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Money in the Fiction of Willa Cather

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MONEY IN THE FICTION OF WILLA CATHER

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Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this thesis in his opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree Master of Arts.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Money has tantalized, tempted, and destroyed man since it first replaced the barter system. It appears in English literature at least as early as the medieval morality play of Everyman, probably much earlier. But money becomes a more pressing problem in the modern age, especially in the United States, because social and economic conditions of this age and this country put wealth at least within hoping distance of huge segments of society, whose counterparts in other times and places could at most expect full stomachs and roofs that did not leak every time it rained.

It is to be expected, therefore, that money would be an important subject for a modern American writer like Willa Cather. And it is. It is a major theme in many of her works. In several others its relative unimportance constitutes a significant statement about modern America. Her attitudes toward money, moreover, are part of a core of key beliefs that govern, to a large extent, her view of the world.

Many critics, however, have given little attention to this subject. David Daiches, for example, in Critical

Introduction,[1] the first book-length study of Willa Cather after her death, mentions money in her work only in passing. And James Woodress in Willa Cather, Her Life and Art[2] treats the subject typically when he says only that Willa Cather attacked materialism in One of Ours.

Several critics do deal with money in Willa Cather's works at more than typical length. One is Dorothy Tuck McFarland, who has written the most recent book about Willa Cather, entitled, appropriately enough, Willa Cather.[3] Although Mrs. McFarland deals with money only in her discussion of The Professor's House, she propounds an interesting theory. She sees Willa Cather using money as a metaphor for the world of material things as opposed to the world of the imagination.[4] This is a specific application of Mrs. McFarland's general conclusion: that Willa Cather's rejection of the post-World War I world was a rejection not of the literal present but of limited, imperfect reality in favor of a higher, spiritual reality.

There are perhaps metaphorical elements in Willa Cather's treatment of money and the present. But money and the present are more than metaphors in her novels and stories. She specifically condemned modern attitudes toward money. The attitudes and actions she criticized are real and common among real people. To see her treatment of money and the present only as metaphorical is to blunt the impact of her

attack on the misuse of money in modern America and to blur her description of the power of wrong attitudes toward it to destroy happiness and blight society.

Two other books also deal at length with money in Willa Cather's fiction. One is Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy, by Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom.[6] The Blooms think money is very important in the novels of the Twenties. They believe Willa Cather thought people in Nebraska, and in the country generally, were increasingly trying to get something for nothing. And, according to the Blooms, she thought that practically the whole society now believed that things were more important than beauty or freedom--especially if the things were brought from somewhere else and sold in a store. Although it is confined to the novels of the Twenties, the Blooms' analysis is perceptive and illuminating.

The Landscape and the Looking Glass by John H. Randall, III, contains an even more extensive study of money in Willa Cather's fiction. Randall discusses money in relation to the novels of the Twenties, such as One of Ours and The Professor's House, but also explores the subject in other books, such as The Troll Garden and My Antonia. Randall's analysis is thorough, but it reflects his appraisal of Willa Cather's work generally: that it is seriously flawed as a result of her emotional defects, which made her unable to accept reality, especially the reality of the present. This

view leads him to conclude that, at least during the Twenties, Willa Cather believed that "money was absolutely necessary if life is to be at all worthwhile," and that "lack of money makes civilized life impossible; it is a necessity for gracious living, but unfortunately there is no gracious way of getting it; one must have it, preferably by inheritance."[7]

Money plays so large a role in Randall's analysis that if his assessment of Willa Cather's beliefs is accurate, he would be correct in concluding, as he does, that her artistic vision was "seriously impaired."[8] This thesis will show, however, that Randall's conclusions about Willa Cather's attitudes toward money are inadequate and his general judgments on her unduly harsh.

Willa Cather's beliefs about money can be summarized as follows: (1) Comfort and pleasure are important. In her fiction good food and pleasant surroundings are essential. (2) Because it can buy things that produce comfort and pleasure, money is important. (3) Riches, however, are not necessary for civilized life. Pleasure can be obtained from simple, inexpensive things. People with modest means can live satisfying lives. (4) Wrong attitudes toward money--greed, covetousness, miserliness, and the belief that money is more important than pleasure and personal accomplishment--prevent happiness, destroy what is worthwhile, and finally make decent life impossible.

