance Ogden, for example, she belittles the color of her hair, and later she makes

fun of the girl's crush on Frank Ellinger, telling him that he has "reduced her to a state of imbecility" (p. 59). Marian likes being looked up to as the epitome of grace, beauty, and charm, and she does not intend to give up her throne to anyone else. Her pride is therefore deeply wounded when Frank, for years her most devoted admirer, deserts her to marry Connie, and when she calls him to congratulate him, she cannot keep herself from releasing a passionate tirade of hatred and accusation. In this episode, as Lloyd Morris contends, "Passion in Marian serves no end but its own; it is immediate and gratuitous, an unquenchable force which, when threatened with frustration by lack of a stimulating object [Frank himself], spends itself recklessly upon any available recipient. . . . In *Antonia* Miss Cather has illustrated the workings of passion in the eternal Penelope; in Marian she has revealed the flowering of passion in the eternal Helen."¹²

Like Venus, who is the "goddess of gardens and flowers,"¹³ particularly of the rose and the myrtle, Marian is a protector of nature. She and her husband have preserved the beautiful marsh that encircles their yard, and they are always surrounded by flowers, growing narcissuses and hyacinths inside during the winter and roses in the garden during the spring. Just as the rose, symbol of beauty and passion, was Aphrodite's flower, so is it Marian's. One morning, for example, Niel takes her a bouquet of wild roses, "with flaming buds. . . , their petals stained with that burning rose-colour which is always gone by noon," (p. 80) but he seems naively unaware of their passionate implications, for he is

¹²Lloyd Morris, "Willa Cather," North American Review, 219 (1924), 48.

¹³Charles Mills Gayley, The Classic Myths (New York: Blaisdell Publishing Co., 1911), pp. 31-32.

shocked and disappointed to hear from her window not only her laughter, but also Frank Ellinger's. He has associated her with the white lily, symbol of the purity which is now "festered," (p. 81), but the rose is her true symbol, just as it is Aphrodite's. As Aphrodite displays sexual weakness in her affairs with Mars and Anchises, so does Marian show her sexual and moral weakness in her affairs with Ellinger and Peters. Marian needs both beauty and love--physical as well as spiritual--in order to survive, and as Randall has noted, her husband not being "able to give her everything she needs, . . . she must turn elsewhere if she is to fulfill her passionate nature."¹⁴

The parallel with Aphrodite is further indicated in Marian's husband, because just as the goddess of love was married to Hephaestus who had become lame from a fall from Olympus, so is Marian married to Captain Forrester, who is crippled and walks with a cane because of a "terrible fall with his horse in the mountains" (p. 7). Also, just as Vulcan was pictured as a "good-natured god, loved and honored among men as the founder of wise customs and the patron of artificers [and] on occasion as a god of healing and prophecy,"¹⁵ so was Captain Forrester loved and depended on by his men. He had a way of bringing peace and assurance to them, and Cather says:

That had been the secret of his management of men. His sanity asked nothing, claimed nothing; it was so simple that it brought a hush over distracted creatures. In the old days, when he was building road in the Black Hills, trouble sometimes broke out in camp while he was absent, staying with Mrs. Forrester at Colorado Springs. He would put down the telegram that announced an insurrection and say to his wife, "Maidy, I must go to the men." And that was all he did--he went to them (p. 45).

¹⁴Randall, p. 185.

¹⁵Gayley, p. 26.

Like Hephaestus, Captain Forrester was a large figure who radiated strength and confidence to all who beheld him.

The fact that Mr. Forrester worked with steel to build the great railroads of the West forms another link with the god of fire, who was himself a worker in metal. And finally, just as Hephaestus was a creator, having helped Zeus to create man, so is Mr. Forrester a creator. He had come West when the land was nothing but a vast desert, but he could foresee its future beauty and productivity. As a young man, for example, he had come upon the site of his present home. He tells his dinner guests, "'When I came here as a young man, I had planned it in my mind pretty much as it is today; where I would dig my well, and where I would plant my grove and my orchard. I planned to build a house that my friends could come to, with a wife like Mrs. Forrester to make it attractive to them. I used to promise myself that someday I would manage it'" (p. 49). Because he is able to combine imagination and strength, Captain Forrester accomplishes his dreams and aids in the creation of a new civilization in the American West. This success was possible, he indicates, "because a thing that is dreamed of . . . is already an accomplished fact. All our great West has been developed from such dreams; the homesteader's and prospector's and the contractor's. We dreamed the railroads across the mountains just as I dreamed my place on the Sweet Water" (p. 51).

As a creator of civilization, Captain Forrester is another one of Cather's Apollonian characters. Moreover, his life exemplifies the eternal Apollonian virtues of order, tranquility, and morality as opposed to the ephemeral Dionysian values of excitement, passion, and

physical pleasure which govern Marian's life.¹⁶ The Captain represents the moral values of the Old West in contrast to the new business morality, a fact that is shown when he expends his own personal fortune to cover losses suffered by depositors of the bank of which he was president. Marian herself would be incapable of such moral strength, but she understands her husband and respects him for his decision. Because of such incidents, Cather says that "it was as Captain Forrester's wife that she most interested Niel, and it was in her relation to her husband that he most admired her. Given her other charming attributes, her comprehension of a man like the railroad-builder, her loyalty to him, stamped her more than anything else. That, he felt, was quality; something that could never become worn or shabby; steel of Damascus" (p. 75). It will become ironically clear, however, that Marian can maintain her loyalty to the Captain and his values only in his presence; she needs his Apollonian nature to balance her Dionysian one, as indeed he needs her youth and vivacity to balance his dullness and old age.

As one would expect, Captain Forrester is closely associated with the sun. After his stroke, Niel comes to see him and finds him "in his big chair in the bay window, in the full glow of the afternoon sun, saying little, but very friendly" (p. 93). He also likes to sit in his rose garden, itself an illustration of the Apollonian order of his personality. One afternoon Niel finds him there;

His attention was fixed upon a red block of Colorado sandstone, set on a granite boulder in the middle of the gravel space around which the roses grew. He showed Niel that this was a sun-dial, and explained it with great pride. Last summer, he said, he sat out here a

¹⁶Note that Cather has returned to her original conception of the Apollonian life as somewhat superior to the Dionysian life, a concept from which she had departed in One of Ours.

great deal, with a square board mounted on a post, and marked the length of the shadows by his watch. His friend, Cyrus Dalzell, on one of his visits, took his board away, had the diagram exactly copied on sandstone, and sent it to him with the column-like boulder that formed its base (p. 103).

There the Captain sits each day, as the shadows go by, and in the evening he watches the sunset on his roses, the sunset itself foreshadowing the death of both the man and the pioneer civilization which he helped to create. As Yongue says, the sun-dial is a symbol of both "stability and evanescence. . . . He, who is himself the symbol of a vanishing way of life, squarely faces the symbol of time passing and takes comfort in the rock, in the fact that there is a source of stability resilient to passing time and capable of holding together 'the shadows of individual existence.' For Captain Forrester that source of stability is the land."¹⁷

The Captain understands the cyclical pattern of civilization and perceives that the life of each individual is insignificant in relation to history. Ironically, however, the morality of his transient life achieves eternal significance, as symbolized by the sun-dial at his grave, whereas Marian, who cannot understand why he likes "to see time visibly devoured" (p. 106) and who lives only in and for the present, is destroyed by time. When Niel returns from college to visit her, he finds that "In the brilliant sun of the afternoon one saw that her skin was no longer like white lilacs--it had the ivory tint of gardenias that have just begun to fade. . . . There were lines--something strained about the corners of her mouth that used not to be there" (p. 107). These things disappear "in a flash of personality," but their disappearance is only

¹⁷Patricia Lee Yongue, "A Lost Lady: The End of the First Cycle," Western American Literature, 7 (1972), 11.

an illusion. Indeed, time itself will be her downfall. She outlives the era of gentle manners and graceful living, only to be confronted with the unsympathetic reality of such men as Ivy Peters, and in trying to make the difficult adjustment, she becomes confused, and, as the title indicates, "lost".

Marian has been protected all of her life and therefore, she cannot stand the harsh reality represented by the sun. She feels much more comfortable in the soft moonlight, which signifies her Endymion-like desire for peace, love, beauty, and happiness. In addition, the moon also symbolizes her Dionysian affinities for wine, dancing, and love-making. Dionysus, it will be remembered, was the Greek god of fertility and of wine, whose worshippers, the Bacchantes or Maenads, were "women frenzied with wine . . . [who] rushed through woods and over mountains uttering sharp cries, waving pine-cone-tipped wands, swept away in a fierce ecstasy."¹⁸ The picnic suppers or dances that Marian gives in the grove on moonlight nights recall these Dionysian revels, as does the excursion she and Frank make to the woods, allegedly to cut cedar boughs. Significantly, the day "was grey, without sun" (p. 59), indicating the lack of Apollonian order and morality, and indeed, the episode soon turns into a sexual orgy. Frank has been characterized as a Dionysian personality, "with a restless, muscular energy that had something of the cruelty of wild animals in it" (p. 42), and now, sitting close to Marian in the sleigh and his desire for her growing, "His eyes, sweeping the winding road and the low, snow-covered bluffs, had something wolfish in them" (p. 61). This sexual passion has been symbolically foreshadowed the night before as they sat alone drinking brandy

¹⁸Hamilton, p. 67.

in front of the fire; as she left him to go up to bed in the room next to her husband's, ". . . the train of her velvet dress caught the leg of his broadcloth trousers and dragged with a friction that crackled and threw sparks. Both started. They stood looking at each other for a moment before she actually slipped through the door. Ellinger remained by the hearth, his arms folded tight over his chest, his curly lips compressed, frowning into the fire" (p. 56). The sparks of fire are obvious symbols for the intense desire which each feels and, with difficulty, represses.

The restraint that they have exercised the night before, however, is released when they get to the grove, the traditional site of Dionysian worship. They take their buffalo robes deep into the woods and spend the afternoon making love. Late that evening, Adolph Blum quietly witnesses the following scene:

Presently he heard low voices, coming nearer from the ravine. The big stranger who was visiting at the Forresters' emerged, carrying the buffalo robes on one arm; Mrs. Forrester herself was clinging to the other. They walked slowly, wholly absorbed by what they were saying to each other. When they came up to the sleigh, the man spread the robes on the seat and put his hands under Mrs. Forrester's arms to lift her in. But he did not lift her; he stood for a long while holding her crushed up against his breast, her face hidden in his black overcoat (p. 62).

After Frank finally puts Marian in the sleigh, he remembers the cedar boughs that they are supposed to get and goes back to cut some. The cedar boughs recall Dionysus's thyrsus, and along with the hatchet, they become phallic symbols which recall to Marian her orgiastic pleasures: "When the strokes of the hatchet rang out from the ravine, he [Adolph] could see her eyelids flutter. . . . [S]oft shivers went through her body" (p. 63). The scene is then appropriately closed with the image of

the rising moon.

For fulfillment, Marian's nature needs not only sex, but also wine, the Dionysian drink. When Niel drives her home one evening, she offers him sherry, which they too drink before the fire. On the night of her dinner for Frank and the Ogdens, they all drink whiskey cocktails, and then she and Frank also drink brandy. And on the occasion of another of Niel's visits, he "smelled a sharp odour of spirits" (p. 70) about her, and the captain requests that she serve tea rather than sherry. The association of wine and sex is also indicated in the scene which serves as Niel's initiation experience, for on the morning that he discovers Frank Ellinger in Marian's room, the fields are covered in "wine-like sunshine" (p. 80). And finally the moral and physical dissipation which Marian's drinking causes is indicated the night she calls Frank Ellinger to "congratulate" him on his marriage: "Her eyes were shrunk to hard points. Her brows, drawn together in an acute angle, kept twitching in the frown which held them--the singular frown of one overcome by alcohol or fatigue, who is holding on to consciousness by the strength of a single purpose. Her blue lips, the black shadows under her eyes made her look as if some poison were at work in her body" (p. 127).

Another pleasure which Marian considers equal to wine is that of dancing. At the height of her youth and success, she had given dances in the grove, and her laughter even sounds like dance music. She feels stifled in the little town of Sweet Water, and she tells Niel,

"Oh, but it is bleak! . . . Suppose we should have to stay here all next winter, too . . . and the next! What will become of me, Niel?" There was fear, unmistakable fright in her voice. "You see, there is nothing for me to do. I get no exercise. I don't skate; we didn't in California, and my ankles are weak. I've always danced in the winter; there's plenty of dancing at Colorado Springs. You wouldn't believe how I miss it. I shall dance till I'm

eighty. . . . I'll be the waltzing grandmother! It's good for me, I need it" (p. 73).

As Marian and Niel are talking, the new moon rises, appropriately indicative of the Dionysian subject of their discussion. This Dionysian nature of music and dancing has been commented upon by Nietzsche, who claims that Dionysian desire, with "its primitive joy experienced in pain itself, is the common source of music and tragic myth." This Dionysian nature thrives upon the art and rhythm that are produced by the "musical dissonance"¹⁹ that is so conducive to dancing.

On another moonlight night two years later, Niel walks down toward the footbridge below the Forresters' house, where he sees "a white figure standing on the bridge over the creek, motionless in the clear moonlight" (p. 116). He immediately goes to her, and as they walk along the lane, she again voices her fear of becoming poverty stricken and trapped in the dull little prairie town:

"You see, [she says,] two years, three years, more of this, and I could still go back to California--and live again. But after that . . . perhaps people think I've settled down to grow old gracefully, but I've not. I feel such a power to live in me, Niel." Her slender fingers gripped his wrist. "It's grown by being held back. Last winter I was with the Dalzells at Glenwood Springs for three weeks . . . and I was surprised at myself. I could dance all night and not feel tired. I could ride horseback all day and be ready for a dinner party in the evening. . . . I looked happier than any woman there. They were nearly all younger, much. But they seemed dull, bored to death. After a glass or two of champagne they went to sleep and had nothing to say. I always look better after the first glass--it gives me a little colour, it's the only thing that does. I accepted the Dalzells' invitation with a purpose; I wanted to see whether I had anything left worth saving. And I have, I tell you! You would hardly believe it, I could hardly believe it, but I still have!" (pp. 120-21).

¹⁹Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, vol. 1 of The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, ed. by Oscar Levy and trans. by Wm. A. Haussman (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1964), p. 183.

At this point in their walk, they have reached the bridge, which is "a bare white floor in the moonlight," and Mrs. Forrester continues her assertion that she is "struggling . . . to get out of this hole" (p. 121). Obviously, then, the moonlight is equated here with Dionysian desire--earlier the desire for sex and wine, now the desire for escape.

Like Marian, Ivy Peters is also a Dionysian figure, but whereas she exemplifies the joyful instinct for life and love that is implicit in Dionysian worship, he represents the destructive nature of the god. Just as the Bacchanal worshippers often tore apart wild creatures, so does Ivy maim a defenseless woodpecker. Moreover, the sexuality, which is associated with the ancient fertility god and symbolized by the snakes his worshippers carry, is indicated in his name Ivy Peters. In ancient myth the ivy, like the snake, was an ambiguous symbol, associated not only with death, but also with sex and fertility. Ivy, it will be remembered, was the plant which was entwined around Dionysus' thyrsus, his mythic rod which was topped with a pine cone and which was symbolic of regeneration. Indeed, it is implied that Ivy does have an affair with Mrs. Forrester, for once Niel observes him come up behind her and "unconcernedly put both arms around her, his hands meeting over her breast" (pp. 168-69).

However, his affair with her does not have the regenerative power of love, but only pulls her deeper into moral and physical degradation; he almost destroys her in the name of love, just as he does destroy the beautiful marsh land in the name of progress. It should be recalled here that Ivy's nickname is "Poison Ivy," and, as Walter Otto has pointed out, according to Dionysian myth, it is not "without significance that the ivy, in contrast to the enlivening and invigorating grape,

produces a poison which, it was believed, caused sterility. . . ."20

Ivy Peters, therefore, symbolizes the sterility and destruction of modern materialism.

Also according to Otto, the dual nature of Dionysus was symbolized by the two plants associated with him: the vine and the ivy.²¹ As illustrated in the novel, Marian Forrester represents the light and warmth which are necessary for the growth of the vine, as well as the passion which is the result of the fruit of the vine, the wine itself. Ivy Peters, however, is reminiscent of his namesake plant, the ivy, which

. . . has surprisingly little need for light and warmth, and grows green and fresh in the shade and in the cold, too. . . . It has been compared to the snake, and the cold nature ascribed both to it and to the snake has been advanced as a reason for their belonging to Dionysus. The way in which it creeps over the ground or winds itself around trees can really suggest the snakes which the wild women accompanying Dionysus wind around their hair and hold in their hands.²²

Therefore, the snake in Dionysian myth is associated not only with regeneration but also with death, both aspects of the fertility cult.

Ivy Peters' identification with the snake recalls Christian as well as pagan myth. Randall has observed that the setting of A Lost Lady--the lush and marshy meadows, pastures, and fields through which the creek gently winds--is reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, and, he says, "every Garden of Eden must have its serpent: Sweet Water has Ivy Peters. He is an embodiment of evil, a personification of pure malicious

²⁰Walter F. Otto, Dionysus: Myth and Cult, trans. and int. by Robert B. Palmer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), p. 155.

²¹Otto, p. 154.

²²Otto, pp. 154-55. It is significant that in ancient times ivy was often used to decorate graves.

destructive will."²³ While Niel Herbert and some other boys from the town are having a picnic in the grove one bright afternoon, they are interrupted by Ivy's uninvited intrusion. His appearance has been foreshadowed by the presence of a water snake, and he himself has small eyes and his pupils have the "fixed, unblinking hardness of a snake's or a lizard's" (p. 16). From the start he displays Satanic pride and defiance, and, significantly, he carries a gun. Symbolically, then, he introduces death and misery to this modern garden just as Satan had brought it to the Garden of Eden. Ivy has already poisoned several dogs, and as the young boys watch in horror, he cruelly knocks down and blinds a startled woodpecker, who, when she was turned loose,

. . . rose in the air with a whirling, corkscrew motion, darted to the right, struck a tree-trunk--to the left, and struck another. Up and down, backward and forward among the tangle of branches it flew, raking its feathers, falling and recovering itself. . . . There was something wild and desperate about the way the darkened creature beat its wings in the branches, whirling in the sunlight and never seeing it, always thrusting its head up and shaking it, as a bird does when it is drinking. Presently it managed to get its feet on the same limb where it had been struck, and seemed to recognize that perch. As if it had learned something by its bruises, it pecked and crept its way along the branch and disappeared into its own hole (pp. 19-20).

Ivy Peters' treatment of the woodpecker, which, Cather emphasizes, is female, foreshadows his later treatment of Marian Forrester. Like the woodpecker, she, too, is trapped and confused by her Dionysian desires for the earthly pleasures of sex and materialism and cannot see the Apollonian truth, order, and morality that are symbolized by the sun. She becomes morally blind under Peters' influence, allowing him to use his crooked methods to manage her business affairs in the hopes of gaining enough money to take her away from Sweet Water. Moreover, she

²³Randall, p. 181.

becomes even more lost after her husband dies; "without him, she was like a ship without ballast, driven hither and thither by every wind. She was flighty and perverse. She seemed to have lost her faculty of discrimination. . . ." (p. 150). Her progression in the book is thus a steady decline. Just as she was saved from her fall down the face of Eagle Cliff mountain by Mr. Forrester, so does he keep her from falling into complete moral degradation while he is alive. However, as he becomes weaker, she gradually falls further, having her first affair with Frank Ellinger, at least a member of her own class. After her husband dies, however, Marian no longer has anyone to lean on, and like Eve, she succumbs to the serpent, being seduced by Ivy Peters himself.

If Marian is a nineteenth century Eve in the Garden of the American West, then Daniel Forrester is ". . . what R. W. B. Lewis would term an 'American Adam'; he has come with the innocence and strength of an unfallen man and has built not only railroads but a home, the 'Forrester place,' in the midst of the Garden."²⁴ Like Marian, Captain Forrester also has an accident, a literal "fall" from a horse which breaks him up quite badly, and, as in the original Garden, it is not until after the defeat of the Adamic figure that the fall is complete. As Mr. Forrester's physical weakness increases, so does his wife's moral weakness. He retains his own moral integrity, but being aware of Marian's affair with Ellinger, he nevertheless fails to help her to regain hers. He has the ability to see, but he has lost the ability to act to help save either his wife or the marsh that he loves, but which he allows Peters to destroy. As the Blooms contend, "His only guilt is his failure to follow his vision, and his self-recognition invites our

²⁴Bruce Baker, II, "Nebraska Regionalism in Selected Works of Willa Cather," Western American Literature, 3 (1968-69), 33.

compassion. Thus, as a frustrated pioneer living to see the result of his own weakness, he takes on an intensified pathos."²⁵

Also, as the Captain's strength declines, so does that of the honest-natured and generous-hearted West which he has helped to build. The Blooms believe that in Daniel and Marian Forrester, Cather has presented

. . . the accessory causes of Western decay through the personification of two pioneer types. Captain Forrester is the tragic agent of a weakened morality which precludes his defense of that which he recognizes as just. At the same time, Marian Forrester is paralyzed by a residual inertness that simply prevents her from identifying right and wrong and from choosing between them. The Captain and Mrs. Forrester, therefore, with their combined inability to act of their own accord, serve as partial foils to the unqualified evil of Peters.²⁶

Cather realizes, therefore, that the causes of the decline of the American West are various and complex, weakness and passivity being almost as much to blame as active destruction.

Ivy Peters, the materialistic opportunist, and Niel Herbert, the idealistic young observer, are also used as character foils. Both are of the modern generation, but whereas Ivy, like Bayliss Wheeler, is a manifestation of decayed morality and of utilitarian and materialistic values, Niel represents a more absolute morality and retains the old values of beauty and friendship, honesty and generosity. He too is a business man, but like Captain Forrester and unlike Peters, he tries to keep his integrity. Niel has grown up during the tumultuous period when these old values were changing, and unlike Jim Burden, he has accepted

²⁵Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1962), p. 71.

²⁶Edward and Lillian Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy, p. 70.

reality and turned from an Adamic innocent into a mature adult. His initiation into the knowledge of sin and evil, as symbolized in the novel by Marian's illicit affair, is foreshadowed by the fall he takes from the tree as he is trying to help the poor woodpecker, just as later he tries to help Mrs. Forrester. His actual initiation experience, however, is the episode in which, as a young man, he takes the fresh, but sensuous roses to Mrs. Forrester's window, only to hear her laughter mingled with that of Frank Ellinger. Running down the hill and away from the house, he threw the roses

. . . over the wire fence into a mudhole the cattle had trampled under the bank of the creek. He did not know whether he had left the house by the driveway or had come down through the shrubbery. In that instant between stooping to the window-sill and rising, he had lost one of the most beautiful things in his life. Before the dew dried, the morning had been wrecked for him; and all subsequent mornings, he told himself bitterly. This day saw the end of that admiration and loyalty that had been like a bloom on his existence. He could never recapture it. It was gone, like the morning freshness of the flowers (p. 81).

Niel's innocence is lost forever, and so are his illusions about Mrs. Forrester. However, although for years he retains in his mind the image of her infidelity and the hurt and disappointment it brought him, he is eventually able to forgive her not only for her affair with Frank, but for her even coarser relationship with Ivy Peters. Time gives him a better perspective on her life, and he comes to see her as a brave and wonderful woman, symbolic to him of beauty and joy striving to exist in a harsh world. He cherishes his acquaintance with her and is proud to hear from his old friend Ed Elliott about her good fortune in eventually marrying a kind and wealthy old Englishman from South America whom she had met in California.

In A Lost Lady, therefore, Cather has used both Greek and

Christian myth to vivify and universalize her theme of the dying frontier and its accompanying value system. By portraying Marian Forrester as the prototype of Venus, she emphasizes her beauty, graciousness, and desirability; by using the symbols of the Dionysian moon and the Apollonian sun to represent her and her husband respectively, she emphasizes the eternal conflict between order and disorder, reason and passion, restraint and freedom, old age and youth which leads to Marian's own personal dilemma; and finally, by drawing a parallel between the Forresters' decline and the fall of Adam and Eve, she indicates the weakness and innocence as well as the strength and humanity both of the Forresters and of the old West in contrast to the diabolical evil of such men as Ivy Peters and of the decadent, materialistic society which he represents.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CONFLICT OF THE ARTIST IN THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE

Each of the novels Willa Cather wrote before The Professor's House (1925) has its structural basis in an established myth, either classical or Biblical in origin. However, as Bernice Slote has observed, by 1925 her writing had undergone "a gradual development from the carefully structured mythic or symbolic pattern . . . to the use of people and the land remembered, a free dependence on personal materials, ideas, and feeling as their own patterns. The recognizable kingdom of art has gone from surface allusion to organic principle."¹ However, in such novels as The Professor's House, the mythic material does not disappear; it is simply presented in a different and more psychologically subtle manner. The Professor's House, which, in contrast to My Ántonia, is a novel of ideas rather than emotions, cannot be traced to a specific mythic source, as Alexander's Bridge, for example, can be traced to the myth of Paris and Helen or The Song of the Lark to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Nevertheless it is mythic in its intellectual and psychological treatment of the basic dichotomy of mankind--of his eternal conflict between East and West, order and disorder, security and freedom, the ideal and the material, reason and passion, art and

¹Bernice Slote, ed., "The Kingdom of Art," in The Kingdom of Art (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 109-10.

religion, the individual and society--which is symbolized by the mythic figures of Apollo and Dionysus.

This conflict between Apollo and Dionysus has been interwoven into the mythic fabric of all of Cather's previous novels, but never before has the ambivalence of human nature been treated with such complexity and understanding as in The Professor's House. In her frontier novels O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, and A Lost Lady, she seems to give the ordered Apollonian aspect of nature precedence; in One of Ours Dionysian desire is seen to be superior to Apollonian conventionality; and in Alexander's Bridge and The Song of the Lark, the conflict is left unresolved, Dionysian desire and Apollonian order both being necessary to the lives of Alexander and Thea. In The Professor's House, however, Cather explores more fully the positive as well as the negative implications of both sides of human nature, her psychological quest revealing the deepest ambiguities of human nature. Professor St. Peter's experience, therefore, becomes "a dark night of the soul rather than an individual case study,"² and it illuminates not only his life, but also Cather's life and all lives.

Throughout the novel, Professor Godfrey St. Peter is torn between his Apollonian need for individuality and solitude in which to develop his mind, spirit, and artistic ideals and the Dionysian pull of his family, urging him to cultivate his emotions, his material comforts, and his relationship to society. Significantly, the Professor's need for solitude parallels Cather's, for Lewis reports that after she achieved a larger popular and material success and recognition with One

²David Stouck, "Willa Cather and The Professor's House: 'Letting Go With the Heart,'" Western American Literature, 7 (1972), 16.

of Ours, which won the Pulitzer Prize just as St. Peter's history won the Oxford prize, her freedom to create was threatened. While working on The Professor's House, "the one thing needful for her, as for most artists, was solitude--solitude not only to work in, but to feel and think in."³

In the novel this need for solitude is symbolized by St. Peter's small third floor study, which resembles the one Cather had used in Isabelle McClung's house in Pittsburg:

The low ceiling sloped down on three sides, the slant being interrupted on the east by a single square window, swinging outward on hinges and held ajar by a hook in the sill. This was the sole opening for light and air. Walls and ceiling alike were covered with a yellow paper which had once been very ugly, but had faded into inoffensive neutrality. The matting on the floor was worn and scratchy. Against the wall stood an old walnut table, with one leaf up, holding piles of orderly papers. Before it was a cane-backed office chair that turned on a screw. This dark den had for many years been the Professor's study. Downstairs, off the back parlour, he had a show study, with roomy shelves where his library was housed, and a proper desk at which he wrote letters. But it was a sham. This was the place where he worked.⁴

The study was inconvenient and uncomfortable, being heated only by an old gas stove which leaked dangerously when the window was not open, but "it was the one place in the house where he could get isolation, insulation from the engaging drama of domestic life" (p. 19). Throughout the fifteen years he had been working on his "Spanish Adventurers in North America," this room has always been a sanctuary and a center of Apollonian order for him; all the "notes and the records and the ideas

³Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 136.

⁴Willa Cather, The Professor's House, vol. 8 of The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather, lib. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1938), pp. 8-9. Future references to this source will be paginated within the text.

always came back to this room. It was here they were digested and sorted and woven into their proper place in history" (p. 19).

While he was writing his history of the Spanish adventurers, Professor St. Peter gave it precedence even over his family. Once at his desk, he would not leave it even to go downstairs to get more kerosene for his lamp, because "On that perilous journey down through the human house he might lose his mood, his enthusiasm, even his temper" (p. 21). This rejection of his family, even if only temporary, recalls Cather's early comments on the necessary isolation and alienation of the artist in modern society. On October 21, 1894, she had declared in a Nebraska State Journal article that the "fewer friends he [the artist] has the better. . . . When a man has nothing on earth but a purpose people might hold their tongues and leave him alone with it. Leave him to fail alone with it if God shall put upon the chagrin of failure, to succeed alone with it if God has reserved for him that fulness of joy."⁵ And again on September 23, 1894 she stated,

The further the world advances the more it becomes evident that an author's only safe course is to cling close to the skirts of his art, forsaking all others, and keep unto her as long as they two shall live. An artist should not be vexed by human hobbies or human follies; he should be able to lift himself up into the clear firmament of creation where the world is not. He should be among men but not one of them, in the world but not of the world. Other men may think and reason and believe and argue, but he must create.⁶

As Cather implies here, the artist St. Peter actually becomes more married to his art than to his wife Lillian. In St. Peter's "world of Apollo . . . not the life mystery of blood and of the powers of earth but

⁵Willia Cather, The Kingdom of Art, ed. by Bernice Slote, p. 142.

⁶Cather, The Kingdom of Art, p. 407.

the clarity and the breadth of the mind hold sway."⁷ Godfrey's alienation from his wife is indicated not only by his extended visits to his old study, but also by the fact that they have separate rooms in the new house they have built with the prize money he received for his history. Moreover, as the gap between Godfrey and his wife increases, so do his wife's attentions to her sons-in-law, Scott McGregor and Louie Marsellus.

As he grows older, Godfrey becomes even more convinced of his need for sanctuary and solitude. Louie plans to take his wife Rosamund to Europe for the summer, and he asks Mr. and Mrs. St. Peter to go along. However, Godfrey knows from the start that he won't go. He reflects that "He could get out of it without hurting anybody--though he knew Louie would be sorry. He could simply insist that he must work, and that he couldn't work away from his old study. There were some advantages about being a writer of histories. The desk was a shelter one could hide behind, it was a hole one could creep into" (p. 157). When he tells Lillian of his plans, she notes that he is drawing away from his family and becoming "lonely and inhuman," to which Godfrey answers that "the habit of living with ideas grows on one" (p. 158). Obviously, Godfrey is becoming too engrossed in his ideas of the mind, so much so that he is losing his perspective on himself and his relation to humanity. The dangers implicit in such an exclusive reliance on the mind have been pointed out by Carl Jung, who asserts that,

Modern man does not understand how much his rationalism . . . has put him at the mercy of the psychic "underworld." He has freed himself from "superstition" (or so he believes), but in the process he has lost his spiritual values to a positively dangerous degree. His moral and spiritual

⁷Walter F. Otto, Dionysus, trans. and int. by Robert B. Palmer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), p. 142.

tradition has disintegrated, and he is now paying the price for this break-up in world-wide disorientation and dissociation.⁸

Like Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, Godfrey St. Peter sacrifices spirituality to intellect, and the resultant fragmentation of his psyche nearly destroys him.

Solitude is indeed a necessary requirement of the writer, but solitude alone is insufficient for the creation of art. The true artist must also have a first hand knowledge of life--of the individual and society. In Cather's own words, "An author must live, live deeply and richly and generously, live not only his own life, but all lives. He must have experiences that cannot be got out of a classical dictionary or even in polite society. He must know the world a good deal as God knows it, in all the pitiable depravity of its evil, in all the measureless sublimity of its good."⁹ Ironically, then Professor St. Peter's increased withdrawal from life is actually a reaction against the true source of art, for art and history are grounded in humanity. Even St. Peter himself subconsciously recognizes the importance of ordinary life in the arts, for he reflects that

Just as when Queen Mathilde was doing the long tapestry now shown at Bayeaux--working her chronicle of the deeds of knights and heroes--alongside the big pattern of dramatic action, she and her women carried the little playful pattern of birds and beasts that are a story in themselves; so, to him, the most important chapters of his history were interwoven with personal memories (p. 96).

For years, while his daughters were growing up and while he was writing his history, he "had managed . . . to live two lives, both of them very

⁸Carl G. Jung, ed., "Approaching the Unconscious," in Man and His Symbols (1964; rpt. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1968), p. 84.

⁹Cather, The Kingdom of Art, p. 143.

intense" (p. 22). He had given of himself to his family, his students, and his art, each life complementing and expanding the others. He had "loved youth--he was weak to it, it kindled him," (p. 22) and without realizing it, he was inspired to greater artistic understanding and creative expression by his eager, curious students. Therefore, his withdrawal into his mind is doubly tragic for it not only separates him from his family and friends, but it also precludes any creative art. Lillian recognizes the tragedy of her husband's regression when she tells him, "I think your ideas were best when you were your most human self" (p. 158).

The Professor's retreat from the world seems to be augmented by his increasing age, and yet, paradoxically, it is his mind and emotions and not his physical body that seem to have aged. His wife observes,

"You are not old enough for the pose you take. That's what puzzles me. For so many years you never seemed to grow at all older, though I did. Two years ago you were an impetuous young man. Now you save yourself in everything. You're naturally warm and affectionate; all at once you begin shutting yourself away from everybody. I don't think you'll be happier for it" (p. 158).

Godfrey cannot explain his sudden submission to the despair and frustration of age; he can only say that he is disturbed by "the feeling that I've put a great deal behind me, where I can't go back to it again--and I don't really wish to go back. The way would be too long and too fatiguing" (p. 159). Godfrey feels a sense of accomplishment for his authorship of the history of the Spanish adventurers, but he realizes that man cannot exist in the past, and he feels no personal relevance to the decadent materialistic present and little or no hope for an apparently bleak future. His life has been based on ideals and desire, but the death of his ideals, which are symbolized by his friend Tom

Outland and the Blue Mesa he had discovered, has also killed his desire and joy for living.

The Professor's conflict between past and present, the ideal and the material, the need for solitude and the need for society is symbolized in the novel by the juxtaposition of his two houses. The old house, in all its ugliness and discomfort, symbolizes his past happiness, both with his work and with his family. In his solitary attic room, he could work unhindered and yet know that the process of life was going on just below him; in fact he had concrete evidence of it in the study itself, for the room also doubled as a work room for the seamstress Augusta, and it contained her material, patterns, and the forms she used for fitting his wife and daughters Rosamund and Kathleen. These forms have become symbolic to him of his family, and he refuses to let Augusta take them away from the old house, feeling that he cannot work without them in their accustomed places. Moreover, although the study itself is cramped, if used properly, it can serve as a gateway to the world of art, for out of his one window he is able to see "a long blue, hazy smear-- Lake Michigan, the inland sea of his childhood" (p. 23). When he becomes "tired and dull," he escapes from his study and goes swimming in this lake which, in its deep blue color, represents the purity of ideals, of beauty, and of truth.

The study is not the only retreat the Professor has in his old house, however. There is also his "walled-in garden [which] had been the comfort of his life" and "the one thing his neighbours held against him" (p. 6). Here, separated from the prying eyes of outsiders, he has cultivated a beautiful and well-ordered French garden, an artistic creation in itself. During the summers, when Lillian and the girls were

vacationing in Colorado, he had worked and studied there, and at night he had spent long hours there talking to Tom Outland about his ideals, dreams, and memories of the ethereal mesa. The garden, therefore, becomes a symbol of his art, being both a source of its inspiration and a revelation of its order. However, it also indicates the disturbing characteristics of art when it is divorced from life, for "There was not a blade of grass; it was a tidy half-acre of glistening gravel and glistening shrubs and bright flowers" (p. 7). His landlord chides him for his "barren" shrubs which produce no fruit, and indeed, the garden, though beautiful, does exude a disagreeable atmosphere of sterility and barrenness.

In contrast to the old house, the new one represents the materialism of contemporary society in general and of St. Peter's family in particular. His history was translated into vulgar terms when it won the Oxford prize for history and its accompanying five thousand pounds which had been used to build his new house. Moreover, the house itself becomes a symbol of modern materialistic culture. As Marshall McLuhan has perceived, "Literate man, once having accepted an analytic technology of fragmentation, is not nearly so accessible to cosmic patterns as tribal man. He prefers separateness and compartmented spaces, rather than the open cosmos."¹⁰ St. Peter and his wife now have separate rooms, separate closets, and even separate bathrooms, St. Peter's being a "glittering white cubicle flooded with electric light," (p. 28) symbolic of the sterility and coldness of modern society.

The influence of money and of material goods has indeed been the

¹⁰ Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 118.

most disruptive agent in St. Peter's life. Just as in a mythic sense, "Money . . . has the power to specialize and to rechannel human energies and to separate functions,"¹¹ so has it separated St. Peter from his wife and family. The separate rooms he and his wife live in are symbolical of an even greater mental, emotional, and physical separation. As the Professor has receded further and further into his work, she has been engulfed in an ever-increasing interest in worldly things and in her increasingly materialistic daughters and sons-in-law. St. Peter admits that "That worldliness, that willingness to get the most out of occasions and people, which had developed so strongly in Lillian in the last few years . . . was an element that had always been in [her]. . ." (p. 156). For years St. Peter had admired this quality in her because, with her good taste and her small inheritance, she had always been able to keep their house and clothes from looking drab and pathetic like those of many of the other professors. Even St. Peter has become somewhat addicted to secular and material comforts. He enjoys his old imported wine and cheeses, and he grudgingly admits his pleasure in the luxurious hotel suite Louie furnishes him in Chicago. In order to accomplish his work, he has often neglected such discomforts as his leaky stove and harsh light, but "He was by no means an ascetic. He knew that he was terribly selfish about personal pleasures, fought for them. If a thing gave him delight, he got it, if he sold his shirt for it. By doing without so many so-called necessities he had managed to have his luxuries" (p. 20). Godfrey is bothered by material comforts only when they become an end in themselves and a means of corrupting the ideals and morals of man.

