

Georgia State University
ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

English Theses

Department of English

8-8-2017

Spotlighting Truth and Beauty: Willa Cather's Tenebraic Word Pictures

Maria Mackas

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_theses

Recommended Citation

Mackas, Maria, "Spotlighting Truth and Beauty: Willa Cather's Tenebraic Word Pictures." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2017.
https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_theses/222

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

SPOTLIGHTING TRUTH AND BEAUTY:
WILLA CATHER'S TENEBRAIC WORD PICTURES

by

MARIA MACKAS

Under the Direction of Audrey Goodman, PhD

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the way Willa Cather's writing parallels visual art's tenebrism – a dramatic way of illuminating a single person, object or idea by juxtaposing light against dark. Throughout her career, Cather uses this technique to convey truths relating to self realization, aestheticism, spirituality, and social awakening.

INDEX WORDS: Willa Cather, Tenebrism, Truth and beauty, Aestheticism, Cather and art,

Ekphrasis

SPOTLIGHTING TRUTH AND BEAUTY:
WILLA CATHER'S TENEBRAIC WORD PICTURES

by

MARIA MACKAS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2017

Copyright by
Maria Demetra Mackas
2017

SPOTLIGHTING TRUTH AND BEAUTY:
WILLA CATHER'S TENEBRAIC WORD PICTURES

by

MARIA MACKAS

Committee Chair: Audrey Goodman

Committee: Pearl McHaney

Tanya Caldwell

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

August 2017

DEDICATION

To My Randy, my husband of 37 years, who introduced me to *My Antonia* and Willa Cather.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was born out of a paper written in Dr. Audrey Goodman's Modern American Fiction class. In Dr. Goodman, I found a kindred spirit, a lover of Cather, and, of art. I cannot thank her enough for her guidance, encouragement, talent, time, and, for introducing me to the Western Literature Association (WLA), where I found "my people." I thank WLA for honoring me with an award for that paper I wrote in Dr. Goodman's class, which gave me much-needed confidence and validation. I give heartfelt thanks to my readers, Dr. Pearl McHaney and Dr. Tanya Caldwell, whose close readings and insightful comments gave my thesis balance, accuracy and depth. I thank all my professors at Georgia State, who have been so supportive. I am grateful for them. Most of all, I am grateful for Willa Cather, and all writers of beautiful literature. Our world needs you now more than ever. You inspire us.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		V
1	INTRODUCTION	1
1	CATHER'S AESTHETICS: THE SEEDS OF TENEBRISM	7
1.1	Aestheticism, Beauty, and Truth	9
1.2	Cather as Tenebraic Art Lover	13
1.3	Tenebrism Defined	16
1.4	Cather's Tenebrism: The Plow Scene	18
2	THE BEGINNINGS OF CATHER'S TENEBRAIC WORD PICTURES	21
2.1	Epiphanic Moments	21
2.2	Tenebraic Portraiture	24
3	MEMORY, TIME, AND PLACE: TENEBRISM IN CATHER'S LATER NOVELS	31
	31
3.1	The Light-Filled <i>House</i>	31
3.2	Light in <i>Shadows</i>	35
3.3	Cather's Darkest Novel	40
4	CONCLUSION	46
	NOTES	49
	WORKS CITED	52
	APPENDIX	56

1 INTRODUCTION

Nobody can paint the sun, or sunlight. He can only paint the tricks that shadows play with it, or what it does to forms. He cannot even paint those relations of light and shade – he can only paint some emotion they give him, some man-made arrangement of them that happens to give him personal delight – a conception of clouds over distant mesas (or over the towers of St. Sulpice) that makes one nerve in him thrill and tremble. At bottom all he can give you is the thrill of his own poor little nerve – the projection in paint of a fleeting pleasure in a certain combination of form and colour, as temporary and almost as physical as a taste on the tongue. This oft-repeated pleasure in a painter becomes of course a ‘style,’ a way of seeing and feeling things, a favourite mood. What could be more different than Leonardo’s treatment of daylight, and Velasquez’s? Light is pretty much the same in Italy and Spain – southern light. Each man painted what he got out of light – what it did to him. – Willa Cather, “Light on Adobe Walls” 123-4

Light’s effect on Willa Cather is the subject of this thesis. Though she says nobody can paint sunlight, she comes close to doing so with words. Known for her use of light, Cather is also known for her aestheticism, passion for art, and devotion to truth and beauty. The beauty of her writing is renowned; as Eudora Welty suggests, in Cather’s writing, “we are looking at a work of art” (*Eye of the Story* 42). Equally renowned is her observational prowess and attention to detail, which speaks to her appreciation of, and yearning for, truth in all things. The art Cather favors closely aligns with her reverence for beauty and truth, and the stylized way she paints with words. Visual art that moves her has characteristics similar to some of the most moving scenes in her novels. In pivotal, emblematic moments, her writing parallels visual art’s tenebrism – a dramatic way of illuminating a single person, object or idea by juxtaposing light against dark. Similarly, Cather’s descriptions of people – her word portraits – metaphorically favor tenebrism, shining a light on revealing, soul-baring details. She paints with light, expanding the concept of ekphrasis into what could be termed “phosphrasis.” Her stylized way of painting extends beyond description – her descriptions are imbued with light that communicates meaning. She does not describe for the sake of description; she describes to imprint meaning on the minds of her readers through literal and metaphoric illumination. Throughout her career, Cather uses this technique to memorably convey specific truths relating to self realization, aestheticism, creativity, spirituality,

and social awakening. Cather highlights this meaning through tenebrism; the manner in which she shines a light on moments involving a character's relationship with a place or a person transforms the simple everyday into transcendence.

In my thesis, I study this as-yet unexplored stylistic link between Cather and tenebrism. Scholarly perspectives related to visual art's influence on Cather's prose abound; they focus on her detail orientation, adeptness at establishing a focal point, and significant use of light. Scholars have explored the art Cather favored, her use of artistic terminology, involvement in the visual presentation of her novels, and her painterly descriptions. Stylistically, Cather's work has been linked to the artistic technique of chiaroscuro and the genre of Impressionism, but my survey did not discover even a mention of tenebrism. Though I agree her writing definitely employs light and shadow, I contend that her aim to illuminate a single subject and "throw all the furniture out of the window" is more in keeping with the emotion-eliciting technique of tenebrism ("Novel Demeuble"42). I explore the how and why of Cather's tenebraic leanings; close reading reveals that Cather's most dramatic tenebraic scenes sometimes coincide with a character's epiphany – a coalescing resolution to an issue or struggle. Cather's verbal tenebrism spotlights important symbols and ideas, imprinting them with clarity in readers' minds. I also explore her aestheticism, specifically her predilection for tenebraic art, her distaste for less dramatic painterly techniques, and how this informs her writing. Additionally, I touch on Cather's unusual involvement in the visual presentation of her novels.

I study word pictures and their meanings from: *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Ántonia* (1918), *The Professor's House* (1925), *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). These works represent the arc of her career as a novelist; *The Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia* were written early in her career, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* was her last

novel. I track her tenebraic tendencies through this span of twenty-two years, which parallel her evolutionary understanding of life's truths. From her resplendent and luminous early novels, to her somber final book, Cather evolves as a teller of truth; early in her career, she often spells out these truths for her readers, while later, we are left to pursue our own meanings. The truths Cather reveres are revealed in another important primary text which I employ, *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, edited by Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout (2013). The letters offer recent insight, which have not been fully mined by scholars. Cather offers a wealth of art-related backstory in her collection of essays, *Willa Cather on Writing*, and an early look at her scenography in *Willa Cather in Europe*. Secondary texts include journal articles and books from prominent Cather scholars who have linked the author to visual art – among them, Sharon O'Brien, Jean Schwind, Janice Stout, Eudora Welty, and James Woodress.

I traveled to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin to examine Cather archival material, including the author's copy of F. Schuyler Mathews's *Field Book of American Wild Flowers* (1902). Cather carried it with her for more than twenty years and densely annotated it as she hiked in various locales. As Stout says, "we see in these annotations in Cather's cherished field guide her effort to observe the natural world as closely as she could and to describe it as minutely, in as accurate language, as she could" ("Seeing is Believing" 171). For example, Cather strikes through words in the guide, correcting them as she happens upon flowers in the wild. In one instance, Mathews uses the word "scattered" to describe the prickles on a green brier; Cather strikes through that word, and writes in "rose-set." In another description, Mathews writes of the small white aster, "the flowering branches [are] very short." Cather strikes out "very." She often boldly disagrees with the wildflower expert. Pages and pages of extremely detailed annotations illustrate her penchant for

accuracy; of the *Aster spectabilis* she writes, “seems tough and woody. Oblong, very rough, saw-tooth edge.” She notes the place and date she saw certain flowers, seemingly to prove that her annotations are correct; for example, she observed a skunk cabbage in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, in May 1937. Delicate flowers are pressed into the field book; to have studied the actual book Cather held and walked with for many years was to gain insight into her dedication to truth and accuracy. She most likely consulted her field book when she described the wild honeysuckle in bloom on the Virginia countryside and used its Latin name, *Rhododendron nudiflorum* (*Sapphira and the Slave Girl* 797).

This attention to detail is matched by a love of beauty: That Cather was born in 1873, the same year Walter Pater wrote his landmark book on aestheticism, seems prophetic. I explore the scholarship linking Cather to aestheticism and articulate the author’s unique spin on the movement. I also discuss the artistic term “tenebrism.” An email correspondence with contemporary artist William Woodward lends understanding, as does an exploration of many of Cather’s favorite artists who used the technique, for example, Barlomé Esteban Murillo, Jusepe de Ribera, and Puvis de Chavannes. I study Cather’s commentary about these artists and others, drawing parallels between specific paintings she mentions and her literary style. (My appendix includes visuals of specific pieces of art.)

Though I concentrate on visual art, Cather was an aficionado of all types of art, including literature and drama of the early twentieth century. I briefly touch on these areas to lend historical perspective to my analysis, including a review of authors she admired for their visual nature and keen attention to detail. I explore Cather’s comments – from her letters and essays – about her passion for art, and insistence of painstaking, detailed description in her work. I also cover Cather’s extreme and unusual involvement in the visual nature of her books – how she

personally chose the illustrator for *My Ántonia*, and even art directed it, giving input on layout and paper stock. As Stout says, “Cather took an interest in every aspect of the visual appearance of her books, from paper and type font to the color of the binding and the design of the cover” (*Picturing a Different West* 108).

My thesis is organized into three chapters. The first provides background for my premise, and the next two specifically deal with the primary texts. **Chapter One** explores the many elements that contribute to the uniquely Catherian technique of tenebraic scenography: Cather’s aestheticism, alignment with the Romantic ideals of truth and beauty, passion for art, involvement in the visual aspects of her novels, and attention to detail. I review what we know about Cather’s artistic preferences – through her letters, archives, and scholarly commentary – and how they set the stage for her tenebraic scenography. She favors the spare minimalism of *My Ántonia* illustrator W.T. Benda’s pen-and-ink art, which parallels her masterful way of drawing readers to a simple, dynamic point; yet she is also passionate about the light-infused seventeenth-century masterpieces by the likes of Ribera, which parallels her breath-taking iconic scenes. What can we conjecture by these seemingly disparate predilections? I argue that it is her yearning for the revelation of truth in all things, and that she sees truth manifested simply *and* ornately, through a wide range of art. I discuss the meaning of tenebrism and relate it to the iconic plow scene in *My Ántonia*, explaining how my view differs from extant research.