These ideas are developed in a series of distinct phases. The works within each phase are similar in character, setting, and tone. They all deal with a related group of problems and develop related ideas. There are six phases in Willa Cather's fiction: (1) the early work, (2) pioneer novels, (3) money and the modern world, (4) French pioneers, and (5) personal memories.

The change from phase to phase does not always occur for the same reason. That from the first to the second phase, for example, resulted from an attempt to achieve a radically different and radically more satisfactory artistic product.[9] The change to the final phase appears to have resulted from the death of members of Willa Cather's family, her own failing health, and her desire to preserve her memories.

The changes from the second to the third phase and the third to the fourth, however, are closely related to Willa Cather's ideas about money and her perception of trends in the modern world in relation to it. Money pervades all the fiction of the third phase, and greed and other unhealthy attitudes toward money invariably prevent the main characters in these works from living civilized lives and finding happiness. The fiction of the next phase turns away from modern America altogether and is set instead in French culture in the past. In the novels of this stage, with their radically different settings, money is much less important, balanced

attitudes toward it prevail among the characters, and life is civilized. The contrast between the works of these two phases in prevalent attitudes toward money, tone, and setting suggests strongly that Willa Cather's perception of money in the modern world was a significant factor in the changes between these phases.

This thesis is organized around the phases into which Willa Cather's major fiction divides itself. The emphasis is on the primary works, although secondary sources are also used to explore influences upon the fiction and changes from phase to phase. The thesis does not, however, discuss the stories Willa Cather wrote during her literary apprenticeship; for the most, they shed little additional light on her attitudes or their origins, and so, in the interest of brevity, are excluded.

It is difficult to trace the origin of the ideas about money in Willa Cather's fiction to specific events, attitudes, or influences in her personal life. The biographical materials, despite their abundance, do not contain a great deal of helpful information on the subject. This deficiency is partly unavoidable. The formation of attitudes is usually difficult to trace, especially when the attitudes may have been formed largely in childhood. Events that seem insignificant, and even general feelings, may be pivotal. One may be unconscious of the origins of his own beliefs. Unfortunately, this, for

the most part, is the case with regard to Willa Cather's views on money. Chapter 2 does, however, contain some information about her personal finances and her feelings about them. Perhaps more significant, it describes her father's financial affairs and delineates briefly other possible influences, including the climate of opinion in Red Cloud and in the United States generally.

CHAPTER 2

MONEY IN THE LIFE OF WILLA CATHER

I

During the first nine years of her life, Willa Cather lived on a farm in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. The land in that district was generally poor for farming, but Willa's father, Charles, raised and fattened sheep, and evidentally the family was comfortably prosperous. Charles Cather built an unusual four-story sheep barn, and the family lived in a large, comfortable house.

In 1883 the Charles Cather family moved to Nebraska. Although the sheep barn had burned down shortly before this, economic factors do not seem to have been the primary motivation for the move. Willa's grandparents, who moved at the same time, were seeking a more healthful climate. The area where they lived was damp. Several of Willa's aunts had died of tuberculosis, and another was seriously ill. Willa's grandparents thought the drier climate of Nebraska would help.

The Cathers first settled in a district west of Red Cloud, where one of Willa's uncles already had a farm. But

after a year of farming, Willa's father moved the family into Red Cloud and set up a business in loans and mortgages. Many of the people who became Willa's closest friends were also in business. James Miner, the Cathers' neighbor, operated one of the first department stores in Nebraska. Another storekeeper in Red Cloud was Charles Wiener, a cultured German Jew; he and his wife were close friends with the Cathers. Wiener was a political ally of Willa's father, and Mrs. Wiener introduced Willa to French literature and read French with her regularly. One of the most important people to Willa in her childhood was William Ducker, who, although considered impractical by some people in Red Cloud, operated a store together with other members of his family. He introduced her to the Greek and Roman classics[10] and closely supervised her reading until she entered the university. Willa contrasted his passionate reading of literature with the aridly analytical approach of some of her university teachers, and was grief-stricken when he died.[11] Willa's brothers Douglas and Roscoe also became successful businessmen.[12] With this background Willa Cather would be unlikely to view business as necessarily destructive of the human spirit.