¹¹McLuhan, p. 125.

In The Professor's House the royal color purple is used to symbolize material wealth and its accompanying pride and hardness, as well as the violence of Dionysian passion, both wealth and passion being earthly values. Lillian is associated with this color twice, indicating that she is both materialistic and passionate. Rosamund and Louie bring her a bouquet of violets, and one afternoon Godfrey comes upon her having tea with Louie and wearing "an orchid velvet ribbon about her shining hair" (p. 72). Louie is showing her a necklace he has bought for Rosamund, the expensive necklace symbolizing his reliance on material objects to express his feelings. Lillian holds it up "lovingly in her fingers," but she shows that her materialism is not as extensive as the younger generation's when she protests to him that to her emeralds seem "a little out of scale" (p. 70) for Hamilton. When the Professor sees his wife with her admiring son-in-law, he becomes freshly aware of her physical beauty. Whereas he has an Apollonian reliance on the mind, she is characterized by a passionate physical Dionysian nature. St. Peter realizes that, "With her really radiant charm, she had a very interesting mind--but it was quite wrong to call it mind, the connotation was false. What she had was a richly endowed nature that responded strongly to life and art, and very vehement likes and dislikes which were often quite out of all proportion to the trivial object or person that aroused them" (p. 44).

As a young man, the Professor had been so passionately in love with Lillian that he had accepted the first professorship offered him in order to be able to marry her. In the intervening years, however, their young passion satiated, they have grown apart, and Godfrey now associates her with one of the forms in his study, the bust that "looked so ample

and billowy (as if you might lay your head upon its deep-breathing softness and rest safe forever)," but which really "presented the most unsympathetic surface imaginable, . . . a dead, opaque, lumpy solidity, like chunks of putty, or tightly packed sawdust--very disappointing to the tactile sense, yet somehow always fooling you again" (pp. 10-11). Evidently, the Professor has also been disappointed in his wife and her growing hardness, coldness, and materialism.

The other form in St. Peter's study symbolizes his daughters, especially Rosamund. Its "bosom resembled a strong wire bird cage," indicating his daughters' heartlessness and coldness, but it responds to a new party dress by taking on "a sprightly, tricky air," (p. 11) just as Rosamund responds to material objects. The Professor notes that since Rosamund's marriage to Louie Marsellus, who has made a fortune by marketing Tom Outland's invention, both she and his wife have "changed and hardened" (p. 157). When Rosamund comes to visit her father in his old study, wearing a "silk suit of a vivid shade of lilac, admirably suited to her complexion and showing that in the colour of her cheeks there was actually a tone of warm lavender" (p. 53), she reveals her basic selfish and mercenary nature. Shading her eyes with a lilac sunshade, she offers to share some of the Outland inheritance with her father and is piqued when he indicates that the money would cheapen his feeling for his deceased friend. Moreover, she resents his suggestion that she give some of the money to Professor Crane, who had assisted Tom in his experiments, and she seems blithely neglectful of her responsibility to find Tom's friend Roddy Blake. Her newly and easily acquired wealth has made Rosamund so hard that she is blind to the deepest feelings of sympathy and concern for others, and the only emotion that she shows besides

selfishness, hatred, and resentment is the Dionysian passion she feels for her husband. Sighing "luxuriously," (p. 56) she tells her father that Louie has made her happy, and she and Louie are sometimes unable to restrain their passion in public, as when he caresses her at one of the St. Peters' dinners.

Rosamund's wealth has made her haughty and proud toward her family and friends. One day as St. Peter is coming to visit his younger daughter Kathleen, he notices Rosamund's Pierce-Arrow and chauffeur in front of the house, and then he sees her as she comes

. . . out of the bungalow alone, and down the path to the side-walk, without seeing her father. He noticed a singularly haughty expression on her face; her brows drawn together over her nose. The curl of her lips was handsome, but terrifying. He observed also something he had not seen before--a coat of soft, purple-grey fur, that quite disguised the wide stooping shoulders he regretted in his truly beautiful daughter (p. 76).

St. Peter compliments Rosamund on her furs, telling her that "these things with a kind of lurking purple and lavender in them are splendid" (p. 76) for her. Significantly, it is only since she has married Louie and become wealthy that she was worn this color, indicating again its symbolic associations with money and passion.

When St. Peter enters Kathleen's bungalow, he is disturbed to find her unhappy and envious. Whereas the beautiful but proud Rosamund resembles her mother, Kathleen is more like her father, having an independent but sympathetic nature as well as some artistic talent. She has asked her father to come to help her select some new furs, but after Rosamund's visit, she breaks out in tears, saying that now she doesn't want any because her sister "spoils everything." She admits to her father that she is envious and adds, "'I don't think I would be if she let me alone, but she comes here with her magnificence and takes the life

out of all our poor little things. Everybody knows she's rich, why does she have to keep rubbing it in'" (p. 79). Kathleen is convinced that her sister hates her and is appalled by the way she overdresses and exhibits her wealth. As St. Peter fearfully watches his daughter, he sees that "Her pale skin had taken on a greenish tinge--there was no doubt about it. He had never happened to see that change occur in a face before, and he had never realized to what an ugly, painful transformation the common phrase 'green with envy' referred" (p. 80). Kathleen tries to explain to her father how she feels about her sister, telling him,

"When we were at home, Rosamund was a kind of ideal to me. What she thought about anything decided it for me. But she's entirely changed. She's become Louie. Indeed, she's worse than Louie. He and all this money have ruined her. Oh, Daddy, why didn't you and Professor Crane get to work and stop all this before it began? You were to blame. You knew that Tom had left something that was worth a lot, both of you. Why didn't you do something? You let it lie there in Crane's laboratory for this--this Marsellus to come along and exploit, until he almost thinks it's his own idea (p. 81).

Kathleen appears to be jealous and envious because Rosamund got all of Tom's inheritance, but when one realizes that she probably loved Tom herself, or, if not, that he had proposed to her before he did to Rosamund, her feelings are more understandable. Even now, she retains more real concern for him and his memory than does Rosamund, his fiancée who promptly forgot him and all the ideals he stood for when, after inheriting his fortune, she married Louie so quickly.

Kathleen is not the only character who is envious, however. Just as she is associated with the color green, even her hair having "green glints in it" (p. 32), so is her husband. Scott McGregor had been a close friend of Tom, and he resents Louie's proprietary attitude to the dead hero whose wife and fortune he has exploited. Moreover, he deeply

resents the Marselluses having used Tom's money to build for themselves a pretentious Norwegian manor house--a house which, ironically, they name Outland as a "memorial" to Tom. Thus, while Louie naively raves to Sir Edgar, St. Peter's distinguished dinner guest, about the remarkableness of Tom, Scott quietly fumes with "his eyes upon his cool green salad. He was struggling with a desire to shout to the Britisher that Marsellus had never so much as seen Tom Outland, while he, McGregor, had been his classmate and friend" (p. 37).

Louie Marsellus is the bright young engineer who had foreseen the monetary potential in Outland's vacuum and who, in marketing the product, had gained for himself both Outland's fortune and his fiancée. As contrasted with Outland and St. Peter, who represent the ideals of pre-war society, Louie is the ambiguous symbol of post-war technological and materialistic values. Like Bayliss Wheeler and Ivy Peters, he thinks in terms of profit and expense, getting money and spending it, but nevertheless, he is also a generous and sympathetic person. When Mrs. Crane comes to St. Peter to complain about their rights in the Outland vacuum, and when Kathleen tells him about Augusta's having lost \$500.00 in a poor investment, it is to Louie that St. Peter plans to go for help, not to Rosamund. Rosamund callously drags her father to Chicago to help her select some Spanish furniture but becomes so involved in her cold and deliberate "orgy of acquisition" (p. 150) that she even neglects to pay her father's way. Louie, on the other hand, provides the St. Peters with a luxurious hotel suite when he accompanies them to Chicago, and he offers to pay their expenses for a European tour. Also, one afternoon--wearing a purple golf jacket, again the color of wealth and passion--he bursts into his father-in-law's study and invites St. Peter to ride

with him and Rosamund out to the country club. On the way he shows his generosity by offering to give the McGregors a chiffonier that Scott has admired, only to be rebuked by his wife, who cruelly blurts out the rumour that Scott had blackballed him for the Arts and Letters. Marsellus is hurt, of course, but he is quick to forgive both Scott and his wife.

The conflict between idealism and materialism which is so central to The Professor's House is symbolized by the contrasting characters of Marsellus and Tom Outland. Louie greatly admires Tom, and when he visits the professor's study, he regards Tom's yellow and purple blanket with near reverence, declaring, "I never think of him as a rival . . . I think of him as a brother, an adored and gifted brother" (p. 161). And to Sir Edgar, Louie describes Tom as

" . . . a brilliant young American scientist and inventor, who was killed in Flanders, fighting with the Foreign Legion, the second year of the war, when he was barely thirty years of age. Before he dashed off to the front, this youngster had discovered the principle of the Outland vacuum, worked out the construction of the bulk-headed vacuum that is revolutionizing aviation. He had not only invented it, but, curiously enough for such a hot-headed fellow, had taken pains to protect it. He had no time to communicate his discovery or to commercialize it--simply bolted to the front and left the most important discovery of his time to take care of itself" (p. 35).

In choosing to go to the war, Tom has placed his ideals over his material welfare, but whereas he has died for an ideal, Louie has ignorantly and unwittingly killed an ideal by his exploitation of another man's invention.

St. Peter observes of Tom that "As an investigator, he was clear-sighted and hard-headed; but in personal relations he was apt to be exaggerated and quixotic. He idealized the people he loved and paid his devoir to the ideal rather than to the individual . . ." (p. 167). This

characteristic explains his devotion to Rosamund, and it also explains his tragic friendship with Roddy McDowell. Tom had met Roddy when he was working in Pardee, New Mexico, as a call boy. One night Roddy won a lot of money in a poker game, but he was too drunk to get home safely with his winnings. Tom, who was ten years younger than him, followed him to his room, put his money in a safe place, and sat on the floor wrapped in an old coat until Roddy woke up the next morning. Afterwards, the two boys became close friends, and when Tom was weakened with a bout of pneumonia, Roddy quit his job on the railroad and secured a job for both of them herding cattle, the fresh air of the open range being what Tom needed for his recuperation. While they were camped beside the Blue Mesa, they discovered the remains of an ancient Indian cliff dwelling. Tom was fascinated by the old relics, but while he was in Washington trying to get the government to help with the exploration and excavation, Roddy sold all the movable remains. Therefore, just as Louie has ignorantly exploited Tom's scientific invention, so does Roddy innocently exploit his archeological discovery, the idealistic being defeated by the materialistic in each instance.

The purity of Tom's ideals is symbolized in the novel by the turquoise, the sacred stone of the ancient Indian civilization. When Tom first came to the St. Peters' home, he left not only some pottery for Mrs. St. Peter, but also some gifts for the girls:

Taking a buckskin bag from his pocket, he walked over to the window-seat where the children were, and held out his hand to them, saying, "These I would like to give to the little girls." In his palm lay two lumps of soft blue stone, the colour of robin's eggs, or of the sea on halcyon days of summer.

The children marvelled. "Oh, what are they?"

"Turquoises, just the way they came out of the mine, before the jewellers have tampered with them and made them look green. The Indians like them this way" (p. 115).

Symbolically, Cather implies, just as the turquoise is superior in its natural state, so are man and civilization better when they are close to the sources of nature. The color blue, in contrast to purple or green, is established here as a symbol of purity, freedom, and aspiration. Just as the Professor seeks freedom and regeneration in the blue water of Lake Michigan, so does Tom seek truth and freedom high on the Blue Mesa.

The turquoise bracelet that Tom later gives Rosamund is also used as an effective symbol for the ideal beauty, purity, and innocence of the ancient Pueblo civilization in contrast to the corruption and vulgarity of modern materialistic values, which are symbolized by the gaudy and expensive necklace Louie gives her. As Schroeter has proclaimed,

Whereas the gold necklace, . . . [Louie's] present . . . to his wife at Christmas, is the kind of showy trinket that anyone could pick up in an antique shop if he had enough money, the "turquoise set in dull silver" which Marsellus "tolerantly" recalls . . . had been a gift from Tom Outland: it has never been bought or sold, it is unique, it is made by hand, it is the product of an ancient and vanished Indian civilization, and its value is of the intrinsic sort that comes from the beauty of its design and workmanship, and of the extrinsic sort conferred by its origin and the beauty of the motives behind Outland's finding and then giving it as a gift. The basic irony, then, as those familiar with the values running all through Willa Cather's fiction will recognize, is that the half-forgotten Indian bracelet represents the true beauty, while the overvalued gold necklace represents the false.¹²

Moreover, as Schroeter and several other critics have recognized, the bracelet of "turquoise set in dull silver" is the key to the structure of the novel. As Schroeter says, "The whole novel . . . is constructed like the Indian bracelet. It is not hard to see that Willa Cather wants to draw an ironic contrast not only between two pieces of jewelry

¹²James Schroeter, "Willa Cather and The Professor's House," Yale Review, 54 (1965), 500.

but between two civilizations, between two epochs, and between the two men, Marsellus and Outland, who symbolize these differences."¹³ Willa Cather has once again resolved her own mythic conflict in favor of the West, which represents to her beauty, freedom, and wholeness in contrast to the stifling conventions and the mental and emotional fragmentation of Eastern society. However, the West she applauds is not the new industrial and materialistic West, but rather the ideal and essential West of the past.

Symbolically, then, the Blue Mesa itself is representative of all important human experience, of art and religion, order and desire, reason and passion. In their daily lives the people of the mesa had combined beauty and utility, the common experience with the impossible dream. This combination of both the Apollonian and the Dionysian aspects of life is symbolized in the novel by the parallel symbols of the sun and the moon and by the colors of yellow (or red) and blue (or bluish purple). The mesa itself is a deep blue with a purplish cast, and Tom describes the days they spend beside it as "blue and gold" (p. 187). Camped in its shadow, they observe the golden cedars and the mesa top itself, "red with sunrise" (p. 189), and during a storm they hear the thunder resound from the depths of the tempting mesa which, Tom says, was "always before us, and was always changing" (p. 189). Finally, Tom determines to swim the Cruzados River which separates them from the giant and apparently inaccessible mesa. After crossing the river, he rides into Cow Canon, where the "bluish rock and the suntanned grass, under the unusual purple-grey of the sky, gave the whole valley a very soft colour, lavender and pale gold. . ." (p. 196). Riding on, he turns into an

¹³Schroeter, p. 501.

adjacent box canyon, and suddenly comes face to face with the remains of an extinct civilization. He tells St. Peter,

In stopping to take breath, I happened to glance up at the canon wall. I wish I could tell you what I saw there, just as I saw it on that first morning, through a veil of lightly falling snow. Far up above me a thousand feet or so, set in a great cavern in the face of the cliff, I saw a little city of stone, asleep. It was as still as sculpture--and something like that. It all hung together, seemed to have a kind of composition: pale little houses of stone nestling close to one another, perched on top of each other, with flat roofs, narrow windows, straight walls, and in the middle of the group, a round tower.

It was beautifully proportioned, that tower, swelling out to a larger girth a little above the base, then growing slender again. There was something symmetrical and powerful about the swell of the masonry. The tower was the fine thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something. It was red in colour, even on that grey day. In sunlight it was the colour of winter oak leaves. A fringe of cedars grew along the edge of the cavern, like a garden. They were the only living things. Such silence and stillness and repose--immortal repose. That village sat looking down into the cañon with the calmness of eternity. The falling snowflakes, sprinkling the piñons, gave it a special kind of solemnity. I can't describe it. It was more like sculpture than anything else. I knew at once that I had come upon the city of some extinct civilization, hidden away in this inaccessible mesa for centuries, preserved in the dry air and almost perpetual sunlight like a fly in amber, guarded by the cliffs and the river and the desert (pp. 198-99).

This beautiful scene--metaphorically described as "sculpture"--is an obvious symbol for the eternal beauty and order of art. The little town, harmoniously grouped around the beautiful tower, illustrates the "perfect sense of proportion" which Cather believed was the "best and highest grace that an artist attains" and which she felt was "most lamentably lacking in the art of this generation."¹⁴ Randall has also recognized the essential artistry of the city, asserting that

¹⁴Willia Cather, The World and the Parish, II, ed., by William M. Curtin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 819.

Their dwellings are grouped around a central tower, forming an artistic whole; and every artifact found on the mesa displays an equal sense of form; even the household utensils combine to a remarkable degree the useful with the beautiful. To Tom, the composition, symmetry, and organic form of the cliff city suggest the balanced, orderly lives of the people who once inhabited it: they must have made of their everyday lives something approaching the order and harmony of a work of art.¹⁵

The tower itself is the central symbol of the village, signifying by its height, its central position in the city, and its own symmetrical design that both Dionysian desire and aspiration and Apollonian order and reason are necessary to the highest art.

The synthesis that this ancient civilization had been able to make between the Dionysian and Apollonian aspects of life is symbolized by the alternating influence of the moon and the sun on the mesa. On that first Christmas night, just after Tom has made his discovery, he is unable to sleep. He puts on his coat and goes outside to "get sight of the mesa. . . . The moon was almost full, hanging directly over the mesa, which had never looked so solemn and silent. . . ." He wonders how many years have passed since the tower was built. "I had been to Ácoma and the Hopi villages," he tells St. Peter, "but I'd never seen a tower like that one. It seemed to me to mark a difference. I felt that only a strong and aspiring people would have built it, and a people with a feeling for design" (pp. 200-201). The cliff dwellers' passions and aspirations are symbolized not only by the tower, but also by the Dionysian moon under which Tom stands, and their talent for design is symbolized by the Apollonian sun, the "blazing sun" (p. 206) which shines in the village courtyard and which, with the wind, keeps the whole

¹⁵John H. Randall, III, "Willa Cather and the Decline of Greatness," in The Twenties, ed. by Richard E. Langford and William E. Taylor (Deland Florida: Everett/Edwards, Inc., 1966), p. 81.

village neat and clean.

Moreover, these ancient people had experienced the full Dionysian initiation, their desire having led them not only to beauty and accomplishment, but also to death and destruction. They had created an artistic civilization, a virtual paradise, but evidently they had also known evil, for Tom and Roddy find a young woman, mummified in the desert air, whose expression and gaping wound indicate a horrible and violent death. Father Duchene suggests that she may have been killed by an irate husband for being unfaithful, his opinion being based on the primitive law that a husband does have such a right. The name that Tom gives this woman--Mother Eve--further indicates the intrusion of evil upon this peaceful, utopian civilization, and it serves to foreshadow the subsequent extinction of the race, which, Father Duchene believes, was attacked by some marauding tribe while it was tending the fields below the mesa. Moreover, the Dionysian moon portends evil at least once for Tom, Roddy, and Henry, their cook, Tom himself proclaiming that "the little new moon, that looked so innocent, brought us trouble" (p. 213). While they are all on an exploring expedition, Henry, who was the smallest and thus the first to reach the top of a high ledge, is struck by a rattlesnake, the snake being the traditional symbol of evil as well as a sign of Dionysian wisdom as expressed in madness. Almost immediately, the old man's face turned purple, and Tom says it took both him and Roddy to "hold him and keep him from jumping down the chasm" (p. 214) before he died.

When Tom returns from his unsuccessful and abortive trip to Washington, the bureaucratic city whose materialism and corruption parallels that of Hamilton, he feels anew the beauty, peace, and power

of the mesa. "Once again," he says, "I had that glorious feeling that I've never had anywhere else, the feeling of being on the mesa, in a world above the world. And the air, my God, what air! Soft, tingling, gold, hot with an edge of chill in it, full of the smell of piñons--it was like breathing the sun, breathing the colour of the sky" (p. 239). This feeling of Apollonian exaltation lasts until he sees Roddy, who has misunderstood his feelings and disappointed him by selling all the Indian relics to a German collector. Refusing to show any sympathy or understanding to Roddy, Tom makes the biggest personal mistake of his life, placing the past above the present, order above love, art above life, the ideal above humanity, not realizing that these values gain meaning only in relation to human life. After the dejected Roddy leaves, Tom has a halcyon summer, during which he comes to a greater understanding of both life and art, recognizing the need of both order and passion, mental understanding and loving forgiveness. His devotion, therefore, is appropriately divided between the moon and the sun, the symbols of these Dionysian and Apollonian qualities. On that fateful night, "The moon was up, though the sun hadn't set" (p. 248). However, through most of the summer he lives in blissful Apollonian isolation, indicated by the predominance of sun imagery. Tom recalls,

I can scarcely hope that life will give me another summer like that one. It was my high tide. Every morning, when the sun's rays first hit the mesa top, while the rest of the world was in shadow, I wakened with the feeling that I had found everything, instead of having lost everything. Nothing tired me. Up there alone, a close neighbour to the sun, I seemed to get the solar energy in some direct way. And at night, when I watched it drop down behind the edge of the plain below me, I used to feel that I couldn't have borne another hour of that consuming light, that I was full to the brim, and needed dark and sleep (p. 25).

Satiated by his solitary days in the sun, he feels a subconscious,

Dionysian desire for the mythic integration and psychic wholeness brought by darkness and dreams.

All through these halcyon summer days, Tom reads from Vergil's Aeneid, and before the summer is over, he has come to realize that art is based on both life and nature. He tells St. Peter that when he looks "'into the 'Aeneid' now, [he] can always see two pictures: the one on the page, and another behind that: blue and purple rocks and yellow-green piñons with flat tops, little clustered houses clinging together for protection, a round tower rising in their midst, rising strong, with calmness and courage--behind it a dark grotto, in its depths a crystal spring'" (p. 251). Like Aeneas, Tom has gone back in time and space to visit an ancient kingdom of the dead, and there he too finds the courage and inspiration to face life. Moreover, his actual visit to the village of the cliff dwellers parallels his mythical and psychological descent into the Dionysian depths of his own mind, the "dark grotto" where he comes to recognize his own cruelty and depravity. After the sin of rejecting Roddy's friendship, he tells the Professor, "the older I grow, the more I understand what it was I did that night on the mesa. Anyone who requites faith and friendship as I did will have to pay for it" (p. 252). Tom does pay with his physical death on Flanders Field, but, as the sparkling spring indicates, like Dionysus, he has that rebirth of the spirit which can come only after one has explored the depths of evil. Therefore, his life, though short, is more meaningful than the lives of the blind and selfish inhabitants of Hamilton who are drowning in the extremes of either societal materialism or isolated idealism.

The cliff-dwellers' civilization, unlike modern civilization, was built in accordance with nature. As Maynard Fox has recognized,

these dwellings illustrate "an order wrought by man out of raw nature for his use and enjoyment--an orderliness that does not destroy nature but one which builds on primeval order."¹⁶ The basic harmony that these ancients held with their surroundings gave them a deeper understanding both of themselves and of their universe. As Father Duchene says, "They built themselves into this mesa and humanized it" (p. 219). This total integration of man and nature is in sharp contrast to the separation of man and nature in modern society. Whereas the cliff dwellings harmonize with nature and signify the mental and emotional stability of their inhabitants, the modern dwellings of Hamilton clash with their natural environment. For example, the Marcelluses' Norwegian manor house conflicts with its background of the natural lake and the primeval pine forest, thus indicating modern man's discordant relationship with nature and his resultant psychological confusion and dissociation. Jung describes this phenomenon as follows:

As scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional "unconscious identity" with natural phenomena. These have slowly lost their symbolic implications. Thunder is no longer the voice of an angry god, nor is lightning his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree is the life principle of a man, no snake the embodiment of wisdom, no mountain cave the home of a great demon. No voices now speak to man from stones, plants, and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied.¹⁷

The cliff dwellings had been built back in the natural cavity of the mesa cliffs, a fact which symbolizes the basic harmony between their

¹⁶Maynard Fox, "Proponents of Order: Tom Outland and Bishop Latour," Western American Literature, 4 (1969), 110.

¹⁷Jung, p. 85.

inhabitants and nature and indicates the probable emotional and psychological stability of the people.

The cliff dwellers expressed themselves not only in their homes but also in their pottery, the circular shape of which, like that of the tower, symbolizes again "the totality of the psyche in all its aspects, including the relationship between man and the whole of nature."¹⁸ The natural aspiration of the cliff dwellers is also symbolized by their tower and their pottery. Of this artistic, almost religious faith, Cather has made the following comment:

Hundreds of years ago, before European civilization had touched this continent, the Indian women in the old rock-perched pueblos of the Southwest were painting geometrical patterns on the jars in which they carried water up from the stream. Why did they take the trouble? These people lived under the perpetual threat of drought and famine; they often shaped their graceful cooking pots when they had nothing to cook in them. Anyone who looks over a collection of prehistoric Indian pottery dug up from old burial-mounds knows at once that the potters experimented with form and colour to gratify something that had no concern with food and shelter. The major arts (poetry, painting, architecture, sculpture, music) have a pedigree all their own. They did not come into being as a means of increasing the game supply or promoting tribal security. They sprang from an unaccountable predilection of the one unaccountable thing in man.¹⁹

The aspiration for the ideal that is inherent in art is symbolized for Tom by the tower, but for the Professor, it is symbolized by the Sierra Nevada mountains of Spain. In his youth, as he looked up to them, "the design of his book unfolded in the air above him, just as definitely as the mountain ranges themselves. And the design was sound. He had accepted it as inevitable, had never meddled with it, and it had seen

¹⁸Aniela Jaffe, "Symbolism in the Visual Arts," in Man and His Symbols, ed. by Carl G. Jung, p. 266.

¹⁹Willa Cather, Willa Cather on Writing (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 19.

him through" (p. 101). Significantly, the artistic success of his history stems from its structural reliance on the mountain ranges; to Cather, true art was founded on, not divorced from, nature itself.

The basic design of the cliff dwellers' homes also vivifies another major theme of The Professor's House: that of the individual in relationship to society. The basic contrast between the individualism and isolation of modern society and the totality and wholeness of tribal society has been observed by Marshall McLuhan, who explains that

Literate man, civilized man, tends to restrict and enclose space and to separate functions, whereas tribal man had freely extended the form of his body to include the universe. . . . Housing was an image of both the body and the universe for tribal and nonliterate societies. The building of the house with its hearth as fire-altar was ritually associated with the art of creation. This same ritual was even more deeply embedded in the building of the ancient cities, their shape and process having been deliberately modeled as an act of divine praise. The city and the home in the tribal world (as in China and India today) can be accepted as iconic embodiments of the word, the divine mythos, the universal aspiration.²⁰

Because the cliff dwellings are linked together, they have the physical and psychological wholeness of Dionysian totality, and yet, since within the larger structure there are "about thirty little separate dwellings," (p. 205) they also give the occupants the opportunity for occasional Apollonian solitude and meditation, thus combining the advantages of both ways of life. The totality of experience possible to the tribal civilization is in sharp contrast to the fragmented existence of man in Professor St. Peter's society, for although his study resembles the attic-like pueblo rooms in structure, it is completely isolated and separated from any other human dwelling. Moreover, the courtyard and common kitchen of the pueblo are sites of communal experience unknown to

²⁰McLuhan, pp. 117-18.

modern man, and the tower--symbolic of group aspiration--holds the whole village together. As E. K. Brown has stated, "in the modern town the emphasis falls on the individual buildings, [but] in the ancient village, significantly, [it is] on the architectural as well as the social unity of the whole."²¹

Since this ancient civilization is so much more closely associated with nature than modern civilization, it is also much more conducive to the success of art and religion. The artistic unity of the village, as based on its proportion, wholeness, aspiration, and essential spirituality, has already been illustrated, but these same qualities are also essential to religion, which combines physical ritual and spiritual exaltation. Significantly, therefore, throughout Tom's solitary summer, "the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion" (p. 249) for him. The tall tower not only symbolizes man's quest for the Truth, for the Ideal, for God Himself, but it is also historically associated with ancient religious worship. Father Duchene tells Tom and Roddy, "The tower you so much admire in the cliff village may have been a watch tower, as you think, but from the curious placing of these narrow slits, like windows, I believe it was used for astronomical observations. I am inclined to think that your tribe were a superior people" (p. 216). Perhaps this ancient tribe was interested in astronomy purely for the sake of knowledge, but more likely, the people integrated this knowledge into their lives and their religion. Alexander reports of the importance of the correct astronomical solstices to ancient Indian worship, both the Zuni and the Hopi peoples having "priests whose special duty is to observe the annual course of the sun, and hence to determine the dates

for the great festivals of the winter and summer solstices."²²

The cliff dwellers' civilization, therefore, has integrated art and religion into its society in a way that is impossible for modern civilization, the "Waste Land" which, as Baum has observed, can be "all the more vividly apprehended against the background of Outland's revelation of a past society that was creative, cohesive, and mythos-nourished."²³ Art and religion, therefore, in Stouck's words, "become increasingly the only viable alternatives to the spectacle of ambition and greed that surrounds the Professor; they are a lasting source of happiness because they transcend personal desire."²⁴ The Professor respects and values both art and religion, telling a student that they are superior to science because their power and ritual make men feel important. "Art and religion," he asserts "(they are the same thing in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had" (p. 63).

Throughout his life, however, St. Peter has been more devoted to the high, aesthetic idealism of art than to the religious ideal of brotherly love, a fact which has indeed divorced him from the religion of his ancestors. He often asks Augusta, the seamstress who is also his spiritual mentor, questions about Catholic ritual and worship, but he never makes any conscious or emotional commitment of the religion itself. Moreover, after he has finished his eight volumes of the

²²Hartley Burr Alexander, North American Mythology, vol. X of The Mythology of All Races (Cambridge, Mass: Archaeological Institute of America, Mythology Company, 1916), p. 193.

²³Bernard Baum, "Willa Cather's Waste Land," South Atlantic Quarterly, 48 (1949), 592.

²⁴Stouck, p. 23.

"Spanish Adventurers in North America," he seems to lose his interest even in art. He withdraws more and more into himself and away from humanity, a fact that is symbolized by his retreat to his study and his garden and by his frequent trips to the lake. He is unable to adjust to the materialistic present and to the changes it has wrought in his family, in old friends like Professor Crane, who has sacrificed his ideals in order to fight for a share in the Outland fortune, and in the institution of education itself, the university gradually turning away from the ideals of scientific and humanitarian knowledge to the compromises of a trade school.

As a result of these changes, the Professor seeks escape in the past and in his own youth. "He was," he recognizes, "cultivating a novel mental dissipation--and enjoying a new friendship. Tom Outland had not come back again through the garden door . . . , but another boy had: the boy the Professor had long ago left behind him in Kansas, in the Solomon Valley--the original, unmodified Godfrey St. Peter" (p. 261). St. Peter now believes that this original, presexual being is his essential, elemental Self, which, in a way, it is. This boy "was not nearly so cultivated as Tom's old cliff-dwellers must have been--and yet he was terribly wise. He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. He seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father. He was the earth, and would return to earth" (p. 263). This youthful self is actually Godfrey's original and selfish Ego, and his feeling of being part of the earth reveals a hidden death wish. Cather says that "Along with other states of mind which attended his realization of the boy Godfrey came a conviction (he did

not see it coming, it was there before he was aware of its approach) that he was nearing the end of his life" (p. 265).

The Professor's Ego-centered existence exhibits a selfish desire for the Apollonian isolation which he finds beside the cold blue lake and while lying on the coffin-like box couch of the study, both of which symbolize and foreshadow death. Death would be the ultimate withdrawal, the epitome of Apollonian solitude, and "now he thought of eternal solitude with gratefulness; as a release from every obligation, from every form of effort. It was the Truth" (pp. 230-31).

The Professor's psychological regression reaches a climax one stormy night. He regrets the impending return of his family from Europe, and he believes that he has fallen out of love with his wife; and "Falling out [of love], for him, seemed to mean falling out of all domestic and social relations, out of his place in the human family indeed" (p. 273). Soon after this, "He saw that a storm was coming on. Great orange and purple clouds were blowing up from the lake, and the pine trees over about the physics laboratory were blacker than cypresses and looked contracted, as if they were awaiting something. The rain broke, and turned cold" (p. 274). During the storm, the wind blows out the old gas stove and blows the window shut, so that the Professor is almost suffocated, and indeed, he would have been if not for the saving efforts of Augusta. However, the Professor has tried to save himself and has thus experienced a qualified spiritual rebirth, as symbolized by the refreshing rain and the regenerative pines, which have been traditionally associated with Dionysus, the pagan god of death and rebirth. It is significant, too, that after this experience, Godfrey feels lonely "for the first time in months," indicating his rebirth into

society, and he regards in Augusta "humankind, as if after a definite absence from the world of men and women" (p. 278).

The Professor is now able to accept life and responsibility in a joyless world, but in the future, it is implied, he will get little pleasure out of art, religion, or humanity. His name is a clue to this joyless character. Giannone suggests that his feeling "the ground under his feet" suggests that, like St. Peter, the rock of the Church, his "philosophical grounds are rocklike and solid, perhaps sacred," but that as Godfrey, he is a "St. Peter free of God."²⁵ And indeed the Professor does not feel the renewed energy and happiness of a complete religious rebirth. To him, Augusta, symbolic of religion, "was like the taste of bitter herbs; she was the bloomless side of life that he had always run away from--yet when he had to face it, he found that it wasn't altogether repugnant" (p. 278). Thinking back over his life, he muses that, "He had never learned to live without delight. And he would have to learn to, just as, in a Prohibition country, he supposed he would have to learn to live without sherry. Theoretically he knew that life is possible, maybe even pleasant, without joy, without passionate griefs. But it never occurred to him that he might have to live like that" (p. 280). In the past, Godfrey has wanted Dionysian pleasures. without the accompanying responsibilities. Now, he is able to adjust to the abstract responsibilities to human nature, but he can face the future and the return of his family only with "fortitude" (p. 281), not with anticipation.

Unlike Tom, whose purple and gold blanket indicates a balanced

²⁵Richard Giannone, Music in Willa Cather's Fiction (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 167.

personality, the Professor has not been able to assimilate his knowledge of contemporary society and of the ancient pueblo civilization well enough to reach a synthesis between the Apollonian and Dionysian ways of life--between East and West, the mind and the body, art and religion, the individual and society. He wants the solitary life of mental contemplation, as well as Dionysian physical pleasures; he admires aesthetic beauty and considers himself an artist without recognizing that art must be combined with morality and a religious consciousness if it is to survive; and he selfishly wants personal and artistic solitude, not realizing that art and life are meaningful only in relation to each other. Cather implies that the true artist should forfeit personal pleasure in his responsibility to and absorption in humanity. As John Hinz has proclaimed, "The gifted man separated from the people is corrupt; in his withdrawal lie the seeds of treason."²⁶

The Professor's life has been a critical and symbolical journey from middle age to old age, encompassing the death of Self and pleasure. Mythically, his journey "is not a death as a last judgment or other initiatory trial of strength; it is a journey of release, renunciation, and atonement."²⁷ St. Peter realizes that "His temporary release from consciousness seemed to have been beneficial. He had let something go--and it was gone: something very precious that he could not consciously have relinquished, probably" (p. 281). He has "let go" his Apollonian selfishness and individuality, and as a man and an artist, he has been reborn. Hopefully, he has substituted humanity for aestheticism, for

²⁶John Hinz, "A Lost Lady and The Professor's House," Virginia Quarterly Review, 29 (1953), 85.

²⁷Joseph L. Henderson, "Ancient Myths and Modern Man," in Man and His Symbols, ed. by Carl G. Jung, p. 151.

to Cather, the true artist must have the "gift of sympathy"²⁸ which allows him to understand people. Throughout the novel St. Peter has experienced within his psyche a traumatic battle between the forces of Apollo and Dionysus, and he has achieved, not a resolution, but a sort of uneasy truce between the two forces. What Bernice Slote has said of Cather herself could apply to Professor St. Peter, for Cather, like her protagonist, ". . . was caught in that ancient pull of the gods, torn between the Dionysian and Apollonian forces of rapture and repose, release and containment. The conflict was at the very center of her creative will. She wanted both in one. Sometimes she achieved wholeness, . . . [but], much more was unresolved."²⁹

²⁸Cather, Willa Cather on Writing, p. 51.

²⁹Bernice Slote, ed., The Kingdom of Art, p. 81.

CHAPTER IX

THE QUEST FOR IMMORTALITY

IN MY MORTAL ENEMY

In My Mortal Enemy (1926), a brief but suggestive nouvelle, Willa Cather continues her investigation of the dual nature of man. She again contrasts the Dionysian and Apollonian aspects of life and vivifies the negative and positive aspects of each. As in The Professor's House, Dionysian passion is seen to bring good and evil effects, leading not only to great accomplishments in art and religion, but also to an excessive reliance on the sensual and the material. Moreover, the ethereal Apollonian ideal is also revealed to be ambiguous, for it is not only the basis for man's eternal search for spiritual truth, beauty, and God, but it can also lead him to a self-centered divorce from mankind. In order to keep from losing his soul, man must be able to combine the passions of love, generosity, and forgiveness with spiritual aspiration.

The characteristics of art and religion and of the East and the West are, therefore, somewhat ambiguous as described not only in The Professor's House and My Mortal Enemy, but throughout Cather's career. In The Professor's House the solitary Apollonian life is associated with art and the East, whereas the more communal Dionysian life is associated with religion and the West. However, in My Mortal Enemy, this symbolic motif seems to be reversed, Dionysian passion being linked with art and

the East and Apollonian solitude with religion, truth and the Ideal as found in the West. However, the geographical movement in both is from East to West, the East being the traditional site of art and the West the mythic source of religion, the spirit, and the Ideal. In My Mortal Enemy Myra Henshawe undergoes an intense personal struggle between the opposing forces of her nature, but like Cather's, her development is also from East to West. Throughout the novel she moves ever closer to the Apollonian religious Ideal of the West until she eventually meets her death on a sunlit headland of the coast of California.