Chapter Two connects key passages from the early primary texts to tenebrism, exploring their symbolic value and illustrating how Cather’s dramatic way of illuminating a person, object, or scene is similar to the way painters illuminate their central ideas. I contextualize the passages and explore how memory, place, and temporality enter into Cather’s tenebraic scenography. I

also compare and contrast tenebraic passages in which she overtly states meaning, and those in which she does not.

In **Chapter Three**, I similarly explore examples of tenebraic imagery in Cather's later work, seeking to find a continuation of tenebraic tendencies throughout her career. *The Professor's House* and *Shadows on the Rock* reveal a strong propensity for using the tenebraic technique to highlight epiphanic moments involving memory and place; however, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is uncommonly dark, containing the fewest instances of verbal tenebrism. I aim to find meaning in this void.

"People say I have a 'classic style,'" Cather wrote. "A few of them know it's the heat under the simple words that count" (*Selected* 561). Through my thesis, I hope to be one of those few, because like Welty, I believe that in Cather's writing, "we are looking at a work of art." I illustrate that one style of that art is tenebraic.

1 CATHER'S AESTHETICS: THE SEEDS OF TENEBRISM

Many elements contribute to the uniquely Catherian technique of tenebraic scenography: Cather's aestheticism, alignment with the Romantic ideals of truth and beauty, passion for art, involvement in the visual aspects of her novels, and attention to detail. Each of these characteristics plays an important role in the beauty of her passages, the accuracy with which she constructs them, and the style she employs. As Thea in *The Song of the Lark* declares: "What was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould¹ in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself – life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?" (263). Through Cather's eyes, we see beauty and truth mindfully encapsulated and illuminated; she eloquently, memorably and artfully imprisons these moments for us – in a style akin to tenebraic painting – urging us to notice the fleeting people, objects, and landscapes before us. What qualities and characteristics of beauty and truth does Cather word-paint? How does she elevate the everyday? This thesis aims to answer those questions by connecting Cather's aestheticism and its development to a symbolic way of highlighting, in a tenebraically painterly fashion, artistic achievement, hope, beauty, and truth. As Joseph R. Urgo writes, "very often in Cather an everyday occurrence is raised out of its literal significance to achieve a kind of transcendent timelessness; to enter the world of art, yes, but also to command a different level of perception" (27). Urgo connects this transcendent aspect of Cather's writing to Emerson's idea of the transcendentalist as "one who looks at life from these moments of illumination" (27). Cather's tenebraic technique is a unique intersection of transcendentalism and aestheticism: the beauty of the moment, but so much more; a lasting, sometimes life-changing perception or realization. In *My Ántonia*, Cather's iconic plow scene, showing the inky black

implement against the molten red sun ball, symbolizes the heroic truth in the simple – the working of the land. In *The Professor's House*, amid the gleaming peaks of southern Spain, viewed from a boat, we witness an epiphany showing the beauty of creative endeavor as the book's main character receives inspiration for a life-changing book. In *Shadows on the Rock*, an old bishop lovingly washes the feet of a prostitute's son in the firelight, reconnecting to his heart's work of serving.

The temporal aspect of Cather's tenebraic scenography parallels the temporality of life and the evolution of memories. Because the sun will set and the plow will move, this symbol of hard work and harvest may never reappear; Cather implies we must be mindful, observant, open. The light may never shine on the Hautes-Pyrénées in southern Spain in exactly the same way; ideas, and scenes, are fleeting. Firelight fades, and a child's washed foot gleaming in a dark room will dry; we must be reflective. As noted above, Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark* eloquently articulates the temporality of life through art's attempt to capture these brief, shining moments of truth and beauty. Thea, a musician, is in Panther Canyon, a place significant in her development as a singer, where she experiences a moment of epiphany. She is bathing in a stream at the bottom of the canyon, remembering pottery shards she has seen there. She imagines the pottery as a sheath to hold a precious elusive element, water; she likens this sheath to the sheaths artists create: "The Indian women had 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" (264). Thea remembers, reflects, notes the temporality of life and defines art as a way to capture these moments.

Visual impressions like Thea's abound in Cather's novels. James Woodress recounts that a friend told Cather that "great minds like Balzac or Shakespeare got thousands and thousands more distinct mental impressions every day of their lives than most men in a lifetime" (33). Woodress said Cather's mind worked similarly; her tenebraic scenography is proof. The manner in which Cather paints a scene is her way of preserving or encapsulating the moments Thea refers to as "too sweet to lose"; Thea's use of the word "imprisons" suggests the power behind Cather's word pictures. The author paints them for a reason: to inspire emotions, awaken senses, embolden ambitions. This dichotomous word, "imprison," implies a loss of freedom, but what type of freedom? Cather's hope is that we not fail to live examined lives; that we move through the world engaged with it, not as sleepwalkers, oblivious to its wonders; that we are open to the grace of the natural world and all the creatures that inhabit it. "Imprison" also connotes a sense of discipline to an artistic endeavor, to hard work, to family, to faith, though in a joyful, not obligatory, way.

1.1 Aestheticism, Beauty, and Truth

Willa Cather was born in 1873, the same year Walter Pater wrote *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, his landmark book of essays in which he expounds his philosophy on aestheticism. Called the Aesthetic Movement's revered spokesman and resident philosopher, Pater writes of the importance of art for art's sake and presents a nearly worshipful approach to beauty (MacCarthy 4). Pater writes: "Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or fact; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest"; he believes in "the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects" (Watson and Moseley xiv).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines aestheticism as "the quality of being aesthetic; the pursuit of, or devotion to, what is beautiful and attractive to the senses, esp. as opposed to an

ethically or rationally based outlook; *spec.* adherence to the Aesthetic Movement.” Cather’s adherence to the Aesthetic Movement has been widely studied by scholars; in fact, two volumes of essays have been devoted to her aestheticism – *Willa Cather and Aestheticism*, edited by Sarah Cheney Watson and Ann Moseley, 2012, and Janis Stout’s *Picturing a Different West: Vision, Illustration, and the Tradition of Cather and Austin*, 2007. As Watson and Moseley explain, “Cather accepted ideas about beauty and truth from the Aesthetic movement and adapted them to her own uses. But she always believed that the artist must look at the world through a lens of aestheticism, holding her art always in the service of beauty insofar it reflects truth” (xiv). Cather was twenty-eight years old in the summer of 1902 when she first went to England and France, and visited the London studio of the artist she called “the master of all English painters,” Edward Burne-Jones (*Willa Cather in Europe* 73). Interestingly, Burne-Jones created the “defining aesthetic movement painting, *The Golden Stairs*” (“Aesthetic Movement” 4). This painting features a group of white-robed young women descending a spiral staircase, illuminated by a natural sky light which is a rectangular opening; doves have entered this opening, and it reveals a blue sky. Later in this chapter, I explore the works of tenebraic artist and Cather favorite, Ribera, who cut a hole in his ceiling to illuminate his artistic subject matter. Cather was drawn to works like *The Golden Stairs* which, like Ribera’s and Burne-Jones’, effectively employed light.

Cather used light to reveal and focus on truth, which, from a historical perspective, figures prominently in Cather’s work. As Cather scholar Janis Stout writes:

A robust interrogator of received truths, she was as aware as her contemporaries among the so-called High Modernists of the shattering of pieties and assurances wrought by World War I and all that accompanied it, and she was at least as obsessed as Robert Frost

(whose poetry she greatly admired) with the need to erect momentary stays against the confusion that she saw all about her. (“Seeing and Believing: Willa Cather’s Realism” 168)

Those “momentary stays” appear to the reader in the form of phosphrasis, or tenebraic scenography. Cather’s verbal tenebrism is effective because of her observational prowess. Stout writes of the author’s “isolation of individual details” and her “visual acuity” (1). The scholar details Cather’s precise and copious annotations in F. Schuyler Mathews’s *Field Book of American Wildflowers*, which she carried with her on her nature walks for more than twenty years, saying her descriptions provide evidence of “a linkage of visual experience and verbal virtuosity” (5). Stark, striking images seem to form in Cather’s mind as part of her writing process; Stout recounts an anecdote about Cather discussing *Ántonia*’s character development with Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant. Cather positioned a single glazed jar by itself on the clear space of her friend’s desk, trying to visually illustrate *Ántonia*’s centrality in the novel (3). Cather wanted *Ántonia* front and center, with all other characters taking a back seat; she wanted readers to fully absorb the magnitude of the character’s passionate persona by centrally positioning *Ántonia* on the many canvases she paints in this novel.

Cather’s scrupulous details and magnification of minutia are evident when she lucidly describes a broad spectrum of landscapes, creatures, and phenomena. For example, a rabbit, which “seemed to be lapping up the moonlight like cream”; a star “that seemed to rest just on the rim of the earth” (*The Song of the Lark* 108 and 71); and a black cloud during a thunderstorm: “...no bigger than a little boat, drifted out into the clear space unattended, and kept moving westward” (*My Ántonia* 139). Light made possible these three similes: the silver sheen of creamy moonlight; the boat-like black cloud, solitary in its western journey across the sky; and the

celestial punctuation of a planet. Each could be a painting, each encapsulates a moment, each imbues the ordinary with meaning, each is temporal: the moonlight, the cloud, the star are fleeting. But the memory of them, now eternalized in a word picture, is not. The meaning? Stop and notice the changing landscape; be filled with wonderment and awe at its beauty; know that beauty is truth.

With Cather's absorption in scenographic detail, it is no surprise that she was extremely involved in the visual nature of her books; for example, she personally chose the illustrator for *My Ántonia*, and even art directed it, giving input on layout and paper stock. She weighed in on the typeface style for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and would not allow paperback editions of her books during her lifetime. Cather's six-year stint as managing editor of *McClure's Magazine*, which Stout calls "one of the most lavishly illustrated magazines in the United States," gave her experience in choosing illustrators and illustrations (*Picturing* 108).

Cather was intimately involved in the illustrations for *My Ántonia*. Her letters and subsequent scholarship recount how Cather dictated the artist, W. T. Benda, and the style of illustration: simple, impactful pen-and-ink drawings (see fig. 1). Cather called the illustrations the story's "silent supplement" (Stout, "The Observant Eye, the Art of Illustration, and Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*" 17). The author even specified their placement on the page and the type of paper stock on which to print the book. According to Stout, Cather even tried to create the drawings herself (5). That she cared deeply about the look and feel of the book evinces her aesthetic bent; she seemed to want her reader to be immersed in a total visual/verbal/tactile experience. Besides having readers envision the open sky with the singular black cloud on its solo flight westward, the author wants us to enjoy the spacious margins around her carefully crafted narratives and the feel of the paper under our fingers. Her insistence on white space

around the drawings and their spare, minimalist style parallels her writing technique of incorporating negative space. What she does not say is as important as what she says; as Eudora Welty so insightfully noted about Cather in “The House of Cather,” “. . .we are made as aware of what isn’t as of what is” (42).