Almost from the beginning of the settlement of the Great Plains, speculation in land was rampant. Hamlin Garland in A Son of the Middle Border describes how families

with good farms in longer-settled parts of the Middle West, like Wisconsin or Iowa, would sell out and homestead on the Great Plains, planning to sell the land for profit as soon as the claim had been proved. Other speculative practices were also prevalent. As soon as ground had been broken, Eastern financiers would take a mortgage on the land and would in many cases lend amounts equal to the full value of the farm.[13]

Willa Cather's father speculated in this way and by 1893 had acquired a great deal of land.[14] There is no evidence in Willa Cather's fiction that she ever came to question the moral and economic value of speculation. She seemed to believe that it presented an opportunity that no intelligent, farsighted settler--the true pioneer--would neglect to take advantage of.

During the 1880's land values on the Plains increased rapidly, and speculators and farmers thought they would soon be rich. But in 1893 a severe drought, combined with a nation-wide depression, produced a severe decline in farm land prices, and the speculation exacerbated many farmers' troubles. Charles Cather was forced to abandon a large farm then under cultivation.[15]

II

The expectation that intelligence, prudence, and hard

work would produce wealth was prevalent until the First World War, especially in newly-settled regions like Red Cloud. The converse belief, that poverty was the result of sloth and stupidity, was also widely accepted.[16] Among the more sophisticated these beliefs were given intellectual buttressing and a savage interpretation by the gospel of Social Darwinism, preached by Herbert Spencer.[17] It taught that economic competition in the capitalist system played the same role that natural selection played among animals, culling the weak and increasing the numbers of the strong. Spencer held that if the system were allowed to work unimpeded, weak and defective people would be eliminated, and society would become stronger and more efficient. This, of course, was good.

In the United States these doctrines were received with enthusiasm by professors, preachers, and the prosperous generally. Henry Ward Beecher wrote to Spencer that, "The peculiar conditions of American society has [sic] made your writing far more quickening here than in Europe."[18] When Spencer came here in 1882, "He was accorded a welcome by the faithful befitting a Messiah."[19]

Willa Cather was too tenderhearted to exult in the unfit being weeded out. But O Pioneers! strongly suggests that the weeding out process was valuable in a pioneer society, at

least when those being weeded out could go to Chicago or St. Louis and find work in a bakery, as they can in this book.

III

Throughout her fiction Willa Cather maintained that having money was important. She never glorified poverty. As a child she saw it at first hand when she visited struggling settlers living in tiny, dark sod houses. In the depression and drought of 1893-96 her own family had a hard time.

After she had moved away from home and had gone to live in Pittsburg, she had a difficult time herself and worried about having enough money to live.[20] Edith Lewis says that she had trepidations about quitting her teaching job and going to work for McClure's magazine because she was afraid of poverty and had no assurance that her job would last.[21]

At McClure's she received a good salary, especially after she became managing editor. But she and Edith Lewis lived frugally in order to save as much as possible for the time Willa Cather would leave her salaried job for full-time writing.[22] According to Miss Lewis, they even debated about whether or not to buy a new coffee pot.[23] Apparently, only when Willa Cather began to receive royalties from her first Knopf-published books (Youth and the Bright Medusa and One of Ours, which won the Pulitzer Prize) was she entirely

free from financial worry. Even then she was frugal. She very rarely spent money on a cab and usually went to the opera on a streetcar.[24]

All this should not suggest that Willa Cather did not like to spend money on herself or did not value comfort. Just the opposite. When she was in college she wanted to buy everything that appealed to her, immediately.[25] When she felt she could afford it, she moved into a very comfortable seven-room apartment. But even here she sought only comfort, not opulence. After buying the furnishings they thought they needed, she and Edith Lewis spent no more money getting new things. Miss Lewis says:

> The financial rewards that came to her were of course gratifying, in that they freed her from worry about money and assured her of liberty to work with complete independence. .... But in other ways money was less important to her than to the majority of people. She had genuinely simple tastes. I think luxury was actually distasteful to her. She never wished for personal possessions. There was one exception--she was greatly attracted by beautiful jewels; but she never bought any. I think they would have been spoiled for her by the thought of what the money would mean to some of her friends in the West.