The nouvelle consists of the impressions of Nellie Birdseye, the young and rather naive narrator, who records her observations of three successive meetings with Myra Henshawe and her husband Oswald: the Henshawes' brief visit to Nellie's Aunt Lydia in Parthia, Illinois; Nellie and her aunt's visit to the Henshawe's fashionable New York apartment; and Nellie's coincidental meeting of the Henshawes in a cheap California boarding house ten years later. The people of Parthia look up to Myra Driscoll Henshawe, who, until disinherited by her marriage, had been the ward of the town's wealthiest and most influential citizen. Therefore, when Nellie's aunt receives word that Myra will be visiting her for two days, she invites her niece to come to meet her. Upon entering the parlor, Nellie sees

. . . a short plump woman in a black velvet dress, seated upon the sofa and softly playing on cousin Bert's guitar. She must have heard me [Nellie reflects], and, glancing up, she saw my reflection in a mirror; she put down the guitar, rose, and stood to await my approach. She stood markedly and pointedly still, with her shoulders back and her head lifted, as if to remind me that it was my business to get to her as quickly as possible and present myself as best I could. I was not accustomed to formality of any sort, but by her attitude she succeeded in conveying this idea to me.¹

¹Willa Cather, Lucy Gayheart & My Mortal Enemy, vol. 11 of The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather, lib. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1938), pp. 238-39. Future references to this source will be paginated within the text.

This description implies Myra's imperious and domineering personality, but it also indicates her interest in music and art, which are based on a combination of Dionysian passion and Apollonian order.

Discovering that she has intimidated Nellie, Myra extends her hand and speaks kindly, prompting Nellie to observe, "What a beautiful voice, bright and gay and carelessly kind--but she continued to hold her head up haughtily" (p. 239). Afraid to meet the bold woman's eyes, poor Nellie stares at her necklace of carved amethysts, only to be shocked into speechlessness by Myra's thoughtless remark, "Does this necklace annoy you? I'll take it off if it does" (p. 240). Myra is almost disturbingly frank, and Nellie is completely bewildered by her conversation: "I was never sure whether she was making fun of me or of the thing we were talking about," Nellie records. "Her sarcasm was so quick, so fine at the point--it was like being touched by a metal so cold that one doesn't know whether one is burned or chilled" (p. 240). Nellie is fascinated by Myra, but "ill at ease" (p. 241) as one would be in the presence of a beautiful but deadly snake. Combining the Dionysian characteristics of passion and cruelty, Myra is best remembered by her mirth, which is so different to Marian Forrester's happy, musical laugh. "She had an angry laugh, for instance," Nellie says, "that I still shiver to remember. Any stupidity made Myra laugh--I was destined to hear that one very often! Untoward circumstances, accidents, even disasters, provoked her mirth. And it was always mirth, not hysteria; there was a spark of zest and wild humour in it" (p. 243).

Myra's charming brilliance, striking beauty, and sharp cruelty are contrasted by the unprepossessing manner and quiet kindness of her husband Oswald. The two are evidently very much in love, however,

because when Oswald enters the room, Myra greets him with a warm kiss, simply "because his presence gave her lively personal pleasure" (p. 241). Nellie is astonished at this public show of affection, but she immediately likes Oswald and feels more comfortable talking to him than to his wife. She states that

Mr. Henshawe was less perplexing than his wife, and he looked more as I had expected him to look. The prominent lines of his face gave him a rather military air; a broad, rugged forehead, high cheek-bones, a high nose, slightly arched. His eyes, however, were dark and soft, curious in shape--exactly like half-moons--and he wore a limp drooping moustache, like an Englishman. There was something about him that suggested personal bravery, magnanimity, and a fine, generous way of doing things (p. 241).

Oswald's "half-moon" eyes indicate his human desire and passion, and, although he is supposed to be a "free-thinker," his kindness and generosity show a concern for humanity which is almost religious in nature.

The next Christmas after the Henshawe's visit to their former home town of Parthia, Nellie and her Aunt Lydia accept their invitation to spend Christmas in New York. The day before Christmas, amid falling snow, Myra and Ewan Gray, a young admirer of hers, meet them at the station. Myra and Lydia immediately decide to go shopping, but Nellie spends the afternoon in Madison Square, watching the snow fall:

The snow lay in clinging folds on the bushes, and outlined every twig of every tree--a line of white upon a line of black. Madison Square Garden, new and spacious then, looked to me so light and fanciful, and Saint-Gauden's Diana, of which Mrs. Henshawe had told me, stepped out freely and fearlessly into the grey air. I lingered long by the intermittent fountain. Its rhythmical splash was like the voice of the place. It rose and fell like something taking deep, happy breaths; and the sound was musical, seemed to come from the throat of the Spring. Not far away, on the corner, was an old man selling English violets, each bunch wrapped in oiled paper to protect them from the snow. Here, I felt, Winter brought no desolation; it was tamed, like a polar bear led on a leash by a beautiful lady (p. 257).

In the context of the novel, however, Nellie's naive assertion that winter will bring no desolation is deeply ironical, for age, the winter of life, will bring deep sadness, resentment, and desolation to the heart of Myra, the beautiful woman who will be ruled by rather than ruling nature. Moreover, the transience of life and beauty is symbolized here by the English violets, "wrapped in oil" to protect them from the cold and snow, just as in "Paul's Case" it is symbolized by the fragile red carnation.

The statue of Diana, the moon goddess and symbol of desire, as well as the "rhythmical splash" of the fountain, indicates the Dionysian character of the Henshawes' Eastern home, the meeting place of artists of all kinds. Rhythm is the Dionysian facet of music, just as melody is the Apollonian element, and violet in the flowers and in the surrounding "violet buildings, just a little denser in substance and colour than the violet sky," (p. 257) is the color of Dionysian passion. The moon symbol is extended when Myra quietly approaches and says, "'Why, you're fair moon-struck, Nellie!" (p. 257) and the color of passion appears again that night at the Christmas Eve dinner in the Henshawes' apartment, where "The long, heavy velvet curtains and the velvet chairs were a wonderful plum-colour, like ripe purple fruit." The curtains, however, are lined with an Apollonian color, "that rich cream-colour that lies under the blue skin of ripe figs" (p. 258), just as the Apollonian desire for order, religion, and the ideal seems to underlie the lives of the passionate Henshawes.

The theme of passion, both in love and in art, figures prominently at the Henshawes' dinner. Both Oswald and Myra's young friend Ewan Gray stand before the fire, indicating their inner fires of love.

Oswald, of course, is still in love with Myra, but Ewan is in love with a young singer named Esther Sinclair and relies on Myra only for advice about the gifts and poetry he sends her. After dinner is over and Ewan has left, Lydia and Nellie go with the Henshawe's to the florist for Myra to buy a Christmas gift for the famed singer Madame Modjeska. Myra, of course, picks out the most expensive plant in the shop, a "glistening holly tree, full of red berries and pointed like a spire" (p. 261). The holly is indeed perfectly appropriate for the great artist, its height indicating the desire and aspiration and its hardy red berries and green leaves indicating the passion, brilliance, and strength necessary to the career of the artist. The pleasant evening closes as the Henshawes and their guests walk home under the rising moonlight. Myra points out to Nellie,

"See the moon coming out, Nellie--behind the tower. It wakens a guilt in me. No playing with love; and I'd sworn a great oath never to meddle again. You send a handsome fellow like Ewan Gray to a fine girl like Esther, and it's Christmas Eve, and they rise above us and the white world around us, and there isn't anybody, not a tramp on the park benches, that wouldn't wish them well--and very likely hell will come of it!" (p. 262).

The image of the moon, which, in the above passage is an obvious symbol for sexual desire, is extended by the image of the tower, which implies the wider implications of Dionysian desire. However, although love and desire are important to life, Myra's bitter coda reveals that in themselves they do not bring complete fulfillment.

Furthermore, although Myra is superficially happy, she does have periods of deep bitterness, resentment, and dissatisfaction with her life because she is basically a worldly woman who, having defied her uncle by her marriage, has walked out on a vast fortune. Myra lives as elegantly as her relatively limited means will allow her, though, and

she surrounds herself with artistic and wealthy friends. To Richard Giannone,

The distinguishing quality of this life is its worldliness. That is its brilliance and charm. Its music, though not defined by a specific composition, corresponds to the abiding values of the society it represents. The music is secular. Art, beauty, reputation, jewelry, gracious apartments and elegant clothes are the appurtenances. For Myra such material beauty and accomplishments are important. Indeed, they are crucial to her. She relies on them because they signify dignity and happiness, without either of which life would be shabby and meaningless.²

She visits several "moneyed" business friends "on Oswald's account" (p. 269), but one senses that she likes to be in the presence of wealth. Nellie observes that "Among these people Mrs. Myra took on her loftiest and most challenging manner. . . . We had a carriage that afternoon, and Myra was dressed in her best--making an especial effort on Oswald's account; but the rich and powerful irritated her. Their solemnity was too much for her sense of humour; there was a biting edge to her sarcasm, a curl about the corners of her mouth that was never there when she was with people whose personality charmed her" (p. 270). Ironically, Myra probably dresses her best not because of Oswald but because of her own sensitive pride, and her irritation is bitter and jealous resentment of their wealth, which she evidently feels she could put to much better and more tasteful use. She returns the generous hospitality of these people with spiteful envy and rude sarcasm. This envy becomes even clearer as she and Nellie ride home in a hired cab, for they are passed by a private carriage from which a woman extends a friendly hand. Mrs. Henshawe's reaction, however, is not a gracious one. She "bowed stiffly, with a condescending smile. 'There Nellie,' she exclaimed,

²Richard Giannone, Music in Willa Cather's Fiction (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 175.

'that's the last woman I'd care to have splashing past me, and me in a hansom cab!'" (p. 271). Nellie realizes now that she longs "for a carriage--with stables and a house and servants, and all that went with a carriage" (p. 271), all, indeed, that she has left behind when she married. When the cab reaches the Henshawe's apartment, Myra's pride causes her to play the magnanimous lady and over-tip the driver, after which she admits to Nellie, "'all the same . . . it's very nasty, being poor'" (p. 271).

In these early days in the East, however, Myra places importance not only on wealth, but also on art. Giannone interprets the entire book as a search for immortality and asserts that her initial search is "hedonistic. First she discovers a secular immortality: famous and fortunate friends and valuable things."³ Of these secular values, however, art and the artistic ideal is by far the most lasting. By using the parallel symbols of the sun and the moon in two separate scenes, Cather is able to illustrate the immutable and everlasting value of art. The first scene focuses on Anne Aylward, a young friend of Myra's and a poet who is dying of tuberculosis. One afternoon Myra and Nellie visit Miss Aylward, finding her "in a bathchair, lying in the sun and watching the river boats go by" (p. 272). In the face of life's irrevocable transience, symbolized by the fleeting boats, the young poet retains an Apollonian calmness and serenity, secure in the fact that her art at least will be eternal.

The second scene occurs at the Henshawes' New Year's Eve party. Most of the guests are artists, the queen of the company being Helen Modjeska herself, the epitome of artistic passion and expression. Nellie

³Giannone, p. 175.

remembers Modjeska as sitting "by the fire in a high-backed chair, her head resting lightly on her hand, her beautiful face half in shadow. How well I remember those long, beautifully modelled hands, with so much humanity in them. They were worldly, indeed, but fashioned for a nobler worldliness than ours: hands to hold a sceptre, or a chalice--or, by courtesy, a sword" (p. 275). Like Myra, this artist signifies the worldliness of Dionysus, but because she is a true artist, not just an observer, she receives a religious satisfaction which escapes Myra. The lighting in the scene is soft candlelight, foreshadowing the religious atmosphere of the last part of the book, and the moonlight again indicates passion, this time artistic desire and aspiration. Modjeska looks out of the window and notes that "the Square is quite white with moonlight," and then she suggests to a young soprano who is also a guest to sing something from Norma. Nellie relates that while the young artist is singing, Modjeska

. . . sat by the window, half draped in her cloak, the moonlight falling across her knees. Her friend went to the piano and commenced the Casta Diva aria which begins so like the quivering of moonbeams on the water. It was the first air on our old music-box at home, but I had never heard it sung--and I have never heard it sung so beautifully since. I remember Oswald standing like a statue behind Madame Modjeska's chair, and Myra, crouching low beside the singer, her head in both hands, while the song grew and blossomed like a great emotion (pp. 276-77).

All three listeners, especially Myra, are indeed deeply emotional people who express their feelings in the beautiful but secular world of the East. For years Nellie associates Myra with this moonlight night and considers the aria "mysteriously related to something in her nature that one rarely saw, but nearly always felt; a compelling, passionate, overmastering something for which I had no name, but which was audible, visible in the air that night, as she sat crouching in the shadow"

(p. 277). Perhaps this mysterious something is her innate dissatisfaction and the passionate desire for spiritual truth, beauty, and immortality which she will reveal when, in her old age, she moves to the far West.

There is, however, as indicated in her crouching position, another and a darker side to Myra's nature. Nellie is introduced to this aspect of her Dionysian personality one day when she hears her maliciously quarreling with Oswald and making jealous accusations about a new key. Afterwards, Nellie is "glad to get out into the sunlight with him [Oswald]," because "the air inside had been like poison" (p. 281). Oswald shows kindness and generosity in his attitude toward Nellie as well as Myra, his personality reflecting the calmness and repose of the Apollonian side of human nature. It is appropriate, therefore, that he is associated with the sunlight here as well as when he takes Nellie and her aunt to church, when "the sun shone blindingly on the snow-covered park" and "the god Diana flashed against a green-blue sky" (p. 263). Moreover, whereas Myra's jewel is the brilliant purple amethyst, his is the "winy-yellow" topaz, which symbolizes the balance he has apparently been able to achieve between his Dionysian (wine) and Apollonian (yellow) desires. He has made a sacrifice for Myra just as she has for him, but he feels no resentment or hatred toward her and the way she has dominated his life. Looking at him, Nellie wonders

. . . at the contradiction in his face: the strong bones, and the curiously shaped eyes without any fire in them. I felt that his life had not suited him; that he possessed some kind of courage and force which slept, which in another sort of world might have asserted themselves brilliantly. I thought he ought to have been a soldier or an explorer. I have seen those half-moon eyes in other people, and they were always inscrutable like his; fronted the world with courtesy and kindness, but one never got behind them (p. 281).

Oswald has constructed a protective emotional shield against hurt, for he has spent his life loving Myra in spite of her petty jealousies and hateful remarks, and his love remains true until her death, even though her malicious resentment toward him increases.

The malevolence that Myra will show him before her death is foreshadowed in Part I by two slight incidents. The first occurs at the theater when she sees a man who had been her friend but who has incurred her eternal enmity by passing up an opportunity to help Oswald. "'I've never forgiven him,'" (p. 274) she declares, and neither, it seems, will she be able to forgive Oswald for having loved and married her. The second incident involves Nellie more closely, for it concerns her Aunt Lydia. After the Henshawes' quarrel, Myra decides to go visit a friend for a while, and, coincidentally, she takes the same train as Nellie and Lydia, who are on their way home to Parthia. Myra is "jolly and agreeable," but rather cool toward her old friends. They lunch together, and Nellie notices that "when she [Myra] was in this mood of high scorn, her mouth, which could be so tender--which cherished the names of her friends and spoke them delicately--was entirely different. It seemed to curl and twist about like a little snake. Letting herself think harm of anyone she loved seemed to change her nature, even her features" (p. 283). Her snake-like smile indicates again the destructiveness of her Dionysian personality, which breaks out with renewed maliciousness when she tells them good-bye; turning back and referring to the topaz sleeve buttons which Lydia had pretended to give to Oswald, but which had really been given him by a client, Myra says, "'Oh, Liddy dear, you needn't have perjured yourself for those yellow cuff-buttons. I was sure to find out, I always do. I don't hold it against you, but

it's disgusting in a man to lie for personal decorations. A woman might do it, now . . . for pearls!' With a bright nod she turned away and swept out of the car, her head high, the long garnet feather drooping behind " (p. 283).

Ten years later Nellie, who is now teaching because her family has become impoverished, encounters the Henshawes in a shabby apartment-hotel. They have progressed steadily downward since their New York days, Oswald having lost his old job and Myra having become incurably ill. Age has made Myra even more bitter and resentful, and poverty has made her divided psyche even clearer. Paradoxically, she wants the rewards both of the flesh and of the spirit, this world and the other world. Moreover, she is unable to adjust to her impoverished condition with any grace. Having been accustomed to the trappings and security of wealth, if not to wealth itself, she resents the loneliness and ugliness of their rooms. Annoyed by the rudeness and noise of her upstairs neighbors, she complains, "'Oh, that's the cruelty of being poor; it leaves you at the mercy of such pigs! Money is a protection, a cloak; it can buy one quiet, and some sort of dignity'" (pp. 295-96).

Now Myra regrets that she ever defied her uncle to marry Oswald. Their love and their decision to marry has been "the ruin of us both," she says. "'We have destroyed each other. I should have stayed with my uncle. It was money I needed. . . . I am a greedy, selfish, worldly woman; I wanted success and a place in the world. Now I'm old and ill and a fright, but among my own kind I'd still have my circle . . .'" (p. 302). In her old age, she remembers her Uncle John Driscoll with renewed respect, admiring his passionate and powerful nature which so resembles her own. She tells Nellie,

"Yes, he had violent prejudices; but that's rather good to remember in these days when so few people have any real passions, either of love or hate. He would help a friend, no matter what it cost him, and over and over again he risked ruining himself to crush an enemy. But he never did ruin himself. Men who hate like that usually have the fist power to back it up, you'll notice. He gave me fair warning, and then he kept his word. I knew he would; we were enough alike for that. He left his money wisely; part of it went to establish a home for aged and destitute women in Chicago, where it was needed" (p. 308).

Myra's pride has increased with her poverty, and now she feels closer to her uncle than to her husband. She seems to feel now that her uncle was right to place money above love, and she says that if he were alive, she would "'go back to him and ask his pardon'" because now she knows "'what it is to be old and lonely and disappointed'" (p. 309).

As Myra retreats into herself and her past, her occasional cruelty toward her devoted husband increases. Thinking about the wealth she has lost, she rudely tells Nellie and Oswald, "'Go away, please, both of you and leave me!'" (p. 302). As soon as they are outside, she locks the door, symbolically locking out humanity and selfishly locking herself in her own Ego. Oswald reveals to Nellie that in the past she has locked him out for several days at a time, and he is puzzled by the apparent split in her personality, for she has been a "'woman of such generous friendships,'" but now it is "'as if she had used up that part of herself'" (pp. 302-3). This dichotomous personality again becomes apparent to Nellie when Myra reveals her youthful love for Oswald. She exclaims to Nellie, "'oh, how youth can suffer! I've not forgotten; those hot southern Illinois nights, when Oswald was in New York, and I had no word from him except through Liddy, and I used to lie on the floor all night and listen to the express trains go by. I've not forgotten'" (p. 313). Myra's treatment of her husband, however, is a

direct negation of this deep feeling for him which, consciously or unconsciously, she tries to suppress. When Nellie protests to her about the way she treats him, she says wistfully,

"It's a great pity, isn't it, Nellie, to reach out a grudging hand and try to spoil the past for anyone? Yes it's a great cruelty. But I can't help it. He's a sentimentalist, always was; he can look back on the best of those days when we were young and loved each other, and make himself believe it was all like that. It wasn't. I was always a grasping, worldly woman; I was never satisfied. All the same, in age, when the flowers are so few, it's a great unkindness to destroy any that are left in a man's heart." The tears rolled down her cheeks, she leaned back, looking up at the ceiling. She had stopped speaking because her voice broke. Presently she began again resolutely. "But I'm made so. People can be lovers and enemies at the same time, you know. We were A man and a woman draw apart from that long embrace, and see what they have done to each other. Perhaps I can't forgive him for the harm I did him. Perhaps that's it. When there are children, that feeling goes through natural changes. But when it remains so personal . . . something gives way in one. In age we lose everything; even the power to love" (p. 314).

If Oswald is a sentimentalist, however, she is a pessimist, for whereas he remembers only the good things about their life together, she remembers only the bad.

As Myra gets closer to the end of her life, her rancorous persecution of her husband is augmented. She accepts the care and attention he and Nellie offer her, but she does so with grudging resentment. Once when Nellie picks up her ebony crucifix in order to straighten her sheet, she snaps, "'Give it to me. It means nothing to people who haven't suffered'" (p. 318). And if Oswald did anything for her, "she was careful to thank him in a guarded, sometimes a cringing tone. 'It's bitter enough that I should have to take service from you--you whom I have loved so well,'" (p. 319) she says. She clings to the symbols of her youthful Catholic faith, but she does not seem aware of the basic Christian tenets of love, service, and humility.

The climax of her pitiless treatment of her husband occurs the day before she takes the Sacrament. As if talking to herself, she says quietly but distinctly, "I could bear to suffer . . . so many have suffered. But why must it be like this? I have not deserved it. I have been true in friendship; I have faithfully nursed others in sickness Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?" (p. 320). Superficially, of course, Myra is referring to Oswald, the "free thinker" who, she believes, has taken from her both her inheritance and the faith of her fathers. On a deeper level, however, this statement is ironical and refers to Myra herself and to the destructive agents of her own personality, to her selfishness, worldliness, cruelty, and pride, the latter being the cardinal sin of her Church. Randall believes that

. . . she relinquishes her old illusions only to embrace new ones. It is not her selfishness but her love for Oswald which she comes to hate, although both are included in the passions, and it is the passions which she comes to distrust. In turning from worldly satisfactions to religious ritual she shows no real understanding of either. She has no idea that her passions have hurt other people who have deserved better of her; she is only concerned because they have hurt her. . . .⁴

Nellie is shocked by Myra's ruthless statement to her husband, but she observes that "Violent natures like hers sometimes turn against themselves . . . against themselves and all their idolatries" (p. 321). Myra has not really turned against herself--her own Ego is too strong for that, but she has finally turned herself against the world--against both materialism and humanity. This final release of Dionysian passion and hatred destroys what as a young girl she had most loved in this world, her husband and their love, just as in her Dionysian madness Agave had

⁴John H. Randall, III. The Landscape and the Looking Glass (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), p. 238.

destroyed that which she loved most, her own son Pentheus.

The next day, sensing that her end is near, Myra slips away from her room, leaving Oswald a note that she wishes to be alone. My Mortal Enemy is now nearing its inevitable climax. From the very first, its direction has been from the Dionysian to the Apollonian--from society to solitude, art to religion, East to West. Parallel to Myra's journey from the East to the West has been her withdrawal from society and from the material aspects of this world. On the anniversary of Madame Modjeska's death, she asks Nellie to take some money to Father Fay for a mass for her soul, explaining to Nellie that the money is part of the reserve she keeps "'for unearthly purposes; the needs of this world don't touch it'" (p. 312). She surrounds herself with the symbols of religion, the crucifix and candles, and her devotion prompts the young priest to comment to Nellie, "'I wonder whether some of the saints of the early Church weren't a good deal like her'" (p. 319). As Brown says, this remark "amazes because Myra has none of the kindness, charity, or humility that we conventionally associate with a religious spirit; but it also illuminates--for it becomes plain to us that this worldly woman has passed out of worldliness into a preoccupation with primary realities."⁵ One wonders, however, if her pride has allowed her to grasp these essential realities, because in her sleep she calls out, "'Ah, Father Fay, that isn't the reason! Religion is different from everything else; because in religion seeking is finding'" (p. 320). She alters the Biblical verse "to seek is to find" to mean that the seeking, the desire is itself all there is to religion. Indeed, in a truly unselfish

⁵E. K. Brown, Willa Cather (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 250.

Christian, who is able to love and forgive his enemies, there is reward in the struggle of life itself, but Myra's life does not seem to have been rewarding in this sense. Her personal tragedy seems to be that since she has not yet been able to find the religious Absolute, she tries to convince herself that her own intense, but so far misguided, longing is enough.

It is possible, however, that in her death Myra does find the religious truth and peace she has been seeking for so long; at any rate, the symbolism of the scene seems to indicate hope for her salvation. Throughout Part II Myra seems to have been preparing for the end of her life, almost actively seeking death and immortality. When Nellie first visits her, she calls her attention to the bitter smell of the sea, symbolic of immortality and infinity. Also, when Nellie takes her to see the bare headland beside the sea, she even alludes to death and redemption. There, with the sun "beating from the west on her cliff as if thrown by a burning glass," she tells Nellie: "'I've had such a beautiful hour, dear; or has it been longer? Light and silence: they heal all one's wounds--all but one, and that is healed by dark and silence'" (p. 300). Myra has been a proud, worldly woman, but now in her old age, she longs for the immortal life symbolized by the sea and the Western sun and for the spiritual rebirth symbolized by the dawn:

"I'd love to see this place at dawn," Myra said suddenly. "That is always such a forgiving time. When that first cold, bright streak comes over the water, it's as if all our sins were pardoned; as if the sky leaned over the earth and kissed it and gave it absolution. You know how the great sinners always came home to die in some religious house, and the abbot or the abbess went and received them with a kiss?" (p. 300).

Myra has indeed been a great sinner, but if her sins were extensive, her desire for God's love and forgiveness is boundless. She has not

deserved God's gifts of salvation and immortality--as indeed no man has--but perhaps she received his mercy. Cather must have felt, at any rate, that Myra should be forgiven, for Nellie reports that they "found her wrapped in her blankets, leaning against the cedar trunk, facing the sea. Her head had fallen forward; the ebony crucifix was in her hands. She must have died peacefully and painlessly. There was every reason to believe she had lived to see the dawn" (p. 327). Myra's simple, peaceful death is in striking contrast to the elaborate and pompous funeral which her uncle had requested, indicating that, unlike him, she has finally separated herself from her worldly values. Alone on the high cliff, she must have finally made her peace with God, for her head is bowed as if in humility; she is facing the sea of eternity; it is implied that she saw the dawn of spiritual rebirth.

With the writing of My Mortal Enemy, Willa Cather herself concludes her own period of Dionysian darkness and doubt, for all the novels since My Ántonia--One of Ours, A Lost Lady, The Professor's House, and My Mortal Enemy--have been dirges to the death of spiritual values in a technological society. However, as Woodress contends, this dark nouvelle "apparently drained the last bit of gall from her system and cleared the way for the serene historical novels of her next half decade."⁶ If Cather can forgive the sins of Myra Henshawe, she can also forgive the sins of a lost and materialistic world. In her future novels, she will continue to analyze the eternal human conflict between the forces of Apollo and Dionysus, reason and passion, order and disorder, restraint and freedom, the spirit and the flesh, but now she is

⁶James Woodress, Willa Cather (New York: Western Publishing Company, Inc., 1970), p. 213.

more hopeful of man's ability to resolve his conflict and to achieve both peace and redemption. The sunrise with which My Mortal Enemy closes signifies the dawn of a new period of artistic creativity for Willa Cather.

CHAPTER X

THE QUEST OF THE SPIRIT IN DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP

Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927) initiates Cather into her third and last phase of mythic creativity. In her first period she illuminated both the artist's quest for truth and beauty and the pioneer's search for the self-knowledge and psychic wholeness that comes with a harmonious relationship with the land; in her second period, beginning with One of Ours, she examined the emergence of a modern technological and materialistic wasteland as well as the accompanying psychic dissociation and moral corruption in mankind; and now, after having mythically explored the darkest recesses of society and the heart of man, Cather is prepared for the most religious and redemptive phase of her career. However, in order to present her mythico-religious view of life, she feels that she must reject the literalistic, rationalistic present, of which Joseph Campbell has commented,

It is not only that there is no hiding place for the gods from the searching telescope and microscope; there is no such society any more as the gods once supported. The social unit is not a carrier of religious content, but an economic-political organization. Its ideals are not those of the hieratic pantomime, making visible on earth the forms of heaven--but of the secular state, in hard and unremitting competition for material supremacy and resources. Isolated societies, dream-bounded within a mythologically charged horizon, no longer exist except as areas to be exploited. And

within the progressive societies themselves, every last vestige of the ancient human heritage of ritual, morality, and art is in full decay.¹

Feeling alienated from the scientific and materialistic values of the twentieth century, Cather returns to a more mythic past for the settings of three of her last four novels. However, Clifton Fadiman is mistaken when he proclaims that "few will affirm that it [her evocation of the past] bears any relationship to our present-day conception of history."² By portraying the past mythically and symbolically, she is able to distill from it the essential and primary elements of human nature and of human life. Edith Lewis confirms this humanistic interest in the past, asserting that "she did not care for old things because they were old or curious or rare--she cared for them only as they expressed the human spirit and the human lot on earth."³

In Death Comes for the Archbishop Cather utilizes the archetypal quest motif as well as the perennial human conflict of the flesh and the spirit, energy and repose, the mind and the heart, which is mythically symbolized by the gods Apollo and Dionysus and represented in the novel by the characters Latour and Vaillant. The novel is a muralistic record of Bishop Latour's search for spiritual peace and fulfillment--a heroic quest which parallels Christian's quest of the Celestial City, the knight Percival's search for the Holy Grail, and Moses' quest for the Promised Land. Bernice Slote has commented that

¹Joseph Campbell, The Hero With a Thousand Faces, (1949; rpt. Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Co., 1956), pp. 387-88.

²Clifton Fadiman, "Willa Cather: The Past Recaptured," Nation, 135 (1932), 564.

³Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 120.

Vaillant (valiant or courageous) and Latour (the tower) are "significant names for a Pilgrim's Progress,"⁴ and James Dinn has summarized the novel's reliance on "the myth of the questing knight and the related fertility of the land" as follows:

The Perilous Chapel incident [in the Gothic cavern] . . . is central to a much larger pattern. The protagonist is first seen on horseback, alone, pushing across an arid wilderness. To describe his mission as a quest would be the literal truth. His devout veneration of the cross is knightly as well as priestly. And the description of his virtues is markedly chivalric. It begins like Spenser's description with gentleness, and it dwells especially on the all-embracing quality of courtesy. . . . His quest has entailed a journey for which no one could give him directions because "no one had ever been there" (p. 21). His hardships have been archetypal ones: shipwreck, injury, wandering in a trackless wilderness, thirst.⁵

The Celestial City, the Grail, and the Promised Land are all archetypal symbols for the spiritual peace, truth, and fulfillment which Latour, as well as Cather, is seeking. Latour's quest, like that of his creator, leads him from East to West, from the secure but prosaic European civilization to the vital foundations of life--both physical and spiritual--as found in the American Southwest of the nineteenth century.

This quasi-historical novel, therefore, incorporates with surprising ease and naturalness both European and American myths as well as Catholic, Indian, and Spanish legends. In an open letter to the Commonweal, Cather herself called attention to the mythic and legendary qualities of her masterpiece:

⁴Bernice Slote, ed., "The Kingdom of Art," in The Kingdom of Art by Willa Cather (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 110.

⁵James M. Dinn, "A Novelist's Miracle: Structure and Myth in Death Comes for the Archbishop," Western American Literature, 7 (1972), 43.

My book [she wrote] was a conjunction of the general and the particular, like most works of the imagination. I had all my life wanted to do something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment. Since I first saw the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of the life of Saint Genevieve in my student days, I have wished that I could try something a little like that in prose; something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition.⁶

As she indicates here, she sought to accommodate the style to the mythic substance of the book. Just as Latour and Vaillant's lives were grounded in the elemental and primary aspects of life, so is her language correspondingly simple and basic. In order to portray the fundamental physical and spiritual experiences of her missionaries, Cather felt that "one must use language a little stiff, a little formal, one must not be afraid of the old trite phraseology of the frontier."⁷ By fusing the relatively primitive language of the frontier, illustrated in particular by the speech of the Indian Jacinto, with its primeval myths and ancestral legends, Cather shows an instinctive understanding of the basic symbolic relationship between myth and language.⁸

Structurally and thematically Death Comes for the Archbishop is Willa Cather's chef d'oeuvre, the artistic zenith of her career.

⁶Willa Cather, Willa Cather on Writing (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 9.

⁷Cather, p. 10.

⁸Ernst Cassirer, in Language and Myth, trans. by Suzanne K. Langer (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1946), p. 43, has pointed out this fundamental relationship between language and myth, asserting that "it is evident that myth and language play similar roles in the evolution of thought from momentary experience to enduring conceptions, from sense impression to formulation, and that their respective functions are mutually conditioned. Together and in combination they prepare the soil for the great synthesis from which our mental creation, our unified vision of the cosmos springs."

The book's construction may be illuminated by two of the major symbols incorporated within: the river and the cathedral. The underground river of ancient Indian legend, confronted by Latour when he and Jacinto take sanctuary in a sacred and primitive cave during a storm, symbolizes the mythic sub-strata which underlie the entire work. As Powell says, it is a river book, "but more like the Gila, a place where little water runs on the surface and the wonder is worked in a subterranean way."⁹ In addition the book is arranged like a great cathedral, symmetrically and ascendingly. The novel opens with a Prologue and then divides itself into nine well balanced books, subdivided by time lapse into groups of threes, an arrangement which has prompted Robert Gale to compare the book's structure with that of the Angelus, which is rung in "'nine quick strokes in all, divided into threes.'"¹⁰

The novel progresses both horizontally and vertically, the horizontal movement being from East to West and, like the Chavannes frescoes and the Golden Legend, equalizing and balancing all experience so that "the martyrdoms . . . are no more dwelt upon than are the trivial incidents of their lives. . . ." ¹¹ Just as Cather traces the Western movement of Latour's life, as symbolized by the sun, so does she follow his spiritual ascension, also symbolized by the sun and culminating in his death. The novel, then, like a cathedral, combines

⁹Lawrence Clark Powell, Books West Southwest (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1957), p. 7,

¹⁰Robert L. Gale, "Cather's Death Comes for the Archbishop," Explicator, 21 (1963), Item 75.

¹¹Cather, p. 9.

both the physical and spiritual aspects of life as symbolized in its horizontal and vertical lines. Early in her career Cather herself had recognized this artistic parallel between the architecture of a great cathedral and that of a great novel, proclaiming that "a novel requires not one flash of understanding, but a clear, steady flame and oil in one's flask beside. Not a mood, but a continuous flow of feeling and thought and a vast knowledge of technique and of the artistic construction of the whole. Many a man can fashion an arch or design a spire or carve a gargoyle, but to build a cathedral is quite another matter."¹² In Death Comes for the Archbishop, as in a cathedral, Cather has built a place where man meets God.

The first two chapters of the novel--"The Cruciform Tree" and "Hidden Water"--reveal the basic quest pattern of the novel and symbolically foreshadow the lifelong quest that is to come for Latour. This action corresponds to the basic hero myth of separation, initiation, and return as defined by Joseph Campbell: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." Jean Marie Latour is a representative of this archetypal hero, a "person of exceptional gifts."¹³ As he bows in prayer on the lonely desert, Cather remarks that

His bowed head was not that of an ordinary man--it was built for the seat of a fine intelligence. His brow was open,

¹²Willia Cather, The Kingdom of Art, ed. by Bernice Slote, p. 339.

¹³Campbell, pp. 30, 37.

generous, reflective, his features handsome and somewhat severe. There was a singular elegance about the hands below the fringed cuffs of the buckskin jacket. Everything showed him to be a man of gentle birth--brave, sensitive, courteous. His manners, even when he was alone in the desert, were distinguished. He had a kind of courtesy toward himself, toward his beasts, toward the juniper tree before which he knelt, and the God whom he was addressing.¹⁴

Like the mythic hero, who is sometimes "honored by his society," but "frequently unrecognized or disdained,"¹⁵ Latour has been honored by his superiors who have made him a Bishop and given him the See of New Mexico, but he has been rejected by his own priests and parishioners. The Mexican priests will not recognize his authority without instructions from the Bishop of Durango, under whose jurisdiction they claim to be.

Therefore, after having traveled nearly a year to get to Santa Fé, Father Latour leaves his friend Father Vaillant, who has come with him as Vicar of New Mexico, and sets out alone on the long and hard journey to Old Mexico. It is on this journey "through an arid stretch of country somewhere in central New Mexico" (p. 19), the country itself being symbolic of the spiritual aridity of many of its inhabitants, that the priest loses his way, and his predicament, then, becomes representative of the unregenerative condition of all mankind. The priest is a good man, but he is also human and as such is imperfect. He recalls that "He had been warned that there were many trails leading off the Rio Grande road, and that a stranger might easily mistake his

¹⁴Willa Cather, Death Comes for the Archbishop, vol. 9 of The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938), p. 21. Future references to this source will be paginated within the text.

¹⁵Campbell, p. 37.

way. For the first few days he had been cautious and watchful. Then he must have grown careless and turned into some purely local trail" (p. 26).

The novel, therefore, meets the archetypal requirement that the hero "and/or the world in which he finds himself suffers from a symbolical deficiency . . . [;] in apocalyptic vision the physical and spiritual life of the whole earth can be represented as fallen, or on the point of ruin."¹⁶ Father Latour may have been absent minded, but his environment is a veritable wasteland--both physical and spiritual. For decades, the Catholics of New Mexico have had little or no guidance, for the native priests have lapsed into corruption and the people have lost their ability to distinguish between right and wrong, just as Latour has lost his ability to distinguish the right trail amid

. . . the country which . . . was so featureless--or rather, . . . was crowded with features, all exactly alike. As far as one could see, on every side, the landscape was heaped up into monotonous red sand-hills, not much larger than haycocks, and very much the shape of haycocks. . . . He had been riding among them since early morning, and the look of the country had no more changed than if he had stood still. He must have travelled through thirty miles of these conical red hills, winding his way in the narrow cracks between them, and he had begun to think that he would never see anything else. They were so exactly like one another that he seemed to be wandering in some geometrical nightmare; flattened cones, they were, more the shape of Mexican ovens than haycocks--yes exactly the shape of Mexican ovens, red as brickdust, and naked of vegetation except for small juniper trees. (pp. 19-20).