1.2 Cather as Tenebraic Art Lover

Cather’s phosphatic writing technique parallels her affinity to tenebraic art; her artistic leanings are clearly evident from her earliest correspondence. In March 1908, the author wrote to her brother, Roscoe, about some prints she purchased for him in Boston. Of an Anthony VanDyck self-portrait, she says, “If you don’t like the Van Dyck I shall hate you. I have one like it, and I think it has given me more delight than any other picture I possess” (*Selected Letters* 106).² Van Dyck’s self portrait is lit as from within, as are the white areas of his clothing; set against its dark background, the portrait is luminous (see fig. 2). The artist paints himself against black so we notice the individual tendrils of his wavy brown hair; the angle of his arm, captured mid-paint stroke; the shimmery white collar, ruddy cheeks and aquiline nose against velvety black.

Cather was drawn to many artists who were even more tenebraic in technique than Van Dyck. For example, in a letter to Edith Lewis, Cather proclaimed the “Murillo Virgin the prettiest woman in the world,” and said she still loved the Ribera Nativity [“Adoration of the Shepherds”]; both pieces feature the Virgin Mary as the central focus (*Letters* 341, see figs. 3 and 4). In the Murillo, Mary is enveloped by a luminous aura; in the Ribera, her face glows, matching that of the Christ Child. In both works, Mary’s eyes are lifted heavenward. These depictions of Mary draw us in, stop us in our tracks, as does Cather’s tenebraic scenography. Both paintings use vibrant colors, in stark contrast to two paintings of Virgins Cather detested:

“Such awful color, I’ve never got over the shock of it. I mean [Edward] Burne-Jones and [Dante Gabriel] Rossetti – seems as if they mixed a little mud in their paint. I remember awful greens, and ladies, - pure Virgins with mouldy complexions” (*Letters* 501, figs. 5 and 6).³ These paintings are muted, restrained, almost murky; Cather’s use of the words “awful,” “moldy,” and “mud” convey her strong distaste for their lack of vibrancy.

Was she influenced by the art she admired when she crafted her fiction, or was she drawn to these pieces because of the way she crafted her fiction? This statement by the author points to the former: “Since I first saw the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of the life of St. Genevieve in my student days, I have wished that I could try something like that in prose...” (Byatt 4; see figs. 7 and 8). Scholars quote Cather as saying the frescoes were the inspiration for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*; the singular white figure of St. Genevieve also may have influenced the style of luminous singular imagery in other Cather novels (Schwind 2). Clinton Keeler explores de Chavannes’ influence on Cather, saying of the painter, “the idea of distance, and especially overlaid light, imply a special attitude toward the events of history” (126). Keeler parallels Cather to Puvis, saying:

...the distance, the detachment, with which she treats her historical subjects has the effect of the monumental style... light is a correlative of belief, and space is a correlative of freedom...the manner in which the light and space are used, the manner of stasis instead of accent, of distant vision instead of perspective, of suffusion of light instead of dramatic action, is parallel to what is “monumental” in Puvis’ frescoes. (126)

Keeler captures Cather’s use of light and space, and insightfully articulates the importance of spotlighting as opposed to employing dramatic action.

Though this paper deals primarily with visual art, Cather was an aficionado of all types of art, including literature and drama of the early twentieth century. For example, in keeping with her love of bold, saturated color in paintings was her love of the same in prose: “Conrad Richter is surely a man worth watching . . . his sentences have a thrill, they flash into pictures, have a certain tone color” (*Letters* 517). Stout writes of another instance when Cather wrote of “tracking A.E. Housman through his own scenes” (“Seeing” 170). During her first trip to England, Cather had “visual verification” of the imagery in Housman’s poems, and therefore judged the poems to be true (“Seeing 170). Cather admired *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder, without question a tenebraic play, with its interplay of darkness and light, pared-to-the-bones sets, and spotlight on the singular (see fig. 9). Stylistically and conceptually, it is no surprise that this simple, yet profound work greatly appealed to Cather. In a 1938 letter to Wilder, she writes, “I truly think ‘Our Town’ is the loveliest thing that has been produced in this country in a long, long time – and the truest” (*Letters* 556). Cather notes in this letter that “two hearings of it are not enough,” implying she saw the place twice, sometime in 1937, in New York City.

Cather’s comments from her letters and essays illustrate her passion for art, and insistence of painstaking, detailed description in her work. For example, the admiration she expressed for Jean-Francois Millet and Jules Breton, praising their “technical mastery” and “elemental power” (Stout, “Nude Descended” 158). She compares Millet’s process for creating “The Sower” to her writing method:

Millet had done hundreds of sketches of peasants sowing grain, some of them very complicated and interesting, but when he came to paint the spirit of them all into one picture, ‘The Sower,’ the composition is so simple that it seems inevitable. All the discarded sketches that went before made the picture what it finally became, and the

process was all the time one of simplifying, of sacrificing many conceptions good in themselves for one that was better and more universal” (“Art of Fiction”102-3).

Cather famously edited six pounds’ worth of text from her *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* manuscript, assuredly “sacrificing many conceptions good in themselves.” Many of Cather’s sparse, stark images are “so simple that it seems inevitable,” though close study of her copious journals and notes reveal she likely wrote “hundreds of sketches” to make her word pictures what they finally became.

1.3 Tenebrism Defined

To fully appreciate Cather’s tenebraic technique, the art form of tenebrism must be understood, though as Madelyn Dickerson writes in *The Handy Art History Answer Book*, many art historical categories can be relatively flexible, and tenebrism is no exception (135). In *Oxford Art Online*, Erin Benay defines tenebrism as “the use of dark shadows to obscure parts of the composition,” then goes on to describe chiaroscuro as the strong contrast of light and dark (1). The contemporary artist William Woodward explains that chiaroscuro and tenebrism both express a function of light:

Chiaroscuro was first coined by Leonardo who said ‘I use chiaroscuro to *dar sommo relieve alle figure*’ – give a sense of high relief to the figures. The figures in Leonardo da Vinci’s work and that of his followers have the tactile sense of three-dimensional illusionism and volume. Later, notably in the work of Caravaggio and his followers, the three-dimensional modeling of the figures was subjected to the darkening of the painted space in the overall composition of the painting, achieved by successive layers of transparent colored glazes, which darken the painting. The artist would spotlight figures or parts of the figures to highlight small sections of the anatomy, or gestures deemed

relevant to the meaning of what he was trying to convey. This is called tenebrism, a term that is relatively new, though the technique is centuries old.

Maria Rzepińska confirms Woodward's interpretation of the term tenebrism. In "Tenebrism in Baroque Painting and Its Ideological Background," she writes that "Caravaggio merely gave forcible expression to this tendency [tenebrism]" (93). She explains that the term tenebrism, or *maniera tenebrosa*, did not surface until much later than the 1600s. As both experts note, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio was reputedly the first to employ tenebrism, using dark shadows to obscure parts of his composition. The manner in which Benay describes Caravaggio's work is strikingly similar to Cather's word pictures: "the strong contrast of light and dark lends his paintings a dramatic effect that has been likened to a spotlight stage" (1). In *Beyond Caravaggio*, Letizia Treves discusses the narrative implications of this technique, calling "the most lasting impact of Caravaggio's revolutionary art the power of his storytelling" (17-18). Painters who emulated Caravaggio, called Caravaggisti, spread tenebrism across Europe. Ribera, a Cather favorite, was one of those artists. Treves notes that of Caravaggio's many followers, Ribera was the one to whom the master's "stark lighting" most appealed (17). Of Ribera, Benay writes:

In 1612, two years after Caravaggio's death, a young Ribera asked his Roman landlord for permission to cut a hole in his roof. Allowing natural light to illuminate models in Ribera's studio, this makeshift skylight stands as unusual evidence of the lengths Caravaggisti might go to achieve the first-hand observation, dramatic lighting, and incisive realism that characterized this new approach to art. (4)

First-hand observation, dramatic lighting, and incisive realism are all phrases that could describe writing techniques used in Cather's most memorable scenes, and in the art she admires. Cather's

work has been linked to the artistic techniques of chiaroscuro and the genre of Impressionism.⁴ Though, as has been discussed, art terminology is somewhat open to interpretation, I contend Cather's artistry is strongly aligned with tenebrism. Just as tenebraic painters tell stories using layers of color to darken less important elements and draw attention to others, Cather uses layers of meaning in her light-infused descriptions to illuminate significant ideas.

1.4 Cather's Tenebrism: The Plow Scene

In her most iconic scene, which appears in *My Ántonia*, Jim Burden, the story's narrator, Ántonia, and her "hired girl" friends, are on a summer excursion in the country. Ántonia urges Jim to tell the story of Coronado and his search for the Seven Golden Cities, which Jim believes took place, in part, along the very river where the five friends sit. The girls wonder what the land was like back then, and why Coronado had never returned to Spain and "his riches." Cather's canvas is primed for the answer, and she foreshadows its unveiling with light-infused descriptions of the landscape ("curly grass . . . on fire," "bark of the oaks turned red as copper," "shimmer of gold on the brown river," "sandbars glittered like glass," "light trembled in the willow thickets as if little flames were leaping among them" (236-7). Then she reveals this scene of wonder, a vision which soon disappeared:

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, a heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun. (*Antonia* 237)

Stout calls this scene “Cather’s heroizing verbal image” and says:

. . . the outsized plow redefines the saga of the West from one of adventure and violence to one of cultivation and family survival. The passage is also a dramatic demonstration of the visual quality of Cather’s writing. In the plow against the sun she creates a defining emblem . . . of her conception of the frontier as an agricultural and humane one. (125)

Stout effectively and eloquently pinpoints the symbolism and meaning of the scene, one in which Cather lovingly and soulfully depicts the land, the working of the land, and the people of the land in this one, artistically wrought, tenebraic image.

Mark Facknitz’s analysis of the plow scene emphasizes its simplicity and ephemerality: “Here are two pure colors and black, no foreground except that implied by their perceiver, and we see the temporary magnitude of the object, not at all the same as seeing the object itself. Cather has understood that making readers see depends not on careful, crafted complexities but on simple colors quickly applied or, more generally, on significance suddenly and solidly revealed” (120). As Facknitz implies, Cather strives to get readers to the heart of the matter by using simple, bold, deft, brush strokes. But as Facknitz fails to note, the contrast of light and dark – the illumination – is critical to the scene. “Art, it seems to me, should simplify,” she said (“Art of Fiction”¹⁰²⁻³). Cather simplifies by making the scene vividly compelling – with the dark plow contrasted against the bright sun. Her famous image is not only striking, but transformative, shedding light on a time-honored ideal: A simple plow, larger than life, symbolizing the land’s true heroes: hardworking, earth-loving people. In the blink of an eye, the image disappears.