Her old friends in the West were the recipients of a great deal of Willa Cather's generosity. She gave to them "as if from a bottomless purse."[27] For several years she sent Annie Pavelka (the prototype of Antonia) money for seed wheat and hybrid corn. She once sent Annie fifty dollars with instructions that she buy herself something expensive;

but taxes on the farm were due, and Annie used it to pay them.[28] And when, after years of skimping and saving, Willa Cather moved into her spacious Bank Street apartment, she regretted the move because of the plight of her friends in Nebraska.[29]

IV

An examination of Willa Cather's personal life suggests the origin of several ideas about money. Since her father and some of her dearest friends were in business, she would naturally respect business, businessmen, and business success. Likewise, the land speculations of her beloved father would influence her attitude toward speculation in general. A general feeling in the community in which she grew up that riches invariably come to the deserving, aided and abetted by the residues of Social Darwinism trickling down from Newport and New York, would make her likely to see riches as the natural result of pioneering activity.

But biography does little to reveal the origins of other, perhaps more important, ideas about money revealed in her fiction. It does not account for her belief in the importance of pleasure and comfort. It is difficult to find from available information the precise origins of the belief that wealth was not essential for civilized life. It is perhaps even more difficult to find the origins of her hatred of the tendency to value everything only in terms of money.

It seems likely, however, that Willa Cather's conception of the civilized life and the relation of money to it developed gradually and that its growth was watered by many streams. The early influence came from her cultured friends, like the Wieners and William Ducker. Her love of literature also provided a balance to the general thinking in Red Cloud. Literature was probably scorned by the sturdy burghers of Red Cloud in comparison to more practical things like making money and getting ahead.[30] The connection was probably not lost on Willa Cather. These general tendencies in her thinking were undoubtedly strengthened by her reading, especially in Nineteenth Century French literature. And her experience in Pittsburg and New York undoubtedly confirmed her feelings.

Unfortunately, this is conjecture. What is more rewarding is to read her fiction and see how these ideas on money form an important part of the balanced, civilized views toward life that are expressed in these works.

CHAPTER 3

THE EARLY BOOKS

I

In 1905, when Willa Cather was thirty-two,[31] she published her first book of fiction, a collection of short stories entitled The Troll Garden. The stories had been first published mostly in prominent magazines and had been generally well received. "Paul's Case" was especially praised. Alexander's Bridge, written while Willa Cather was managing editor of McClure's, was published seven years later, in 1912. Both books show the influence of Henry James. With the exception of some stories in The Troll Garden, the setting and characters are not the kind that give strength to Willa Cather's best work. The characters are generally Easterners or Europeans in Eastern or European settings. The exceptions occur in some of the finest of the early works: "The Sculptor's Funeral," "A Wagner Matinee," and "Paul's Case," a significant artistic accomplishment.

Willa Cather's immediate financial circumstances seem to have had little effect on the attitudes toward money

expressed in these works. Several of the stories in The Troll Garden are wonderfully evocative of poverty. This may have been the result of Willa Cather's own experiences. Edith Lewis says that Willa Cather had a hard time when she was in college and that her first years in Pittsburg were lean.[32] But in the same place Miss Lewis suggests that Willa Cather was always nervous about money, and it seems likely that these descriptions are at least partly the happy result of this nervousness. Certainly they are not reflections of Willa Cather's circumstances at the time of writing, for she then had the security of a teaching job and lived amid the considerable luxury of Judge McClung's mansion on Murray Hill Road in Pittsburg, where she had moved at the behest of the judge's daughter Isabelle, one of Willa's best friends.[33]

There is even less connection between Willa Cather's own financial affairs and Alexander's Bridge. Although she earned a good salary at McClure's while writing this novel, there was a vast gulf between the way she and Edith Lewis lived in their apartment in Madison Square and the luxury and opulence of Hartley Alexander's life.

II

The Troll Garden is a collection of stories about art, artists, and related subjects. Several explore the relation-

ship of art and money. In them money invariably distracts the characters from the pursuit of beauty and happiness or confuses them about how to pursue them.

"The Sculptor's Funeral," for example, tells of a man who has left his small Kansas hometown for Boston, has become a great sculptor, and has finally died in the East. At the beginning of the story, the sculptor's body is brought back to his native town for burial. One of the sculptor's disciples accompanies it.

That night he and several townsmen sit up with the body. The local men talk about the dead sculptor, and the disciple is shocked to hear them describe him as a failure because he made statues rather than money. Finally, a once-promising but now alcoholic town lawyer denounces the others at length for their false values.

This story is an indictment of a type of narrow businessman that Willa Cather often found in small Western towns, the prototype of Wick Cutter, Bayliss Wheeler, and Ivy Peters. These men think only in terms of money and are completely oblivious, and usually hostile, to comfort, pleasure, and beauty. Greed is linked with hatred of pleasure and anything that produces it.