After having wandered for hours in this mythic wasteland, he suddenly witnesses the fabulous appearance of a supernatural sign. He has closed his eyes "to rest them from the intrusive omnipresence of the triangle" (p. 20), the image of the Holy Trinity, just as sinful man

¹⁶Campbell, p. 37.

has always tried to evade the awful presence of God. However, "When he opened his eyes again, his glance immediately fell upon one juniper which differed in shape from the others. It was not a thick-growing cone, but a naked, twisted trunk, perhaps ten feet high, and at the top it parted into two lateral, flat-lying branches with a little crest of green in the centre, just above the cleavage. Living vegetation could not present more faithfully the form of the Cross" (pp. 20-21). It is significant here that the cross is made of "living vegetation," because Christ himself was the living cross. The image of the tree unites the Tree of Knowledge with the tree of the cross, but whereas the first tree brought death into the world, the second tree brought eternal life. Man's sin made a Wilderness out of Paradise, but God's sacrifice transforms the Wilderness back into a living and fruitful Garden. In Death Comes for the Archbishop God's love is exhibited through the Fathers Latour and Vaillant, who spend their lives trying to make a spiritual Garden out of the sinful Wilderness of the Southwest.

After encountering the vision of the cross in the wilderness, Bishop Latour meditates upon the sinful condition of man and upon the sacrifice and suffering of Christ. Just as Christ had thirsted upon the cross, so does the Bishop suffer from lack of water, but his physical thirst implies an accompanying spiritual thirst. Significantly, however, immediately after he concludes his devotions to the Savior, he feels a quickening within his mare, and within an hour he has discovered a secluded paradise, a rich oasis hidden amid the desert sands:

Below them, in the midst of that wavy ocean of sand, was a green thread of verdure and a running stream. This ribbon in the desert seemed no wider than a man could throw a

stone--and it was greener than anything Latour had ever seen, even in his own greenest corner of the Old World. But for the quivering of the hide of his mare's neck and shoulders, he might have thought this a vision, a delusion of thirst.

Running water, clover fields, cottonwoods, locust trees, little adobe houses with brilliant gardens, a boy driving a flock of white goats toward the stream--that was what the young Bishop saw (p. 27).

After having satisfied his own physical and spiritual thirst, the Bishop is guided to the village by a young girl who has come for water, and there he is able to give spiritual blessings to the villagers, who have miraculously retained their faith for generations in spite of the fact that they had no priest to guide them.

Bishop Latour has thus completed the fundamental quest of the hero, having been separated from his people, having undergone a spiritual initiation that has brought him close to the land, the people, and God, and having ultimately brought these blessings of the spirit back to the people. Like Moses and Elijah, he has gone into a wilderness, and like them he finds the wisdom and faith to continue his mission. Like Moses, the new Bishop--"to whom order is necessary --as dear as life" (p. 9)--will restore law and order to his people, and like Elijah, he will bring conviction of sin to those capable of redemption and will destroy those false prophets and rulers who are misleading the people. After the miraculous appearance of the oasis in the desert, Latour reflects that "He had expected to make a dry camp in the wilderness and to sleep under a juniper tree, like the Prophet [Elijah], tormented by thirst" (p. 33), but God has given him sustenance as he did to the Prophet of old. Moreover, the ancient customs of the little village where the Bishop has found sanctuary recall Biblical practices. He observes that "these people beat out

their grain and winnowed it in the wind, like the Children of Israel" (p. 34). So, too, will the new Bishop, again like the Old Testament prophets, have to separate the chaff from the grain, the weak and wicked priests from the true and faithful ones, his guide being the Holy Spirit that is symbolized by the cleansing wind.

The Bishop's physical and spiritual journey through his diocese gives unity to the various episodes and characters of the novel. Like the ancient heroes, he "moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials."¹⁷ As will be discussed later, the Southwestern landscape has powerful, almost supernatural effects on the traveler, but the most obvious trials that Latour has to encounter are the sins of the people and the priests themselves. Like Spenser's Red Cross Knight, he must learn to tell true devotion from hypocrisy, guilt from purity, the True One from the False One.

In the symbolical episode of the tree and the hidden water, Bishop Latour has a symbolical encounter with the ambiguity of these native Mexican priests, as symbolized in the flock of goats:

He heard a frantic bleating behind him, and was overtaken by Pedro with the great flock of goats, indignant at their day's confinement, and wild to be in the fringe of pasture along the hills. They leaped the stream like arrows speeding from the bow, and regarded the Bishop as they passed him with their mocking, humanly intelligent smile. The young bucks were light and elegant in figure, with their pointed chins and polished, tilted horns. There was great variety in their faces, but in nearly all something supercilious and sardonic. The angoras had long silky hair of a dazzling whiteness. As they leaped through the sunlight they brought to mind the chapter in the Apocalypse, about the whiteness of them that were washed in the blood of the Lamb. The young Bishop smiled at his mixed theology. But though the goat had

¹⁷Campbell, p. 97.

always been the symbol of pagan lewdness, he told himself that their fleece had warmed many a good Christian, and their rich milk nourished sickly children (pp. 34-35).

The goats, therefore, symbolize not only Apollonian beauty and Christian purity, but also the Dionysian energy and pagan sinfulness of the native priests. Maynard Fox has recognized the Bishop's fundamental dilemma regarding these priests, who "have been performing a service to the people in spite of their lewdness and avarice, just as the physical realities of life there in the little valley have gone on rather comfortably while religious instruction has lagged. The Bishop must walk circumspectly in order to preserve the good when he tries to destroy the evil."¹⁸

Evil and disorder are represented throughout the novel by hypocritical priests and selfish, degenerate human creatures. As D. H. Stewart has recognized, each of the seven deadly sins is represented at least once in the various picaresque episodes of the novel,¹⁹ and the Bishop's progress through the Southwestern wasteland, like that of Bunyan's Christian, is a nightmare of spiritual tests. In the Prologue, the American missionary who journeys to Rome to urge the appointment of Father Latour as Bishop calls the See of New Mexico an Augean stable, revealing to the Cardinals that the priests are "without guidance or discipline. They are lax in religious observances and some of them live in open concubinage" (p. 7). Therefore, he declares that "The New Vicar must be a young man, of strong constitution, full of zeal, and

¹⁸Maynard Fox, "Proponents of Order: Tom Outland and Bishop Latour," Western American Literature, 4 (1969), 113.

¹⁹D. H. Stewart, "Cather's Mortal Comedy," Queen's Quarterly, 76 (1969), 253. Stewart interprets the structure of the novel according to that of Dante's Divine Comedy.

above all, intelligent. He will have to deal with savagery and ignorance, with dissolute priests and political intrigue" (p. 9). The new Bishop, in short, must be a Herculean hero.

The first evil priest that Latour meets on his archetypal journey through the diocese is Padre Gallegos, who, although gay and hospitable, is intemperate in his Dionysian desires for pleasure, wine, and money. He

. . . belonged to an influential Mexican family, and he and the rancheros had run their church to suit themselves, making a very gay affair of it. Though Padre Gallegos was ten years older than the Bishop, he would still dance the fandango five nights running, as if he could never have enough of it. He had many friends in the American colony, with whom he played poker and went hunting, when he was not dancing with the Mexicans. His cellar was well stocked with wines from El Paso del Norte, whiskey from Taos, and grape brandy from Bernalillo (p. 94).

Like the Monk and the Friar in The Canterbury Tales, Gallegos is indeed too concerned with worldly affairs. The Bishop sees him as a good man, but an incapable priest, and he soon divests him of his duties and replaces him with Father Vaillant.

Padre Gallegos is not the only degenerate priest, however. The Chaucerian list continues, and the evil and corruption steadily increase. The next evil priest to be described is Fray Baltazar, the seventeenth century resident priest of Ácoma, the sky city built atop a barren rock mesa. This Friar vivifies the sins of pride, gluttony, sloth, and anger, being characterized as an "ambitious and exacting" priest who believed that "the pueblo of Ácoma existed chiefly to support its fine church" (p. 119), and of course, its priest. He took from the Indians "the best of their corn and beans and squashes for his table, . . . selected the choicest portions when they slaughtered

a sheep, chose their best hides to carpet his dwelling" (pp. 119-20). Also, he demanded that the people bring from below baskets full of earth from the churchyard and his garden. Moreover, the women were expected to water the garden from their precious and limited supply, and young boys were used as runners to bring him grape cuttings, wine, fish, or rabbits. Ironically, these errands "were seldom of an ecclesiastical nature" (p. 121). Baltazar has let his nature become imbalanced, the Dionysian elements dominating over the Apollonian. As Cather comments, "It was clear that the Friar at Ácoma lived more after the flesh than the spirit" (p. 121). He does not see the body in perspective, as Cather does, as a way to the spirit, but rather he treats its pleasures as his primary goals. Moreover, as his selfishness increases, so does his tyranny, until the Ácoma Indians are nearly at the point of revolt. It only takes one incident, therefore, to bring about the Friar's downfall. Having prepared a gourmet feast for some neighboring priests, he flies into a rage when the awkward serving boy spills his prize sauce on the head of one of the guests. He angrily throws an empty pewter mug at the hapless boy, inadvertently killing him and simultaneously triggering the Indians' rebellion and bringing death to himself.

Father Latour's journey through his diocese next takes him to Padre Martínez and Padre Lucero, who are also representatives of Dionysian evil and intemperance. Each is characterized by a daemonic sin which, according to Rollo May, "can itself usurp power over the whole self, . . . [thus driving] the person into disintegrative behavior."²⁰ Martínez is the personification of lust; Lucero is the

²⁰Rollo May, "Psychotherapy and the Daimonic," in Myths, Dreams, and Religion, ed. by Joseph Campbell (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1970), p. 197.

incarnation of avarice. Kit Carson tells the Bishop that "Our Padre Martínez is an old scapegrace, if ever there was one; he's got children and grandchildren in almost every settlement around here. And Padre Lucero at Arroyo Hondo is a miser, takes everything a poor man's got to give him a Christian burial" (p. 87). Martínez's lust is not confined to women, however, for he also yearns after political power and wealth. It was he who had incited the Taos Indian revolt, which resulted in not only the deaths of the American Governor and about twelve other white men, but also in the execution of the Indian rebels who, incidentally, had deeded their rich lands to the Padre in the belief that he would save them. Martínez was also the leader of the clergy in their initial rejection of the new Bishop.

Father Martínez is the direct opposite of Latour, who represents Apollonian order, reason, and spirituality, for he is the epitome of Dionysian passion, disorder, and sexuality: "His mouth was the very assertion of violent, uncurbed passions and tyrannical self-will; the full lips thrust out and taut, like the flesh of animals distended by fear or desire" (p. 163). The Bishop finds his house in so much disarray that he is uncomfortable, and it is full of loud, disorderly women servants. Moreover, during supper he is vexed by the presence of Trinidad, Padre Lucero's stupid nephew--or maybe Martínez's son, who is there studying for the priesthood. Like Martínez, he is a glutton with his food, but "When his attention left his plate for a moment, it was fixed in the same greedy way upon the girl who served the table--and who seemed to regard him with careless contempt. The student gave the impression of being always stupefied by one form of sensual disturbance or another" (p. 168). Trinidad forms an unattractive

mirror for the excessive passions of Martínez, on whom he has obviously modeled his life.

It is significant, too, that the Padre's crucifix, the symbol of the spirit, is hidden behind a disorderly pile of books, representative of the secular mind. Unlike Trinidad, Martínez is indeed an intelligent man, but he uses his misguided intelligence to try to pervert the teachings of the church, for he claims that celibacy is wrong for the priesthood--even citing Saint Augustine as a reference. "No priest," he argues, "can experience repentance and forgiveness of sin unless he himself falls into sin. Since concupiscence is the most common form of temptation, it is better for him to know something about it. The soul cannot be humbled by fasts and prayer; it must be broked by mortal sin to experience forgiveness of sin and rise to a state of grace" (p. 169). There seems to be a certain logic in Padre Martínez's argument, but he fails to see that deliberately partaking in sin is not the same as recognition and understanding of it, and that Christ was tempted but never succumbed.

However, Father Martínez's basic understanding of the singular character of the Church and the people of New Mexico is valid. He warns the Bishop,

"We have a living Church here, not a dead arm of the European Church. Our religion grew out of the soil, and has its own roots. We pay a filial respect to the person of the Holy Father, but Rome has no authority here. We do not require aid from the Propaganda, and we resent its interference. The Church the Franciscan Fathers planted here was cut off; this is the second growth, and is indigenous. Our people are the most devout left in the world. If you blast their faith by European formalities, they will become infidels and profligates" (p. 170).

As implied here, Martínez's ambiguous nature also expresses itself in a passionate love for the Church and its people. The Bishop recognizes

that he has a "compelling personality, a disturbing, mysterious magnetic power" (p. 174). His passionate Dionysian nature is not, in itself, either good or bad, and with better guidance, Martínez could have been an unequivocal asset to the Church and to humanity. Bishop Latour reflects that he "had never heard the Mass more impressively sung than by Father Martínez. The man had a beautiful baritone voice, and he drew from some deep well of emotional power. Nothing in the service was slighted, every phrase and gesture had its full value. At the moment of the Elevation the dark priest seemed to give his whole force, his swarthy body and all its blood to that lifting-up" (pp. 173-74). Again, the body is ideally represented as the threshold to the spirit.

Bishop Latour decides to overlook the sin and laxity of Padre Martínez until he can find a Spanish priest to replace him. However, after Latour does eventually send a new priest to Martínez's parish, with the stipulation that Martínez is to assist at Mass and other religious observances, his and Lucero's usurpation of power and defiance of the Church become so great that the Bishop relieves them of their priestly duties and privileges, only to have them mutiny and form a schismatic church of their own. Father Martínez is buried outside the Church, but just before his death old Lucero calls for Father Vaillant to administer the last rites to him. Lucero is a greedy miser, having proclaimed to all who would listen that avarice "was the one passion that grew stronger and sweeter in old age. He had the lust for money as Martínez had for women, and they had never been rivals in the pursuit of their pleasures" (p. 187). In spite of his age and weakness, the old padre has recently knifed a thief who was trying to

rob him, and as he is dying, his greatest concern is for his money, which, he says, is to be counted before the body is cold, one third of it then to be given to Trinidad and the other two-thirds to be used for masses for his soul.

As he nears his death, the corrupt old priest is obsessed with light. Having always hid his own light under the bushel of his greed, now he cannot have enough light. He has always been too miserly to buy candles, but now he wants the room filled with them. He cries, "'No, no, do not take away the lights! Some thief will come, and I will have nothing left'" (p. 193). Although Lucero is obviously thinking about a human thief who will steal his money, the cry is ironically reminiscent of the parable of the ten virgins. Christ has come for Lucero's soul, like a thief in the night, and Lucero is spiritually unprepared to receive him. Outside the miser's shack, the life-giving rain drives against the window panes, but one wonders if it can redeem the corrupt priest. However, the Sacrament does seem to compose his tortured spirit, and he waits for death to come and steal away his life.

In the vast spiritual wasteland of the New Mexican desert, sin exhibits itself not only among the priesthood, but also among the laymen. Indeed, the most despicably evil character that Father Latour encounters in his journey is Buck Scales, a man that he and Father Vaillant meet on the lonely road to Mora. Just as bandits used to rob and beat poor wayfarers on the lonely road to Jericho, so has Scales robbed and killed each traveler who has stopped at his house for shelter on the long journey across the desert. When Father Latour and his friend enter the wretched adobe house, he is surprised to find that

the owner is an evil looking American: "He was tall, gaunt, and ill-formed, with a snake-like neck, terminating in a small, long head. . . . With its rudimentary ears, this head had a positively malignant look. The man seemed no more than half human, but he was the only householder on the lonely road to Mora" (p. 77). The Satanic character of this greedy and sadistic man is indicated by his snake-like neck and head which "played from side to side exactly like a snake's" (p. 79). However, just as the poor Jew was saved from death by the Samaritan, so are the priests saved from a tragic end by the warning of his appropriately named wife, Magdalena. Moreover, just as she saves the priests from death, so do they save her, the archetypal "damsel in distress," from the anger of her monster-like husband.

Later in Father Latour's life-long quest, he encounters the representatives of covetousness and envy in the Olivares family, who contest their brother Don Antonio's will in a concerted effort to cheat his wife Doña Isabella and his daughter Inez out of his fortune. However, although Doña Isabella is a kind and generous person, she too has a fault that almost allows her wicked in-laws to succeed. Cather comments that "She was a trifle vain, it must be owned. . ." (p. 205). This vanity is most obvious after her husband's death when she refuses to acknowledge her true age in order to prove that she is Inez's mother and thus to defeat the greedy Olivares family. Eventually, she does admit to being fifty-two, the youngest she could possibly be and still be Inez's mother, but at the victory supper, she redeems her pride, chiding "'I never shall forgive you, Father Joseph, nor you either, Bishop Latour, for that awful lie you made me tell in court about my age'" (p. 227).

As illustrated by Doña Isabella and her husband Don Antonio, who,

incidentally had given generously to Bishop Latour's cathedral fund, Cather's hero also encounters many basically good, if humanly imperfect, people in his sojourn through New Mexico. Kit Carson, for example, is a positive character in the novel. He is described as having a face that was" . . . both thoughtful and alert; anxiety had drawn a permanent ridge between his blue eyes. Under his blond moustache his mouth had a singular refinement. His lips were full and delicately modelled. There was something curiously unconscious about his mouth, reflective, a little melancholy--and something that suggested a capacity for tenderness" (p. 86). Latour feels "in him standards, loyalties, a code which is not easily put into words, but which is instantly felt. . ." (p. 86). Carson's kindness is indicated when he offers to take care of Magdalena, and his honesty is implied when old Lucero wants him to count his money, but he also reveals pride, ignorance, and ethnocentrism when he helps the army to drive the Navajos away from their homeland.

Perhaps the most saintly minor character in the novel is Padre Jesus de Baca of the pueblo of Isleta. Talking with him, Bishop Latour discovers "that he was simple almost to childishness, and very superstitious. But there was a quality of golden goodness about him" (p. 98). Padre Jesus's innocence and purity are reflected in his surroundings. As he approaches the Isleta pueblo, "gleaming white across a low plain of grey sand, Father Latour's spirits rose, It was beautiful, that warm, rich whiteness of the church and the clustered town, shaded by a few bright acacia trees, with their intense blue-green like the color of old paper window-blinds" (p. 97). The Padre has succeeded in integrating himself both with nature and with the Indian culture, and in so doing his life has achieved immortal significance as symbolized by the acacia trees, ancient symbols of

immortality.²¹ He has respected the Indians' culture and shared their beliefs, and in return they have lovingly cared for him, keeping food prepared for him and his church and home clean and whitewashed.

Moreover, the innocence and simplicity of the Isleta culture itself is also indicated by the whiteness of the village; "When the Bishop remarked that everything in this pueblo, even the streets, seemed clean, the Padre told him that near Isleta there was a hill of some white mineral, which the Indians ground up and used as whitewash. They had done this from time immemorial, and the village has always been noted for its whiteness" (p. 98). The simplicity of the Indians' lives is also signified by a wooden parrot that the Padre prizes. The ancient Isleta Indians had valued the parrot's feathers and worshipped the bird itself. Latour notes that the carving "had the whiteness and velvety smoothness of very old wood. Although scarcely carved at all, merely smoothed into shape, it was strangely life-like; a wooden pattern of parrots, as it were" (p. 99). The parrot symbolizes not only the elemental life of the Indian, but also indicates the basic qualities of myth and archetype as found in the novel, for Latour's "voyage perilous" is a "pattern" of the physical and spiritual journey of life which all men must make.

The necessity of integrating new Christian culture with the old Mexican and Indian customs is symbolized by the presence of pagan images in the church at Laguna. The small white church was "painted above and about the altar with gods of wind and rain and thunder, sun and moon, linked together in a geometrical design of crimson and blue and dark green, so

²¹Arnold Whittock, Symbols, Signs and Their Meaning (London: Leonard Hill [Books] Limited, 1960), p. 129

that the end of the church seemed to be hung with tapestry" (p. 103). Like Blake, who declared that "Without contraries [there] is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to Human existence."²² Cather recognizes the necessity of opposites. In the Laguna church, East meets West, Dionysus meets Apollo, pagan meets Christian.

Christian and Indian myths and miracles are therefore intermingled throughout the collage of events that comprises the novel. There is a reverent attitude apparent throughout the book, which is permeated with holy wonders and Christian miracles. Father Latour regards the juniper tree and his salvation in the desert as a miracle, although he believes that the miraculous is not always so obvious and spectacular. He tells Father Joseph,

"Where there is great love there are always miracles. . . . One might almost say that an apparition is human vision corrected by divine love. I do not see you as you really are, Joseph; I see you through my affection for you. The Miracles of the Church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always" (pp. 57-58).

Latour considers all nature miraculous, but his response to the miracle is an intellectual one, whereas Father Vaillant, who defines the miracle as "'something we can hold in our hands and love'" (p. 57), reacts emotionally.

A favorite legend of the Catholic Southwest is that of Our Lady of Guadeloupe.²³

²²William Blake, quoted by Dorothy Norman, in The Hero: Myth / Image / Symbol (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1969), p. 22.

²³This myth has also been recorded by Cleve Hallenbeck and Juanita H. Williams, Legends of the Spanish Southwest (Glendale, California: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1938), pp. 289-93.

It is said that, years ago, while Juan Diego, a "poor neophyte of the monastery of Saint James" (p. 53), was going to attend Mass, there appeared in his path a bright light and a vision of the Mother of God. The Lady told him to instruct the Bishop to build a church for her on the place where he stood. However, since Juan did not have a sign, the Bishop refused to believe him, and he was thus afraid to return to the place where he had met the lady. Leaving the city for medicines for his sick uncle, however, Juan again encountered Her, and requesting a sign, was told to gather roses from the adjacent rocks. The season was December, but the rocks were miraculously full of roses, which the Lady helped him secure in his poor mantle. Juan again went to the Bishop, and this time when he opened his mantle, letting the roses fall to the floor, the Bishop and his Vicar "instantly fell upon their knees among the flowers. On the inside of his poor mantle was a painting of the Blessed Virgin, in robes of blue and rose and gold, exactly as She had appeared to him upon the hillside" (p. 56). To the people of Bishop Latour's diocese, the miracle of Our Lady is a manifestation of God's love to the people of the New World.

The Holy Mother's appearance to Juan as well as to Latour reveals her role as the tutelary spirit of the hero, comparable to Athena in the Odyssey or Venus in the Aeneid. James M. Dinn connects both the miracle at Guadalupe and the legends of Father Junípero Serra with Bishop Latour's apocalyptic experience before the juniper cross, saying that Latour's experience in the desert parallels that of Juan because both are instances "of the Virgin's manifestation to a traveler." Moreover, he notes that there is a linguistic parallel between the juniper tree and Father Junípero's name, and he suggests that this priest is a living repre-

sentative of the cross.²⁴

Several miraculous legends are told about the courageous missionary, Father Junípero. Once, for example, when he and his two companions were trying to cross a dangerous river, a stranger appeared out of nowhere, directed them to a safe crossing, and then disappeared. Another time, when they were starved for water, a mysterious horseman appeared, gave them three ripe pomegranates, which miraculously renewed their strength, and then rode off. And finally, while crossing a vast, unpopulated desert, the Father and his companion came across three large cottonwood trees-- emblematical in themselves of the Holy Trinity. As they neared the trees,

. . . they observed an ass tied to a dead trunk which stuck up out of the sand. Looking about for the owner of the ass, they came upon a little Mexican house with an oven by the door and strings of red peppers hanging on the wall. When they called aloud, a venerable Mexican, clad in sheepskins, came out and greeted them kindly, asking them to stay the night. Going in with him, they observed that all was neat and comely, and the wife, a young woman of beautiful countenance, was stirring porridge by the fire. Her child, scarcely more than an infant and with no garment but his little shirt, was on the floor beside her, playing with a pet lamb (p. 325).

When the missionaries reach their destination and the Brother of the monastery reveals to them that there is no house beside the three cottonwood trees, they realize that they have been miraculously entertained by the Holy Family itself.

Other miraculous incidents in the novel illuminate both the conflict and the mutual reliance of East and West, pagan and Christian, art and nature. The morning following Bishop Latour's return to Santa Fé from Durango, he is surprised to be wakened by the ringing of the Angelus, "and from a bell with beautiful tone. Full, clear, with something bland and suave, each note floated through the air like a globe of silver. Before the nine strokes were done, Rome faded, and behind it he sensed something

²⁴Dinn, pp. 40-41.

Eastern, with palm trees--Jerusalem, perhaps, though he had never been there" (p. 49). The ancient bell, which--though made from Moorish silver--had been pledged to Saint Joseph in the wars with the Moors, was brought with great difficulty from Mexico City by ox-cart. Since bells as used in Christian ritual were adapted from the Moslems, it symbolizes the Eastern, almost pagan, source of many Western religious customs and beliefs. As Brown has noted, "For the Archbishop the history of Spain in America is in that bell: a century of eclipse and ruin after an age of hardy achievement guided by religious feeling that overrode all practical obstacles and expressed for the New World that affinity of religion with art and beauty which had grown up in the Old."²⁵ The decadence and disintegration of the New World is indicated by the fact that the remarkable Ave Maria bell has been hidden away in a basement for over a hundred years, but Father Vaillant resurrects it, symbolically giving both religious and aesthetic significance to the lives of the Catholics of the New World.

The relative values of East and West are also signified in the accounts of two paintings brought by missionaries to the New World. In the Prologue the Spanish Cardinal relates how his great grandfather had once offered a poor American missionary a painting from his collection, only to have him "pounce upon" one of the best, an El Greco of Saint Francis in meditation. He is shamed into upholding his bargain when the crafty missionary retorts, "'You refuse me this picture because it is a good picture. It is too good for God, but it is not too good for you'" (p. 14). The proud Cardinal has learned nothing from his ancestor's mistake, however, because he still covets the painting and charges the visiting missionary to have the new Bishop "keep my El Greco in mind"

²⁵E. K. Brown, Willa Cather (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1953), p. 265.

(p. 14, emphasis added). The other painting is one of Saint Joseph which was sent by the King of Spain to the Ácoma pueblo. Whereas the Cardinal values his El Greco only as a beautiful work of art, the Indians value their painting, which, when properly "entreated and honoured . . . had never failed to produce rain" (p. 123), as a religious miracle. Moreover, the worship of the image here and elsewhere in the novel (the carved saints Father Latour finds in Auga Secreta, the holy medal he gives Old Sada, and the lovely wooden figure of Mary which the people of Santa Fé delight in dressing) indicates a return to the primitive and elemental aspects of religion, to the powerful sources of love and devotion which constitute the foundations of preternatural myth.

The power of primitive religion is also implied by the pagan Indian myths which pervade the section of the book entitled "Snake Root." On his way to minister to Father Vaillant, who has taken ill in a mountain village, Bishop Latour visits the home of his Indian guide Jacinto and is saddened to learn that his baby is ill. The bishop observes that because of smallpox, measles, and high infant mortality, the pueblo of Pecos was dying out. He reflects, however, that

Of course there were other explanations, credited by many good people in Santa Fé. Pecos had more than its share of dark legends--perhaps that was because it had been too tempting to white men, and had had more than its share of history. It was said that this people had from time immemorial kept a ceremonial fire burning in some cave in the mountains, a fire that had never been allowed to go out, and had never been revealed to white men. The story was that the service of this fire sapped the strength of the young men appointed to serve it--always the best of the tribe. Father Latour thought this hardly probable. Why should it be very arduous, in a mountain full of timber to feed a fire so small that its whereabouts had been concealed for centuries?

There was also the snake story, reported by the early explorers, both Spanish and American, and believed ever since: that they kept rattlesnakes concealed in their houses, and somewhere in the mountain guarded an enormous serpent which

they brought to the pueblo for certain feasts. It was said they sacrificed young babies to the great snake, and thus diminished their numbers (pp. 141-42).

As the Bishop meditates upon these things, a great storm comes up, and he reflects that the wind which "was blowing out of the inky cloud-bank that lay behind the mountain . . . might well be blowing out of a remote, black past" (p. 143).

Indeed, the journey that Latour and Jacinto take into the mountains does prove to be a journey back to the mythic foundations of life, back into the depths of man's subconscious. Moreover, it supports the archetypal quest pattern of the novel because it serves as a severe test of endurance for Father Latour:

Toward noon the Bishop suggested a halt to rest the mules, but his guide looked at the sky and shook his head. The sun was nowhere to be seen, the air was thick and grey and smelled of snow. Very soon the snow began to fall--lightly at first, but all the while becoming heavier. The vista of pine trees ahead of them grew shorter and shorter through the vast powdering of descending flakes. A little after midday, a burst of wind sent the snow whirling in coils about the two travellers, and a great storm broke. The wind was like a hurricane at sea, and the air became blind with snow. The Bishop could scarcely see his guide--saw only parts of him, now a head, now a shoulder, now only the black rump of his mule. Pine trees by the way stood out for a moment, then disappeared absolutely in the whirlwind of snow. Trail and landmarks, the mountain itself, were obliterated (p. 145).

The fact that the pine trees, mythic symbol of life and regeneration, are hidden indicates the seriousness of their plight, and Jacinto decides to abandon the trail and seek sanctuary on the mountain. The wayfarers struggle over rocks and trees and through snow drifts until they reach "two rounded ledges" which suggest "great stone lips" (p. 146).

Jacinto helps the Bishop "through the orifice into the throat of the cave," and "He found himself in a lofty cavern, shaped somewhat like a Gothic chapel, of vague outline--the only light within was that which came

through the narrow aperture between the stone lips. Great as was his need of shelter, the Bishop, on his way down the ladder, was struck by a reluctance, an extreme distaste for the place" (pp. 146-47). The fact that the cavern is shaped like a Gothic chapel implies its religious nature, and, indeed, Jacinto tells the Bishop that he doesn't know whether he should have brought a white man here because "This place is used by my people for ceremonies and is known only to us" (p. 148). The Bishop, who is cold and afraid of this "glacial" cave with its "fetid" odor, as well as the unknown forces of darkness which it represents, implores Jacinto to make a fire. However, the guide seems in no hurry, moving the wood and then plastering up a mysterious hole in the wall before he does so. There has evidently been a fire in the cave before, for there are burned logs as well as fresh ones. Perhaps this cavern was once the source of the perpetual fire which may now be kept in the Pecos pueblo itself, the fire which, like water, is identified with life itself. Since the Indians believe "that the life in your body and the fire on your hearth are one and the same thing, and that both proceed from one source,"²⁶ they would associate the death of the fire with the gradual death of the tribe.

The title "Snake Root" and Jacinto's caution in plastering up the large hole in the cavern wall also strongly indicate that this cavern is the home of the great snake or "plumed serpent" which tradition attributes to the Pecos tribe. According to Indian mythology, the snake is associated both with water and with fertility. The moving snake is connected with lightning and thus with rain, which they believe is carried to the sky from

²⁶Daniel G. Brinton, The Myths of the New World (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), p. 151.

vast underground rivers.²⁷ Thus, while the poison of the snake may bring death to the unbeliever, its symbolical fertility brings life and rebirth and wisdom. Moreover, the snake emphasizes the sense of returning to the unknown past of history and of the mind, for, according to Henderson, the snake is symbolic of "the collective unconscious" and brings into "the field of consciousness a special chthonic (underworld) message."²⁸

Henderson also points out the psychological significance of the giant serpent or dragon in the quest myth of the hero:

In the struggle of primitive man to achieve consciousness, [he says,] this conflict [between the ego and its shadow] is expressed by the contest between the archetypal hero and the cosmic powers of evil, personified by dragons and other monsters. In the developing consciousness of the individual the hero figure is the symbolic means by which the emerging ego overcomes the inertia of the unconscious mind, and liberates the mature man from a regressive longing to return to the blissful state of infancy in a world dominated by his mother.²⁹

Latour's experience is a full initiation into the mysteries of the New World and serves to release him from the Old World, his "mother country". Like the ancient heroes, he undergoes a symbolical death when he enters the dark cavern, which, being described in terms of "lips" and a "throat", parallels the monster figure of such myths as Jonah and the Whale. Moreover, although Latour does not have a direct confrontation with the giant serpent, in spite of his fear, he expresses a desire to examine the hole which leads

²⁷Hartley Burr Alexander, North American Mythology, vol. X of The Mythology of All Races (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Archaeological Institute of America, Mythology Company Publishers, 1936), p. 180.

²⁸Joseph L. Henderson, "Ancient Myths and Modern Man," in Man and His Symbols, ed. by Carl G. Jung (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1968), p. 153.

²⁹Henderson, pp. 110-11.

to the monster, and afterwards, "he did not cease from wondering about it" (p. 153). As Henderson contends, although most people never perceive the "dark or negative side of the personality" which is symbolized by the serpent, the hero "must realize that the shadow exists and that he can draw strength from it. He must come to terms with its destructive powers if he is to become sufficiently terrible to overcome the dragon. I.e., before the ego can triumph, it must master and assimilate the shadow."³⁰ In the cave, Latour has come face to face with the dark shadow of humanity.

The third manifestation of ancient Indian myth is that of the vast subterranean river. Upon entering the cavern the Bishop becomes aware of a humming vibration. When he asks Jacinto about the noise, the guide takes him through a tunnel to the back of the mountain where he shows him a crack which, like the hole in the cavern wall, has been plastered with clay. Jacinto digs out an opening and motions for the Bishop to listen to the sound that is released:

Father Latour lay with his ear to the crack for a long while, despite the cold that arose from it. He told himself he was listening to one of the oldest voices of the earth. What he heard was the sound of a great underground river, flowing through a resounding cavern. The water was far, far below, perhaps as deep as the foot of the mountain, a flood moving in utter blackness under ribs of antediluvian rock. It was not a rushing noise, but the sound of a great flood moving with majesty and power (p. 150).

The Bishop is simultaneously fascinated and repelled by the strength and mystery of the ancient river. However, although he listens to the sound for a long while and is intrigued by the secluded snake, afterwards he cannot contemplate his experience in the cave without repugnancy and horror: "No tales of wonder, he told himself, would ever tempt him into a cavern hereafter" (p. 153).

Henderson, pp. 110-11.

In mythic lore, the subterranean river represents the very sources of primitive life and vitality, including evil as well as good. The Pueblo Indians believed that life originated in the depths of the earth: the Navajo believe that "there are four subterranean worlds, one below the other; and the Zuni call these four worlds the four wombs of the Earth. It was right down in the deepest womb of the Earth that men lived in the beginning."³¹ Moreover, many tribes believe that the place of emergence was a lake or a spring, which reveals even more clearly the vital significance of the vast subterranean river as the true source of life. Indian myth also recounts the primeval development of man from one level to another. Father Latour would indeed be justified in being repulsed by the most primitive of these forms, imperfect beings crowded in the darkness that "crawl over one another like reptiles, grumbling, lamenting, spitting, and using indecent and insulting language."³²

However, with the aid of the mythic Twins, children of the Father Sun and Earth Mother and ancestors and lords of men, these creatures eventually evolve into higher forms of life, and as they do, they ascend to the upper levels, the fourth level being the surface of the Earth itself. The birth of mankind from the womb of Mother Earth is therefore parallel to the natural birth of man and thus has psychological as well as mythic significance. Mircea Eliade summarizes this Indian cosmogonic myth as follows:

The formation of the embryo and the birth repeat the cosmic acts of the birth of mankind, conceived as an emergence from the profoundest cavern-womb in the chthonic depths. Yet, as we have seen, this emergence occurs under the sign of the

³¹Mircea Eliade, Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Truths and Archaic Reality (1957; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Harper Torchbooks, 1967), p. 157.

³²Eliade, p. 159.

Spirit; it is the Sun who, through the intermediation of the Twins, leads and helps mankind to reach the surface of the Earth. Life--although it was the creation of the first hierogamy between earth and Heaven--would, if left to itself, have remained forever at the level of foetal existence. So the Zuni myth tells us, perfectly clearly: in the deepest of the Cavern-wombs the human beings lived like larvae; they were a grumbling throng, moaning and reviling each other in the dark. Their progression to the light is homologous with the emergence of mind. The solar Twins lead embryonic humanity up to the threshold of consciousness.³³

Because of the dark and primeval implications of the sacred cave, with its hidden serpent and its secret river, it is understandable that Latour, representative of the Apollonian mind, would feel uncomfortable. However, Cather implies, it is necessary for all men to confront at least once this darker side of human nature if he is to develop to the highest point of understanding. Significantly, in the Ácoma episode which preceded, the Bishop had felt a sense of spiritual inadequacy and defeat while performing mass for its inhabitants, "antediluvian creatures" (p. 115) who recall the larvae-like beings of the first level of human development. Now his understanding is increased, and he experiences a sort of rebirth, indicated by the facts that when they emerge from the cave it is sunrise and when they finally reach Father Vaillant, who has been near death and who is a symbolical extension of Father Latour, they find him "already on the way to recovery" (p. 153).

The dichotomous nature of man and the universe is also implied in the cosmogonic myth of the Pueblos. The Twins were formed from the substances of the Earth and the Sun, which symbolically parallel the forces of the flesh and the spirit, the blood and the intellect, Dionysus and Apollo. Moreover, the fact that the initial offspring of the Earth and the Sky are twins indicates that this dual nature inherent in the universe will be passed

³³Eliade, pp. 160-61.

on to humanity. Henderson has explained the psychological nature of the mythic image of the Twins as follows:

Though the Twins are said to be the sons of the Sun, they are essentially human and together constitute a single person. Originally united in the mother's womb, they were forced apart at birth. Yet they belong together, and it is necessary--though exceedingly difficult--to reunite them. In these two children we see the two sides of man's nature. One of them, Flesh, is acquiescent, mild, and without initiative; the other, Stump, is dynamic and rebellious. In some of the stories of the Twin Heroes these attitudes are refined to the point where one figure represents the introvert, whose main strength lies in his powers of reflection, and the other is an³⁴ extravert, a man of action who can accomplish great deeds.

This dichotomy of mankind which has been represented in various ways throughout the canon of Cather's work is revealed in Death Comes for the Archbishop through the complementary personalities of Father Latour and Father Vaillant, Latour being the Apollonian introvert and Vaillant the Dionysian extrovert.