Cather is saying, be mindful; transformative moments are fleeting. “Such a ravishing world and such a short life to see it in!” she wrote (*Letters* 110).

I contend this famous scene, like many other Cather scenes throughout her novels, is classic tenebrism. The details of the handles, the tongue, the share, wrought in inky black against volcanic red, employ the tenebraic technique of contrasting light and dark. The great black figure in the Cather scene, though not a human one, is breathtaking. The plow symbolizes the fruitfulness of the land, of hard work, of human endeavor. Coronado did not believe he found the Seven Golden Cities, but Cather believes he did; to her, the land and its people are symbolic gold. One can almost hear *Ántonia*, Jim and their friends take in a collective breath. They sprang to their feet, and Cather wants us to mentally turn on a light that shines on all that is pure and good. Cather stops us – wills us – to notice, through imaginative, effective, tenebraic ekphrasis.

2 THE BEGINNINGS OF CATHER'S TENEBRAIC WORD PICTURES

Cather uses tenebrism to encapsulate ideals she seeks to illuminate. This tenebraic technique is prominent in not only *My Ántonia* (1918), but in another early work, *The Song of the Lark* (1915), most notably in her descriptions of people and landscapes. As in the plow scene, Cather notices moments in time and illustrates them in such a way that the light-emanating landscapes and portraits crystallize in readers' minds, making vivid points – spotlighting, quite literally – values, traits and aspirations that Cather holds dear, such as artistic achievement, hope, beauty, truth. The author accentuates this meaning through light, capturing a fleeting moment when the ephemeral light is just right.

2.1 Epiphanic Moments

Meaning through light is prevalent in *The Song of the Lark*, a portrait of an artist and her rise to fame as an opera singer, which is the author's most autobiographical novel, according to Cather scholar Sharon O'Brien (Preface to *Lark* v). O'Brien discusses the parallels between the author and her protagonist, Thea Kronborg, and notes that "perhaps the richest autobiographical source" of *The Song of the Lark* was Cather's 1912 trip to the Southwest, which became a critical turning point for the author:

She [Cather] left for the Southwest an exhausted, drained professional woman whose successful editorial work at *McClure's* had left her dispossessed of her creative self. She returned reborn as a writer, ready for a new life. Cather gives Thea a similar transformation in Panther Canyon . . . Thea Kronborg finds herself as an artist. Similarly, after her return to New York, Cather seemed 'suddenly in control of her inner creative forces,' her friend Elizabeth Sergeant recalls. Somehow the Southwest had made

available a ‘new artistic method’ . . . The Southwest helped Cather to create her own voice as a writer. (vi)

Thea quite literally creates her voice as an artist – she decides to become an opera singer, not a pianist. O’Brien says somehow the Southwest helped created Cather’s voice as a writer by stirring up the rich broth of her childhood memories, and the result was her early novels, including *The Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia*. Perhaps it was the vast, open Western spaces that helped open Cather’s mind to her memories. Thea’s breakthrough moment comes when she clears her mind of all thought, in Panther Canyon:

Thea, too, was drowsy, and lay looking through half-closed eyes up at the blazing blue arch over the rim of the cañon. She was thinking of nothing at all. Her mind, like her body, was full of warmth, lassitude, physical content. Suddenly an eagle, tawny and of great size, sailed over the cleft in which she lay, across the arch of walls, then wheeled, and mounted until his plumage was so steeped in light that he looked like a golden bird. He swept on, following the course of the cañon a little way and then disappearing beyond the rim. Thea sprang to her feet as if she had been thrown up from the rock by volcanic action. She stood rigid on the edge of the stone shelf, straining her eyes after that strong, tawny flight. O eagle of eagles! Endeavour, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art! (277)

Through Thea, Cather spells out the symbolism of the soaring, gilded eagle, providing a caption for the word picture: “Endeavour, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art.” Thea is so struck by the light-filled moment, “she sprang to her feet as if she had been thrown up from the rock by volcanic action.” The moment physically and spiritually moves her. The eagle is not just any eagle, but the eagle of eagles – the ultimate in courage, freedom and strength. This

illumination of the eagle of eagles, “steeped in light,” illumines a Cather value: That man’s highest pursuit is art, in its many forms. If this were a Ribera painting, the viewer’s eye would be drawn to the shimmering eagle; the canyon and the sky would be background. As this passage continues, Thea says:

From a cleft in the heart of the world she [Thea] saluted it [the eagle] . . . [Cather’s ellipsis] It had come all the way; when men lived in caves, it was there. A vanished race; but along the trails, in the stream, under the spreading cactus, there still glittered in the sun the bits of their frail clay vessels, fragments of their desire. (277)

Here Cather highlights the eternality of art and artistic desire, the “It” in the second sentence of this passage. Thea recognizes that art lives on, through the ages; even when races vanish, the glittering fragments of their art lives on, to inspire and awe. O’Brien’s contention that *The Song of the Lark* is “richly satisfying and aesthetically complex” is illustrated in this evocative passage (vii). The scholar notes that in later novels, Cather exhibits “a spare fictional aesthetic, represented by her phrase ‘the novel demeuble,’ the unfurnished novel,” deriving aesthetic power from the unsaid, the ‘inexplicable presence of the thing not named’” (vi). Epiphanic moments like Thea’s canyon episode recur in later novels, but sometimes differ in that their meaning is often implied rather than stated. However, Cather’s tenebraic technique remains consistent.

Another example of the said versus the unsaid is a tenebraic description of Panther Canyon coming to life at sunrise. Cather writes “a kind of hopefulness broke in the air” (*Song* 270). She goes on to describe pine trees “flashing with coppery fire,” “the trees and bushes . . . which one scarcely noticed at noon, stood out magnified by the slanting rays,” “the dripping cherry bushes, the pale aspens, and the frosty *piñons* . . . glittering and trembling, swimming in

the liquid gold” (271). This stated hopefulness, combined with the light-imbued details, appear a few pages before Thea’s epiphany with the eagle, foreshadowing her breakthrough. This contrasts sharply with Cather’s technique even three years later, in *My Ántonia*, as illustrated in the plow scene. In *My Ántonia* and later books, the author hones her craft of “the novel dmeuble” with sparser, often non-existent word picture captions; meaning is implied rather than stated.

2.2 Tenebraic Portraiture

Cather’s word portraits in *The Song of the Lark* furnish (rather than unfurnish) meanings. For example, when Fred and Thea are in Panther Canyon, he notices her from a distance, “between the sky and the gulf, with that great wash of air and the morning light about her” (276). Fred interprets the scene for us: “Even at this distance one got the impression of muscular energy and audacity – a kind of brilliancy of motion – of a personality that carried across big spaces and expanded among big things” (276). In classic Catherian style, the author uses her tenebraic technique to surround Thea with light, but here, she tells us why she uses the technique – to highlight the protagonist’s “brilliancy of motion” and larger-than-life persona. Thea is a woman with ambition, drive, and determination – an opera singer in the making, at a time when women most commonly chose to settle down and have families. Her romantic interest and future husband, Fred, is looking up at Thea when he observes her “standing on the edge of a projecting crag” (275). Thea was also standing on the precipice of her destiny as a renowned opera singer.

In contrast, just three years later, in *My Ántonia*, Cather presents this portrait of Cuzak, Ántonia’s husband:

He was shorter than his older sons; a crumpled little man, with run-over boot-heels, and he carried one shoulder higher than the other. But he moved very quickly, and there was

an air of jaunty liveliness about him. He had a strong, ruddy colour, thick black hair, a little grizzled, a curly moustache, and red lips. His smile showed the strong teeth of which his wife was so proud, and as he saw me his lively, quizzical eyes told me that he knew all about me. He looked like a humorous philosopher who had hitched up one shoulder under the burdens of life, and gone on his way having a good time when he could. He advanced to meet me and gave me a hard hand, burned red on the back and heavily coated with hair. He wore his Sunday clothes, very thick and hot for the weather, an unstarched white shirt, and a blue necktie with big white dots, like a little boy's, tied in a flowing bow. (345-6)

From Cather's observant description, we know this man; he is full of life, though he's lived a hard life. Again, Cather uses vivid, bold colors to illuminate the essence of the man: black hair, red lips, a white shirt, a blue necktie with big white dots. One can imagine Cuzak as a Van Dyck portrait, ruddy cheeked, uneven shouldered, squarely centered on the artist's canvas. Cather scholar Jean Schwind says the singular white figure of St. Genevieve in the Puvis de Chavannes fresco may have influenced this style of luminous singular imagery (2). Cather hints at the meaning associated with her description – “his lively, quizzical eyes told me that he knew all about me” and “he looked like a humorous philosopher who had hitched up one shoulder under the burdens of life, and gone on his way having a good time when he could” – but does not clearly interpret for us, like she did through Fred in the description of Thea and her “personality that carried across big spaces.”

The scene that Cuzak goes on to describe for *Ántonia* is also luminous: “Mama, I wish you had see the lady dance on the slack-wire in the street at night. They throw a bright light on her and she float through the air something beautiful, like a bird!” (357) Again, the lady is a

singular, bright figure, like St. Genevieve in a de Chavannes fresco. Cather's verbal portrait of Cuzak and this small detail conveying his wonder and awe at the tightrope dancer clearly illustrates the character's love of beauty and life. As we have seen, Cather is moved by faces alive with vibrancy, like Murillo's Virgin. She also admires three-dimensional portraiture: "...the Royal Museum is the richest in portrait sculpture I have ever seen...Of all the statues of Caesar I have seen it is the most wonderful. Such a head! Napoleons [sic] is a wooden block compared to it. I go back and back to it and I doubt whether the world has produced another such head in all the centuries since" (*Letters* 110). Cather obviously admires the artistry and lifelike quality of Caesar's bust, contrasting it to Napoleon's "wooden block." Interestingly, Thea in *The Song of the Lark* buys a photograph of the Naples bust of Julius Caesar, has it framed, and hangs it on her wall at the Lorch house (149).⁵

One of Cather's most poignant portraits is of Antonia, not as a young girl, but later in her life. After twenty years, Jim Burden returns to Nebraska to visit "his" Antonia. Like rapidly riffling through a flip book, his mind flashes back to scenes from their childhood and youth, which he describes in art-related terms:

Antonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade – that grew stronger with time. In my memory there was a succession of such pictures, fixed there like the old woodcuts of one's first primer: Antonia kicking her bare legs against the sides of my pony when we came home in triumph with our snake; Antonia in her black shawl and fur cap, as she stood by her father's grave in the snowstorm; Antonia coming in with her work-team along the evening sky-line. She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true. I had not been mistaken. She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which

fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. 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. All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races. (342)

Here, Cather does interpret for us; Jim tells us what to make of *Ántonia's* hand on a tree and her gaze up at the apples. We feel Jim's emotion as he realizes the strength of *Ántonia's* character and the depth of her soul – not just in this description, but throughout the entire book, which serves as an extended portrait of this charismatic Bohemian woman. Jim notes that his images of *Ántonia* do not fade, but grow stronger with time. Like dramatic, memorable Baroque paintings, Cather's images are timeless.