"The Garden Lodge" explores the relative values of wealth and art in a different way. The heroine, Caroline Noble,

has escaped a childhood that combined devotion to art with poverty. Her father was an improvident music teacher and composer; her mother, a patient martyr to a romantic elopement; and her brother, a casual artist who had committed suicide. Caroline has escaped all this. Married to a wealthy Wall Street businessman, she lives in luxury.

One day she invites a great tenor, Raymond d'Esquerre, to spend a month with her husband and her. During his stay he practices singing in the garden lodge, and Caroline plays the piano for him.

After d'Esquerre leaves for Europe, Caroline's husband suggests pulling down the garden lodge and building a summer house in its place. Caroline demurs. That night she goes out to the lodge and there realizes that wealth and ease do not satisfy her.

> This happy, useful, well-ordered life was not enough...It was not even real....Her father, poor Heinrich[her artist brother, who had killed himself], even her mother, who had been able to sustain her poor romance and keep her little illusions amid the tasks of a scullion, were nearer happiness than she.[34]

This story suggests that money is not the only trap. Comfort, order, and some kinds of accomplishment--things that elsewhere in Willa Cather's fiction make life pleasant--prevent fulfillment if they supplant art, or even romance. And the danger is for the ordinary person as well as the artist.

"Paul's Case" discusses the opposite danger in balancing art and romance with money and comfort. Paul is a high school student in a grimy part of Pittsburg. He has no interest in anything except the excitement he encounters in his part-time job as a theater usher. In high school Paul does so little and misbehaves so badly that he is expelled. His father then finds him a job in a bank, but Paul is bored.

Finally, he flees the dreariness of his life by stealing money from the bank and going to New York. There he rents a suite of rooms at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, has flowers sent up, and eats in the dining room. But he makes no attempt to go to theaters, concerts, or anywhere else. He merely lounges about the hotel, sopping up the atmosphere of elegance and ease.

Then Paul reads in the paper that the Pittsburg bank has discovered his theft and identity but after his father's promise to repay is willing to forgive him. He determines never to return to the drab life of Pittsburg. His money is now running short, and he knows of no way that is acceptable to him to get more. He goes out into New Jersey and throws himself in front of a train.

"Paul's Case" shows the crippling effects of an environment dominated by narrow materialism which excludes art and beauty. Willa Cather attacked this sort of environment

throughout her fiction. Her heroes often flee it to find fulfillment.

But "Paul's Case" makes it clear that this common, often-attacked variety of materialism is not the only kind that destroys lasting happiness. Paul is destroyed by an even more insidious type: one that confuses art, beauty, and romance with money and expensive things. Willa Cather believed that nothing worthwhile--art, beauty, romance--could be produced except by strenuous effort. Paul does not recognize that. He has no desire at all for constructive activity. What he likes about the theater in Pittsburg is not art but glamor. When he arrives in New York, he does not set about becoming an artist--or even a knowledgeable enthusiast. He just rests.

Like Caroline Noble he seems interested in romance. But unlike her, he does not see that romance might require sacrifices, that in order to have Caroline's mother's illusions, one might also have to perform the tasks of a scullion. With such confusion, it is to be expected that Paul would steal the money he thought he needed.

"Paul's Case" shows that all confusion about money is destructive and that money itself, unless acquired by constructive effort, can never bring satisfaction. Such insight, characterized by breadth of thinking and moral

impact, forms the basis of the attitudes toward money that Willa Cather developed throughout her fiction.

III

Alexander's Bridge, Willa Cather's first novel, deals not with an artist but with an engineer. The main character, Hartley Alexander, is a great bridge builder. A Westerner, he has achieved spectacular success. He has become rich, married a beautiful Boston aristocrat, and is now building an enormous bridge in Canada, a project that has already brought him fame, but which eventually collapses and kills him.

Hartley Alexander is unusual among Willa Cather's characters. Unlike those in most of the succeeding (and, according to Willa Cather, more successful[35]) works, he is never shown when he is not rich. The reader is told that he has had to struggle but sees him only when the struggle is successfully over. The world we see him in is one in which money is taken for granted and mentioned as infrequently as possible.