Archbishop Latour is representative of Apollonian reason and order, the mind and the spirit. He interprets miracles intellectually, and he was chosen for his position because for him order was " 'necessary--as dear as life' " (p. 9). Whereas Vaillant is spontaneous and impulsive, Latour is cautious and deliberate, qualities that often serve him in good stead while working with the natives of his diocese. For example, in contrast to Father Vaillant, he realizes that it would be wiser to remain blind to some of Padre Martínez's transgressions until he can replace him with a man who can win the confidence of the people. When Father Joseph protests about leaving this degenerate priest on duty, he says, "I do not wish to lose the parish of Taos in order to punish its priest. . ." (p. 182). Even as a boy, "Latour himself was much cooler and more critical in temper; hard to please

³⁴Henderson, p. 106.

and often a little grey in mood" (p. 262). His greatest temptation, then, is to a sort of spiritual sterility, to "those periods of coldness and doubt which, from his boyhood, had occasionally settled down upon his spirit and made him feel an alien wherever he was" (p. 245).

Latour, like Professor St. Peter, is therefore susceptible to that intellectual isolation and alienation from society which, if allowed to completely rule one's life, mark the spiritual death of the artist or the religious person. He muses that whereas "During their Seminary years he had easily surpassed his friend in scholarship, . . . he always realized that Joseph excelled him in the fervour of his faith" (p. 262). When they were studying languages to prepare for missionary work, for example, Latour had learned them correctly, but Vaillant had learned them better and more quickly, even though he often used incorrect grammar. Unlike the proud Latour, "To communicate with peons, he was quite willing to speak like peons" (p. 262).

Latour often feels the need for solitary contemplation, as when he stays in Eusibio's hogan, "isolated like a ship cabin on the ocean" (p. 267), but Vaillant wishes to be among people. The Bishop recalls that

In his youth, Joseph had wished to lead a life of seclusion and solitary devotion; but the truth was he could not be happy for long without human intercourse. And he liked almost everyone. In Ohio, when they used to travel together in stage coaches, Father Latour had noticed that every time a new passenger pushed his way into an already crowded stage, Joseph would look pleased and interested, as if this were an agreeable addition--whereas he himself felt annoyed, even if he concealed it. (p. 264)

Joseph, who has an ugly visage himself, was never bothered by the ugliness and disorder of the crude American towns, and whereas the more artistic Latour plans to build a beautiful Midi-Romanesque cathedral in Sante Fé, he would have been just as pleased with an ugly brick building like the Ohio churches. Indeed, the only artistic sensibility that Father Vaillant

expresses is a love for music. This passion for music is matched by his Dionysian passion for good food and drink. Latour admits that he cannot explain the basic contradictions of Vaillant's nature:

His Vicar was one of the most truly spiritual men he had ever known, though he was so passionately attached to many of the things of the world. Fond as he was of good eating and drinking, he not only rigidly observed all the fasts of the Church, but he never complained about the hardness and scantiness of the fare on his long missionary journeys. Father Joseph's relish for good wine might have been a fault in another man. But always frail in body, he seemed to need some quick physical stimulant to support his sudden flights of purpose and imagination. Time and again the Bishop had seen a good dinner, a bottle of claret, transformed into spiritual energy under his very eyes. From a little feast that would make other men heavy and desirous of repose, Father Vaillant would rise up revived, and work for ten or twelve hours with that ardour and thoroughness which accomplished such lasting results (p. 263).

Moreover, though for his Church and the people of his parish, Father Joseph is an inveterate beggar, he keeps nothing for himself. Although, superficially, he is a representative of the flesh and the world, he uses the flesh as a means to the spirit.

Just as Father Vaillant learns to sacrifice the body for the needs of the spirit, so does Father Latour eventually realize the need to supplement intellectual and spiritual solitude with human involvement. The climax of this spiritual development occurs after one of his periods of intense spiritual sterility. Getting up from his bed, he goes out into the cold December night, dark because the moon, symbolic here of Apollonian spirituality as well as the Dionysian values of love and humanity as exemplified in the Passion of Christ, is hidden behind a cloud. Significantly, he has thrown on "that faithful old cloak that was the twin of Father Vaillant's" (p. 246), an act which symbolically foreshadows his subsequent rebirth through the integration of his solitary and intellectual Apollonian nature with Father Vaillant's passionate and humanistic Dionysian one. In front

of the church and under the moon, "muffled in vapour," he sees Old Sada, a poor Catholic woman who is kept from expressing her faith by her cruel anti-Catholic employers. Feeling love and pity for the lonely old woman, Bishop Latour extends to her not only spiritual, but also human and brotherly love. As a result, never before "had it been permitted him to behold such deep experience of the holy joy of religion as on that pale December night" (p. 252). Kneeling beside her,

He received the miracle in her heart into his own, saw through her eyes, knew that his poverty was as bleak as hers. When the Kingdom of Heaven had first come into the world, into a cruel world of torture and slaves and masters, He who brought it had said, 'And whosoever is least among you, the same shall be first in the Kingdom of Heaven.' This church was Sada's house, and he was a servant in it (p. 253).

Through this experience, Latour achieves complete spiritual and psychological integration. His new-found humility grants a complete effacement of Self, of Ego, and allows him, for a little while, to become part of the cosmic and collective One. He offers Old Sada his cloak, but, significantly, she refuses to take it. Bishop Latour has just received into his personality a Dionysian consciousness of Earth, as exemplified in the cloak and in the Image he gives her, "the physical form of Love" (p. 254) as well as in the passionate full moon, now shining "high in the blue vault, majestic, lonely, benign" (p. 254). However, as the distance and solitude of the moon also indicate, to retain his sense of wholeness to complete his heroic Endymion quest, Latour's new-found Dionysian nature must unite with rather than suppress his original Apollonian one. As Henderson has recognized, some men need to be "aroused" by a Dionysian rite, others need to be "subdued" by an Apollonian experience, but "a full initiation embraces both themes."³⁵

³⁵Henderson, p. 146

As Brown has observed, creating the wholeness, the "seamless unity" of Latour's nature must have been "an intense if somewhat sad pleasure"³⁶ for Cather, who had herself always been torn between the conflicting aspects of her own personality.

Although Latour does achieve a temporary unity in his personality, the totality of human character is more adequately represented by both Latour and Vaillant, Apollo and Dionysus, who, like the mythic Twins, seem to represent the dual manifestations of the whole personality rather than two completely separate characters. This mythic dissociation of the total psyche seems to have been recognized by only one other critic, Francis X. Connally, who asserts that

The Archbishop and Vaillant are in effect one complete personality, since each exists completely in the other by virtue of their common inspiration and culture. Their temperamental differences serve to render credible the co-existence in that one complete personality of the healthy coarse grain of the pioneer and the tender sensibility of the artist. Take either man out of the book, or separate their life stories, and the whole idea of the book falls apart. Taken together, Latour and Vaillant stand for the fusion of action and contemplation, of doing and being, of enterprise and art which was latent in My Ántonia and emergent in The Professor's House.³⁷

The twinship of Latour and Vaillant is symbolized not only by the twin cloaks mentioned above, but also by Contenta and Angelica, the identical white mules which Father Joseph begs from Manuel Lujon, Taking the Father through his grounds, Lujon

. . . exhibited with peculiar pride two cream-coloured mules, stalled side by side. With his own hand he led them out of the stable, in order to display to advantage their handsome coats, not bluish-white, as with white horses, but a rich, deep ivory, that in shadow changed to fawn-colour. Their

³⁶Brown, p. 254.

³⁷Francis X. Connally, "Willa Cather: Memory as Muse," in Fifty Years of the American Novel, ed. by Harold C. Gardiner (New York: Gordian Press, Inc., 1968), pp. 84-85.

tails were clipped at the ends into the shape of bells.

"Their names," said Lujon, "are Contenta and Angelica, and they are as good as their names. It seems that God has given them intelligence. When I talk to them, they look up at me like Christians; they are very companionable. They are always ridden together and have a great affection for each other," (pp. 68-69)

The two priests, like the mules, are servants of the people; moreover, they are also Christian, intelligent, and close, companionable friends. And finally, just as the mules have never been separated for long because they might pine for each other, so are Father Latour and Vaillant never psychologically and spiritually separated. Although Lujon had intended to give only Contenta to Vaillant, the crafty priest is also able to obtain Angelica for Latour. Throughout their ministry in the Southwest, neither the priests nor the mules are physically separated for long, and when Vaillant sets out on his mission to the spiritually barren goldfields of Colorado, Latour thoughtfully sends Angelica along with Contenta and his friend. Therefore, symbolically speaking, Latour and Vaillant, Apollo and Dionysus, Ego and Alter ego are never completely divided. As Henderson has perceived, "Ego and shadow, indeed, although separate, are inextricably linked together in much the same way that thought and feeling are related to each other."³⁸

In addition to being manifested in the characters of Latour and Vaillant, the Apollonian-Dionysian conflict is also represented in the symbols of the wasteland and the garden, the sun and the moon. The Southwestern landscape of the novel is a vast and arid desert, symbolic of the spiritual sterility of many of its inhabitants, and it is filled with countless canyons and arroyos, representative of man's spiritual valleys. The loneliness of this environment is emphasized during Latour and Vaillant's

³⁸Henderson, p. 110.

journey to Mora and in the legend of Father Junípero's miraculous desert crossing. The description of the land beyond the spiritually fruitful pueblo of Isleta as "a country of dry ashes," (p. 101) relieved only by the lizard-like pumpkin vine, is strongly reminiscent of Eliot's Waste-land, as is the landscape between Laguna and Ácoma:

In all his travels the Bishop had seen no country like this. From the flat red sea of sand rose great rock mesas, generally Gothic in outline, resembling vast Cathedrals. They were not crowded together in disorder, but placed in wide spaces, long vistas between. This plain might once have been an enormous city, all the smaller quarters destroyed by time, with only the public buildings left--piles of architecture that were like mountains. . . .

This mesa plain had an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness; as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together, on the eve of being arranged into mountain, plain, plateau. The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape (pp. 108-9).

The unfinished aspect of the land here indicates the primitive state of the Ácoma Indians, "shell backs" who, Latour thinks, "might be saved by baptism and divine grace, as undeveloped infants are, but hardly through any experience of their own" (p. 115).

However, although the desert land itself seems barren, there is a symbolical spiritual promise in the sky. In the Kansas plains Latour had "found the sky more a desert than the land" (p. 110), but

. . . west of the Pecos all that changed; here there was always activity overhead, clouds forming and moving all day. Whether they were dark and full of violence, or soft and white with luxurious idleness, they powerfully affected the world beneath them. The desert, the mountains and mesas, were continually re-formed and re-coloured by the cloud shadows. The whole country seemed fluid to the eye under this constant change of accent, this ever-varying distribution of light (p. 110).

The powers of Dionysus and Apollo, darkness and light, are both represented here, and the earthly mesas are each "duplicated by a cloud mesa,

like a reflection, which lay motionless above it or moved slowly up from behind it" (p. 109). One is reminded of the Indian belief that creation stemmed from Father Sky and Earth Mother.

Moreover, the desert is punctuated with natural garden imagery. When Latour visits his Navajo friend Eusabio, he lives in a hogan which sits next to a river and under enormous cottonwood trees, which, though all living, "seemed to be of old, dead, dry wood, and had very scant foliage." However, "high up in the forks, or at the end of a preposterous length of twisted bough, would burst a faint bouquet of delicate green leaves--out of all keeping with the great lengths of seasoned white trunk and branches. The grove looked like a winter wood of giant trees, with clusters of mistletoe growing among the bare boughs" (p. 258). The image of the mistletoe here symbolizes the spiritual regeneration that Latour experiences during his solitary stay, at the end of which he recalls Father Vaillant to Santa Fé, where he receives his summons to the goldfields of Colorado.

There are at least four other natural gardens described in Death Comes for the Archbishop, only one of which is not primarily benevolent. The Ácoma mesa is the literal personification of the Rock, which Cather describes as a sanctuary, as "the utmost expression of human need," as "the highest comparison of loyalty in love and friendship," as the comparison Christ himself had used "for the disciple to whom He gave the keys of His Church" (p. 112). However, the Rock is not the positive image it is in The Professor's House and Shadows on the Rock, for the antediluvian Indians do not see the Rock as symbol; they cling to it literally, and as a result, they have regressed to a reptilian state, moving backward rather than forward in their spiritual evolution. The

primitive evil and sterility of this mesa is signified by the fact that it "was absolutely naked of vegetation, but at its foot a rank plant grew conspicuously out of the sand; a plant with big white blossoms like Easter lilies. By its dark blue-green leaves, large and coarse-toothed, Father Latour recognized a species of the noxious datura. The size and luxuriance of these nightshades astonished him" (p. 113). This poisonous nightshade recalls the deadly purple shrub of "Dr. Rappaccini's Daughter," for each plant symbolizes the original sin and evil inherent in man without spiritual guidance.

The other three natural gardens found in the novel all imply the opposite, more benevolent side of God and nature. The green ribbon and the hidden stream which Father Latour miraculously discovers in the desert illuminate God's watchful care for his servants, and the beautiful, life-giving arroyos reveal that he has prepared physical and spiritual oases in the vast wilderness. Approaching Arroyo Hondo to administer the last rites to Padre Lucero, Father Vaillant sees a mythic paradise below: "Drawing rein at the edge, one looked down into a sunken world of green fields and gardens, with a pink adobe town, at the bottom of this great ditch. The men and mules walking about down there, or ploughing the fields, looked like the figures of a child's Noah's ark. Down the middle of the arroyo, through the sunken fields and pastures, flowed a rushing stream which came from the high mountains" (p. 191). The saving waters of Christianity have reached these people, in spite of the bad influence that the avariciousness of Lucero must have had on the parish.

The fourth natural garden is that of the Cañon de Chelly, ancestral home of the Navajo. For the Navajo, their home, "where there

was shelter and unfailing water," was inseparable from their religion." Eusabio and his people have lived there for centuries in an Indian "Garden of Eden, and "That cañon and the Shiprock were like kind parents to his people, places more sacred to them than churches, more sacred than any place is to the white man" (p. 342). The fact that the white man attempts to drive the Navajo from his natural home indicates that he is not in tune with the natural order of things as are the Indians. Father Latour observes that "just as it was the white man's way to assert himself in any landscape, to change it, make it over a little (at least to leave some mark or memorial of his sojourn), it was the Indian's way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water, or birds through the air" (p. 271).

The Indian respects nature and thus becomes integrated with it, even in a barren desert country. The Christian European, however, has an innate tendency to try to bring order and fruitfulness to the open wilderness. Therefore, the image of the artificial garden, sometimes negative, sometimes positive, also permeates the book's structure. The garden image symbolizes spiritual fruitfulness, and ideally it should be accessible to the people and representative of Christian love and generosity. Thus, the "hidden garden" (p. 3) of the Roman Cardinals, placed high above the city of Rome, as well as Fray Baltazar's secluded cloister, signifies the priest's separation from his flock. In Ácoma,

Besides the church proper there was the cloister, large, thick-walled, which must have required an enormous labour of portage from the plain. The deep cloister corridors were cool when the rock outside was blistering; the low arches opened on an enclosed garden which, judging from its depth of earth, must once have been very verdant. Pacing those shady passages, with four feet of solid, windowless adobe shutting out everything but the green garden and the

turquoise sky above, the early missionaries might well have forgotten the poor Ácomas, that tribe of ancient rock-turtles, and believed themselves in some cloister hung on a spar of the Pyrenees (p. 117).

The physical separation of the missionary from his people symbolizes an even greater spiritual alienation, and subsequently, when the Ácomas threw their tyrannical friar over the cliff, the women "took pleasure in watching the garden pine and waste away from thirst," (p. 131) its death being symbolic of the accompanying spiritual degeneration of the people.

Whereas the sensuality and intemperance exhibited by the gardens at Rome and Ácoma are indicative of the sterility and destructiveness of Spenser's Bower of Bliss, there are other gardens in the novel which, in their order and fertility, are reminiscent of the life-giving and redemptive Garden of Adonis. Padre Jesus has a simple, natural garden of domesticated cactus plants, and the Bishop has made a vegetable and flower garden behind the church and set out apple trees, cherry trees, and a grape arbor. These fruit trees had been brought to the wilderness as dry switches, but the Bishop has planted and pruned, and this actual garden has flourished simultaneously with his spiritual garden. Like Father Jesus, the Bishop has incorporated plants indigenous to the area, for "against the sun-baked adobe walls, the tamarisk waved its feathery plumes of bluish green" (p. 234). When the Bishop returns to his little estate north of Santa Fé, he plants another garden where he not only grows superb cherries, apricots, apples, quinces, and pears, but where he also domesticates and develops native flowers such as the purple verbena. He has the talent to see the religious implication of natural objects, for the color of the verbena is "the violet that is full of rose colour and is yet not lavender; the blue that becomes almost pink

and then retreats again into sea-dark purple--the true Episcopal colour and countless variations of it" (p. 310).

The equation of the literal garden with the spiritual garden is indicated by the fact that Bishop Latour "urged the new priests to plant fruit trees wherever they went, and to encourage the Mexicans to add fruit to their starchy diet. Wherever there was a French priest, there should be a garden of fruit trees and vegetables and flowers. He often quoted to his students that passage from their fellow-Auvergnat, Pascal: that Man was lost and saved in a garden" (p. 310). This miracle of spiritual redemption is symbolized by Juan Diego's finding roses among the barren rocks and manifested in the physical and spiritual flowering of Magdalena, who, like her Biblical namesake, is saved from sin and evil and transformed into a devoted servant of Christ. Like the Virgin Mary of the Guadalupe legend, Magdalena is associated with flowers, gathering them for altar decorations when she comes to feed the doves, symbolic themselves of Christian love and peace. In a singularly appropriate metaphor, Father Vaillant compares the spiritually untaught Catholics of the Southwest to "seeds full of germination but with no moisture" (p. 239). It is up to the Bishop and his Vicar to bring them the spiritual redemption that is symbolized by the life giving water.

In addition to the garden, the moon, sun, and wind serve as natural symbols throughout the novel. The Dionysian moon, however, is an ambivalent symbol. In the anecdote about Ácoma's friar it symbolizes spiritual coldness, isolation, and eventually death, for it is not until after the appearance of the moon--"the clock which began things in the pueblo" (p. 129), that the Indian mob comes to execute him for his tyranny and cruelty. However, in the vignette called "December Night,"

the high moon, "majestic, lonely, benign" (p. 254), symbolizes the benevolence and omniscience of God as well as the corresponding spiritual aspiration and human love of mankind as exhibited in Bishop Latour's kindness to Old Sada.

Like the moon, the sun is a symbol of time, but it is also an Apollonian symbol of religious warmth and fruitfulness. Therefore, when it is hidden or obscured, as when Father Latour and Father Vaillant are travelling toward Mora, or when the Bishop and his guide are riding to Laguna and Ácoma, there is an ominous indication of danger and evil. The bright sunlight, however, is excellent for the growth of the Bishop's fruit, spiritual as well as physical, and its fusion with the earth symbolizes the equilibrium essential both to man and to nature. In the Bishop's garden, Dionysus and Apollo are balanced, for the "air and the earth interpenetrated in the warm gust of spring; the soil was full of sunlight, and the sunlight full of red dust. The air one breathed was saturated with earthy smells, and the grass under foot had a reflection of blue sky in it" (p. 233). This intermingling of earth and sky recalls again the Indian myth of the Earth Mother and the Sky Father as the creators of life and thus implies the spiritual rebirth of the Southwest brought about by the Bishop and Father Vaillant. (Significantly, this scene occurs in May, the month of the Annunciation and thus of spiritual rebirth).

The natural purity and religious beauty of the sun is also associated with the Bishop's cathedral, which is built out of a hard rock which is yellow in color, "a strong golden ochre, very much like the gold of the sunlight that was now beating upon it" (p. 279). In his cathedral, then, the Bishop unites both the image of the Rock and that

of the sun, indicating the strength and imagination necessary to build a spiritual monument in the Wilderness. Moreover, in his beautiful structure, he is able to integrate art and nature, for the building is built from material indigenous to the environment, and "the tawny church seemed to start directly out of those rose-coloured hills--with a purpose so strong that it was like action. Seen from this distance, the cathedral lay against the pine-splashed slopes as against a curtain. When Bernard drove slowly nearer, the backbone of the hills sank gradually, and the towers rose clear into the blue air, while the body of the church still lay against the mountain" (p. 315). In the complementary lines of the Cathedral--vertical as well as horizontal--one again senses the religious wholeness of the novel, the fusion of Earth and Sky, Dionysus and Apollo, the body and the spirit.

The Bishop comes to love the sun, the sky, the wind, and the spiritual aspiration and freedom which he finds in the Southwest. In this West, his spiritual home, "The landscape one longed for when one was far away, the thing all about one, the world one actually lived in was the sky, the sky!" (p. 270). He feels stifled and stagnated in the East, in Europe, where "the grey dawn lasted so long" and "the country was a long while in coming to life. The gardens and the fields were damp, heavy mists hung in the valley and obscured the mountains; hours went by before the sun could disperse those vapours and warm and purify the village" (p. 318). He visits the home of his childhood, but he returns to die under the bright sun and in the light, dry air of the West, symbolic of man's spirit. He feels in this pure air something "soft and wild and free," something that "released the prisoned spirit of man into the wind, into the blue and gold, into the morning, into the morning!" (p. 319).

Whereas the pure air of the Southwest represents man's immortal soul, the sun represents for him the cycle of time. The fact that Latour journeys to his Cathedral in Santa Fé at sunset symbolizes the nearness of his death. Significantly, during those last weeks of his life, he returns to memories of his youth, not for escape as Professor St. Peter had done, but in order to achieve a perspective on his life and on its relationship to eternity. Looking back on the events of his life from the point of view of eternity, they all seem to have equal importance: "He was soon to have done with calendared time, and it had already ceased to count for him. He sat in the middle of his own consciousness; none of his former states of mind were lost or outgrown. They were all within reach of his hand, and all comprehensible" (pp. 336-37). The Bishop is slowly and acquiescently letting go of his own personal ego so that through death his spirit may be integrated with the sacred Oneness of God and the cosmos. He awaits his death in Apollonian peace and repose, and one night, just before dark, it comes; he completes the quest that he and his alter ego Joseph Vaillant had begun in their youth. Cather tells the reader that when his watchers try to catch his last words, "in reality the Bishop was not there at all; he was standing in a tip-tilted green field among his native mountains, and he was trying to give consolation to a young man who was being torn in two before his eyes by the desire to go and the necessity to stay. He was trying to forge a new Will in that devout and exhausted priest; and the time was short, for the diligence for Paris was already rumbling down the mountain gorge" (p. 347).

During the course of the novel Archbishop Latour has achieved a psychic and spiritual unity unparalleled by any other Catherian

character, or indeed by many other characters in American literature. Moreover, his death completes the archetypal quest of the hero which has been interwoven throughout the novel, for his peaceful death is the culmination of his life which, in the tradition of the societal hero, has been a living sacrifice for humanity. Just as the diligence of his youth had carried him and his friend to a new life as missionaries in America, so does this mortal diligence carry him to a new and eternal spiritual life; the mythical cycle of death and rebirth is complete.

CHAPTER XI

THE QUEST FULFILLED IN SHADOWS ON THE ROCK

The quest myth which is so essential to Death Comes for the Archbishop is present in Cather's next novel, Shadows on the Rock (1931), but the journey motif is not as evident as it was in the earlier work. Therefore, the tone of Shadows on the Rock is much softer and more subdued, and the Dionysian-Apollonian conflict, although present, is somewhat reduced. Whereas the primary symbols in Death Comes for the Archbishop are the cathedral and the white mules, the latter being representative of the two priests and their assiduous travels, labors, and devotions, the major symbol of Shadows on the Rock is the Rock itself, symbol of the strength and endurance of both the religion and the culture of the French Canadians. James Woodress has described this basic structural difference by asserting that the former novel "has a linear progression in the organization of the material and is based on the journey motif; the latter is static, centered on the rock which here symbolizes permanence and security."¹

Moreover, whereas in Death Comes for the Archbishop, Cather created a medieval tapestry or fresco, touching upon each charming anecdote and then passing on, in the present novel, the structure is

¹James Woodress, Willa Cather (New York: Western Publishing Company, Inc., 1970), p. 233.

"mainly anacoluthon."² This literary device as used by Cather has been explained by Edward and Lillian Bloom as follows:

Classically, the purpose of this device was to evoke an emotional or moral effect through a temporary suspension of completeness--that is, like a series of minor suspenses--within the individual actions of the principal framework. This seeming disjunction she attained by initiating episodes and then disclosing their resolutions in subsequent appropriate phases of Shadows. For example, she early introduces us to Blinker, or to Jacques and Toinette, or to Jeanne le Ber, but she does not reveal their significance until later in the novel. And yet each of these characters or groupings has its own episodic meaning as well as one related to that of the entire novel. Nevertheless, even though the links between episodes are not obvious, the single pieces of action are not without logical succession and progression. The ultimate effect is subtly cumulative, and the reader--unconsciously and without strain--discovers the links.³

Anacoluthon is singularly appropriate to the mythic atmosphere of the novel, because this is the device that Sir Thomas Malory employed centuries ago to bind together the seemingly irrelevant but actually interdependent legends and myths of Morte d'Arthur. Simultaneously interwoven with the main plot of Euclide Auclair and his daughter Cécile are the threads of Jeanne le Ber's retirement and Pierre Charron's love for her, the poverty and piety of Jacques and his mother's neglect of him, and the ancient feuds between Count Frontenac and the Bishops Laval and Saint-Vallier, and, indeed, between the Bishops themselves.

Cather's delineation of character, the quest theme, and the seasonal structure of the novel all attest to its fundamental reliance

²Willia Cather, Willia Cather on Writing (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), p. 15.

³Edward and Lillian Bloom, "Shadows on the Rock: Notes on the Composition of a Novel," Twentieth Century Literature, 2 (1956), 72.

on myth. E. K. Brown has stated that "the personages are figures in a legend rather than living characters. These are indeed but shadows!"⁴ Furthermore, the Blooms contend that "massive outlines of characters and situations rise penumbrally behind a screen of created opaqueness. The screen, softening rather than blurring the action, renders it evocative and demands a high degree of reader participation."⁵ Significantly, in the novel as in ancient culture, myth is inseparable from the people, having been created in their collective consciousness, and thus it too demands a high degree of participation. Moreover, the participation that is demanded in myth, as in Shadows on the Rock, is often religious in nature.

The quest motif which underlies the novel is both religious and national, and the mythic image which unites the two is the Rock of Quebec itself. The importance of such symbolic images in myth and literature has been pointed out by Mark Schorer, who maintains that "A myth is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has organizing value for experience. A mythology is a more or less articulated body of such images, a pantheon. Without such images, experience is chaotic, fragmentary and merely phenomenal. It is the chaos of experience that creates them, and they are intended to rectify it."⁶ In a mythic sense, France represents Chaos and Evil; the Rock of Quebec represents the Promised Land of both the Israelites, led by Moses, and the ancient Romans, led by Aeneas.

⁴E. K. Brown, "Homage to Willa Cather" Yale Review, 36 (1946), 89.

⁵Edward and Lillian Bloom, p. 72.

⁶Mark Schorer, "The Necessity of Myth," in Myth and Mythmaking, ed. by Henry A. Murray (1960; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 355.

The Paris of seventeenth century France where Euclide Auclair and his family dwelled was a monstrous center of evil and corruption. As in ancient Egypt, the rulers were surfeited with riches and pleasures, while the ordinary citizens were oppressed by poverty and harsh laws. Like the Israelites who witnessed the pharoahs' cruelty toward the people of God, Euclide Auclair

. . . could not shut his eyes to the wrongs that went on about him, or keep from brooding upon them. In his own time he had seen taxes grow more and more ruinous, poverty and hunger always increasing. People died of starvation in the streets of Paris, in his own parish of Saint-Paul, where there was so much wealth. All the while the fantastic extravagance of the court grew more outrageous. The wealth of the nation, of the grain lands and vineyards and forests of France, was sunk in creating the pleasure palace at Versailles. The richest peers of the realm were ruining themselves on magnificent Court dresses and jewels. And, with so many new abuses, the old ones never grew less; torture and cruel punishments increased as the people became poorer and more desperate. The horrible mill at the Châtelet ground on day after day. Auclair lived too near the prisons of Paris to be able to forget them. In his boyhood a harmless old man who lodged in their own cellar was tortured and put to death at the Châtelet for a petty theft.⁷

The French people are all in bondage to the wealth and power of their King and his Court, the ones who carry out the cruel mandates, like the pathetic Blinker, a former prison torturer, being just as enslaved as the desperate prisoners and starving beggars.

Although most of the people hopelessly accepted their cruel fate, there were a few, like Euclide Auclair, who, though he was a "natural city-dweller" and a "creature of habit," (p. 36) kept their minds free and open. Auclair is not the typical Catherian pioneer, but as he sees

⁷Willa Cather, Shadows on the Rock, vol. 10 of The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather, lib. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938), p. 37. Future references to this source will be paginated within the text.

the wickedness of his nation increase, "Gradually there grew up in . . . [his] mind the picture of a country vast and free. He fell into a habit of looking to Canada as a possible refuge, an escape from the evils one suffered at home, and wishing he could go there" (p. 36). Auclair has heard about the settlement of Canada from his landlord Count Frontenac, who, like a modern, secular Moses, has guided and protected the colony there. Therefore, when the Count is again appointed as Governor-General and asks Auclair to accompany him to the colony in the wilderness, he does so, although not without many qualms and fears.

After a long and difficult voyage over the water, Auclair and his family, a wife and a little four year old daughter Cécile, finally reached their destination, "a grey rock in the Canadian wilderness" (p. 4). Eight years after this exodus, during which time his wife has died and his daughter has grown to be a responsible homemaker for him, Auclair stands on the peak of Cap Diamant, staring down at the empty river from which the home-bound French ships have just sailed. Auclair and his wife have tried to transplant the order and routine of their home in France to this vast continent, but he does not feel at home, and he longs to return to France. To him, the wilderness is a symbol of the darkness and disorder, savagery and mystery of the New World:

On the opposite shore of the river, just across from the proud rock of Quebec, the black pine forest came down to the water's edge; and on the west, behind the town, the forest stretched no living man knew how far. That was the dead, sealed world of the vegetable kingdom, an uncharted continent choked with interlocking trees, living, dead, half-dead, their roots in bogs and swamps, strangling each other in a slow agony that had lasted for centuries. The forest was suffocation, annihilation; there European man was quickly swallowed up in silence, distance, mould, black mud, and the stinging swarms of insect life that bred in it. The only avenue of escape was along the river. The river was the

one thing that lived, moved, glittered, changed--a highway along which men could travel, taste the sun and open air, feel freedom, join their fellows, reach the open sea . . . reach the world, even! (p. 7).

Unlike his daughter, who is sympathetic to the history and miraculous legends of Quebec, Auclair lives in the past of the Old World and his own rationalistic mind. He must have Apollonian order, security, and knowledge in order to exist, and he is therefore mortally afraid of the Dionysian darkness and the unknown, both of the mythic past and of the subconscious, which are symbolized by the forest.

As in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter and "Young Goodman Brown," the dense wilderness also symbolizes the dark sins of mankind and his subsequent death, both physical and spiritual. Moreover, the savagery and disorder of the Indians who live there, eating the flesh of dogs and maybe even of humans, seem to strengthen the idea of the forest as a place of evil and corruption. Civilized man can survive in such an environment only by bringing with him his own sense of order and faith, which is exactly what these French colonists have done. They have brought with them their God, their saints, and their established Church, and their natural affinity for order is reflected in the town that they built on the side of the mountain rock, a hierarchal town in which no two buildings are on the same level, the Count and Bishops' residences being the highest, the houses of the poor being the lowest, and the merchants' shops, such as that of the apothecary Auclair, forming a bridge between. This religious and cultural phenomenon has been observed by Bernice Slote, who contends that to this novel Cather brought "God's fire in the wilderness--from the Children of Israel to the English 'memory and work of the great' to French culture of 'feeling about life'--this concept of preserving through history some sacred

fire, of carrying it through ocean and savage wilderness, is again the quest and the voyage perilous. For Willa Cather it was an absolute lifelong vision."⁸

Although the society which has established itself on the Rock is not perfect, containing not only such moral degenerates as Toinette, Jacques's mother, but also the sinful pride and hypocrisy of its new Bishop Saint-Vallier, it is, when compared to decadent France, a virtual Promised Land, an undefiled paradise. Whereas the Île d'Orléans, which Cécile will later visit is an ambivalent paradise, the garden of the Hôtel Dieu, directed by Mother Juschereau de Saint-Ignace, is as physically innocent and spiritually pure as Eden before the fall. In back of "the avenue of trees the long stone walls of the monastery--seven feet thick, those walls--made a shelter from the wind; they held the sun's heat so well that it was possible to grow wall grapes there, and the purple clusters were cut in September" (p. 39).

The significance of the Rock as a Promised Land or a new paradise rising out of the wilderness is further illuminated by Frye's comment that "In Biblical typology the relation between Eden and the wilderness of Adam's exile is closely parallel to the relation between the Promised Land and the wilderness of the law. Here again the Promised Land is thought of as being 'above' the wilderness, its capital being Jerusalem, the center of the world and the city on the mountain."⁹

⁸Bernice Slote, "The Kingdom of Art," in The Kingdom of Art by Willa Cather (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 91. Willa Cather has used the image of the fire in referring to the Canadian colonists. "Those people," she said in her letter to the Saturday Review of Literature, "brought a kind of French culture there and somehow kept it alive on that rock, sheltered it and tended it and on occasion died for it, as if it really were a sacred fire," Cather, Willa Cather on Writing, p. 16.

⁹Northrop Frye, Fables of Identity (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), p. 60.

The Canadians have rejected the cruel laws of the Old World, replacing law and fear by faith and love, just as God replaced the Old Covenant of the law with the New Covenant based on faith in Christ. Therefore, Auclair exonerates both Bichet, the pauper who had lived in their cellar in Paris and who was executed for stealing two brass pots, and Blinker, the former torturer who had extracted a false confession from an innocent woman, because he feels that the law is wrong. "'The Law,'" he says, "'is to protect property, and it thinks too much of property. A couple of brass pots, an old saddle, are reckoned worth more than a poor man's life. Christ would have forgiven Bichet, as He did the thief on the cross. We must think of him in paradise, where no law can touch him'" (p. 109).

Appropriately, then, the religious emphasis of Shadows on the Rock is on the miracle of love. Stories and legends are told of the miraculous preservation of the Notre Dame de la Victoire during the English bombardment, of Mother Catherine de Saint-Augustine's praying the soul of the sinful Marie into paradise, of her converting an English sailor by putting some of the sacred ground bone of Father Brébeuf's skull in his gruel, and of the recluse Jeanne le Ber's vision of the angels who mended her spinning wheel. As Brown has recognized, such instances of faith show that "in French Canada God is already served as He had been in the deserts of Egypt in the early centuries of Christianity."¹⁰

Whereas in Death Comes for the Archbishop Fathers Latour and Vaillant had received aid from the Holy Mother on their many solitary

¹⁰E. K. Brown, "Willa Cather," in Literary Opinion in America, ed. by Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), p. 510.

journeys, in Shadows on the Rock the emphasis, in keeping with the societal atmosphere of the book, is on the Holy Family. The Auclairs and their neighbors the Pommiers and the Pigeons live on Holy Family Hill, and one of the central scenes of the novel is the placement of the Christmas crèche. Both Jacques and Blinker are enraptured by the little holy figures. Cécile allows Jacques to help her arrange the scene in the window sill, which she has covered with greenery:

The Holy Family must be placed first, under a little booth of fir branches. The Infant was not in His Mother's arms, of course, but lay rosy and naked in a little straw-lined manger, in which he had crossed the ocean. The Blessed Virgin wore no halo, but a white scarf over her head. She looked like a country girl, very naive, seated on a stool, with her knees well apart under her full skirt, and very large feet. Saint Joseph, a grave old man in brown, with a bald head and wrinkled brow, was placed opposite her, and the ox and the ass before the manger (p. 126).

Although Jacques has grown up in the religious city of Quebec, his mother, so different from the Holy Mother, has spent her time entertaining sailors rather than teaching him about God and his Son. Thus, when Cécile puts the three Kings on the sill, he listens to their story with the wonder of first excitement, and the next day he brings his own gift to the little Christ Child in the crèche, a little beaver which a friendly sailor has carved for him. Cécile hesitates about putting the untraditional animal in the manger scene, but her neighbor Madame Pommier points out that "'Our Lord died for Canada as well as for the world over there, and the beaver is our very special animal'" (p. 130); and later Madame calls attention to the holy love and forgiveness apparent in the fact that "'we have a bad woman amongst us, and one of her clients makes a toy for her son, and he gives it to the Holy Child for a birthday present'" (p. 131).

Another incident fraught with religious meaning is Bishop Laval's

encounter with Jacques one cold, moonlit night. The Bishop is truly the Rock of the Church in Quebec, for he never fails to execute his duties, as symbolized by his devoted ringing of the bell for early Mass:

The Bishop got up at four o'clock every morning, dressed without a fire, went with his lantern into the church, and rang the bell for early Mass for the working people. Many good people who did not want to go to Mass at all, when they heard that hoarse frosty bell clanging out under the black sky where there was not yet even a hint of daybreak, groaned and went to the church. Because they thought of the old Bishop at the end of the bell-rope, and because his will was stronger than theirs. He was a stubborn, high-handed, tyrannical, quarrelsome old man, but no one could deny that he shepherded his sheep (p. 87).

One night as the Bishop is returning from sitting by a sick woman's bedside, he hears a child crying. Having awakened and found his mother gone, little Jacques has wandered all over town looking for her and has finally sat down to cry on the steps of the episcopal residence, cold and vacant because Bishop Saint Vallier is in France. Bishop Laval takes the forlorn child home with him, gives him some warm milk and a warm bath, and then washes and kisses his feet as Christ had washed the feet of his disciples. Jacques then goes to sleep, and the Bishop reflects on his strange experience: "This was not an accident, he felt. Why had he found, on the steps of that costly episcopal residence built in scorn of him and his devotion to poverty, a male child, half-clad and crying in the merciless cold? Why had this reminder of his Infant Savior been just there, under that house which he never passed without bitterness, which was like a thorn in his flesh" (p. 88). In Shadows on the Rock, this child image, extended by Cécile, the child protagonist, is, as Dorothy Van Ghent says, "a psychological symbol . . .--the 'divine child' of myth and of dreams, making its clamor at the

limen of consciousness, requiring entrance."¹¹ The child again brings to Laval's consciousness the divine love and forgiveness of the Savior and admonishes him again that to the world the Church is the proper representative of this love.