Contemporary critics recognized Cather's painterly style and the strength of her verbal portraiture. For example, H.W. Boynton said the effectiveness of *Ántonia's* portrait “depends in an unusual sense upon the skill of the painter. Casual as her [Cather's] touches seem, no stroke is superfluous or wrongly emphasized; and we may be hardly conscious how much of the total effect of the portrait is owing to the quiet beauty and purity of the artist's style” (qtd. in “Historical Essay” Woodress 397). Similarly, *The Nation* called Cather's style that of “an artist,” saying she created “a notable portrait of *Ántonia*” (qtd. in Woodress 396). The *New York Times* dubbed the novel “a carefully detailed picture of daily existence on a Nebraska farm” and *Ántonia* “a true daughter of the soil” (qtd. in Woodress 396). And Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, twelve years after the book's publication, that *My Ántonia* had “a beautiful

tenderness, a vivifying imagination that transforms but does not distort or exaggerate – order, proportion” (qtd. in Woodress 399).

Cather achieved her artistic vision, as mentioned in Chapter One of this thesis, when with her friend Elizabeth Sergeant, Cather positioned a single glazed jar by itself on the clear space of her friend’s desk, trying to visually illustrate *Ántonia*’s centrality in the novel. Sergeant writes, that while they were having tea:

She then suddenly leaned over . . . and set an old Sicilian apothecary jar of mine, filled with orange-brown flowers of scented stock, in the middle of a bare, round antique table. “I want my new heroine to be like this – like a rare object in the middle of a table, which one may examine from all sides.” She moved the lamp so that the light streamed brightly down on my Taormina jar, with its glazed orange and blue design. ‘I want her to stand out – like this – like this – because she is the story.’ (qtd. in Woodress 387)

Cather wanted *Ántonia* in a tenebraic spotlight – sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically. Like Ribera, Cather metaphorically cut a hole in the ceiling to let the light in and make *Ántonia* stand out – because she is the story. Stories of other characters captivate readers’ imaginations, but *Ántonia*’s developing story – of her family, her relationship with Jim, her growth and maturation, is central to the novel. We see a time-lapse portrait of *Ántonia*, like we do of Thea in *The Song of the Lark*. We learn how others perceive these women, how these main characters respond in certain situations and environments, how their lives are shaped. This novel-long approach to portraiture is a Catherian strength.

Ántonia’s story comes to an epiphanic crescendo for Jim at the end of the book, during their twenty-year reunion. *Ántonia*’s children show Jim the family’s new “fruit cave,” the cellar filled with barrels of preserved fruits and vegetables, and as the two friends leave and stand

outside talking, this tableau presents itself: “. . . they 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. It made me dizzy for a moment” (328).

Later that night, when Jim is tucked into the haymow in the Cuzak barn, he remembers the scene, saying, “That moment, when they all came tumbling out of the cave into the light, was a sight any man might have come far to see” (342).

The lighthearted scene in the fruit cave, with descriptions of pickled watermelon rinds, spiced plums and chopped pickles, contrasts sharply with scenes from a similar cave early in the novel – *Ántonia*’s dark, damp, childhood cave home. Her father’s homesickness led to his suicide; her mother’s bitterness over their poverty made her harsh and sometimes unkind. In stark contrast, *Ántonia*’s later cave is the setting from which her happy brood bursts forth with an “explosion of life” – quite the light-filled opposite of melancholy, bitterness, and death. The scene could be a tenebraic painting with the dark mouth of the cave and the gleaming legs and hair of the children, glowing in the sun. Viewing the scene, which Jim mentions twice, affects him; the scene, which encapsulates *Ántonia*’s fulfilled, light-filled life, contrasts sharply with Jim’s emptier, though economically more prosperous, existence. We know that Jim has a marriage of convenience and his time is filled with work-related travel. *Ántonia*, on the other hand, is surrounded by the warmth of family and the lushness of her land; she is “a rich mine of life,” in Jim’s words. The two incredibly different cave settings bring to mind these two incredibly different lives – intertwined, yet worlds apart. Cather’s tenebraic technique in this final cave scene allows for the interplay of time and memory, coalescing in a satisfying present, just as the plow scene harkened back to Coronado’s exploration of the West.

In *My Ántonia*, written three years after *The Song of the Lark*, Cather has refined her tenebraic technique; it has evolved into a deeper, subtler way of using light to illuminate important ideas. Cather's tenebrism is sometimes subtle, but always sure. Close reading is often required to unpack it, as in the contrasting cave scenes in *My Ántonia*. Cather does not always articulate her meanings, as she did, for example, in the cliff scene in *The Song of the Lark* where Thea explains the gilded eagle represents artistic endeavor. In these unfurnished scenes, Cather achieves her goal of "throwing all the furniture out the window." She respects the reader enough to allow us to analyze the meaning in these tenebraic moments.

3 MEMORY, TIME, AND PLACE: TENEBRISM IN CATHER'S LATER NOVELS

Cather's tenebraic way of painting visual images and using them to illuminate meaning is even more pronounced in two of her later works, *The Professor's House* (1925) and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). In these two novels, Cather's visual acuity is at its sharpest in terms of luminous description. James Woodress writes that once an image was recorded on Cather's brain, it never left her; he quotes Cather as saying, "When I sit down to write, turns of phrase I've forgotten for years come back like white ink before fire" (34). Cather's choice of words, "like white ink before fire," unknowingly connote the manner in which she employs light as a revelatory mechanism – a mechanism intrinsically tied to visual art. Woodress writes, "Her ability to remember mannerisms, turns of phrase, idioms, and all sorts of verbal nuances was like her ability to record visual images. Taking notes on her material, she told an interviewer, would kill the material. It was the memory that was important" (33-4).

3.1 The Light-Filled *House*

Memory plays a significant role in the tenebraic images featured in *The Professor's House*, as does place – much as they did in the *My Ántonia* cave scene. Additionally, visual art terminology is frequently used in this novel, drawing an even stronger parallel between Cather's pen and a painter's brush. One scene in the novel effectively illustrates this: Professor Godfrey St. Peter, the prize-winning historian who is the protagonist of the book, sits looking out his office window, musing about his career as a teacher and a writer. From the window, he can see a distant Lake Michigan, which always inspired him, whether he was admiring it from afar, swimming in it, or sailing on it. St. Peter calls the lake "the great fact in life, the always possible escape from dullness . . . like an open door that nobody could shut" (114). In third-person narrative, he describes his memory in this luminous fashion:

When the ice chunks came in of a winter morning, crumbly and white, throwing off gold and rose-coloured reflections from a copper-coloured sun behind the grey clouds, he didn't observe the detail or know what it was that made him happy; but now forty years later, he could recall all its aspects perfectly. They had made pictures in him when he was unwilling and unconscious, when his eyes were merely open wide. (114-15)

Cather created St. Peter with sensibilities similar to her own – to the author and her character, place is revered, significant, sacred; memories are detailed and clear; pictures are mentally captured, as truly as if they were plein air painted. In fact, Cather revealed in 1938 that she fashioned *The Professor's House* after an exhibition of Dutch paintings she had seen in Paris.⁶ Like St. Peter, Cather had places that “made pictures in her” – places to which she returned, time and time again, for creative inspiration and renewal. As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, Cather found her voice as a writer during a difficult period in her career after visiting the Southwest. Cather was also drawn to Grand Manan Island, where she wrote *The Professor's House*.

Embedded in *The Professor's House* is the story of Tom Outland, St. Peter's prize pupil and almost-son-in-law, whose life was tragically cut short in World War I. Tom's memory casts a shadow over the professor's life. Tom explored the Southwest, found a lost city, and invented a product which made him posthumously wealthy. Rosamond, St. Peter's daughter and Tom's fiancée, inherited his wealth, and, as a result, she and her husband live in luxury. When the book opens, St. Peter is depressed and disillusioned, looking for meaning in his life – a meaning which Tom had given him: “Through Outland's studies . . . he had been able to experience afresh things that had grown dull with use. The boy's mind had the super-abundance of heat which is always present when there is rich germination. To share his thoughts was to see old perspectives

transformed by new effects of light” (256). Cather’s use of the words “heat” and the way she describes transformative change in terms of light illustrate her tenebraic technique.

Cather also speaks through Tom using tenebraic scenography, when he is exploring in the Southwest:

. . . the rays of sunlight fell slantingly through the little twisted piñons, - the light was all in between them, as red as a daylight fire, they fairly swam in it. Once again 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 on it, full of the smell of piñons – it was like breathing the sun, breathing the colour of the sky. (246)

This description fairly bursts with the significance of place – the mesa, “a world above the world.” Cather imbues this place with spiritual importance for Tom, as she did Lake Michigan for St. Peter, with tenebrism – sun falling through the trees, red as fire, the trees swimming in it. Even the air is gold. The vision of breathing in sun and color brings to mind Baroque paintings virtually dripping with emotion. When Cather was twenty-eight years old, in the summer of 1902, she visited Europe for the first time and wrote of a little fishing village in southern France, called Le Lavandou:

Out of every wandering in which people and places come and go in long successions, there is always one place remembered above the rest because the external or internal conditions were such that they most nearly produced happiness. I am sure that for me that one place will always be Lavandou. . . . One cannot divine nor forecast the conditions that will make happiness; one only stumbles upon them by chance, in a lucky hour, at the

world's end somewhere, and holds fast to the days, as to fortune or fame. (*Cather in Europe* 157-8).

For Cather as a young woman, the “one place remembered above the rest” was Lavandou; through her letters and essays, we know that throughout her life, place always held a strong significance for her. As Eudora Welty has written, “the emotions of her characters, too, have deep roots in the physical world” (“The House of Cather” 52). Whether Cather wrote of Nebraska, the Southwest, or Canada, the landscape was meaningful to her characters, just as it was to Cather. For Tom and Thea, the Southwest, with its gleaming canyons, held meaning. St. Peter found inspiration near or in the waters of Lake Michigan, and also in an unlikely epiphanic setting: the south of Spain. As a young professor, St. Peter visited one of his former tutees in Spain. He was considering the idea of writing a book about the early Spanish explorers. It was during this trip, on a boat excursion, that St. Peter had his epiphany:

On the voyage, everything seemed to feed the plan of the work that was forming in St. Peter's mind; the skipper, the old Catalan second mate, the sea itself. One day stood out above the others. All day long they were skirting the south coast of Spain; from the rose of dawn to the gold of sunset the ranges of the Sierra Nevadas towered on their right, snow peak after snow peak after snow peak, high beyond the flight of fancy, gleaming like crystal and topaz. St. Peter lay looking up at them from a little boat riding low in the purple water and the design of this 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 him through. (160-61)

That St. Peter, in a flash, sees his prize-winning, career-making book before his eyes while gazing up at the gleaming-like-crystal-and topaz-peaks, is significant. Light figures prominently,

as does place. Through St. Peter, Cather gives a nod to the significance of this scene: The professor remembers this epiphany earlier in the book, after a bittersweet night in Chicago at the opera with his wife, during which he longs for their younger, more engaged-with-each-other days. He comments to his wife that “it’s been a mistake, our having a family and writing histories and getting middle-aged. We should have been picturesquely shipwrecked together when we were young” (153). Later, in his hotel room bed, he contemplates the image of the shipwreck, “. . . but his wife was not in it. Indeed, nobody was in it but himself, and a weather-dried little sea captain from the Hautes-Pyrénées, half a dozen spry seamen, and a line of gleaming snow peaks, agonizingly high and sharp, along the southern coast of Spain” (153).