Willa Cather later forbad the republication of Alexander's Bridge and said it described a setting and type of character that were not hers.[36] It is significant that money plays so small a role in a book that was not close to her interests and sympathies and such a large role in later works that

were.

Unlike The Troll Garden, but foreshadowing later books, riches seem to come to Hartley Alexander as the automatic result of creative work. The idea is only implicit in this book. But it becomes very clear in O Pioneers! and The Song of the Lark.

Again unlike the stories in The Troll Garden, Alexander's Bridge does not portray money as a glittering and dangerous allurement. It is instead an important element of life--and one that makes it more pleasant. This does not seem so much a change in Willa Cather's position as a development of it. While containing few explicit references to money, the book reveals a number of Willa Cather's implicit attitudes toward it.

IV

In these early books generally, money is not as prominent as in Willa Cather's later works. But the number of stories in The Troll Garden in which it is a major theme shows that it was important to Willa Cather. In these stories the love of money destroys happiness and the possibility of fulfillment. It is fully as fatal when it masquerades as culture or elegance, as in "Paul's Case." "The Sculptor's Funeral" shows that wrong attitudes toward money also blight and destroy the lives of others. In later

works Willa Cather developed and refined these concepts. But the ideas about money expressed in these early books form the basis of future money-related themes and recur throughout her fiction.

CHAPTER 4

THE PIONEER TRIUMPHANT

I

In the spring of 1912 Willa Cather resigned from McClure's and went to visit her brother Douglas in Winslow, Arizona. She did not break her connections with McClure's completely: at the urging of S. S. McClure she agreed to write two stories for the magazine in the course of the year. She never did, but during the next few years she contributed a number of articles and collaborated with her former chief on his autobiography.

After she got over her initial distaste for the town of Winslow, Willa Cather found herself charmed by her desert surroundings. She also enjoyed some of the people she met, particularly a priest and a young Mexican whom she was infatuated with. She returned to New York by way of Red Cloud, where she stopped to watch the wheat harvest. While in Red Cloud she began writing O Pioneers!

When it was published the next year, it was a critical success. Willa Cather had at last begun using a setting and

tone with which she was completely comfortable. Two of the three books written during this period are among her very best.

This period was one of great satisfaction and happiness for her personally. In 1912 she and Edith Lewis moved into a new, large apartment at 5 Bank Street. Miss Lewis says:

> She[Willa Cather]was working under happier conditions than ever before--her life and her work were perhaps for the first time in harmony. She felt settled and secure....[37]

She had also got over "her first nervousness at not earning a salary."[38]

Her novels of this period share this mood of happiness. Although not blind to the evil in the world, they portray a succession of heroines who overcome all obstacles.

II

O Pioneers! is primarily concerned with the fortunes of the Bergsons, a Swedish immigrant family, that at the beginning of the book includes John Bergson; his wife; his oldest daughter, Alexandra; and his three sons, Oscar, Lou, and Emil. The first part of the book describes the poverty the Bergsons and their neighbors endure, the primitive living conditions, their struggle to get the land to give them a living. In this section John Bergson dies, entrusting the management of the farm to his daughter, Alexandra.

Despite difficulties, Alexandra has faith that the land

will yield abundantly as soon as the farmers discover how to farm it. So she refuses to let Oscar and Lou sell the farm and buy land in the valley, as they want to. Instead she persuades them to borrow money to buy more land on the high plains. In the second part of the book, Alexandra's faith has been proved right. The farmers of the area are rich, and Alexandra and her brothers are among the richest.

The story of O Pioneers! is difficult to place precisely in historical time. We do know that at the end of the book Alexandra and Carl Linstrum are about to leave for the gold rush in Alaska and the Yukon, which began in 1897. The story then takes place in the 1880's and '90's. This was the period during which the Great Plains were settled and during which Willa Cather grew up. As the novel shows, it was a period in which Willa Cather believed heroic achievement was possible.

In O Pioneers! riches come almost naturally to those who make heroic achievement. Those who do are natural aristocrats:[39] intelligent, hard working, persevering, strong-willed.[40] They pit themselves against nature and win.

Intelligence is perhaps their pre-eminent quality. Alexandra bluntly tells her brothers that they are better off than their neighbors because their father was more intelligent.[41] She also tells them that Charlie Fuller, the

real estate speculator, is rich because he is intelligent.[42]

The natural aristocrat (who deserves wealth) also has exceptional vision. Alexandra, for example, saw that hard times would not last and so kept the farm going. Her vision resulted in the family's buying vast amounts of land when prices were low and becoming rich when prices rose.