In addition to the Biblical myth of the Promised Land which rises out of the wilderness and culminates in the person of Jesus Christ and his Church, as symbolized by the Rock, this novel also makes use of the classic myth of Aeneas' search for his prophesied home. The French Canadians establish on the Rock of Quebec not only a church, but also a nation. In Shadows on the Rock, however, there is no one man who corresponds to Aeneas, the Trojan adventurer and founder of Rome, but rather the hero is a society. The French, like the Trojans, have suffered disappointment and defeat in their native land, and they both embark on a long and dangerous ocean voyage, hoping to find sanctuary in "the Western Country"¹²--Italy for the Trojans, Canada for the French.

Credence is given to the mythic parallel between the settlement of Rome and that of Quebec by the subtle allusions that Cather scatters throughout the novel. For example, when the woodsman Frichette and the priest Father Hector Saint-Cyr are struggling through a snow storm to reach Frichette's dying brother-in-law, Father Hector murmurs what his companion thinks is a very long prayer. However, when Frichette comments about it, Father Hector laughs and answers, ""That's not a prayer, Antoine . . . 'that's a Latin poem, a very long one, that I learned at school. If I am uncomfortable, it diverts my mind, and I remember my old

¹¹Dorothy Van Ghent, Willa Cather, University of Minnesota Pamphlet Series, No. 32 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 39.

¹²Edith Hamilton, Mythology (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942), p. 320.

school and my comrades"" (p. 167). Certainly this "long poem" must be Vergil's Aeneid.

Another major allusion occurs just after Blinker has told Auclair the pathetic story of his life as a torturer. Cécile has overheard part of the conversation, and when she inquires about the old man, her father replies that "He was one of the unfortunate of this world. You remember, when Queen Dido offers Aeneas hospitality, she says: "Having known misery, I have learned to pity the miserable." Our poor wood-carrier is like Queen Dido" (p. 191). Like Dido, Euclid and Cécile have also learned to pity the miserable, but in colonizing a new land, they are more like Aeneas himself than like Dido. Like Aeneas, Euclid has a small child, and, like him, he loses his wife. Moreover, Auclair also has a "Dido" which keeps him from devoting himself completely to his task in the New World. This Dido is not a person, however, but rather his memory of Old France, which, like Dido of old, makes him forget his new responsibilities. Lingered by the river, the symbol of escape, until after the last ship has gone back to France, he reflects that "for him this severance from the world grew every year harder to bear" (p. 4). All through the long winter he looks forward to the return of the ships, and he and his protector the Count confidently expect the King's recall. Accordingly, when the ships return in the summer, Euclid begins packing his herb collection and preparing things to leave. However, the call does not come, and when the Count finally realizes that the King does not intend to call him back and offers to pay the Auclairs' passage, Euclid refuses, declaring that he came to Quebec to serve the Count and would remain with him.

What makes life in this harsh New World bearable, and even

rewarding, for the Auclairs and the other settlers is that they have brought their way of life with them--their religion and their customs. Just as Aeneas brought to Rome the gods of Troy, so do these people bring their religion to the New World:

Inferretque deos Latio. When an adventurer carries his gods with him into a remote and savage country, the colony he founds will, from the beginning, have graces, traditions, riches of the mind and spirit. Its history will shine with bright incidents, slight perhaps, but precious, as in life itself, where the great matters are often as worthless as astronomical distances, and the trifles dear as the heart's blood (pp. 114-15).

Quebec's history does indeed shine with bright incidents associated with Mother Catherine and Jeanne le Ber, and the faith of the nuns and of the missionary priests gives spiritual enrichment to the colony. Although the sisters have moved across the world, they are "still in their accustomed place in the world of the mind, and they had the same well-ordered universe about them" (p. 113). Quebec is indeed a New Rome, for like Rome, originally founded by Aeneas but later consecrated to God by St. Peter and the Church, Quebec is the center of religion for the people. Appropriately enough, both cities are built upon the Rock of Faith.

In addition to their religion, the Canadians have also brought with them the effects, customs, and habits of French society:

Madame Auclair had brought her household goods, without which she could not imagine life at all, and the salon behind the shop was very much like their old salon in Paris. . . . As long as she lived, she tried to make the new life as much as possible like the old. After she began to feel sure that she would never be well enough to return to France, her chief care was to train her little daughter so that she would be able to carry on this life and this order after she was gone (pp. 26-27).

The emphasis in the Auclair household is on order and ritual, ritual itself being a mythic expression of life. Lionel Trilling has observed that in this novel, Cather "attaches a mystical significance to the

ritual of the ordered life, to the niceties of cookery, to the supernal virtues of things themselves--sherry, or lettuce, or 'these coppers, big and little, these brooms and cloths and brushes,' which are the tools for making life itself."¹³ Cécile's mother tells her that her father's "whole happiness depends on order and regularity, and you will come to feel a pride in it. Without order our lives would be disgusting, like those of the poor savages" (p. 28). The Auclair household is indeed based on regularity and routine; breakfast is always a pot of chocolate and a fresh loaf of bread from the baker's, luncheon is a "mere goûter" (p. 19), but dinner is always quite an elaborate affair, including soup, wine, a main dish, and a dessert.

As her mother had predicted, Cécile does indeed come to appreciate her French heritage, and she learns to take pride and pleasure in maintaining her home in Canada. One experience in particular, an experience which, in imagery and effect, parallels Aeneas' trip to the Underworld, makes her appreciate the order and meaning of her way of life. The Auclairs' friend Pierre Charron has promised to take Cécile along on a three day excursion to the Île d'Orléans, a small luxuriant island located in the middle of the St. Lawrence River and, in its isolated beauty and peacefulness, reminiscent of the Elysian Fields. Cécile had always wanted to visit this island, for

. . . from the slopes of Cap Diamant she could watch its fields and pastures come alive in the spring, and the bare trees change from purple-grey to green. Down the middle of the island ran a wooded ridge, like a backbone, and here and there along its flanks were cleared spaces, cultivated ground where the islanders raised wheat and rye. Seen from

¹³Lionel Trilling, "Willa Cather," in Willa Cather and Her Critics, ed. by James Schroeter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 152.

the high points of Quebec, the island landscape looked as if it had been arranged to please the eye--full of folds and wrinkles like a crumpled tablecloth, with little fields twinkling above the dark tree-tops. The climate was said to be more salubrious than that of Quebec, and the soil richer (p. 214).

The Underworld of the Aeneid, like the island, must be reached by crossing a river, and the names of the two ferrymen are almost identical: in the ancient myth Charon ferries Aeneas and the Sybil across; in the modern myth, the heroic Charron rows Cécile across.

The character of the island, like that of the Land of the Dead, is quite ambiguous, for it is a curious combination of heaven and hell. Pierre tells Cécile that the "wild grapes on the island are the best in Canada" (p. 218), so good in fact that Jacques Cartier had named the island the Île de Bacchus. As the boat approaches the shore, they sense the "balmy odours that blew out from the Canadian shores . . . the aromatic breath of spruce and balsam" which "the early navigators believed . . . was the smell of luscious unknown fruits, wafted out to sea" (p. 220). Pierre and Cécile soon reach their destination, the home of Pierre's friends the Harnois family, and Cécile goes off into the fields with the four Harnois girls

. . . to pick wild strawberries. She had never seen so many wild flowers before. The daisies were drifted like snow in the tall meadow grass, and all the marshy hollows were thatched over with buttercups, so clean and shining, their yellow so fresh and unvarying, that it seemed as if they must all have been born that morning at the same hour. The clumps of blue and purple iris growing in these islands of buttercups made a sight almost too wonderful. All the afternoon Cécile thought she was in paradise (pp. 220-21).

However, before long, paradise turns to torment, for the Harnois girls begin to discuss vulgar details of animal behavior, the food is too greasy, and the bed that she is asked to sleep in--along with all four dirty Harnois girls--is crowded and filthy. Cécile sits up all night,

and the next day she is happy only when she can escape into the fields away from the dirt and disorder of the Harnois household.

After two nights and days on the island, Pierre notices Cécile's discomfort and takes her back home, where she views her way of life with renewed appreciation. She wants to prepare a good dinner for Pierre and her father, and

As she began handling her own things again, it all seemed a little different--as if she had grown at least two years older in the two nights she had been away. She did not feel like a little girl, doing what she had been taught to do. She was accustomed to think that she did all these things so carefully to please her father, and to carry out her mother's wishes. Now she realized that she did them for herself, quite as much. . . . These coppers, big and little, these brooms and clouts and brushes, were tools; and with them one made, not shoes or cabinet-work, but life itself. One made a climate within a climate; one made the days--the complexion, the special flavour, the special happiness of each day as it passed; one made life (p. 230).

This episode illustrates, as Bernice Slote has observed, that pervading the novel "is a sense of the highest kind of excellence--what in the family, and in the place made in the wilderness, is kept of traditions, culture, the household gods that Aeneas so long ago felt also compelled to deliver into a new world: in short, the sacred fires of a people."¹⁴

In the novel Cather implies the vital correspondence of myth, history, and culture in the development of a nation, and the development of a nation is indeed one of the main themes of the novel, just as it is in Vergil's Aeneid. In his book on the great Roman poets, M. L. Clarke has commented that

In the Aeneid the national spirit finds full expression. For more than half the work the scene is laid on Italian soil and in such episodes as the Trojans visit to Latinus or that of Aeneas to the site of Rome, and in the catalogues of the Italian and Etruscan chieftains, Vergil gives expres-

¹⁴Slote, p. 111.

sion to his love of Italy and of her old traditions. But this is not all. The theme of the Aeneid is the foundation of the Roman people; sentiment and antiquarianism are only incidental. Vergil's main purpose is to justify the Roman Empire, and the numerous passages look forward to the future and show the greatness of Rome as destined by fate.¹⁵

Similarly, almost all of Shadows on the Rock is set in Canada, in New France, and the legends of Mother Catherine, Jeanne le Ber, Father Chabanel and others attest to Cather's new-found love of the Canadian people and their traditions. "There," she said, "among the country people and the nuns, I caught something new to me; a kind of feeling about life and human fate that I could not accept, wholly, but which I could not but admire."¹⁶

Shadows on the Rock is thus concerned with the early history of Quebec, with the very foundations of French Canada, just as the Aeneid is concerned with the mythic history of Rome. The colonists have brought their French customs and traditions with them, but it is not these things in themselves that will mould the new nation, but rather their combination with the wildness and innocence, the freedom and independence that are representative of the New World. In their yearning to return to France, Auclair, Count Frontenac, and Bishop Saint-Vallier represent the Old World and the past, whereas in their love for the people and the places of the New World, Cécile, Pierre Charron, Bishop Laval, and such minor characters as Mother Catherine, Father Chabanel, and Father Hector are the true Canadians. Cécile's father looks forward to returning to France, but to Cécile such an event would be disaster.

¹⁵M. L. Clarke, The Roman Mind: Studies in the History of Thought from Cicero to Marcus Aurelius (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1968), p. 91.

¹⁶Cather, Willa Cather on Writing, p. 15.

She realizes that "her father scarcely cared at all for those they would leave behind--the only friends she had ever known" (p. 265), and she lives in utter terror until the last boat returns without them and she knows "that the world was not going to be destroyed this winter" (p. 292). As Pierre tells her, "You and I are Canadians, monkey" (p. 203).

Pierre Charron also loves the land and people of Canada and is, in fact, a sort of national hero for Quebec, just as Aeneas was for the Trojans. To the Auclairs,

Pierre Charron had seemed the type they had come so far to find; more than anyone else he realized the romantic picture of the free Frenchman of the great forests which they had formed at home on the bank of the Seine. He had the good manners of the Old World, the dash and daring of the New. He was proud, he was vain, he was relentless when he hated, and quickly prejudiced; but he had the old ideals of clan-loyalty, and in friendship he never counted the cost. His goods and his life were at the disposal of the man he loved or the leader he admired. Though his figure was still boyish, his face was full of experience and sagacity; a fine bold nose, a restless, rather mischievous mouth, white teeth, very strong and even, sparkling hazel eyes with a kind of living flash in them, like the sunbeams on the bright rapids upon which he was so skillful (p. 200).

Like Aeneas, Pierre has fought the natives and the wilderness of the country and has won the respect and admiration of the people. Thus, as his name "Peter" indicates, he is a rock of courage for the people, and it is to him that the Auclairs look for support after the Count dies. The Epilogue reveals that Pierre and Cécile have married and have four little boys, "'the Canadians of the future--the true Canadians'" (p. 324). In Pierre and Cécile's marriage, Cather has united strength with imagination, freedom with order, the vigor of the land with the redeeming power of religion, Dionysus with Apollo, and their children, it is implied, will inherit the best qualities of both the Old World and the New. A new nation and a new people have been born.

The Apollonian-Dionysian conflict which is intermingled throughout Cather's novels is also implied in the novel's reliance on the Aeneid. Clarke reports that "In the description of Aeneas's shield in the eighth book of the Aeneid Vergil includes a picture of the battle of Actium. On the one side is Augustus with the gods of Rome, on the other Antonius and his Egyptian queen, and with them dog-headed Anubis and other monstrous oriental deities. Apollo of Actium decides the issue and puts to flight the eastern deities. It is a conflict between east and west, between civilization and barbarism, and Apollo is on the side of civilization."¹⁷ So, too, in Shadows on the Rock there is a conflict between barbarism and civilization, chaos and order, passion and reason, Dionysus and Apollo, and whereas a balance is sought between the two extremes, the scales seem to be weighed toward Apollonian order and civilization.

In this novel, the moon and the sun continue to be major symbols, but here the moon is associated not with Dionysian desire and the Endymion-Diana myth, but with the cruelty, coldness, and loneliness as personified in Hecate, the goddess of the dark of the moon. For example, when Toinette stays out all night, dogsledging with friends in the cold air and "with a pale lemon moon riding high overhead" (p. 83), she shows unforgivable coldness, thoughtlessness, and cruelty to her little son Jacques. That same bitter night, poor Jacques wakes up lonely and frightened and discovers that his mother is gone: "The moonlight shone brightly, but the fire had gone out, and all about him things creaked with cold" (p. 84). He puts on his shoes and goes out into the snow to look for his mother, but he does not find her. Crossing the Place, he

¹⁷Clarke, pp. 78-79.

sees the statue of King Louis, representative of the cruelty, neglect, and injustice of the Old World, and it looks "terrifying in the moonlight" (p. 84), the moon here also representing the coldness and cruelty of Europe. In France, for example, many poor little children have died of starvation and neglect, but here in Quebec, Bishop Laval discovers Jacques and, like Cécile, he takes care of him in spite of the degenerate and spiteful mother.

There are at least two other instances in the novel where the moon symbolizes loneliness. The first instance occurs when, feeling spiritually isolated in the dirty and disordered Harnois house, Cécile sits up all night beside the window, watching the moon come up. In the second incident, one cold moonlit night, Pierre hides in the church to catch a glimpse of Jeanne le Ber, the recluse he had once loved. He tells Auclair that when she appeared, he was shocked to see her sorrowful, stony face and to hear her voice--"hoarse, hollow, with the sound of despair in it. Why is she unhappy, I ask you? She is, I know it! When she prayed in silence, such sighs broke from her. And once a groan, such as I have never heard; such despair--such resignation and despair! It froze everything in me" (p. 213). Here the cold moon symbolizes Jeanne's solitude and intense spirituality. The holy recluse has probably experienced great spiritual rewards in her years of isolation, but in the process, she has become alienated from all humanity. She seems to have felt more sorrow than joy, and as Brown proclaims, she has at last "receded into a long spiritual drought."¹⁸

Toward the end of the novel, Pierre plans a moonlight supper for

¹⁸E. K. Brown, Willa Cather (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 283.

the Auclairs and for his friend Captain Pondaven. The gaiety and sociability of the occasion gives it a Dionysian atmosphere, but the party is viewed by the lonely figure of Father Hector, who has just been to see the Count on business. Lingerin on the Count's terrace, he notices that

The moon was high in the heavens, shining down upon the rock, with its orchards and gardens and silvery steeples. The dark forest and the distant mountains were palely visible. This was not the warm white moonlight of his own Provence, certainly, which made the roads between the mulberry trees look like rivers of new milk. This was the moonlight of the North, cold, blue, and melancholy. It threw a shimmer over the land, but never lay in the velvet folds on any wall or tower or wheatfield (p. 260).

The moonlight reflects the loneliness and isolation of life on the Rock of Quebec, as well as an Endymion-like desire for the softness of the Old World.

There is another side to Canadian life, however--the warmth, humanity, and order which are symbolized by the sun. The sun is linked here, not with solitude, as in My Mortal Enemy and other novels, but with companionship. Standing beside the river after the boats have left, Auclair is "glancing up at the sun to reckon the time of day" (p. 8) when he sees a soldier coming to bid him to the Count's presence. The sun shines over Pierre and Cécile as they glide down the river together, and it shines on Cécile and Jacques while they are coasting down the hill. Moreover, when Cécile and her father visit the Sisters at Hôtel Dieu, "the red-gold autumn sunlight [which] poured over the rock like a heavy southern wine," (p. 38) symbolizes not only human companionship and love, but also physical and spiritual fertility, for the walls of the monastery "held the sun's heat so well that it was possible to grow wall grapes there" (p. 39).

Therefore, the sun also symbolizes birth and growth. It marks Cécile's homecoming from the Île d'Orléans, and it signals the arrival of the ships from France. Also, on the first day of June, "When the sun came up over the Île d'Orléans, the rock of Kébec stood gleaming above the river like an altar with many candles, or like a holy city in an old legend, shriven, sinless, washed in gold. The quickening of all life and hope which had come to France in May had reached the Far North at last" (p. 197). Here the religious imagery associated with the sun implies the spiritual rebirth of man along with the rebirth of the year, and later the autumn sun indicates a spiritual as well as a physical harvest. Moreover, the beautiful red afterglow which lingers in the Northern sky even after the sun has set indicates that even in death or winter, God will not forget these people who cling so tenaciously to their rock.

The progression of the seasons is vital both to the structure and the theme of Shadows on the Rock. Like many of Cather's previous novels, this one begins in the autumn, the first scene being the departure of the boats in October. During the brisk autumn days, Cécile sees after her household and her little friend Jacques, until a heavy December snowfall signals the advent of winter--"the deepest reality of Canadian life" (p. 115). December is climaxed by the Birth of the Savior, reenacted in the Auclair house through the placement of the symbolic crèche. After Christmas, however, the long cold winter, the death of the year, settles down hard over Quebec. Significantly, the legends and stories recorded in the section entitled "The Long Winter" all deal with death, either physical or spiritual. The tale of Jeanne le Ber's physical entombment and eventual spiritual degeneration is re-

counted here, as are the stories of Father Chabanel, who sacrifices his body and his spirit to the savages he hated, and of Frichette and Father Hector who risk death by braving a snow storm in order to reach Frichette's dying brother-in-law and administer the Sacrament to him. This is also where Blinker's history as a prison torturer is revealed, but in unburdening his guilty, tormented conscience, Blinker seems to find a new peace and contentment that prefigures the spring. Near the end of the winter, Cécile takes to her bed for a few days with a cold, but one day her father carries her to the door to show her their beloved swallow. Spring has finally come, and Cécile's recovery comes along with it.

By June the city is warm and bright, and Pierre Charron, the proper representative of new life in a new country, appears to visit the Auclairs and take Cécile on a trip with him. It is also in the early part of the year that the ships come from France, bringing with them happiness and excitement for all. The year and the novel have made a full circle when these ships again leave for France, leaving behind them the Auclairs and their protector Count Frontenac. As winter comes again, the old Count becomes ill, and knowing he can never return to France, he reconciles himself to die in Quebec. He does, however, dream of a house near Pontoise, France, where as a child he had stayed with a kind old nurse, and his dream foreshadows his death:

In his dream, too, he had been asleep and had suddenly awakened. . . . He had been awakened by fright, a sense that some danger threatened him. He got up and in his bare feet stole to the door leading into the garden, which was ajar. Outside, in the darkness, stood a very tall man in a plumed hat and huge boots--a giant in fact; the little boy's head did not come up to his boot-tops. He had no idea who the enormous man might be, but he knew that he must not come in, that everything depended on his being kept out (pp. 282-83).

The little boy fastens the door leading into the garden and the front door and then feels "suddenly faint. . . . That terrible man on the other side of the door; one could hear him moving about in the currant bushes, pulling at the rose-vines on the wall. There were other doors-- and windows . . . but for the moment he was safe" (p. 283). Count Frontenac, like Archbishop Latour, returns to a memory of childhood before death; one is reminded of Wordsworth's contention that the child has a prescience or memory of what immortality is like.

Sensing the symbolic meaning of his dream, the Count decides to make his will, in which he leaves to Cécile a beautiful bowl of glass fruit that she has often admired. Sargent Bush views this bowl of fruit as

. . . a symbol of the lasting and intangible value to those in Quebec of all that France used to be. The symbol suggests that this heritage, like France's fruit, has a richness and a fecundity which lasts beyond the time in which it was originally produced. Cécile appreciates the beauty of the fruit fully as much as does the Count and he is thus wise in giving it to her. In inheriting the bowl of fruit, she inherits a part of the past which has been meaningful to those who have lived before her and we are assured that she will know how properly to admire and value this object in her own time. The bowl of fruit is, of course, not the past itself, but a distillation of it. Like any valuable piece of art, it captures an essence of what is valuable in the time in which it was produced and it is available for the delight and enjoyment of all those future generations who bring to their encountering of it experience of their own which can help to make it meaningful to them.¹⁹

As the old generation passes, it bequeaths to the new its values of an orderly and beautiful society.

Sensing the inevitable decline of the corrupt and decadent regime of France, Auclair finally decides that he is "indeed fortunate

¹⁹Sargent Bush, Jr., "'Shadows on the Rock' and Willa Cather's View of the Past," Queen's Quarterly, 73 (1966), 283.

to spend his old age here [in Canada] where nothing changed" (p. 325), but even in Canada the inevitable cycle of life continues. The Count is dead, and Auclair and Bishop Saint-Vallier are old, but the family and the society experience rebirth and regeneration through Pierre and Cécile's marriage and through their children who have in their blood the heritage of both the Old World and the New, Dionysus and Apollo. Cather has revealed that in this novel she tried "to state the mood and the viewpoint in the title. To [her] the rock of Quebec is not only a stronghold on which many strange figures have for a little time cast a shadow in the sun; it is the curious endurance of a kind of culture, narrow but definite. There another age persists."²⁰ The title, then, symbolizes the eternal paradox of life, for although each life and each season passes, the cycle of nature and of the generations persists. In other words, although the shadows of time vanish, the stability of the rock remains.

²⁰Cather, Willa Cather on Writing, p. 15.

CHAPTER XII

THE WINTER OF LIFE AND LOVE

IN LUCY GAYHEART

In Lucy Gayheart (1931), a rather conventional novel which is somewhat marred by sentimentality and coincidence, Willa Cather returns to the contemporary Middle West to examine once again the relationship of life and art which had been a major theme of The Song of the Lark and The Professor's House. Although, unlike The Song of the Lark, this novel is not based on an established myth, it does employ the mythic cycle of the seasons, and it uses isolated mythic symbols--the sun, the moon, and the stars, the orchard and the river. Moreover, in Lucy Gayheart Cather once again reveals the eternal conflict of Dionysus and Apollo, for which she had found a temporary synthesis in Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock. In Lucy and in her rival sweethearts, Harry Gordon and Clement Sebastian, one can discern the conflicting values of business and art, caution and impulse, reality and the ideal, innocence and experience.

The cycle of the seasons has long been an appropriate metaphor for the cycle of life--for birth, youth, age, and death. Ancient man became reconciled to the death of the year because he knew that new life and growth would appear in the spring. Thus, the swift cycle of the year symbolizes both the transience of life and the perpetuity of life because each crop, each individual is only an infinitesimal part of a much larger plan. In Lucy Gayheart the life of the heroine corresponds to the cycle

of the year, and she dies, appropriately, in the dead of winter. Richard Giannone has recognized and summarized the seasonal pattern of the novel: "Reversing the conventional order," he says, "Cather has the romance [with Sebastian] begin in the dead of winter. In spring love burgeons, in summer the lovers separate, in autumn the lover dies, and in winter the beloved dies. The corresponding geographical movements are a winter journey Eastward to love in Chicago and an autumn return westward to Nebraska."¹ This initial eastward movement followed by a return to the West corresponds to the pattern of Cather's career, to whom the West, like the autumn or the winter, represented the quest's end, which was really the beginning.

Lucy Gayheart opens on the last day of Lucy's Christmas vacation in the year 1901. Lucy has been skating all afternoon and is tired, but when her friend Harry Gordon, who has been working at his father's bank, reaches the shallow arm of the river where the ice is good for skating, she makes a special effort to skate with him. Reaching the shore of the island, they drink some Scotch whiskey he has to warm them up and then sit down on an old log to rest:

The round red sun was falling like a heavy weight; it touched the horizon line and sent quivering fans of red and gold over the wide country. For a moment Lucy and Harry Gordon were sitting in a stream of blinding light; it burned on their skates and on the flask and the metal cup. Their faces became so brilliant that they looked at each other and laughed. In an instant the light was gone; the frozen stream and the snow-masked prairie land became violet, under the blue-green sky. Wherever one looked, there was nothing but flat country and low hills, all violet and grey.²

¹Richard Giannone, Music in Willa Cather's Fiction (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 220.

²Willa Cather, Lucy Gayheart & My Mortal Enemy, vol. 11 of The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather, lib. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938), p. 10. Future references to this source will be paginated within the text.

The sunset light as well as the winter season forebode sadness for this young couple. For each of them, happiness, like the blinding light, lasts for only a moment in the eternity of time before love and Lucy's life are gone.

The bright star which comes out while Lucy and Harry are driving back to town indicates not only man's insignificance in relation to time and the cosmos, but also Lucy's desire for life and understanding:

That point of silver light spoke to her like a signal, released another kind of life and feeling which did not belong here. It overpowered her. With a mere thought she had reached the star and it had answered, recognition had flashed between. Something knew, then, in the unknowing waste: something had always known, forever! That joy of saluting what is far above one was an eternal thing, not merely something that had happened to her ignorance and her foolish heart (pp. 11-12).

Lucy cannot sustain this understanding for long, just as she cannot sustain her later passionate happiness and love, and she returns to the world of reality as represented by Harry. However, even though she likes Harry, she longs to be back in Chicago where she is studying music, for that is where, in her spirit and her mind, she really lives. Lucy has an Apollonian aspiration for truth, but she has an even greater Dionysian desire for life, which Harry, who is conventional, cautious, and business-like, admires, but cannot understand or imitate.

On the train to Chicago, Lucy wants to be alone, but Harry is also going to Omaha on the same train, and he sits beside her. She is conscious of his "good physical presence" and his strength and self-possession, which were "very reassuring to a mercurial, vacillating person like Lucy" (p. 18). While Lucy thinks about Chicago, he is thinking, in his careful way, "that he had about made up his mind" to ask Lucy to marry him. Being a watchmaker's daughter, she is not in his social or

economic class, but "When he was with her, life was different; that was all" (p. 22). Although he himself values the Apollonian traits of order, caution, and appearance, he is drawn to her vitality and her spontaneous response to life. Cather says that Lucy always walked, even on the coldest or hottest days, as if she were hurrying toward something pleasant: "Life seemed to lie very near the surface in her. She had that singular brightness of young beauty: flower gardens have it for the first few hours after sunrise" (p. 5).

When Lucy reaches Chicago, she has the feeling of coming home to herself again. Just before she left for the holidays, she had heard the great baritone Clement Sebastian, and his singing had aroused levels of feeling and awareness in her which she did not know existed. As he sings "Der Doppelgänger," or "The Double," she has a vision of "moonlight, intense and calm, sleeping on old human houses; and somewhere a lonely black cloud in the night sky" (p. 30), and through the music and its symbolical associations, she becomes aware of the dual nature of man--of Sebastian and herself. Brought face to face with this darker Dionysian aspect of life, Lucy sits through the rest of the concert, but

. . . her mind was far away. She was struggling with something she had never felt before. A new conception of art? It came closer than that. A new kind of Personality? But it was much more. It was a discovery about life, a revelation of love as a tragic force, not a melting mood, of passion that drowns like black water. As she sat listening to this man, the outside world seemed to her dark and terrifying, full of fears and dangers that had never come close to her until now (p. 31).

Later Sebastian returns to sing the melancholy "When We Two Parted" as an encore, a song which haunts Lucy after she goes home like an evil omen. She had the "feeling that some protecting barrier was gone--a window had been broken that let in the cold and darkness of the night" (p. 32). This

experience has changed Lucy's life so much that she does not feel comfortable or satisfied in Haverford or with Harry. She is frightened by the dark intensity that Sebastian has released in his songs, but she is also greatly fascinated by it. Now, after she has returned from her unsatisfactory visit home, she realizes that "Her forebodings on that first night had not been mistaken; Sebastian had already destroyed a great deal for her. Some people's lives are affected by what happens to their feelings and their thoughts--that and nothing more" (p. 33). Sebastian has destroyed the innocence and ignorance in Lucy's mind, which, to Cather, are of greater import than the innocence of the body.

His regular accompanist being in poor health, Sebastian has engaged Lucy as a temporary pianist. Therefore, when she returns to Chicago, Lucy goes to his studio to play for him while he practices his singing. While they are working, the room is filled with sunlight, the Apollonian symbol of art and music, but when they are finished and are talking over a glass of port, Sebastian lowers the shades. Afterwards, he shows Lucy through the studio and introduces her to Giuseppe, his Italian valet. Lucy is very impressed by the good taste and order of the studio apartment, and when she returns home to her room above a German bakery, she compares Sebastian favorably to Harry Gordon. Sebastian, she reflects, "would be equal to any situation in the world. He had a simplicity that must come from having lived a great deal and mastered a great deal. If you brushed against his life ever so slightly it was like tapping on a deep bell; you felt all that you could not hear" (p. 47).

Each morning before she goes to the studio, Lucy takes a long walk along the lake front. Being young and happy, she enjoys the cold

January weather: "The sharp air that blew off the water brought up all the fire of life in her. . ." (p. 48). When it is time for her appointment, she goes into the studio and brings "the freshness of the morning weather to a man who rose late and did not go abroad until noon" (p. 48). The winter weather here is the appropriate setting for the aging Sebastian as well as for Lucy, who is ending one life in order to begin another. During this winter she leaves behind her provincial, Haverford sensibilities in order to embrace a larger conception of life and love.

Sebastian has a "courteous, half-playful, and rather professional" manner with Lucy when she plays for him, but she senses that his other, darker side is more real. By chance, she has observed this sterner, more melancholy aspect of his nature when he thought he was alone on the street, and one day she slips into the back of the cathedral where he has gone to a friend's funeral. Lucy notes that his eyes never left the coffin;

. . . turning his head slowly, he followed it with a look that struck a chill to Lucy's heart. It was a terrible look; anguish and despair, and something like entreaty. All faces were turned reverently toward the procession, but his stood out from the rest with a feeling personal and passionate. He had forgotten himself, forgotten where he was and that there were people who might stare at him. It seemed to Lucy that a wave of black despair had swept into the church, carrying him and that black coffin up the aisle together, while the clergy and the worshippers were unconscious of it. Had this woman been a very dear friend? Or was it death itself that seemed horrible to him--death in a foreign land, in a hotel, far from everything one loved? (p. 55).

Sebastian's despair and absorption in the death of his friend, his interest in the black coffin itself, is an ominous foreshadowing of his own impending death.

As the winter passes, Lucy and Sebastian both learn to look forward to their mornings together in the studio, and while he is away on a concert tour, Lucy misses him a great deal. Moreover, when she goes to his studio the day after his return and discovers that he has spent the day before with an old lady friend who was passing through town and who has filled his room with roses and acacias, she is unaccountably hurt and jealous. Because the flowers remind Sebastian of the transience of life and youth, she asks him if he hasn't ever felt happiness in love, and he answers her with a teasing rejoinder which hurts her feelings and sends her flying out of the room. That night Sebastian goes to see her to apologize, and their happy mornings continue on through February.

One Sunday, however, when he is alone, Sebastian reads about the death of another old friend and becomes deeply melancholy about his life and age. Until now,

Nothing had ever made Sebastian admit to himself that his youth was forever and irrevocably gone. He had clung to a secret belief that he would pick it up again, somewhere. This was a time of temporary lassitude and disillusion, but his old feeling about life would come back; he would turn a corner and confront it. He would waken some morning and step out of bed the man he used to be. Now, all in a moment, it came over him that when people spoke of their dear youth they were not using a figure of speech. The thing he was looking for had gone out into the wide air, like a volatile essence, and he was staring into the empty jar. Emptiness, that was the feeling. . . (p. 79).

He regrets having missed a close relationship with the land, the loss of friendships, and the failure of his marriage. He is about to decide that there is no joy or happiness left in his life, when suddenly he remembers Lucy and decides to ask her to go to dinner with him.

The next morning Sebastian is tied up with his agent, but he asks Lucy to come to tea in the afternoon. When she arrives, Sebastian opens

the door, and she finds herself in his arms:

They stood for a long while without moving, in the dusky little hall among overcoats and walking-sticks. Lucy felt him take everything that was in her heart; there was nothing to hold back any more. His soft deep breathing seemed to drink her up entirely, to take away all that was timid, uncertain, bewildered. Something beautiful and serene came from his heart into hers; wisdom and sadness. If he took her secret, he gave her his in return; that he had renounced life. Nobody would ever share his life again. But he had unclouded faith in the old and lovely dreams of man; that he would teach her and share with her. When they went into the music room, neither of them had spoken (p. 89).

They declare their love for each other, and Sebastian tells her how happy she has made him during their morning sessions. "I began to watch for you from the window," he says, "and when I caught sight of you tripping along in the wind, my heart grew lighter. I love young ardour, young fire. . . . When you knocked, it was like springtime coming in at the door. I went to work with more spirit because things were new and wonderful to you" (pp. 90-91). Lucy is for him the very incarnation of all youth, and for a short while she brings back to him a renewal of his own youthfulness and love of life. In return for the hope and happiness he receives, Sebastian gives Lucy greater wisdom and perspective on life--on youth and age, life and art, love and death. In these two lovers, the innocence of the New World meets the experience of the Old. As Wallace Stegner has phrased it, "It is as if Miss Cather conceived the settlement of her country as a marriage between a simple, fresh, hopeful young girl and a charming, worldly, but older man."³

³Wallace Stegner, "The West Authentic: Willa Cather," in The Sound of Mountain Water (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1969), p. 239.

For a short while Sebastian and Lucy are blissfully happy, but the season does not last. Sebastian must go East on a tour, and Harry comes up for a week at the opera with Lucy. Perhaps Lucy subconsciously realizes that her happiness is only a fleeting illusion, because she dreads seeing Harry, who is down to earth and very realistic. She fears that "He would manage to prove to her that she had been living in a dream, that she was Lucy Gayheart and had been fooling herself all this while" (p. 99). Harry does come, however, and with the exception of their disagreement over the relative merits of representational and impressionistic art, the week goes better than she had hoped. However, when, on his last night, he tries to ask her to marry him, Lucy resents his over-confidence and reacts childishly by telling him a lie about her relationship with Sebastian, a lie which hurts Harry deeply. Thinking she has taken the famous singer as her lover, Harry leaves her at the restaurant to get home as best she can, and the next week, still nursing his wounded pride, he married a plain heiress who has been interested in him for a long time.

After Harry is gone, Lucy regrets her hasty action, and she is hurt by his rebound marriage, but she soon forgets him in her absorption in Sebastian's successful tour. However, since his success has increased his popularity, Lucy learns from Giuseppe that he has added some engagements to his European tour and will be leaving almost immediately after his return to Chicago. When he does return in late March, the beginning of the seasonal year, he tells Lucy that "'The best thing about this concert tour has been a revival of interest--in here, I mean,' he tapped his chest" (p. 144), and it is apparent that his renewal, his artistic and emotional rebirth that parallels the seasonal rebirth, has been sparked by Lucy's youth and his love for her.

Sebastian wants Lucy to keep his studio until he returns in the autumn, and he plans for her to meet him in Europe the next summer, but Lucy sees no further than the present separation. Their subsequent parting is a sad one because both sense that things will never be the same for them. Sebastian is afraid that Lucy will change, and she is afraid that he will not come back. She recalls the pre-sentiment of sorrow she had had when she first heard him sing "When We Two Parted," and now she sees that the song refers to them and their love. Thus, the song as quoted below foreshadows the later tragedy of Sebastian's death:

When we two parted
 In silence and tears,
 Half broken-hearted,
 To sever for years

Pale grew thy cheek and cold,
 Colder thy kiss;
 Surely that hour foretold
 Sorrow to this (p. 32).

Lucy feels a sense of inevitable and impending loss, and by early autumn her fears are realized, for Sebastian drowns in Lake Como, pulled down by the cowardice of his lame accompanist, James Mockford, the green-eyed, mocking personification of jealousy, envy, and treachery. Just as spring had brought Lucy and Sebastian the fulfillment of their love and their art, autumn brings the death that was foreshadowed in Sebastian's song "Der Doppelgänger," in the dark music which reveals the "passion that drowns like black water" (p. 31).

Lucy Gayheart goes home to Haverford to recuperate from the shock of Sebastian's death, but she is not the same Lucy her neighbors remember. Watching her pass by her window, Lucy's old friend Mrs. Ramsay reflects on the change: "Lucy had always walked rapidly, but with a difference. It used to be as if she were hurrying toward something delight-

ful, and positively could not tarry. Now it was as if she were running away from something, or walking merely to tire herself out" (p. 148).

Lucy's sluggishness is like the sleep of Endymion. Before her tragic love affair, Lucy had always felt a passionate, Endymion-like desire for love and life, beauty and art, as symbolized in the moon. Lying in the Chicago studio, she had recalled that during previous summers,

At this hour she used often to be sitting on the church steps, looking up at that far-away moon, everything so still about her, everything so wide awake within her. When she couldn't sit still any longer, there was nothing to do but to hurry along the sidewalks again; diving into black tents of shadow under the motionless, thick-foliaged maple trees, then out into the white moonshine. And always one had to elude people. Harry and the town boys had their place, but on nights like this she liked to be alone. She wondered she hadn't worn a trail in the sidewalks about the Lutheran church and the old high school. She wondered that her heart hadn't burst in those long vacations, when there was no human image she could hold up against the summer night; when she was alone out there, looking up at the moon from the bottom of a well (pp. 138-39).