Much like Thea’s breakthrough moment in Panther Canyon, with the gilded eagle, St. Peter has a life changing moment on the gleaming-peaked coast of Spain. As in the scenes from her earlier novels, Cather tells us what is happening; in this instance, through St. Peter. She even tells us the design that unfolded before his eyes was ultimately the way the book was written, putting stock in the power of mindful observation, immersion in place, and retreat into nature.

3.2 Light in *Shadows*

As in *The Professor’s House*, Cather’s tenebraic scenography is prominent in *Shadows on the Rock*. Tenebrism is used similarly in this novel: to convey the significance of place; the respectful, empathetic portrayal of people; and the beauty of landscape. However, in *Shadows on the Rock*, there is often a religious significance to the light. The novel, which takes place in seventeenth-century Quebec, is replete with references to Catholicism, prayer, saints, churches, iconography, and bishops. The book tells the story of the widowed apothecary, Euclide Auclair, his daughter Cécile, and their relationships with the townspeople. One touching relationship, that of Cécile and Jacques, the young, neglected son of a prostitute, has been likened to “childlike

versions of Mary and Christ,” by Susan A. Hallgarth (137). Cécile compassionately cares for Jacques like a mother, in practical ways (washing his mouth out with soap, like the sisters in the convent school she formerly attended, when he uses naughty language), and spiritual ways, recounting stories of saints and faith. In one particularly tenebraic scene, Cécile and Jacques seek refuge from a downpour in the Notre Dame de la Victoire, “feeling the goodness of shelter” (506). They admire a luminous portrait of Saint Anne after Jacques convinces his motherly friend to light candles:

They went softly up to the feet of Saint Anne, where the candles were burning down in the metal basin. Each of them took a fresh taper from the box underneath, lit it, and fitted its hollow base upon one of the little metal horns. After saying a prayer they returned to their bench to enjoy the sight of the two new bright spots in the brownish gloom. Sure enough, when the tapers were burning well, the gold flowers on Saint Anne’s cloak began to show; not entire, but wherever there was a fold in the mantle, the gold seemed to flow like a glistening liquid. Her figure emerged from the dusk in a rich, oily, yellow light.

(506)⁷

The scene is symbolic of a light shining in the dark, or true sanctuary. Cather explains that Jacques leaves his painful home life behind and finds sanctuary when he is with Cécile and her father, much as the faithful find solace and comfort – sanctuary – at church. Saint Anne brightens the darkness for the troubled Jacques and the faithful Cécile. Interestingly, Saint Anne, the Virgin Mary’s mother, died when Mary was young; in a similar situation, Cécile was a young girl when she lost her mother. Saint Anne, emerging from the dusk in rich light, symbolizes hope and comfort.

Another glowingly warm tenebraic scene with a religious context involves Jacques and Old Bishop Laval. The bishop is out on a bitterly cold, snowy night, ministering to a sick woman. On his way home, he hears a child, Jacques, crying. The bishop takes him home with him, bathes him and feeds him. Again, a third-person memory, this time from Jacques's perspective:

He was sitting on the edge of a narrow bed, wrapped in a blanket, in the light of a blazing fire. He had just been washed in warm water; the basin was still on the floor. Beside it knelt a very large old man with big eyes and a great drooping nose and a little black cap on his head, and he was rubbing Jacques's feet and legs very softly with a towel. They were all alone then, just the two of them, and the fire was bright enough to see clearly. What he remembered particularly was that this old man, after he had dried him like this, bent down and took his foot in his hand and kissed it; first one foot, then the other. (510-11)

Bishop Laval reflects on finding the child, and feels it was not coincidental. The child was found on the steps of the lavish residence of the younger churchman, Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier. Through Laval, Cather, who has illuminated the scene for us in warm firelight, illuminates its meaning:

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 Saviour been just there, under that house which he never passed without bitterness, which was like a thorn in his flesh?" (511).

The bishop wonders if he has been too absorbed in the business of the church and not enough in the true meaning of his calling. The gentleness and sacredness of the old bishop kissing the young boy's feet in the warmth of the firelight could be a Baroque painting, with the dark room as background, and the bishop's face (as described by Cather), and Jacques's feet, illuminated. As in the scene with Saint Anne's golden cloak, this scene takes on religious significance. The bishop realizes in the firelight ("the fire was bright enough to see clearly") both Jacques and Jesus, children of unwed mothers, are precious – more precious than the ostentation symbolized by the lavish Episcopal residence, and more precious than the business of the church. The firelight makes it clear: The bishop's pastoral calling, not his administrative duties, should be his true vocation.

Though the religious significance of light is a distinguishing feature of *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather's tenebraic scenography in this novel is similar to earlier novels in that place is imbued with meaning. When Cécile is pulling Jacques on her sled, at the end of a pleasant winter day, she describes the sky as "throbbing with fiery vapours" and says "the sky shone with a blue to ravish the heart, - that limpid, celestial holy blue" (530). In the same scene, Cécile declares, "would not her heart break for this? For this rock [Quebec] and this winter, this feeling of being in one's own place?" (531). Cécile, yet another Cather character with a sense of place, combines religious significance with her love of Quebec, calling the sky's color, "celestial holy blue."

Significance is also given to people, in classic Catherian style. Cather empathetically paints tenebraic verbal portraits, for example this one, of Euclide Auclair, the apothecary:

He was a slender, rather frail man of about fifty, a little stooped, a little grey, with a short beard cut in a point, and a fair complexion delicately flushed with pink about his cheeks

and ears. His blue eyes were warm and interested, even in reflection, - they often had a kindling gleam as if his thoughts were pictures. (467)

The portrait of Auclair that Cather paints seems gray and dull, but for the small bit of pink on his cheeks and ears. Out of this gray, we are drawn to the “kindling gleam” of Auclair’s eyes, that show us more than color and shine; we go deeper – we are privy to the activity behind his eyes, the windows to his soul. We “see” him conjuring pictures. Similarly, Cather describes Aunt Clothilde, through the eyes of Cécile, Auclair’s daughter. Cécile, if she ever returned to France, was disappointingly destined to live with this aunt:

The face of this aunt Cécile could never remember, though she could see her figure clearly, - standing against the light, she always seemed to be, a massive woman, short and heavy though not exactly fat, - square, rather, like a great piece of oak furniture; always in black, widow’s black that smelled of dye, with gold rings on her fingers and a very white handkerchief in her hand. Cécile could see her head, too, carried well back on a short neck, like a general or statesman sitting for his portrait; but the face was a blank, just as if the aunt were standing in a doorway with blinding sunlight behind her. (471)

The aunt, perennially in black, was ever standing against the light, in tenebraic fashion. Cécile’s remembrance was of a silhouette – a blank face, in a doorway, with a background of blinding sunlight. Aunt Clothilde would not be Cécile’s choice for a guardian, and her negative impressions of the aunt come through in Cather’s description. The light is “blinding,” the handkerchief, “very white” – everything is black and white, with no room for in between. The statesman and general references further serve to add coldness and distance to the aunt figure. This verbal portraiture is a memory – and Cécile cannot remember the face. The recollection is stark and impersonal, dramatized by the harshness of the scene’s tenebrism.

Light-filled images are numerous in *Shadows on the Rock*: cathedrals are bathed in sunlight, roofs flash, and spires gleam. Woodress notes “her ability to render landscape is superb, and her visits to Quebec at different times of the year resulted in some marvelous evocations of place” (236). Woodress quotes Cather as saying:

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. (236)

Cather’s rendering of life’s trifles on the rock – hot chocolate with cognac, a drummer boy flourishing his drumsticks, a bowl of glass fruit – make Quebec truly shine bright for her readers, making the light more memorable than the shadows.

3.3 Cather’s Darkest Novel

In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), Cather’s last book, the dark is more memorable than the light. The author deals with slavery: a painful part of American history during which trifles were indeed dear, but the great matter of people owning other people could not be considered worthless. The novel is uncommonly dark; during its writing, Cather said in a letter to her brother, Roscoe: “The sentences don’t come sharp and clear as they used to – the pictures are a little blurred” (*Letters* 561). It is widely known that the novel was born from a scene in Cather’s memory bank, dating back to when the author was five years old; she witnessed the reunion of two women: a black mother, Till, who stayed with Cather’s great-grandparents who had once enslaved her, and her mulatto daughter who had escaped and had fled to Canada. In the novel, Sapphira Colbert, an invalid, has wrongly convinced herself that her husband is enamored

of her slave Nancy, Till's daughter. Sapphira is jealous and connives to show Nancy is lustful, though she is quite the opposite. Sapphira plots to have her randy nephew rape Nancy. The result is a story showing the white Sapphira to be the darker personality, and the black slaves to be the purer. In this way, Cather metaphorically juxtaposes light and dark, in a beneath-the-skin attempt at tenebrism, but the result is not luminous, revelatory, or satisfying. Rather, it is dismal. Cather says in a letter to her brother Roscoe, "every word in the scene of 'Nancy's Return' is true, my boy even the weather" (591). And, in a letter to Ferris Greenslet, she writes: "It (the original conception) was all light and shade, was meant to be neither wise nor instructive – certainly not heavy. Some weeks ago I put the discard (the excised chapters & paragraphs) on the bathroom scales, and they weighed six pounds. I was very pleased" (594). George N. Kates says of this drastic editing: "To have taken everything possible in; but then calmly to cut most of it out: this is a procedure she had pressed to extremest use, as she herself has told us, even with the actual pounds of manuscript that she discarded from *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*" ("Willa Cather's Unfinished Avignon Story" 490).

Cather, by her own admission, struggled with this final novel. To have cut six pounds of text is evidence of the struggle. Toni Morrison points to the subject matter of the book to explain the author's difficulty, not Cather's diminishing skill; she writes of Cather's "struggle to address an almost completely buried subject: the interdependent working of power, race, and sexuality in a white woman's battle for coherence" (*Playing in the Dark* 34). Morrison says Cather "works out and toward the meaning of female betrayal as it faces the void of racism" (43).