Another ingredient in success and riches in this pioneer society is persistence. Coupled with intelligence, it kept the Bergson farm going during difficult times. Such a combination, intelligence and persistence, is also a characteristic of Thea Kronberg in The Song of the Lark, the next of Willa Cather's novels.

O Pioneers! contains an interesting corollary to the idea that riches are a natural reward of the deserving. The parsimony of nature is seen here as fulfilling a valuable function in weeding the unfit out of the society of heroes. During hard times, the Linstrums, the Bergsons' closest neighbors and friends, give up farming and leave for the city. In discussing this move, Carl Linstrum tells Alexandra that it is better for them to have left because his father was never fitted to be a farmer. Alexandra agrees.[43] This is faintly reminiscent of Social Darwinism. But there are important differences. For Social Darwinism to work most efficiently, the best thing for those weeded out to do is to die--and

the sooner the better. That way they will not continue to reproduce inefficient parts for the social machine. But in this book the ones weeded out--if that phrase can be used here--go off to work they are better fitted for in a city. And they are not looked upon with scorn or derision. Carl Linstrum remains one of the book's most admirable characters, and, in a strange twist at the end of the book, heads north with Alexandra to the new frontier of the Klondike.

In spite of the emphasis on new-found riches, in this novel wealth is not the goal of the true pioneer. When Alexandra tries to persuade her brothers to help her fulfill her vision, she says that she wants to be rich like Charlie Fuller.[44] But later she says, "A pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves."[45]

But even in the heroic pioneer period the farmers misuse their money. They use it not for comfort and pleasure but for ugly, unusable but stylish things. Alexandra acquiesces to public taste in the furnishing of her dining room:

> She said frankly that she knew nothing about such things, and she was willing to be governed by the general conviction that the more useless and utterly unusable objects were, the greater their virtue as ornaments.[46]

Willa Cather found the tendency more pronounced in the next generation of Nebraska farmers. In <u>One of Ours</u> she

complains that money was being wasted on things, from furniture to farm machinery, all bought in town, that gave pleasure to no one.[47] Money, then, is beneficial as long as it is spent to make people more comfortable, or happy in some other way. But other uses are hopeless extravagances.

Here, then, are the basic ideas about money in O Pioneers! First, wealth is the natural reward of true pioneers, the men and women with intelligence, vision, and perseverence. It is their reward for valuable service to the land and society.

Second, in a pioneer society the successful businessperson is not necessarily a Shylock, a Babbitt, a Wick Cutter, or an Ivy Peters. If wealth is the natural reward for heroism, then many of the rich are heroes. Honest businessmen, particularly if they are successful, are to be respected and admired.

Third, money can become a trap when people believe it is itself the highest good. And relying on money rather than ingenuity, taste, and intelligence can blight the land with ugly, unusable things. All of these ideas recur and are developed in other books Willa Cather wrote about the West.

III

Willa Cather's next book, The Song of the Lark,[48] tells

the story of another Swedish woman, Thea Kronberg, who also comes from the West--Colorado, in this case--and who becomes a great and famous singer.

The Song of the Lark repeats many of the ideas about money found in O Pioneers! In it riches are good for the rich if they have taste and intelligence; and in The Song of the Lark, all the rich have them. The book contains no wealthy philistines or scoundrels.

An example of this general attitude is Dr. Archie, perhaps the most admirable character in the book. As a young physician in Thea's hometown, he is one of the few people who recognize Thea's extraordinary gifts. When Thea's parents are finally persuaded to send her away for musical training, Dr. Archie wisely insists that she be sent to Chicago rather than to Denver. And at a crucial time in Thea's career, Dr. Archie sells valuable mining stock at a loss to enable her to study in Europe and fulfill her potential. In the course of the book, kind, cultured, perceptive Dr. Archie becomes one of the richest men in Colorado.

Other rich characters in The Song of the Lark are also admirable. Among them are the Nathanmeyers, wealthy Chicago Jews who promote talented young musicians. They play a key role in the development of Thea's career by having her sing

at their house before influential friends and even by giving her the right clothes.

Fred Ottenburg is another character with wealth who plays a constructive part in Thea's development. Scion of a family of princely affluence, he gives her self-confidence and the vision to become great.