For the life-loving Lucy, as for Endymion, the moon symbolizes the beautiful ideals which she has sought, but believing she has found the Ideal in Sebastian, she allows his death to almost destroy her desire.

Lucy wanders through her house and the town of Haverford as if she were in a trance. Her kind old father cannot sympathize with her, even though he, too, is a musician of sorts, and her sister Pauline is jealous and resentful of her. The only person that she feels could understand and sympathize with her is Harry Gordon, but she finds his heart apparently closed to her. She creates "accidental" meetings with her old friend at the post office and the bank, but he always answers her with a pretense of surprise and casual cordiality that immediately puts a barrier between them.

The only solace that Lucy can find in Haverford is the old apple

orchard behind the Gayheart house, and she has begged Pauline, who planned to have it chopped down in order to plant onions there to bring in some extra money, to leave it another year. Lucy, like Cather, views the trees almost as animate beings and cannot bear to see them destroyed.⁴ Thus, in the orchard, reminiscent of the mythic gardens and orchards of both the Greeks and the Christians, Lucy finds the peace and repose that she needs. She lies there in the sun and remembers Sebastian, his music, and their love, and in that beautiful, innocent spot, she feels a sense of redemption and renewal which she believes will help her to continue life. However, she knows that Pauline plans to have the trees chopped down the next year, and the destruction of their beauty, like that of the Forresters' marsh land, becomes symbolic to her of the defeat of beauty, art, and the ideal--values she herself stands for.

Lucy's complete lethargy continues until two weeks after Christmas, when she goes to hear a traveling opera company perform. There her interest is aroused by the musical passion, understanding, and aspiration of one of its singers who, though old and weak in talent, still strives to give her best to the audience. This singer's desire strikes a latent chord of desire in Lucy, and she longs to go "back to a world that strove after excellence" (p. 184). For days she feels this sense of renewed excitement, and one night as she sits in her room, she recalls

How often she had run out on a spring morning, into the orchard, down the street, in pursuit of something she could not see, but knew! It was there, in the breeze, in the sun; it hid behind the blooming apple boughs, raced before her through the neighbours' gardens, but she could never catch up with it. Clement Sebastian had made the fugitive gleam an actual possession. With him she had learned that those

⁴Mildred R. Bennett, The World of Willa Cather (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 144.

flashes of promise could come true, that they could be the important things in one's life. He had never told her so; he was, in his own person, the door and the way to that knowledge (p. 186).

Sitting there in the twilight, Lucy again feels a mythic Endymion-like desire for beauty and love, and she longs to return to the city and to Life. She has a sudden personal revelation and wonders, "What if--what if Life itself were the sweetheart? It was like a lover waiting for her in distant cities--across the sea; drawing her, enticing her, weaving a spell over her" (p. 187). Lucy, like Cather, has begun with a reliance on the cold Apollonian ideal of art, but she ends with a full Dionysian worship of Life itself. In this heroic decision to rejoin life after her symbolical winter of spiritual death, Geismar asserts that "we get that sense of a final catharsis, of a human rebirth, which . . . Cather has constantly struggled for. . . ." ⁵

After her revival of interest in life, Lucy writes to Professor Auerback, her former teacher and employer, to request her old position back, and he writes back to tell her that it will be available for her in March, the spring again signaling the beginning of a new life. In the meantime, however, Lucy becomes restless and resentful of the restrictions of her family and the town. She does, though, become closer to the land and to nature, a relationship which Sebastian had felt was essential to happiness and knowledge, and one afternoon she observes a beautiful pink glow in the sky, which, like the glow of happiness she now feels, precedes the sunset, mythic symbol of death.

Lucy has not told her family about her plans, and Pauline gets her

⁵Maxwell Geismar, "Willa Cather: Lady in the Wilderness," The Last of the Provincials (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1947), p. 213.

some music pupils, thinking that she will be pleased. However, when Lucy makes it quite clear that she has no intention of teaching in Haverford, Pauline unleashes her jealousy and resentment of her pampered sister, pointing out how much money it has taken to support her in Chicago and how little she has contributed to expenses herself. Hurt and angry, Lucy grabs her skates and rushes off before Pauline can tell her that the skating place has been ruined by a flood and that now the main part of the river flowed where the shallow arm used to be. After her anger wears off, Lucy finds walking very hard, and when, coincidentally, she hears the bells of Harry's cutter, she hopes for a ride. However, still nursing his pride and trying to hide his true feelings for her, Harry rudely refuses her, and Lucy's temper explodes: "Such a storm of pain and anger boiled up in her that she felt strong enough to walk into the next county. Her blood was racing, and she was no longer conscious of the cold. She forgot to look where she put her feet; they took care of themselves" (pp. 200-1).

In her anger, Lucy does not notice the change in the landscape, but skates right toward the center of the river itself. The thin ice breaks through, and Lucy's skate catches in a submerged tree, entrapping her and drowning her just as her lover had been drowned. Like the mythic river Alpheus, the powerful Platte River is symbolic of the Dionysian passion which has destroyed everyone in the novel: Sebastian is destroyed by the hatred and envy of his subordinate, James Mockford; Lucy is destroyed by her own uncontrollable temper and anger as well as the morbid depression which is the last remnant of her love for Sebastian; and Harry is almost destroyed by his personal selfishness and pride. As Elizabeth Sergeant has recognized, in Lucy Gayheart, "there lies this almost allegorical shadow cast by a solitary immature passion. Suffering and

ecstasy are bedfellows here. . . ."6

The scene of Lucy's death forms an ironic parallel to the opening scene of the novel, for the principal actors--Lucy and Harry--are the same, the season (winter) is the same, the place is the same, and even Harry's sleigh bells are the same. However, the carefreeness and gaiety of the first scene has turned to tragedy, and Harry, who is returning from his "important appointment," must now follow remorsefully behind the death procession of the girl he has always loved but, for whom, just a few hours earlier, he had been too busy and too proud to give a ride.

Lucy's death occurs in the winter, the death of the year, and twenty-five years later, her father also dies in the winter. In the intervening years many changes have taken place in Haverford. Harry has had to live with guilt and regret for many years, but he has finally found peace with himself. After Mr. Gayheart's funeral, he goes to the little study he has furnished behind the bank, of which he is now sole owner, and remembers what his life has been like since Lucy's death. He recalls that even before Lucy's death, he had regretted his hasty marriage and that he had had to fight to keep from showing her that he still loved her. Even then he had dreamed that he and Lucy could some day be together, but he wanted to hold back, to punish her for her infidelity and for his own hurt. After Lucy's accident, he did not have the courage to go to the funeral, but asked his wife to go instead, and for several years afterward, he was unreliable in his business affairs. However, he found meaning in the contributions he made to the war effort, and after

⁶Elizabeth Sergeant, Willa Cather (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1953), p. 256.

he returned home from France, where he had worked with an ambulance unit, he was more stable in business and kinder to his wife.

As the years passed, Harry developed a friendship with Lucy's father, which was "somewhat like a retribution" (p. 224). He spent many evenings playing chess in Mr. Gayheart's shop, where Lucy's old piano still stood as a reminder of her. He has established a perspective for himself, and he realizes that his individual memories "mattered very little when one looked up there at eternity" (p. 222), as symbolized in the stars; however, he still feels that "Lucy was the best thing he had to remember. When he looked back into the past, there was just one face, one figure, that was mysteriously lovely" (p. 225). Over the years Lucy has become less an individual and more a symbol for Harry, as she was for Sebastian. Now Harry "is not a man haunted by remorse; all that he went through with long ago. He enjoys his prosperity and his good health. Lucy Gayheart is no longer a despairing little creature standing in the icy wind and lifting beseeching eyes to him. She has receded to the far horizon line, along with all the fine things of youth, which do not change" (p. 226). Since Pauline is also dead, Harry now owns the Gayheart house, which was mortgaged to him for thrice its worth, and he values it so much that he will not sell it. The house reminds him of Lucy, of course, but even more important to him is the walk, which holds the imprint of her feet--three "swift impressions" (p. 229) made when she was thirteen years old. To Harry, these "three light footprints, running away" (p. 234), capture the essence of Lucy's beautiful but transient life.

Lucy Gayheart, then, does not have the solid mythic substructure of many of Cather's previous novels, but it does create a vital character who is representative of the beauty and transience of life, and it illuminates

the solitude and regret that often accompany middle age. It juxtaposes the opposing extremes of Dionysus and Apollo, youth and age, business and art, innocence and experience, reality and illusion, and the synthesis that Harry Gordon is able to make between his nature and that of Lucy's constitutes a sort of psychological and emotional rebirth that rounds out the seasonal cycle of the novel. From Lucy's death and its effect on his proud and hard nature, Harry Gordon has gained the wisdom and perspective he needs to live his life.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ROLE OF THE SOUTHERN MYTH IN SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL

As Willa Cather grew older, she was affected more and more by the inflammation of her wrist that had impeded her writing of Lucy Gayheart, and she was increasingly disheartened by the losses and changes that were constantly taking place around her. Her father, the model for Euclide Auclair and Mr. Gayheart, had died in 1928, and in 1931, just after the publication of Shadows on the Rock, her mother also died, having been ill for nearly three years. In contemplating these personal tragedies, Edith Lewis came to believe that

. . . it was the death of her father and mother, and the long train of associations and memories their death set in motion that led her to write Sapphira. Virginia, which she had not given much thought to during all the Bank Street period, had come to occupy her mind more and more. When she did finally begin the writing of Sapphira, it was with her whole power and concentration.¹

Willa Cather, of course, had lived in Virginia until she was nine years old, but she had been so deeply influenced by her early removal to the Nebraska frontier that, until this late date, her Virginia memories and associations had remained buried in her subconscious. However, friends had urged her to utilize this source, and she had promised her father that she would some day write of their Southern heritage. Moreover, as

¹Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 182.

Woodress has observed, she "seems to have felt at this time that the South represented a bastion of tradition in a changing world."² As a result of all these things, she began writing Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940) in the fall of 1937, and in the spring of 1938, she and Edith made a literary pilgrimage to the South, much as they had to the Southwest during her writing of Death Comes for the Archbishop and to Canada and France for Shadows on the Rock. The town of Winchester, Virginia, and her old home Willowshade were greatly changed since her childhood, but Cather ignored these changes and absorbed the history and atmosphere of the country itself. Lewis has observed that these changes, "instead of disheartening her, seemed to light a fierce inner flame that illumined all her pictures of the past."³

The writing of Sapphira was hampered by the deaths of Cather's brother Douglas and her friend Isabelle Hambourg, by the bitter reality of World War II, and by the constant threat of further inflammation of her hands. However, according to Lewis, she worked at the novel "with a resoluteness, a sort of fixed determination which . . . was different from her ordinary working mood; as if she were bringing all her powers into play to save this, whatever else was lost."⁴ Critical controversy over this last novel of Cather's has been acute. Apparently laboring under the illusion that there are easy answers to life's problems, John Randall asserts that "In this book more than in any other the conflict between value systems destroys her vision of reality and makes a hash of

²James Woodress, Willa Cather (New York: Western Publishing Company, 1970), p. 261.

³Lewis, p. 183.

⁴Lewis, p. 184.

her art"; David Daiches proclaims that the novel describes a past that is "no longer picturesque--only confused, pathetic, and very far away"; and Dorothy Van Ghent believes that "the novel has little interest beyond the historical."⁵ Other critics, however--Lewis, Woodress, Canby, Sergeant, and Brown--⁶have judged the novel as the last worthy effort of a dedicated and talented artist. Edith Lewis makes the following case for the novel's merits:

I believe that Sapphira has very strongly the quality of permanence, of survival; and that as time goes on, it will take a higher and higher place in any estimate of Willa Cather's work. It is written austere, with very little of that warmth and generous expansion of feeling so many of her readers delight in. It is a novel without a heroine--the central figure is a cold and rather repellent character. Nothing is stressed--incidents, scenes are touched on so lightly, one is hardly aware of their having more than a surface significance. Yet one finds--I find, at least--that they have a curiously imperishable quality. The story as a whole seems to me to be the brief chronicle of a time that will never be recaptured with the same truth and crystalline vision, the same supreme art.⁷

Woodress, too, senses that the novel, although austere and disciplined, has permanent value. "Somehow," he says, Cather "summoned hidden reserves and produced one last novel of undeniable excellence."⁸

⁵John H. Randall, III, The Landscape and the Looking Glass (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), p. 366; David Daiches, Willa Cather (1951; rpt. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971), p. 137; and Dorothy Van Ghent, Willa Cather (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p. 41.

⁶Besides the works by Lewis and Woodress cited above, see Henry Seidel Canby, "Conversation Piece," [Review], Saturday Review of Literature, 23 (1940), 5; Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willa Cather (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1953), p. 267; and E. K. Brown, Willa Cather (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. 311-16.

⁷Lewis, p. 185.

⁸Woodress, p. 259.

Perhaps many critics have been harsh on Sapphira because--in setting and tone--it is not the kind of novel one expects from Willa Cather. However, in addition to being another example of the versatility of her talent, the novel also continues her interest in the contrasting values of Apollo and Dionysus, reason and passion, order and disorder, tradition and change, slavery and freedom, the old society and the new. Moreover, in Sapphira and the Slave Girl, she again explores the mythic foundations of society--this time of the antebellum South. Just as she had earlier utilized a brilliant combination of memory and history--referred to in Chapter III as "mythic memory"--in her pioneer novels, so does she make Sapphira an amalgamation of family memories and societal myth and history. James Woodress reports that when she sent her friend Viola Roseboro an advance copy of the book,

. . . she wrote that the story was so largely made up of family and neighborhood stories that she scarcely knew where her own contribution to it began. Willa Cather's great-grandparents, Jacob and Ruhamah Seibert, supplied the prototypes for Henry and Sapphira Colbert; Mrs. Blake, of course, was Grandmother Boak; and Till and Nancy appear in the novel without name change. The setting at Willow Shade, called the Mill House in the novel, the old mill on Back Creek, and the countryside all come from the author's memories of Virginia.⁹

Besides capturing these personal and family memories in her book, Cather also recreates a vanished society. Brown describes the novel as "a study of manners, a picture of how a little society lived in conditions that had vanished forever,"¹⁰ and Canby proclaims that it recreates, "with subtle selection of incident, a society and a culture and a sociology in which a conflict of morals and of philosophies produces an

⁹Woodress, p. 260.

¹⁰Brown, p. 311.

inner, ever more tightly-coiled spring."¹¹

When she chose to write about the antebellum South, Cather selected a subject rich in history and mythic tradition. As George Tindall has asserted, "The idea of the South--or more appropriately, the ideas of the South--belong in large part to the order of a social myth. There are few areas of the modern world that have bred a regional mythology so potent, so profuse and diverse, even so paradoxical, as the American South."¹² Southern myth is comprised of a rich array of participants--the aristocratic plantation owners, the Protestant middle class, the poor whites, and the Negro slaves. Recent southern fiction in the so-called Gothic tradition has centered upon the poor whites and the decadent aristocracy, but this Gothic myth is antedated by an older plantation myth which still surfaces occasionally in popular fiction. Moreover, according to Tindall, this older plantation myth has two sides: one is the "moonlight and magnolia" school which brings to mind "the whole euphoric pattern of kindly old marster with his mint julep; happy darkies singing in fields, [the cotton] perpetually white to the harvest . . . ; coquettish belles wooed by slender gallants in gray underneath the moonlight and magnolias";¹³ the other side is the picture inspired by Uncle Tom's Cabin of

Corrupt opulence resting upon human exploitation. Gentle old marster became the arrogant, haughty, imperious potentate, the very embodiment of sin, the central target of the antislavery attack. He maintained a seraglio in the slave

¹¹Canby, p. 5.

¹²George B. Tindall, "Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History," in The Idea of the South: Pursuit of a Central Theme, ed. by Frank E. Vandiver (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 1.

¹³Tindall, p. 4.

quarters; he bred Negroes like cattle and sold them down the river to certain death in the sugar mills, separating families if that served his purpose, while Southern women suffered in silence the guilty knowledge of their men's infidelity. The happy darkies in this picture became white men in black skins, an oppressed people longing for freedom, the victims of countless atrocities so ghastly as to be unbelievable except for undeniable evidence, forever seeking an opportunity to follow the North Star to freedom. The masses of the white folks were simply poor whites, relegated to ignorance and degeneracy by the slavocracy.¹⁴

Neither extreme, of course, is accurate, and yet there are no doubt vestiges of truth in each portrait. In Sapphira and the Slave Girl, Willa Cather fuses a realistic attitude toward life and human nature with the mythic traditions which are inseparable from Southern history.

Cather admired the rich sense of place and of a meaningful past that she found in the South, but she was alienated by its superficial manners and attitudes. Lewis recounts that

Even as a little girl she felt something smothering in the polite, rigid social conventions of that Southern society--something factitious and unreal. If one fell in love with those sentimental attitudes, those euphuisms that went with good manners, one lost all touch with reality, with truth of experience. If one resisted them, one became a social rebel. She told once of an old judge who came to call at Willowshade, and who began stroking her curls and talking to her in the playful platitudes one addressed to little girls--and of how she horrified her mother by breaking out suddenly: "I'se a dang'ous nigger, I is!" It was an attempt to break through the smooth, unreal conventions about little girls--the only way that occurred to her at the moment.¹⁵

In Sapphira, Cather resembles Rachel Blake, Sapphira's individualistic, sincere, and somewhat rebellious daughter who rejects the accepted institution of slavery and helps to put Nancy on the road to freedom.

Even though Cather's setting, characters, and situations are starkly realistic, there are obvious elements of the Southern plantation

¹⁴Tindall, p. 5.

¹⁵Lewis, p. 13.

myth in the novel. Sapphira had been a Dodderidge, one of the "quality" families of Winchester, and she never forgets her heritage or her position. After the death of her invalid father, whom she had nursed for three years, Sapphira made a surprising marriage to Henry Colbert, the son of a miller and the grandson of a Flemish immigrant, who was loyal to a dissenting Protestant church and who had been advising Mr. Dodderidge on business matters. It was unusual indeed for a member of the Southern aristocracy to marry someone from the middle class, but Sapphira was twenty-four, which, in her society, was bordering on spinsterhood, and she was a very proud and independent woman.

Immediately after their marriage, Sapphira and her husband moved to Back Creek, where she owned considerable property. Besides its farm land, the Back Creek estate boasted a water mill, which Henry can operate, and a large new Mill House which Sapphira had recently had constructed. Back Creek was in mountain country and was settled mostly by small farmers and "poor whites" who owned few if any slaves. Therefore, the old settlers, many of whom did not believe in slavery at all, resented the intrusion of Sapphira and her score of slaves. Sapphira, however, was not intimidated, and although she sold back into Loudoun County those slaves she found she did not need, she retained her feudal, ordered, and aristocratic household.

For years after her marriage Sapphira had been a very active woman, running her household and her slaves with an iron hand. Even after her children had married, she reflects, "the management of the place had kept her busy. Every year there was the gardening and planting, butchering time and meat-curing. Summer meant preserving and jelly-making, the drying of cherries and currants and sweet corn and sliced

apples for winter. In those days she often rode her mare to Winchester of a Saturday to be there for the Sunday service."¹⁶ However, now she is afflicted with dropsy and has been unable to walk for several years. Nevertheless, in spite of her invalid condition, she still retains the respect and obedience of her servants, and she continues to maintain her own personal dignity. She makes sure, for example, that the Apollonian order and regularity of household routine are observed. Each morning she is carefully dressed by Nancy, her personal maid who is the daughter of Till, her capable housekeeper. Then at 8:00 she breakfasts with her husband, who in recent years has been spending more and more nights at his room in the mill, and then she has lunch, tea, and dinner at regular intervals. Sometimes she goes for a drive along the country roads, and sometimes she has some of the young slaves carry her chair outside so she can pick flowers from her yard or visit Jezebel, the old black woman who had come from Guinea on a British slave ship. In such a physical condition, many women would become pathetic, but Sapphira is the true Southern aristocrat and always maintains a stately composure. To Louis Auchincloss, she is one of "the most memorable of Willa Cather's characters . . . regal enough just to escape the ridiculous as she is borne about in a chair by her loving darkies, a backwoods Queen Bess, always a pageant to herself and her slaves."¹⁷

Outwardly Sapphira seems reconciled to her condition, but

¹⁶Willa Cather, Sapphira and the Slave Girl, vol. 13 of The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather, lib. ed. (1940; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), p. 51. Future references to this source will be paginated within the text.

¹⁷Louis Auchincloss, "Willa Cather," Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of Nine American Women Novelists (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), pp. 121-22.

inwardly she feels the frustration and insecurity that is natural to any woman whose usual activity has been curtailed. This feeling of helplessness and resentment is increased one morning when she overhears a conversation which arouses in her unfounded suspicions about her husband. The morning is hot and the open windows of the kitchen, which is separate from the main house, lets the voices of the servants drift into the dining room where the Mistress is breakfasting alone. In the morning stillness, she hears Nancy say to fat Lizzie, the impudent, disorderly, and jealous-natured cook,

"You dasn't talk to me that way, Lizzie. I won't bear it! I'll go to the Master."

Then Lizzie, with a big laugh: "Co'se you'll go to Master! Ain't dat just what I been tellin' you? You think you mighty nigh owns dat mill. Runnin' down all times a-day and night, carryin' bokays to him. Oh, I seen you many a time! pickin' villets and bleedin'-hearts an' hidin' 'em under your apron. Yiste'day you took him down de chicken livers fur his lunch I fried for Missus! You're sure runnin' de mill room wid a high han', Miss Yaller Gal, an' you'se always down yonder when you'se wanted."

"Tain't so! I always hurries. I jest stays long enough to dust de flour away dat gits over everything, an' to make his bed cumfa'ble fur him."

"Lawdy, Lawdy! An' you makes his bed cumfa'ble fur him? Ain't dat nice! I speck! Look out you don't do it once too many. Den it ain't so fine, when somethin' begin to show on you, Miss Yaller Face."

Through Lizzie's lewd laughter broke the frantic voice of a young thing bursting into tears.

"I won't stay here to listen to your nasty tongue! An' him de good kind man to every nigger on de place. Shame on you, you bad woman!" Nancy rushed out of the kitchen sobbing, her face buried in her hands. She did not see her mistress standing in the doorway (pp. 58-59).

Nancy is innocent of Lizzie's accusations, but her natural sensitivity and her obvious affection for her Master seem to betray her. At any rate, from that night on, the Mistress makes her sleep in the open hall outside her own door, and she withdraws her previous favors from her, scolding and abusing her upon the slightest pretext. As Elizabeth

Sergeant has noted, Sapphira reveals "how subtly tyrannical and malevolent a well-bred, well-endowed outdoor Virginia woman of 1850 . . . may become when physically ill and spiritually and socially frustrated."¹⁸

One morning at breakfast in March of 1856--the date the novel opens--Sapphira broaches to her husband the subject of selling Nancy, and when he refuses, she feels that her fears are confirmed. Far from being the long-suffering wife of Southern myth, Sapphira determines to get rid of Nancy one way or another, and to this end she invites Martin Colbert, Henry's nephew who is a notorious rake, for an extended visit. Moreover, she feels no guilt for such an action because, besides her belief that Nancy has already been debauched by her husband, she considers Nancy--and all her other slaves--her property to do with as she wishes.

Sapphira's ambiguous and sometimes cruel treatment of her servants is a constant source of puzzlement to her daughter Rachel Blake, who is an avowed sympathizer with Northern abolitionists. However, Sapphira's contradictory attitudes are only reflections of the paradoxical myths of the region. Like most of her contemporaries, she looked on Negroes as children, incapable of taking care of themselves, and she felt a personal responsibility for them. For example, when young Dave, who had been one of the jolliest of the young blacks, loses his wits over Susanna, the personal maid of an arrogant and hypocritical woman who refuses to sell her to Sapphira, she continues to see that he is clothed and fed, and otherwise allows him to run wild in the woods. She takes an interest in the new babies born on the farm and sends linen and food where it is needed during illness, but she will brook no

¹⁸Sergeant, pp. 267-68.

disloyalty or insurrection. After Martin's belated appearance, Rachel reflects that

Ever since she could remember, she had seen her mother show shades of kindness and cruelty which seemed to her purely whimsical. At this moment Mrs. Blake could not for the life of her say whether Mrs. Colbert had invited this scapegrace to her house with the deliberate purpose of bringing harm to Nancy, or whether she had asked him merely for the sake of his company, and was now ready to tolerate anything that might amuse him and thus prolong his stay. This was quite possible, since Mrs. Colbert, though often generous, was entirely self-centered and thought of other people only in their relation to herself. She was born that way, and had been brought up that way.

Yet one must admit inconsistencies. There was her singular indulgence with Tansy Dave, her real affection for Till and old Jezebel, her patience with Sampson's lazy wife. Even now, from her chair, she took some part in all the celebrations that darkies love. She liked to see them happy. On Christmas morning she sat in the long hall and had all the men on the place come in to get their presents and their Christmas drink. She served each man a strong toddy in one of the big glass tumblers that had been her father's. When Tap, the mill boy, smacked his lips and said, "Miss Sapphy, if my manny's titty had a-tasted like that, I never would 'a' got weaned," she laughed as if she had never heard the old joke before (pp. 215-16).

Here is the myth of the "happy darky," which Sapphira and her generation subscribed to, and which, in spite of her humanity and democratic principles, surfaces occasionally in Cather's attitudes. As Woodress had noticed, she has "the racial attitudes one would expect in an elderly midwesterner in the thirties, that is to say, a theoretical belief in complete equality and a practical acquaintance with Negroes only as servants or laborers."¹⁹

Although Cather shows a deep understanding of and sympathy for Sapphira, possibly because she too has experienced age and illness, she has no patience with physical cruelty. When Rachel comes to visit her mother one morning while she is dressing, she is appalled to hear her

¹⁹Woodress, p. 263.

mother's voice raised in anger against Nancy, "anger with no heat, a cold, sneering contempt" (p. 12), followed by three sharp smacks of the hair brush. Behind this cruel attitude, however, lies the long and dark history of the slaves' forced migration to America, as represented in the story of old Jezebel, Nancy's great-grandmother. Years ago, Jezebel's village in Guinea had been destroyed by slave hunters, and the surviving captives were loaded on the slaver the Albert Horn. The captives were stored in a three-foot high space between decks; the males and females were separated, and all were kept naked and shaved. They were treated like animals, and not surprisingly, the proud Jezebel reacted in kind, biting the thumb of a mate who tried to strangle her for fighting the sailors who were whipping her because of a row she had started between decks. The skipper was impressed by her bravery in standing up against the men and the "cat," and he asked to have her "bridled" and brought to see him:

Jezebel was brought up in heavy irons for his inspection. Her naked back was seamed with welts and bloody cuts, but she carried herself with proud indifference, and there was no plea for mercy in her eyes. The skipper told the seaman in charge to loosen the noose round her neck. As he walked up and down, smoking his pipe, he looked her well over. He judged this girl was worth any three of the women--as much as the best of the men. Anatomically she was remarkable, for an African negress: tall, straight, muscular, long in the legs. The skipper had a kind of respect for a well-shaped creature; horse, cow, or woman. And he respected anybody who could take a flogging like that without buckling (p. 91).

The imagery here of "bridling" and "well-shaped creature" reveals the mythic belief many people had in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the Negro was subhuman, a literal beast of burden without even a soul.

It is the Christian religion, however, that is the greatest

source of comfort to the enslaved blacks. At old Jezebel's funeral, Mr. Fairchild recalls her "long wanderings; how she had come from a heathen land where people worshipped idols and lived in bloody warfare, to become a devout Christian and an heir to all the Promises" (p. 99). Moreover, the slaves, especially Lizzie and her lazy and disorderly daughter Bluebell, find joy and reassurance in singing the old spiritual hymns, such as "There is a Land of Pure Delight" and "In the Sweet By and By." Significantly, each of these songs refers to a distant Promised Land, and by including them in the novel, Cather implies the symbolic relationship between the Negroes' bondage and that of the ancient Israelites. The stanza of the former song which Cather quotes in the novel is particularly revealing: in the old country church, Lizzie and Bluebell's voices clearly render the words

Could we but stand where Moses stood
 And view the landscape o'er
 Not Jordan's stream nor death's cold flood
 Would fright us from that shore (p. 75).

To the slaves, the Promised Land is the North, where freedom may be found, and Cather makes it clear that each year, with the aid of the underground railroad, dissatisfied blacks are seeking and finding this freedom. Later in the book, after Nancy's flight, this mythic analogy with the quest of the Israelites is made even clearer, for Henry thinks to himself, "She would go up out of Egypt to a better land" (p. 223). In this novel, the North is the Canaan--the land of Dionysian freedom--which, in Cather's previous novels, has been located in the West.

Henry's attitude toward this Promised Land, however, is an ambivalent one. Although he secretly believes that slavery is wrong--he stays up at night pouring over his Bible in a futile attempt to resolve the question--and though he has considered freeing the Mill

House slaves, and would do so except for the blow to Sapphira's pride, he is apprehensive about their ability to compete and survive in the free world. He reflects that Nancy

. . . was to go out from the dark lethargy of the cared-for and irresponsible; to make her own way in this world where nobody is altogether free, and the best that can happen to you is to walk your own way and be responsible to God only. Sapphira's darkies were better cared for, better fed and better clothed, than the poor whites in the mountains. Yet what ragged, shag-haired, squirrel-shooting mountain man would change places with Sampson, his trusted head miller? (pp. 223-24).

Henry realizes that the slaves on back creek are of two kinds: the lazy and shiftless, like Bluebell, Sampson's wife Belle, Tap, and, to a certain extent, Lizzie; and the honest and industrious like Sampson, Nancy, and Till. The latter group would be quite capable of succeeding in a free world, but the former would not be capable of handling emancipation.

Henry Colbert is the epitome of the mythic "gentle master," beloved by all his slaves, but in contrast to the old plantation myth, he is not a member of the Southern aristocracy. He is a plain, middle-class miller, a kind man, and a good Christian; he respects Sapphira and, with the exception of the episode about Nancy, leaves the management of the slaves up to her. When Sapphira sends him a special request to come to tea with her and teasingly tells him that "'the Master would always be very welcome company in the evenings,'" he candidly replies, "'Don't you put on with me, Sapphy!'" He reached down to the hearth for another biscuit. 'You're the master here, and I'm the miller. And that's how I like it to be'" (p. 47). Sapphira and Henry's marriage is obviously one of convenience, but if their relationship has not been passionate, it has been companionable and satisfactory for both, for

each feels deep affection and respect for the other.

Nevertheless, Henry's values and religion are different from those of his wife. He goes with his daughter to the local Baptist church, but he never attends the English Christ Church of Winchester with Sapphira. His conscience is constantly bothered by the fact that he allows slaves to be kept at the Mill House, for "he hated the whole system of slavery. His father had never owned a slave" (p. 105). Thus, he secretly sympathizes with the abolition movement and would like to manumit his wife's Negroes, but he felt "that would be an outrage to her feelings, and an injustice to the slaves themselves. Where would they go? How would they live? They had never learned to take care of themselves or to provide for tomorrow. They were a part of the Dodderidge property and the Dodderidge household" (p. 106). Henry, like Cather herself, is aware of the complex interrelationships of Southern feudal society and of the problems which must of necessity accompany freedom for the slaves, but nevertheless he feels that the moral injustice of the institution outweighs the practical advantages. Moreover, he believes in the benevolent design of God, and he sympathizes with the belief of a wise old Quaker friend of his that soon "one of those great designs [would be] accomplished; that the Lord had already chosen His heralds and His captains, and a morning would break when all the black slaves would be free" (p. 109).

In addition to their sympathy for the slaves Henry Colbert and his daughter also feel concern for the poor whites of the neighborhood. Rachel often takes a basket filled with food and medicine to minister to such people as Mandy Ringer, who is burdened with a kind but lame son and two worthless daughters, both of whom have borne illegitimate

children, and the miller has extended credit to the shiftless mountaineers way past the point of good business. One afternoon he sat in his study,

. . . going through his ledger. His purpose was to check off the names of debtors to whom he would not, under any circumstances, extend further credit. He found so many of these names already checked once, and even twice, that, after frowning over his accounts for a long while, he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin. When people were so poor, what was a Christian man to do? They were poor because they were lazy and shiftless--or at best, bad managers. Well, he couldn't make folks over, he guessed. And they had to eat (pp. 45-46).

One of the most trifling of these poor whites, the mythical ancestors of such characters as Faulkner's Snopeses, is a man named Flight, who fishes and lies around while his wife and son Caspar, who is trying to go to school and improve his chances in life, do the farm work. The local teacher tells Colbert that Caspar pulls the plow himself, followed by his mother, who guides it, and when a more prosperous farmer lends them a horse to put in their crop, the "father came home unexpectedly, knocked the boy down, took the horse out of the plough, and rode up to Capon River to go fishing" (p. 77).

In addition to the aristocracy, the slaves, and the poor whites, the Old South was also populated by a number of middle class farmers, artisans, and scholars, many of whom were sympathetic with the plight of the slaves and hoped for their freedom. Although Rachel is the daughter of a Southern aristocrat, she is also the daughter of a miller, and she takes after her father in both looks and ideals. During the action of the novel, Rachel is about thirty-seven years old, and "looked so much like Henry Colbert that it was not hard to guess she was his daughter. The same set of the head, enduring yet determined, the broad, highly coloured face, the fleshy nose, anchored deeply at the nostrils. She had the miller's grave dark eyes, too, set back under

a broad forehead" (p. 11). Rachel is certainly not the stereotype of the Southern belle, and she feels out of place among the Dodderidges. She knew that "Her two aunts disapproved of her; she dreaded the yearly visit to them. At home, she knew that all the servants were fond of her mother, in good or ill humour, and that they were not fond of her. She was not at all what the darkies thought a young lady should be. Till's good manners were barely sufficient to conceal her disappointment in Miss Sapphy's youngest daughter" (p. 135). As a young girl, Rachel had been reserved and decided in her opinions, and her mother could see nothing in her that she thought would make her interesting to men, but, nevertheless, when young Michael Blake, who was a candidate for the United States Congress, stopped at the Colbert farm, he fell in love with her. The young couple had married and lived in Washington until Michael and their son Robert died of yellow fever, after which time Rachel and her two girls, Betty and Mary, had returned to live in a little house on Back Creek.

Rachel had never felt at ease around the slaves at the Mill House, and the woman whom she had always most deeply admired was Mrs. Bywaters, the postmistress who had well-known Northern sympathies. One day when Rachel was a little girl she had heard Mrs. Bywaters and her father talking about her need for help, and they decided that they would never buy a slave because they felt it was wrong to own human flesh and blood. This conversation is a revelation to Rachel, for

A feeling long smothered had blazed up in her--had become a conviction. She had never heard the thing said before, never put into words. It was the owning that was wrong, the relation itself, no matter how convenient or agreeable it might be for master or servant. She had always known it was wrong. It was the thing that made her unhappy at home, and came between her and her mother. How she hated her mother's voice in sarcastic reprimand to the servants! And she hated it in

contemptuous indulgence. Till and Aunt Jezebel were the only blacks to whom her mother never spoke with that scornful leniency (pp. 134-35).

After this, Rachel is even more decided in her opinions, and after she returns home from Washington, her closest friends are Mrs. Bywaters and Mr. Fairchild, the young preacher and school teacher, whom Sapphira also resents because she believes him to be "Yankee" at heart.

It is this group of middle-class citizens--Henry Colbert, Rachel Blake, Mrs. Bywaters, Mr. Fairchild, and Mr. Whitford--who sympathize with the slaves and prepare the way for emancipation, for the change from the Old Order to the New. Whereas Sapphira considers her slaves as property, in his heart, Henry realizes they are human beings. Henry is especially sympathetic to Nancy, and it is just this deep sympathy, so unexpected on a Southern plantation, that makes Sapphira suspicious.

Nancy has cleaned Henry's room since she was twelve years old, and he appreciates her quickness, her cleanliness, her Apollonian neatness (or order) and her decent, respectful ways. Being the daughter of Till, Sapphira's respectable, position-conscious housekeeper, and a Cuban portrait painter, Nancy is set apart from the other slave girls. Moreover, since Sapphira had married her mother to old Jeff, an impotent "capon" man, Nancy has not been subjected to the normal Dionysian vulgarities of life that cannot escape the notice of children who life in a one room shack. Therefore,

The girl had a natural delicacy of feeling. Ugly sights and ugly words sickened her. She had Till's good manners--with something warmer and more alive. But she was not courageous. When the servants were gossiping at their mid-day dinner in the big kitchen, if she sensed a dirty joke coming, she slipped away from the table and ran off into the garden. If she felt a reprimand coming, she sometimes lied: lied before she had time to think, or to tell herself that she would be found out in the end. She caught at any pretext to keep off blame or punishment for an hour, a minute.

She didn't tell falsehoods deliberately, to get something she wanted; it was always to escape from something (p. 41).

Henry Colbert is always kind and thoughtful to her, and, as a result, "After her mother and Mrs. Blake, there was no one in the world she loved so much as the Master. She had never had a harsh word from him--not many words at any time, to be sure. But his kindly greeting made her happy; that and the feeling she was of some use to him" (p. 16). The flowers that she often brings to brighten up his room symbolize the cheerfulness which her warm greeting always brings into the miller's life. Thus, what Sapphira suspects to be a sexual affair is only a warm friendship.

This platonic friendship that Henry and Nancy share, however, is incomprehensible to Sapphira, who retains an old belief in the Dionysian, animalistic passion of the Negro slave girl and her master. Sapphira herself values Apollonian order and conformity to society, and she intends to retain the order of her household--even if it means sacrificing Nancy to the degenerate Martin Colbert. She cannot sympathize with the Negro's Dionysian desire for freedom, but she accepts without question the Dionysian passion, disorder, and immorality of Martin, the shiftless poor whites, and the less sensitive slaves--a moral disorder which has been fostered by the stifling feudal society of the Old South and which is symbolized in the lives of the slaves, the poor whites, and Martin himself.