Morrison's use of the word "void" captures the book's tone. Cather's classic use of tenebrism is rare in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*; how can there be revelatory light when dealing with such a depraved subject as slavery? And female betrayal? When Cather does use the

technique, the light is not luminous, as it is so often in her earlier books; rather, it is destructive or harsh. For example, the scene in which Till, Sapphira's "lady's maid" (and the black mother in Cather's memory) recollects the way her mother died: As Till's mother was dressing for the servant's New Year's party, her finery caught fire from a candle, and young Till watched her mother, in flames, run out into the cold to her death. Cather prefaces this gruesome scene with Till and her mistress returning from a trip to a house where no fires had been lighted. Darkness permeates the book, and when scenes do feature light as the focal point, the scene is tinged with grief or melancholy, as in the tableau of Till's mother engulfed by flames. "The void of racism," in the words of Morrison, is incomprehensibly tangible in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. The reader feels the emptiness and darkness, striking contrasts to the luminosity of all the other novels explored in this thesis. The darkness is as powerful as the light; imagery is veiled, as are emotions. We meet Sapphira as an older woman, so we do not experience an evolutionary portrait, as we do with Thea and Antonia, though we do learn, through Sapphira's daughter that "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" (900). Sapphira's dark internal portrait is juxtaposed with a pasty, pallid external portrait; it is quite the contrast to the vibrant, dynamic Thea and Antonia who glow with life. Though she is a force to be reckoned with, like Thea and Antonia, Sapphira is not powered by creativity, faith, or a strong work ethic; rather, she is motivated by selfishness. Sapphira does not love life; her portrait reflects a lackluster soul – a void. Her daughter articulates the complexity of Sapphira, who often contradictorily showed caring ways toward her "darkies": "No, it ain't put on; she believes in it, and they believe in it. But it ain't right" (900). The "it" is slavery; Rachel Blake's

pronouncement that “it ain’t right” speaks volumes about the void. Owning another human is so intensely wrong that words, for Cather, do not come easily. Thus, the void.

Lackluster characters fill the novel, adding to the void. For example, Henry Colbert, who searches through the bible for proof that slavery is acceptable; he wants justification, knowing in his heart it is wrong, it seems, but trying to find a reason to believe it is right. David Fairhead, the unordained, abolitionist preacher, is sent to Back Creek simply to fill the pulpit. This scene with Fairhead is notable for its lack of warmth: “He closed his eyes and began his invocation. In the untempered light which poured through the bare windows he looked a very young man indeed, with rosy cheeks and yellow hair” (821-2). Fairhead appreciates the Negro singing: “For him the singing was the living worship of the Sunday services; the negroes in the loft sang those bright promises and dark warnings with fervent conviction” (822). The strong image of the singing contrasts sharply with the bland portrait of aptly named Fairhead. A Pennsylvania northerner, Fairhead is characterized as mealy-mouthed and weak; the untempered light in the preaching scene reveals a foppish sort of man-child, not up to the task of dealing with strong-willed Sapphira.

Woodress says Cather had “a theoretical belief in complete equality and a practical acquaintance with Negroes only as servants or laborers. Her sympathies in the novel are clearly with Mrs. Blake [Sapphira’s daughter, who orchestrated the escape], with Nancy’s desire to escape . . .” (263). Woodress recounts a story about Cather’s childhood in Virginia that speaks to her ingrained views of African-Americans:

Once an old judge had come to Willow Shade to visit. He stroked her curls and talked to her in the playful platitudes that southern convention prescribed for little girls. She

recalled shocking her southern mother by exclaiming to the startled judge: ‘I’s e a dang’ous nigger, I is!’ (261)

Woodress goes on to say Cather had nothing of the social rebel in her – only the desire for honesty. That, as a child, she viewed African-Americans as dangerous was surely a sign of the times; one that she came to strongly dislike. Cather had told Edith Lewis she found southern social conventions smothering and that falling in with the South’s sentimental attitudes led to being out of touch with reality (261). With Cather’s passion for the truth, this dark view of the South is in keeping with the darkness of this final novel. The only glimmers of tenebrism come near the end of the novel, when Henry Colbert aids Nancy’s escape by surreptitiously granting his daughter her request for the cash she needs to help the slave to freedom. He imagines Nancy “like the morning star . . . the last star of night . . . she was to go out from the dark lethargy of the cared-for and irresponsible” (904). Even though Henry believes Sapphira’s slaves were well cared for, he knows freedom brings the light, and views escape from slavery, a fading history, as the last star of night. Another light-focused scene comes at the end of the novel, when Sapphira lays dying:

When Till came in with the lights, she would let her leave only four candles, and they must be set on the tea-table so placed that the candle-flames inside were repeated by flames out in the snow-covered lilac arbour. It looked like candles shining in a little playhouse, Till said, and there was the tea-table out there too, all set like for company. When Till peeped in at the door, she would find the Mistress looking out at this little scene; often she was smiling. (938)

Till believes her mistress saw the spirits of the young people who visited Chestnut Hill in days gone by. Was Sapphira dreaming of the days before whispers of emancipation? Does this final

scene of the book lend a negative note? As Cather writes in “Light on Adobe Walls,” an artist “cannot paint those relationships of light and shade – he can only paint some emotion they give him” (124). In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather emphasizes the dark rather than the light, and the emotion she painted was decidedly somber – a fitting emotion for a subject as shadowed as slavery. Morrison contends that there is much – in characteristic Cather fashion – not being said in this novel: Till’s motherly emotions are stripped away, for example, as if she is not human. Only once during the story does she ask, out loud, about her runaway daughter’s safety. This repression, this overlooking of the humanity of a black mother, was not Cather’s failure to emotive; rather it was a reflection of the truth of the times – a mirror image of the dark suppression that was slavery in the South.

Cather’s broad range of tenebraic technique is evident in *The Professor’s House*, *Shadows on the Rock*, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, which span fifteen years. *The Professor’s House* illustrates a contemplative style emphasizing place and memory; *Shadows on the Rock* presents light in a religious connotation, while still highlighting the importance of place; and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* deals with an uncommonly dark subject, slavery, in an uncommonly dark manner. The sparse, subtle style of this last novel harkens back to *My Ántonia*, in which Cather respects the reader enough to demand close reading. In *My Ántonia*, the warmth and passion of the central character contrasts sharply with the scheming unhappiness of slave owner Sapphira. The light in the former is bright and revelatory; when light is featured in Cather’s last novel, it is untempered and harsh, revealing a deadly fire and a pale preacher. The arc of Cather’s work features light, and lack of it, in all its intensities, paralleling the broad range of subject matter the author tackles.

4 CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored Cather's tenebraic technique in diverse novels written over a span of twenty-two years. The landscape, people, plots, and eras vary greatly – Nebraskan “others” near the turn of the twentieth century, trying to make their way; an opera singer in the making, born in Colorado, who discovers her life's ambition while in the Southwest; a Midwestern professor in mid-life crisis; a seventeenth-century community in Quebec, struggling to survive; and a pre-Civil War, slaveholding Virginia family, with conflicting values. One unifying thread through these novels is the distinctive manner in which Cather illuminates scenes, objects, and people. Is it ekphrasis? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ekphrasis, from the Greek, originally meant an explanation or description of something, especially as a rhetorical device. Now it has come to mean a literary device in which a painting, sculpture, or other work of visual art is described in detail. Or does the German term *sich etwas ausmalen*, meaning “to paint something in someone's head,” come closer?⁸

Neither term completely captures the Catherian way of describing an important scene; “phosphrasis,” “verbal tenebrism,” or “tenebraic scenography” come closer. These are more descriptive of the way Cather illuminates scenes, people, and objects in a literal way, through her use of light, and in a metaphoric way, illuminating a resolution for a character, or a value for the reader. Thea watches the gilded eagle and realizes man's highest pursuit is art; we read the iconic plow scene in *Antonia* and gain a sense of dramatic significance in the everyday – the heroism of hard work, pure human endeavor, and the satisfaction of the resulting fruitful harvest. Sometimes Cather overtly states her meaning, as in the case of the scene in *The Song of the Lark*, described here; through Thea, Cather says: “O eagle of eagles! Endeavour, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art!” (277) Other times, Cather's illumination is left for the reader to decipher,

as in the plow scene. We know it is significant – the behavior of the characters viewing it implies that; they, like us, are struck silent by the beauty, though puzzled by the vision before them. It takes them a moment to interpret that the plow is not a human figure. Cather respects the reader enough to sometimes leave the most profound illuminations to his or her own musings about meaning.

Cather's tenebraic scenography is much more than pretty pictures, rendered verbally in a style infused with dark and light. It is a literary technique she uses to capture the duality of moments that reveal the world's beauty and truth – their temporal, yet long-lasting impact. Cather intimates that we must be mindful of these moments, and open to the impact and what that can illuminate for us if we remain receptive. Her technique captures a memory, and elevates it to a life lesson – a sign, a symbol, or as Stout has said, a “defining emblem.”

This thesis is in no way an exhaustive study of Cather works; I am eager to explore the entire Cather oeuvre – short stories, essays, and novels – as it relates to my exploration of tenebraic scenography. I hope to spend more time with the archives at the Harry Ransom Center on the University of Texas campus in Austin, which proved an enlightening experience. Because the *Selected Letters* contains less than twenty percent of Cather's 3,000-letter corpus, I hope to explore the *Complete Letters*, currently in development at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in cooperation with the Willa Cather Foundation in Red Cloud, Nebraska. This digital, scholarly edition's first phase (1,500 letters) is slated to begin publication in early January 2018, when all of Cather's letters enter the public domain. (*Selected Letters* was published because of a fairly recent change in policy by the Willa Cather Trust.) I want to contact the Willa Cather Foundation and explore the possibility of spending time in Red Cloud if art-related letters have surfaced and

are available for scholars to view. I cannot say no stone has been left unturned – there are many stones – and pages – left to turn.

Close readings of Cather's musings as a twenty-eight-year-old in Europe make me wonder if she is even aware of her tenebraic tendencies – was it an innate way of writing? Many of her travel journal-type descriptions effectively use light as a stylistic device, and she frequently finds meaning in the simplest of scenes. She writes this, for example, shortly after arriving in France:

The purple chalk cliffs were dazzling white now, and our eyes, accustomed for some weeks to the blackness of London, ached with the glare of the sun on the white stone and yellow sand. A little boy on the stone terrace was flying a red and green kite, quite the most magnificent kite I have ever seen, and it went up famously, up and up until his string ran short, and of a truth one's heart went just as high. (96)

From early on, Cather naturally created light-filled, full-of-meaning scenes. To notice, to capture with deft precision, to analyze, to remember: Cather does this, and worlds more, as she spotlights truth and beauty. In *The Song of the Lark*, Cather writes “artistic growth is, more than it is anything else, a refining of the sense of truthfulness. The stupid believe that to be truthful is easy; only the artist, the great artist, knows how difficult it is” (436). Cather accomplishes this difficult feat: refining the sense of truthfulness. With simplicity and artfulness, she illuminates that truth for her readers.