The Dionysian immorality and disorder of the lower classes which was apparently accepted by Southern aristocracy is expressed in Sapphira and the Slave Girl by the symbolic opposition of the main house and the slave quarters, the respectable citizens and the poor whites, and, finally, Henry Colbert and Martin Colbert. The Mill House

is a traditional two-storey structure with a long front porch supported by pillars and surrounded by well kept grounds. Cather states that "All was orderly in front; flower-beds, shrubbery, and a lilac arbour trimmed in an arch beneath which a tall man could walk. Behind the house lay another world; a helter skelter scattering, like a small village" (p. 19). This other world is, of course, that of the slaves and, indeed, they live not only in a different physical atmosphere but also in a different social, economic, and moral milieu.

The Apollonian order of the Mill House derives from Sapphira's aristocratic training and values, values which she brought to the country from the Dodderidge mansion in Winchester. Moreover, Sapphira is assisted in maintaining this order by Till, herself trained by the Dodderidge's housekeeper, Mrs. Matchem, who had brought her English standards to the New World with her. Till, therefore, is always glad to go back to Winchester, where, as she enters the town, she sees on either side of Water Street the "neat mansard houses built of pale grey limestone; grey, but almost blue, and not dressed so smooth as to take all the life out of the rugged stone. Such genteel houses they were, opening directly on the street, with green window shutters, and brass knockers; a little walled garden and hydrant behind each house" (p. 71). Just beyond Water Street is the section of town where the "quality" live, and the old Dodderidge house, upon which the order of the Mill House is based. This distinct division of classes and of neighborhoods into quality, middle class, and slaves indicates the feudal order of old Southern society.

Rachel's middle class friends are also representative of Apollonian order, but of moral order rather than feudal order. Rachel

keeps her house neat and clean and is always taking some needed articles to the poor whites of the mountain where the physical dirtiness of their bodies and the disorder of their farms symbolize their innate moral disorder--their laziness, their dishonesty in stealing and refusing to pay bills, and their false pride which prevents them from working beside the blacks. In contrast to these poor whites, Rachel's friends consider themselves morally responsible, not only for their own actions, but also for the offenses of Southern society as a whole, and they feel deeply the burdens of poverty and slavery that are choking the community.

The most obvious contrast between Apollonian order and Dionysian disorder, however, is the contrast between Henry Colbert and his nephew Martin Colbert. The orderliness of Henry's well arranged mill room, furnished with a chestnut bed, secretary, and chest, represents the orderliness of his life. He lives by a set routine, shaving every morning at seven, breakfasting with his wife at eight, usually working at the mill until tea time or dinner, and then returning to the mill to read his Bible or John Bunyan until late in the night. It is because of his penchant for order and morality that Henry is so appreciative of Nancy, who keeps his room so neat and clean, never dawdling or flirting as the lazy and slovenly Bluebell tends to do.

Henry's good character is particularly commendable since the "Colbert men had a bad reputation where women were concerned" (p. 64). Because of this reputation, some people believed that Nancy had been fathered by one of Henry's wild brothers, but, "Although he was a true Colbert in nature, he had not behaved like one, and he had never been charged with a bastard" (p. 64). Henry has natural Dionysian desires, but he is able to control them. Martin Colbert, on the other hand, has

the reputation of being a licentious profligate, and he has had a tooth knocked out by the brothers of a poor young girl whom he had seduced. He is thus a degenerate representative of the myth of the Southern gallant; according to Edward and Lillian Bloom, he is "the symbol of [decadent] Southern masculine society, [who] contains within himself not only the essence of the area's amorality, but before the novel is finished, he with his disfiguring blue tooth, 'an Ignominious brand,' becomes one of the emblems of a festering decay that was slowly spreading out over the entire region."²⁰

Martin is a typical young scapegrace in the tradition of Hardy's Alec d'Urberville, Richardson's Robert Lovelace, and Rowson's Montraville. Moreover, in addition to ruining innocent young women, Martin is also an excessive drinker, an inveterate gambler and an extravagant spender. As a result, his debts finally catch up with him, and he decides to accept his aunt's long ignored invitation to visit Back Creek. On his way down to the house from the main road where he has just gotten off the stage, his horse having been taken for a debt, he reflects that

Just now he was lucky to have any place to go where he would be comfortable and well fed, and rid of his creditors. He was a tall, well-enough built fellow, but there was something soft about the lines of his body. He carried himself loosely at the shoulders and thighs. His clothes were town clothes, but strolling along unobserved he behaved like a country boy. When he laughed at his present predicament, he hitched up his trousers by his gallowses where his waistcoat hung open. He was easily diverted; no fixed purpose lurked behind his chuckle, though there was sometimes a flash of slyness in his whiskey-coloured eyes (p. 149, my emphasis).

Martin's moral weakness is suggested in this description of him and further emphasized in the disorder of his trunk, which Nancy--assigned

²⁰Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), pp. 17-18.

by Sapphira to care for his room!--is asked to unpack. She finds the lower part of the trunk in utter confusion, filled with coats and pants that have been thrown in without being folded and are now hopelessly wrinkled, and she discovers dirty socks and underwear stuffed in his shoes. Moreover, all the time that Nancy is in his room, Martin stares rudely at her, and he frightens her with his light, teasing manner and his lewd laughter.

. From the first Martin pursues Nancy, catching her in his room and kissing her, following her out to the mountain road where Sapphira has sent her to gather laurel, and finally accosting her while she is picking cherries in the yard. Nancy has taken a chair out to the tree and climbed up among the branches to reach the tempting fruit when she hears Martin coming. He has found out from Bluebell where Nancy is, and he reflects, "There never was a finer morning for picking cherries or anything else," (p. 176) a statement which is fraught with obvious sexual symbolism. He talks so kindly and coaxingly to the girl that for a few minutes she forgets to be afraid and he is thus able to catch her off guard. He directs her attention to something behind her, and "The instant her head was turned Martin stepped lightly on the chair, caught her bare ankles, and drew her two legs about his cheeks like a frame. Nancy dropped her basket and almost fell out of the tree herself. She caught at the branch above her and clung to it" (p. 177). Nancy is terrified and begs him to let her go, but he only "framed his face closer and shut his eyes. 'Pretty soon.--This is just nice.--Something smells sweet--like May apples.' He seemed murmuring to himself, not to her, but all the time his face came closer. Her throat felt shut tight, but she knew she must scream, and she did" (p. 178). Martin has

let his Dionysian desire get the better of him and ruined his chance, but he by no means intends to give up his pursuit of the pretty mulatto girl.

By this time, however, both Sampson, the mill hand who had rescued Nancy from her predicament in the cherry tree, and Rachel, in whom Nancy has confided, are aware of the situation, and they both go to Henry, who, although a Colbert, represents the morality and decency which Martin constantly defies. Now that he is aware of Nancy as a woman desirable to Martin, however, "he shrank from seeing her at all. Something was lost out of that sweet companionship; for companionship it had been, though it was but a smile and a glance, a greeting in the fresh morning hours" (p. 191). Whereas Martin is the personification of the mythic Southern Cavalier, representative of aristocracy, civilization, and corruption, Henry, who is a farmer as well as a miller, represents the myth of the yeoman farmer who is democratic and innocent.²¹ However, just as Nancy's innocence is almost destroyed by the presence of the corrupt young rake, so is Henry's morality and peace of mind endangered. He feels inside him the Apollonian-Dionysian conflict represented by the sun and the earth, which drink up his strength during the summer mowing time. He is glad to be at work, however, for

This was a troubled time for Henry Colbert when he was alone with his thoughts. He was too often preoccupied with what Sampson had told him. Now and then the actual realization of Martin's designs would flash into his mind. The poison in the young scamp's blood seemed to stir something in his own. The Colbert in him threatened to raise its head after long hibernation. Not that he was afraid of himself. For nothing on earth, even by a glance, would he trouble that

²¹For a brief explanation of these myths, see F. Garvin Davenport, Jr., The Myth of Southern History: Historical Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Southern Literature (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967), p. 9.

sweet confidence and affection which had been a comfort to him for so long. But it was not the comforting thing it had been. Now he tried to avoid Nancy. Her light step on the old axe-dressed boards of the mill floor, her morning smile, did not bring the lift of spirit they used to bring (p. 206).

Indeed, Henry's morality is so weakened that when his daughter asks him for the money to get Nancy away from her tormentor and through the underground railroad to freedom, he is unable to make a positive commitment. By telling Rachel that the money will be in his coat pocket the next morning, he escapes personal responsibility and forces the entire burden of the matter upon Rachel, who is subsequently alienated from her mother. The dark cloud of slavery has thus spread its shadow over a whole society, turning morality into amorality. As Brown has noted, in Sapphira and the Slave Girl, Cather's "interest is in what slavery has done to harden Sapphira and Martin, to inhibit Till's maternal feelings, to take the edge off Sampson's will, to drive the slave girl into exile, to paralyze the conscience and stultify the intelligence of Henry Colbert. . . . No one is the better for slavery, and only those who oppose it root and branch are safe from its poison."²²

After Nancy's mid-summer exodus from bondage to the Promised Land of the North, there follows a "dark autumn" which emphasizes the seasonal symbolism of the novel. When Sapphira discovers Nancy gone, she immediately suspects that Rachel has helped her to escape, and she therefore requests that her daughter make no more visits to her. The ensuing autumn is indeed a dark one, for Sapphira's dropsy advances quickly, Henry's loneliness increases, and Rachel suffers remorse and sympathy for her mother. The early autumn is bright and clear, but November brings heavy rains and an influx of diphtheria which attacks

²²Brown, p. 316.

both of Rachel's girls, taking the life of Betty, the younger. However, Rachel's hardships do soften her mother's resentment, and knowing that her daughter's house will be sad for her, she asks her and Mary to stay in the Mill House with her, hinting to Henry that this arrangement is especially desirable since she might not live through the winter.

A close examination of the structure of Sapphira, therefore, reveals that, like so many of Cather's works, it is based on the myth of the seasons. The book opens in early spring, in March of 1856, and in its early sections it reflects the innocence and happiness of the mill residents, especially of Nancy and Henry. However, as the year passes, Sapphira's suspicions increase, and the action rushes toward its summer climax. Martin Colbert appears on the scene at the beginning of the summer, on the first day of June, and throughout the early summer he relentlessly pursues Nancy, until in mid-summer she is forced to flee to the cooler (both literal and symbolic) climate of the North. Unhappiness reigns over the Colbert family throughout the early autumn, when mother and daughter are so completely estranged, and tragedy strikes in late autumn with the death of Betty. The yearly cycle is not complete, however, and the following winter is a long one, with snowfalls continuing into early March. On one of these late winter nights, sitting in her chair by the window and watching the reflection of her candles on the snow--of immortality reflected on mortality--Sapphira quietly and courageously meets her death, "upright in her chair. When the miller came at supper-time and went into the parlour, he found her. The strong heart had been overcome at last. Though her bell was beside her, she had not rung it. There must have been some moments of pain or struggle, but she had preferred to be alone" (p. 285).

In the Epilogue, set in another March, twenty-five years later, the reader learns of the intervening deaths of Henry, Martin, and Tap, and of the effects of the Civil War on Southern society, for this is, after all, a novel about time and change. Nancy, who has made a successful career and a happy marriage in Canada, returns for a visit and is presented to the reader through the eyes of Mrs. Blake's granddaughter, supposedly Willa Cather herself. Nancy is now a well-dressed, stately woman, and to the awed little girl she has "presence" (p. 275). Time has been good to her, as indeed it has to all the other survivors of the old Southern order. As Jobes has asserted, "Sapphira and the Slave Girl shows an acceptance of the passage of time. The author presents a long look at the society involved in her earliest memories. Perhaps the dignity and grandeur of that society enabled her to face her own inevitable death with courage."²³

The intrusion of the author in the epilogue has not been prepared for, and Cather herself sensed that it was an artistic fault,²⁴ but it does seem to emphasize the passage of the generations, the transition from the Old Order to the New, in much the same way as Miranda's innocently perceptive observations in the short stories of Katherine Anne Porter. In this novel, Cather, like Porter, has achieved that two-way vision which, according to Rubin, is possible to some writers "not only because of their ability to believe in the value and the meaningfulness of their people's past but also because they could

²³Lavon M. Jobes, Willa Cather's Last Novel," University Review, 34 (1967), 79.

²⁴Sergeant, p. 270.

disbelieve."²⁵ Cather is disillusioned with the facile plantation myth that allowed the institution of slavery to demoralize both master and servant, but as she shows in her criticism of the new industrial methods of the mill where Sampson now works, she is also disenchanted with the modern materialism and industrialism which have exploited the remnants of this old Southern society. In neither the old plantation myth nor the new industrial myth does she find a panacea for the ills of society, but she implies that through a combination of order and freedom, dignity and compassion, Apollo and Dionysus, there is hope for the salvation of man and his community.

²⁵Louis D. Rubin, Jr. "Southern Literature: The Historical Image," in South: Modern Southern Literature in Its Cultural Setting, ed. by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Dolphin Books, 1961), p. 37.

CHAPTER XIV

CONCLUSION:

WILLA CATHER AND THE BRIGHT MEDUSA OF ART

. Willa Cather's art will continue to have vitality and permanence because it is based on a universal and mythic attitude toward life. In her life-long quest, her "voyage perilous," she looks beyond the obvious manifestations of life and art to the inner truths of man's mind and heart. In his introduction to Willa Cather on Writing, Stephen Tennant uses her own metaphor of the "room beyond" to describe her mythic style. "Willa Cather's art," he says, "is essentially one of gazing beyond the immediate scene to a timeless sky or a timeless room, in which the future and the past, the unspoken and the unknown, forever beckon. . . ." ¹

From Cather's novels it is evident that she views mythology in a broad and catholic sense as being at the root of creativity--in nature, in man, and in literature. One feels that she would agree with Northrop Frye, who contends that "mythology as a total structure, defining as it does a society's religious beliefs, historical traditions, cosmological speculations--in short, the whole range of its verbal expression--is the matrix of literature, and major poetry keeps returning to it." ² It is

¹Stephen Tennant, "The Room Beyond," in Willa Cather on Writing, by Willa Cather (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1949), p. v. Cather used this same metaphor in her letter on The Professor's House, which is also printed in this collection.

²Northrop Frye, Fables of Identity (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1963), p. 33.

this comprehensive and elemental view of life that gives Cather's work such profound significance and universal implications. As Mark Schorer has observed,

Great literature is impossible without a previous imaginative consent to a ruling mythology that makes intelligible and unitive the whole of that experience from which particular fables spring and from which they, in turn, take their meaning. Literature ceases to be perceptual and tends to degenerate into mere description without adequate myth.

. . . Thus, for example, the prevailing and tiresome realism of modern fiction. When we feel that we are no longer in a position to say what life means, we must content ourselves with telling how it looks.³

In the early twentieth century, Willa Cather's mythic quest, undertaken at the height of the realistic and naturalistic movement perpetuated by such authors as Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Frank Norris was indeed a brave one. For years she has been overshadowed by her more literalistic contemporaries, but recent generations have come to sympathize with her style and her distrust of modern materialism and industrialism, the former having maimed America's morality and the latter having destroyed her environment. Besides the revival of critical interest in her work that has occurred in the past two decades, there are also some hopeful signs of renewed popular interest. In 1973, marking the centenary of her birth, there appeared a new postage stamp in her honor and new editions of both A Lost Lady and The Professor's House, the latter in paperback. Moreover, in his review of these books, a Newsweek reporter has declared that her work "resonates more strongly now with our increased regret for a sturdier America she saw despoiled and disappearing."⁴

³Mark Schorer, "The Necessity of Myth," in Myth and Mythmaking, ed. by Henry A. Murray (1960; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 357.

⁴W[alter?] C[lemons?], "Browsing the New Fiction: The Professor's House," Newsweek, 18 February 1974, p. 95.

A mythic sense of reality is evident in all of Cather's works, and most of them are rich in mythic allusions. Her basic theme is that of the quest myth, which is directed first toward the East, the Apollonian seat of art, and later toward the West, the Dionysian center of life and religion. Moreover, this artistic quest is mirrored in her biographical one. Mildred Bennett reports that on her first journey East Cather described to a friend "how intoxicating it was, after the train got east of Chicago, to see hills and streams and woods; in fact, her high spirits were so apparent that the conductor had asked if she was getting home. And, wrote Willa, this was just how she felt. She did not then suspect that she had been forever branded by the prairie, and that her life was to be a tug of war between East and West."⁵

Many of Cather's early stories show this initial rejection of the West, "Peter," "Lou, the Prophet," "The Clemency of the Court," "On the Divide," "The Sculptor's Funeral," and "The Wagner Matinee" being particularly illustrative of her fear and resentment of the primitive power of the land as well as the provinciality of the townspeople. Her own internal conflict is apparent even at this state, however, for "The Treasure of Far Island" and "Tommy, the Unsentimental" reveal a basically positive attitude toward the West, the images in the former foreshadowing those in My Ántonia and The Professor's House and the solitary wanderings of the protagonist of the latter foreshadowing those of Thea Kronburg and Lucy Gayheart.

⁵Mildred R. Bennett, ed., Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. xviii. Unless otherwise specified, the short stories cited in this chapter are all printed in this collection, which includes three volumes: The Bohemian Girl, The Troll Garden, and On the Divide.

Of these early efforts, one story in particular, "Eric Hermannson's Soul," clarifies this personal and mythic conflict between East and West. Here, Cather sees the West in terms of asceticism and resignation, as personified in the Free Gospellers who take away Eric's joy of life, which is symbolized by his violin.⁶ After his "conversion" Eric lives a bleak and empty existence until Margaret Elliot, who comes from the East to visit her family, brings music and joy back into his life. At this point in her career, Cather seems to oppose West and East in much the same way that Edith Hamilton has contrasted Egypt and Greece. To Hamilton,

Egypt is a fertile valley of rich river soil, low-lying, warm, monotonous, a slow-flowing river, and beyond, the limitless desert. Greece is a country of sparse fertility and keen, cold winters, all hills and mountains sharp cut in stone, where strong men must work hard to get their bread. And while Egypt submitted and suffered and turned her face toward death, Greece resisted and rejoiced and turned full-face to life. For somewhere among those steep stone mountains, in little sheltered valleys where the great hills were ramparts to defend and men could have security for peace and happy living, something quite new came into the world; the joy of life found expression.⁷

Later, in My Ántonia and Death Comes for the Archbishop, Cather will utilize the Christian imagery of the Promised Land as a positive symbol, but now she too turns from Egypt to Greece, her Dionysian sympathies, at this point, being with the East and the world of art--with its vitality rather than its Apollonian discipline.

The conflict of life and art, East and West, Dionysus and Apollo, is also evident in Cather's first collection of short stories, The Troll

⁶Cather, Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, p. 361.

⁷Edith Hamilton, The Greek Way (1930; rpt. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1964), p. 22.

Garden (1905), although, here, in contrast to her later novels, Apollonian order and aspiration as well as Dionysian energy and vitality seem to be equated with art and the East. For the title and the order of her stories, she uses a mythic metaphor comparable to that of Apollo and Dionysus-- Charles Kingsley's metaphor of the Trolls and the Forest Children.⁸ Bernice Slote has explained that "The Trolls in their fairy palace are the Romans--inside the garden and the palace, rich, busy, experienced, materialistic, ruthless; the Forest Children are the Teutons or Barbarians--outside in nature, strong, barbaric, innocent, and desiring the wonders of the Trolls. When the Forest Children enter the realm of the Trolls, some are lost forever, others return to the forest. Eventually the Children conquer the Trolls."⁹

This conflict between the Trolls and the Forest Children, art and life, city and country, East and West extends throughout the collection, the stories being so arranged that opposing themes alternate with each other. In the oddly numbered stories--"Flavia and Her Artists," "The Garden Lodge," "The Marriage of Phaëdra," and "Paul's Case," Eastern art and urbanity dominate. Flavia is an arrogant and obtuse dilettante who cultivates the friendship of artists who ridicule her behind her back; Caroline Noble is a talented musician who has sacrificed her sensibilities for material security; Phaëdra is a Jamesian villainess who disregards her deceased husband's request and makes a fortune by exploiting

⁸For a full discussion of this metaphor, see the excerpt from Charles Kingsley, "From The Roman and the Teuton: The Forest Children," in Willa Cather, The Kingdom of Art, ed. by Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 442-44.

⁹Slote, The Kingdom of Art, p. 93.

his paintings; and Paul is a romantic and psychologically disturbed young boy who admires, not true art, but artificial beauty, and who commits suicide rather than face the realities of life. Flavia and Phaedra are the materialistic Trolls, whereas Caroline and Paul are the innocent Forest Children. In these stories, the Forest Children are defeated by the Trolls.

The evenly numbered stories, however,--"The Sculptor's Funeral," "A Death in the Desert," and "A Wagner Matinee"--are all concerned with Forest Children of the West. Whereas they expose the absence of an artistic atmosphere in the West, they reveal the vital power of the land and the intense desire of their protagonists. Harvey Merrick, Katharine Gaylord, and Aunt Georgiana are all innocents who journey from the West to the East in search of the true foundations of art, but each eventually returns--either in person or through art--to the West, to the natural Forest. Moreover, in his journey, each has gained a new understanding of life and art, truth and beauty, art and nature.

At this point in her career, however, Cather is not yet ready to sacrifice art to nature, the East to the West, and the four stories which she writes for her next collection, Youth and the Bright Medusa (1920),¹⁰ are all set in the East, and the protagonist of each is an artist. As Daiches says, "The bright Medusa of the title of the 1920 collection is presumably art itself, with its fascinating and sometimes fatal attraction for youth. The theme that runs through all these stories is the special status of the artist in society, the fight of the artist

¹⁰Willa Cather, Youth and the Bright Medusa, vol. 6 of The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather, lib. ed. (1920; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937).

to preserve his integrity in a world of philistines, the struggle of sensitivity to maintain itself in a world of routine and convention."¹¹ The protagonists of "Paul's Case," "A Wagner Matinee," and "The Sculptor's Funeral"--all reprinted from The Troll Garden--are indeed intimidated by the narrow-mindedness and ugliness of their respective environments: industrial Pittsburgh, a bleak western farm, and a bigoted western town. In "A Wagner Matinee" and "The Sculptor's Funeral," art and the East are seen as the panaceas for man's aesthetic and spiritual needs. However, one must remember that the Medusa was a contradictory creature, and that while she undoubtedly had an awful beauty, the very sight of her brought death to mortal man. The title, then, implies that Cather is aware of the ambiguous nature of art, that while it can be a key to life and spiritual understanding, it can also be the cold goddess that alienates man from nature and humanity, hardening his feelings just as the mythic Gorgon turned all those who saw her into stone.

Most of the stories in Youth and the Bright Medusa--"Paul's Case" as well as the new ones, "Coming Aphrodite!," "The Diamond Mine," "A Gold Slipper," and "Scandal"--are set in the East and involve Cather's mythic conflict between art and life, each of the protagonists being psychologically or physically hurt by a total devotion to art or aestheticism. The young boy in "Paul's Case," for example, is destroyed by his moral weakness and his engulfing aestheticism; Don Hedger, the true artist in "Coming Aphrodite!," is disillusioned by Eden Bower, the false imitative artist who, although she has the beauty of Aphrodite, has the superficiality and treachery of Circe; Cressida Garnet in "The Diamond Mine"

¹¹David Daiches, Willa Cather (1951; rpt. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971), p. 144.

is exploited by her selfish and envious family who view her art only as a means of making money; and Kitty Ayrshire of "A Gold Slipper" and "Scandal" spends her talent for an unappreciative audience and is then exploited by the vanity and dilettantism of a wealthy Jewish Philistine who builds his reputation by pretending to have an affair with her. In the new stories, Hedger, Cressida, and Kitty all have high artistic aspirations, but each is also pulled by the desires and responsibilities of life--Hedger by his desire for Eden, Cressida by her responsibility to her family, and Kitty by her need for understanding and companionship. As Jones has pointed out, "Again and again tension in these tales arises from the conflict between the desire of the artist to pursue beauty and the necessity of the craftsman, if he is to live, to make some practical adjustment to the workaday world."¹² Cather's perception of the danger implicit in the coldness and isolation of the artist who is divorced from life paves the way for her later pilgrimage to the life of the West, for as Miller asserts, Cather is essentially "the novelist of the West, critic of the mainstreet society replacing the pioneer spirit, pursuer of a Western spirit: inevitably her gaze was fixed westward, toward the receding frontier, also half-real, half-mythic."¹³

Of the remaining short stories of Cather's early career, only "The Bohemian Girl"--which, significantly, is also set in the West--deserves

¹²Howard Mumford Jones, "Excerpt from The Bright Medusa," in Willa Cather and Her Critics, ed. by James Schroeter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 235.

¹³James E. Miller, "Willa Cather: Quest for Culture," in Quests Surd and Absurd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 82.

special mention. This story combines the East-West motif with the myths of Endymion and Dionysus, and the values of life and love are substituted for that of art. Nils Ericson returns to his family farm from an Eastern city to find his old sweetheart Clara Vavrika married to Olaf Ericson, a dull and stodgy, although materially successful, farmer. Clara feels stifled in her dull environment, for her zest for life matches that of Nils, and his presence rekindles her Dionysian desire for love and excitement. The Dionysian atmosphere reaches its climax at the Ericson's barn raising, where there is an abundance of music and dancing. Later that night, Nils and Clara meet under the bright moonlight, and, carried away by their desire, they ride away into the night and into a new life together in the East. Bernice Slote has observed that Clara "suggests Diana--the huntress riding at night, uneasy in domesticity, sitting in a white dress with a black cat at her feet. Clara's father suggests Bacchus--convivial, drinking rare wine, keeping a tavern. These affirmative and life-loving creatures are sharply distinguished from the stolid earth-bound farmer lot of the Divide. One is not surprised that Diana and Pan [Nils] escape."¹⁴

As illustrated throughout the preceding chapters, the dual themes of art and nature, the city and the country, the East and the West, Apollo and Dionysus extend throughout the canon of Cather's writings, and her career was a life-long quest to find the proper balance between these conflicting forces. In Alexander's Bridge the direction is toward the East, but Alexander's search is not for artistic truth, but rather for Dionysian youth and vitality, and Hilda, although an artist herself, is representative of Dionysian passion and spontaneity, whereas Winifred,

¹⁴Slote, p. 101.

Alexander's wife, represents the order, discipline, and responsibility of art and the artist. The initial journey of Thea Kronburg, the artist heroine of The Song of the Lark, is also toward the East, which she feels is the source of art, but paradoxically, it is not until she returns to the West--not the provincial town of Moonstone, but the primitive and elemental Southwest, permeated with Indian legends and relics--that she is able to integrate passion with order, desire with accomplishment, Dionysus with Apollo.

Cather's mythic pilgrimage back toward the West, toward the true sources of her own life and art, is properly begun in O Pioneers!, where the forces of Apollonian order and creativity, symbolized by Alexandra, triumph over Dionysian desire, disorder, and destruction, as represented in Emil and Marie. My Ántonia again illustrates Cather's admiration for the frontier West, and although Jim, who vacillates between the essential West of his childhood and the East where he lives, is the main character, it is Ántonia who represents the positive values of both Dionysian energy and passion and Apollonian order and creativity.

Cather's next four novels--One of Ours, A Lost Lady, The Professor's House, and My Mortal Enemy--are much more pessimistic than those of her first period, for they describe the decline of the frontier and the advent of a new materialistic, rationalistic, technological society. In One of Ours Cather returns temporarily to her early Eastern commitment, for Claude, who feels physically helpless and psychologically and emotionally paralyzed by the Apollonian conventionality and conformity of his wife and the neighborhood, makes a Dionysian journey to war-torn France, where, for a brief time, he finds meaning and fulfillment in life. In Daniel and Marian Forrester of A Lost Lady, Cather contrasts the Apollonian

values of order and morality, representative of the frontier, with the Dionysian values of desire, passion, exuberance, and the immorality that inevitably resulted from the decline of the frontier and the rise of materialism. The Professor's House is particularly significant for an understanding of Cather's personal development, because in this novel she dramatizes within the artist the conflict of art and life, reason and passion, Apollo and Dionysus, and she concludes that total Apollonian isolation and alienation from life--total commitment to the "bright Medusa"--precipitates the death of meaningful art and moral defeat for man. My Mortal Enemy is a short transitional novel in which Cather again illustrates the opposition of East and West, art and life, the flesh and the spirit. In her youth Myra Henshawe was a worldly woman, but as she grows older and moves West, she becomes bitter toward life, love, and even money and thus recedes into an isolated existence where, through the mercy of God, she hopes to find spiritual immortality.

The quest of the spirit for a psychological synthesis between art and life, reason and passion, the spirit and the flesh, is continued in Death Comes for the Archbishop, and before his death, Latour does achieve this equilibrium, although initially he is a representative of Apollonian values and Father Vaillant of Dionysian ones. In Shadows on the Rock Cécile's ordered Apollonian life is merged with Pierre Charron's passionate Dionysian one, and the result is a continuation of the balance found in Death Comes for the Archbishop. The mythic direction in these two novels is from East to West, from Europe to America, but in her next book, Lucy Gayheart, Cather returns one last time to the artistic East, where Lucy meets and comes to love Clement Sebastian, the personification of art and Old World Eastern culture, and, after his death, Life itself.

However, reacting against Harry Gordon's Apollonian order and caution, she allows her angry passion to get the best of her and to precipitate her early and tragic death. Finally, in Sapphira and the Slave Girl, the Apollonian order and morality of Henry Colbert is contrasted with the Dionysian disorder and immorality of Martin Colbert; the order of Sapphira's Southern plantation corresponds to the ordered society of the East; and Nancy's flight to the North and to freedom parallels the western quest of so many of Cather's earlier heroines.

Cather's ultimate commitment to nature and the freedom of the West is also illuminated in Obscure Destinies (1932).¹⁵ In "Neighbour Rosicky," Anton has left the poverty and stagnation of the East for the freedom and fecundity of the West, and although he dies before the story ends, the mythic cycle of life is continued in the expected birth of his grandchild. In contrast to her daughter, who represents the order, coldness, and superficial politeness of the Southern society which they have left behind, the Grandmother in "Old Mrs. Harris" combines a well-kept and orderly house with a truly unselfish concern for her family. And in "Two Friends" two men who have long been close friends allow intellectual narrow-mindedness and a passionate argument over politics to ruin a valuable relationship. Thus, in each of these stories, intellectual open-mindedness, physical freedom, and humane generosity--all true Western values--are viewed as positive goals.

In the posthumous collection The Old Beauty (1948),¹⁶ however,

¹⁵Willia Cather, Obscure Destinies & Literary Encounters, vol. 12 of The Novels and Stories of Willia Cather, lib. ed. (1932 and 1936; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1938),

¹⁶Willia Cather, The Old Beauty and Others (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

only one of the three stories concerns the West. Lesley Ferguesson, the heroine of "The Best Years," is a rural school teacher in Nebraska who, while taking care of her students during a sudden blizzard, contracts pneumonia and dies. According to Daiches, she is a Persephone figure whose death prefigures the death of the innocent frontier and the onslaught of modern materialism.¹⁷ "The Old Beauty," which is set in an old hotel in Europe, also relates the fall of innocence and beauty and the replacement of the old order with the new, as symbolized by the machine--in particular by the car which indirectly causes Gabrielle Longstreet's death. However, if the first two stories in this collection represent the death of innocence and beauty, the last story, entitled "Before Breakfast," suggests the rebirth of these qualities. The protagonist is Henry Grenfell, who, although old and resigned to his own death, has a vision of the continuation of life and beauty in the morning bath of a young girl--the daughter of a geologist who is vacationing on the same Maine island--who rises out of the foamy sea like a new Venus.

In their treatment of man's dual nature and his eternal quest for truth, therefore, Cather's novels and short stories have the power and universality of the ancient myths. Moreover, her many allusions to myth indicate that she was quite aware of its potency; in fact, she felt that "the fault of most American writers is one of magnitude," and she once asserted that these writers "are not large enough; they travel in small orbits; they play on muted strings. They sing neither of the combats of Atridae nor the labors of Cadmus, but of the tea-table and the Odyssey of the Rialto."¹⁸ Here is an obvious rejection of the realism of her early

¹⁷Daiches, p. 171.

¹⁸James K. Woodress, Willa Cather (New York: Western Publishing Company, 1970), p. 80.

mentor, Henry James, and a corresponding commitment to myth as the ruling principle of art. Indeed, her works are permeated with Norse, Indian, Christian, and Greek myths. In O Pioneers! she discusses ancient Scandinavian tree worship; in O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, The Professor's House, and Death Comes for the Archbishop, she comments on Indian society and cosmogony; in Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock she relates many Christian legends; and in all but two of her novels she uses classical myth as a structural basis for her own story. The myth of Endymion's desire for the ideal as represented in the moon permeates Alexander's Bridge, The Song of the Lark, One of Ours, A Lost Lady, and Lucy Gayheart; the myth of the fertility goddesses Demeter and Persephone and the corresponding myth of the seasons pervade O Pioneers! and My Ántonia, and the seasonal myth alone is present in Shadows on the Rock, Lucy Gayheart, and Sapphira and the Slave Girl; the myth of Aeneas's search for his homeland has parallels in My Ántonia, One of Ours, Death Comes for the Archbishop, and Shadows on the Rock; and finally, The Song of the Lark, A Lost Lady, and One of Ours have foundations in the respective myths of Orpheus, Venus, and Oedipus.

Moreover, the classical conflict between Apollo and Dionysus, East and West, art and nature, the flesh and the spirit which appears throughout Cather's work is dramatized by a group of recurring symbols and images, which are themselves the very core of myth. In most of her novels, the moon--which is often associated with the Endymion myth--represents Dionysian desire and passion, whereas the sun represents Apollonian warmth, order, aspiration, and creativity. The bright sun is usually the more positive symbol, although not always, and the distant moon is often ambivalent in nature--as was the moon goddess, who sometimes appeared as

Diana, sometimes as Selene, sometimes as Hecate--and can symbolize not only love and desire, but also coldness, loneliness, and destruction.

The parallel symbols of the wasteland and the garden, the Wilderness and the Promised Land, also pervade Cather's novels. The development of the frontier is shown in O Pioneers! and My Ántonia, in which the protagonists turn the prairie wasteland into a lush farmland, and its decline is revealed in One of Ours and A Lost Lady, where the garden is dominated and eventually destroyed by the machine. The image of the garden is not deserted, however, even if the garden of the frontier no longer exists. Cather points out in Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock that a spiritual garden may be--indeed must be--established in the moral wasteland. Thus, her use of the past in these novels is not an escape from reality, but rather a search for spiritual values that can be applied to contemporary society, which, tragically, seems to have lost many of the values and beliefs which hold a people together. Therefore, the myth of Moses' journey through the Wilderness to the Promised Land--which forms the principal structure of O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, Death Comes for the Archbishop, Shadows on the Rock, and Sapphira and the Slave Girl--serves as a metaphor for man's search of the Promised Land of the spirit.

Finally, the symbols of the cave and the rock, more than any others, indicate the close relationship of myth and dream, the conscious symbol and the subconscious image. These images correspond to the mythic journeys of Apollonian ascent and Dionysian descent, "the upward ones being," Frye says, "mainly quests for beauty and the downward ones quest for truth." Also according to Frye, the reward of the ascent is usually "direct knowledge or vision, but the reward of descent is usually oracular or esoteric,

knowledge concealed or forbidden to most people. . . ."19 The typical Catherian protagonist is divided between these two quests, pursuing, on the one hand, the bright Medusa of art, beauty, and wealth, and, on the other, truth and the spiritual kingdom of the soul. Thea, Professor St. Peter, Tom Outland, and Myra Henshawe all find the answers--sometimes final, sometimes equivocal--to their dilemmas in the ascent quest, for each has a revelatory spiritual experience on top of a mountain or mesa rock, the visions of Thea and the Professor being of art and those of Tom and Myra being of the spirit.

In contrast to this ascent motif, the mythic descent into the cave represents man's descent into the primeval past and subconscious memory, and thus corresponds to Orpheus' underworld quest. Like Orpheus, Thea, Jim, Antonia, and Bishop Latour all make a descent into an actual cave; and in addition, Alexandra, Claude, and Cécile also have Orphic experiences, although the image of descent is something other than the literal cave. Through their Orphic quests, each of these characters, like Cather before them, experiences a mythic initiation into the vital mysteries of life.

It may be concluded, therefore, that Cather conceives the basic myth of life and art to be an archetypal quest for truth, which encompasses not only societal and historical verities, but also universal and psychological truths. Moreover, in her pilgrimage, like Perseus and Orpheus, she confronts not only the bright Medusa, but also the dark underworld, for she realizes that the perilous voyage entails not only an Apollonian ascent into the heights of art, reason, and the spirit, but

¹⁹Frye, pp. 62-63.

also a Dionysian descent into the depths of nature, emotion, and the subconscious. The goal of her quest is a mythic balance between these dual forces of the universe--between the Trolls and the Forest Children, between Apollo and Dionysus--and it is greatly to Willa Cather's credit that during the latter part of her life, in at least two of her novels--Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock--she achieves this synthesis. Moreover, the significance her divided quest has for the entire body of American literature has been pointed out by George Schloss, who notes that "The landscape of the American artist has often been painted as a battlefield, a place where Paleface meets Redskin, the one armed with an imported consciousness, intellect and aesthetic, the other with nothing more than the primitive experience of the frontier or concrete jungle. The overall contribution of Miss Cather's work is, I think, a partial transcendence of these opposing forces into something that looks like, if not a victory, at least a peace."²⁰ Cather has contributed to American letters, then, not only superb artistic craftsmanship, but also a perceptive study of the basic human conflict of Apollo and Dionysus--the spirit and the flesh, reason and passion, order and freedom, art and nature--a conflict which man must resolve if he is to achieve psychological stability, intellectual understanding, and spiritual peace.

²⁰George Schloss, "A Writer's Art," in Willa Cather and Her Critics, ed. by James Schroeter (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 203.

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