NOTES

1. Cather adopted British spelling conventions (i.e., *mould*) in the 1920s, and the textual commentary of the scholarly edition used for my thesis notes that *My Ántonia* was brought into conformity with her preference.
2. Van Dyck painted several self portraits, though all share similar styles; Cather does not specify which one she owns, or which one she purchased for her brother, though it is most likely his last, and most famous (see fig. 2).
3. Cather contradicts herself in this 1934 letter or perhaps she has changed her mind about Burne-Jones and Rossetti. In 1902, as noted earlier, she calls Burne-Jones “the master of all English painters” and notes “It seems well established that he was the only painter the island has produced whose colour-sense can not [sic] be challenged, and, excepting Rossetti, he also is unstained by that muck of sentimentality which has choked all truth and courage and vividness out of English art.” She goes on to call his “experiments in composition and colour scheme astonishingly bold” (*Cather in Europe* 73).
4. In Asad Al-Ghalith’s insightful evaluation of Cather’s light-inspired style, “Cather’s Use of Light: An Impressionistic Tone,” he compares her technique to that of the Impressionists. Though I agree with his premise that, like the Impressionists, Cather aims to “defurnish” and declutter her canvas, I view her style as bolder and stronger than Impressionism, which is “known for a somewhat unfinished quality” (Dickerson 183). The scholar does come close to acknowledging Cather’s bolder style: “It appears that her concern for a more potent and effective portrayal of the Western sunlight is one that she would actualize, through the medium of writing, many years later in the sunny scenes of *The Song of the Lark*, *The Professor’s House*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *O*

Pioneers!, and My Ántonia” (2). Erna Cooper compares Cather’s technique to chiaroscuro, which she describes as “an aesthetic model incorporating a descriptive technique used to narrate a life lived amongst the shadows” (45). Cooper says Cather uses “language and metaphor to describe the shadows that follow us or fall upon us, from the past, through objects, images, memories or feelings that haunt us, intermittently, with darkness and illumination” (45). Cooper views Cather’s technique as somber and reflective; she says “what is revealed in the text . . . is not merely ambiguity in language and artistry, but the ambiguity of all life, real or imaginary” (46). I disagree in this dismal perspective of Cather’s work, though I do agree with Cooper’s view that the author descriptively and symbolically uses light, in, as she says, “unique, recurrent and symbolic language” (42).

5. It is difficult to ascertain exactly which head of Caesar Cather viewed at the Royal Museum in Naples in 1908. Fig. 10 is a sketch of the portrait bust at Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, copied from the University of Texas Library Portrait Gallery, by H.F. Helmolt (ed.): *History of the World*. New York, 1902. This could have been the print Thea purchased, framed and hung in her room at Mrs. Lorch’s home.
6. Woodress quotes Cather as saying, “Just before I began the book I had seen, in Paris, an exhibition of old and modern Dutch paintings. In many of them the scene presented was a living-room warmly furnished, or a kitchen full of food and coppers. But in most of the interiors, whether drawing-room or kitchen, there was a square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of grey sea.” This is reminiscent of St. Peter’s view of Lake Michigan through his study window.

7. Cather added a footnote near the description of Notre Dame de la Victoire, saying “the charm of this old church was greatly spoiled by unfortunate alterations in the lighting, made in the autumn of 1929. It is unclear what those alterations were, but in studying photographs of the church (dedicated in 1690) it seems lighting was added, perhaps detracting from its original, candlelit tenebrism.
8. German photographer Thomas Struth, in his “Nature & Politics” exhibition at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia, used and translated the term *sich etwas ausmalen*.

WORKS CITED

"aestheticism, n." *OED Online*. Oxford U P, March 2017. Web. 19 May 2017.

Al-Ghauth, Asad. "Cather's Use of Light: An Impressionistic Tone." *Cather Studies* 3 (1996): 267. Print.

---. "Willa Cather's Use of Inner Light." *International Fiction Review* 32.1 (2005): n. pag. Web.

Benay, Erin. "Caravaggio and the Caravaggisti in 17th-Century Europe." *Oxford Art Online*. New York: Oxford U P, 1999. Web. Accessed 13 Apr 2017.

Byatt, A.S. "American Pastoral." *The Guardian*. Web 9 Dec. 2006.

Cather, Willa. *Willa Cather on Writing*. U of Nebraska P, 1988.35-43. Print.

---. "Light on Adobe Walls." *On Writing*. 123-4. Print.

---. *My Ántonia*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2003. Print.

---. "My First Novels." *On Writing*. 91-97. Print.

---. "The Novel Demeuble." *On Writing*. 35-43. Print.

---. "On the Art of Fiction." *On Writing*. 101-104. Print.

---. *The Professor's House*. O'Brien, pp. 99-271.

---. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. O'Brien, pp. 775-939.

---. *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout, eds. New York: Knopf, 2013. Print.

---. *Shadows on the Rock*. O'Brien, pp. 461-641.

---. *The Song of the Lark*. New York: Signet, 1991.

---. "Willa Cather, Famous Nebraska Novelist, Says Pioneer Mother Held Greatest

Appreciation of Art – Raps Women Who Devote Themselves to Culture Clubs."

Interview by Eleanor Hinman. *Lincoln Sunday Star*. 6 Nov. 1921. *Willa Cather*

Archive. 2017. Accessed 16 Jan. 2017.

---. *Willa Cather in Europe: Her Own Story of the First Journey*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988. Print.

Cooper, Erna, and Wadham College. *Chiaroscuro: Aesthetics, Values and Autobiographical Elements in the Works of Willa Cather and Marguerite Duras*. N.p., 2002. Print.

Dickerson, Madelynn. *The Handy Art History Answer Book*. Visible Ink P, 2013. Print.

Duryea, P. P. "Paintings and Drawings in Willa Cather's Prose: A Catalogue Raisonne." (1993): n. pag. Web. Accessed 29 Oct. 2016.

"ekphrasis, n." *OED Online*. Oxford U P, March 2017. Web. Accessed 19 May 2017.

Encyclopedia of Fine Art. visual-arts-cork.com. Accessed 29 Oct. 2016.

Facknitz, Mark. "Willa Cather, the Nabi of Red Cloud." Watson and Moseley, 111-124. Print.

Hallgarth, Susan A. "Archetypal Patterns in *Shadows on the Rock*." *Colby Library Quarterly*, 24.3 (1988). 133-141.

Kates, George N. "Willa Cather's Unfinished Avignon Story." *Willa Cather: Collected Stories*. Vintage Classics, 1992. 464-93.

Keeler, Clinton. "Narrative Without Accent: Willa Cather and Puvis de Chavannes." *American Quarterly* 17.1 (1965): 119-126. Print.

MacCarthy, Fiona. "The Aesthetic Movement." *The Guardian*. 25 March 2011. Web. Accessed 25 Mar 2017.

Matthews, F. Schuyler. *Field Book of American Wild Flowers*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons. 1902. n.pag.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books. 1990.

O'Brien, Sharon, editor. *Cather Later Novels*. Literary Classics of America, 1990.

---. "Possession and Publication: Willa Cather's Struggle to Save My *Antonia*."

Studies in the Novel 45.3 (2013): 460–475. Print.

---. *The Song of the Lark – Preface*. v.

Pater, Walter. *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Oxford UP, 2010.

Rzepińska, Maria, and Krystyna Malcharek. "Tenebrism in Baroque Painting and Its Ideological Background." *Artibus et Historiae* 7.13 (1986). 91-112. Web. Accessed 13 Apr 2017.

Schwind, Jean. "Fine and Folk Art in *The Song of the Lark*: Cather's Pictorial Sources." *Cather Studies*, Vol. 1 (1990), *The Willa Cather Archive*, Web. Accessed 16 Apr 2017.

Stout, Janis P. "'The Nude Had Descended the Staircase.'" *Cather and Aestheticism*. 153-168. Print.

---. "The Observant Eye, the Art of Illustration, and Willa Cather's *My Antonia*."

Cather Studies, Vol. 5 (2003), *The Willa Cather Archive*, Web. Accessed 16 Oct. 2016.

---. *Picturing a Different West: Vision, Illustration, and the Tradition of Austin and Cather*. Texas Tech University Press, 2007. Print.

---. "Seeing and Believing: Willa Cather's Realism." *American Literary Realism*. 2 (2001). 168. Web. Accessed 02 May 2017.

Treves, Letizia. *Beyond Caravaggio*. London: National Gallery Co. Ltd., 2016. Print.

Urگو, Joseph R. "'Dock Burs in Yo' Pants': Reading Cather Through *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*." *Willa Cather's Southern Connections: New Essays on Cather and the South*. Charlottesville: U of V Press, 2000. Web. Accessed 09 June 2017.

Watson, Sarah, Cheney, and Ann Moseley, eds. *Willa Cather and Aestheticism*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2012.

Welty, Eudora. "The House of Willa Cather." *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*. New York: Random House, 1977. 41-60.

Woodress, James. "Historical Essay." *My Antonia*. 2003. 369-401.

---. *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art*. New York: Pegasus, 1970. Print.

Woodward, William. "Tenebraic Pictures." Message to Maria Mackas. 02 Apr 2017. E-mail.

APPENDIX



Fig. 1. Illustration for *My Ántonia* by W.T. Benda, 1918

http://cather.unl.edu/cs005_stout.html



Fig. 2 Self-portrait by Anthony Van Dyck, 1640-41

<http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-27230586>



Fig.3 *The Assumption of the Virgin* by Bartolome Esteban Murillo, 1670

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/bartolome-esteban-murillo/the-assumption-of-the-virgin-1670>



Fig. 4 *The Adoration of the Shepherds* by Jusepe de Ribera, 1650

http://web.sbu.edu/theology/bychkov/ribera_nativity.html



Fig. 5 *The Morning of the Resurrection* by Edward Burne-Jones, 1882

<http://iconsandimagery.blogspot.com/2011/04/title-morning-of-resurrection-artist.html>



Fig. 6 *The Annunciation* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1855

<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s69.rap.html>



Fig. 7 *Childhood of St. Genevieve* by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, 1877

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/pierre-puvis-de-chavannes/life-of-st-genevieve>



Fig. 8 St. Genevieve solicitously watches over the sleeping town (detail of fresco, The Pantheon, Paris) by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, 1898

http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_GzQnzaF4ko/R4PjkXuehBI/AAAAAAAAADmQ/uoTjMjNFnQo/s400/pantheon_paris2.jpg



Fig. 9 *Our Town*, PHS/Act 2 Theatre Company production, Pinckney, Michigan, Nov.

2010 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/chrisdzombak/5279288166/>

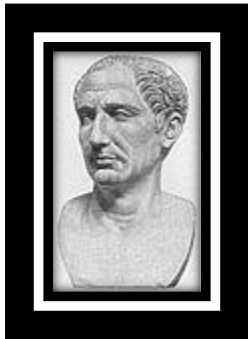


Fig. 10 Sketch of the portrait bust at Museo Archeologico Nazionale Di Napoli, copied from the University of Texas Library Portrait Gallery, by H.F. Helmolt (ed.): *History of the World*. New York, 1902.

<http://www.romanemperors.com/julius-caesar.htm>