The Song of the Lark also expresses admiration for comfort and even luxury. Dr. Archie's Denver style of living, for example, is described in detail. He has a large house, spacious grounds, and a conservatory. His housekeeping is done by three Japanese boys. His library is "a large double room on the second floor which [he] had arranged exactly to his own taste. It was full of books and mounted specimens of wild game, with a big writing table at either end, stiff, old-fashioned engravings, heavy hangings and deep upholstery." Archie's dinners "were always good and well-served, and his wines were excellent."[49]

Dr. Archie's furniture was not modish; the engravings were old-fashioned. But it was comfortable. Appreciation for comfort, along with scorn for fashion, recur throughout Willa Cather's fiction.

It is interesting to note that in The Song of the Lark Willa Cather seems to approve not only of business generally, but also of a kind of business often considered shady, or at least unproductive. The beloved Dr. Archie becomes rich not by inventing something or working hard but by speculating in

mining stocks.

Notice also Fred Ottenburg's business practices. He headed the Brewers' Trust, and Willa Cather, speaking through the third-person omniscient narrator, admires him because of it:

> He was intelligent about music and he must be very intelligent in his business, or he would not be the head of the Brewers' Trust. She respected that kind of intelligence.[50]

Organizations like the Brewers' Trust operated on the fringes of criminality throughout Willa Cather's lifetime. They were generally, moreover, embodiments of the "public be damned" philosophy of economics. This was well known, especially to Willa Cather, who had been managing editor of McClure's, the muckraking journal that had employed Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell and had published the famous expose of Standard Oil. Shortly before The Song of the Lark was written, the Taft administration broke up many organizations of just this type.[51]

The Song of the Lark, however, attacks the whole Reform movement. Dr. Archie at one time supported a Reform candidate for governor of Colorado. This man, however, became involved in a scandal, and Dr. Archie repudiated him and Reform. Fred Ottenburg agrees with him (of course) that Reform is just hypocritical cant, motivated by envy. The implication here is that no limits should be placed on business methods

and activities because the fit will get to the top in the old way and those who are already on the top are natural aristocrats and deserve to stay there. Herbert Spencer would say amen.

With admiration for entrepreneurs of practically every stripe, it is hardly surprising that The Song of the Lark expresses confidence in the justice of the American economic system. Such a belief, of course, is by no means unanimous in fiction of the American West. Hamlin Garland and Frank Norris are more typical. In The Song of the Lark, however, all the alert, intelligent characters are rewarded with riches. Even Thea's mother shares in the bounty when the value of her inherited farm lands, which she does not work, soars and she becomes prosperous.

According to The Song of the Lark, however, money itself does not bring happiness. To achieve that, one must be cultured, have intellectual interests. On a visit to New York, Dr. Archie remarks to Fred Ottenburg (who knows more about New York) that New Yorkers look happier than Westerners. Fred Ottenburg explains:

> People in New York are more taken up by hobbies, interests that are less subject to reverses than their personal affairs. If you're interested in Thea's voice, or in voices in general, that interest is just the same if your mining stocks go down...that is one of the principal differences between people anywhere. ....

> The fourth dimension [being explained here] is not good for business but we think we have a better time.[52]

Dr. Archie himself is cultured. In Moonstone he spends his evenings reading good books.[53] Like all of Willa Cather's cultured characters, he loves good food and treasures his pleasures.[54]

John Randall says that Willa Cather and her characters worshipped success, "especially material success and riches."[55] Admired perhaps, but Thea seems to articulate a different relationship between riches and other values when she returns from Chicago to Moonstone one summer:

> Money and office and success are the consolation of impotence. Fortune turns kind to such solid people and lets them suck their bone in peace.[56]

The Song of the Lark reveals frank appreciation of the pleasures of wealth. It expresses admiration for comfort, even luxury. And it vigorously affirms the equity of the American economic system at its most unbridled. But it also warns that without culture, money produces no lasting happiness.

IV

After the struggle and triumph in The Song of the Lark, My Antonia[57] comes as a change of pace. In spite of the difference in tone, however, many attitudes toward money that one finds in The Song of the Lark recur in My Antonia.

My Antonia provides further evidence of Willa Cather's

approval of business and businessmen. Christian Harling, the area's most enterprising businessman, is one of the book's pleasantest minor characters. Jim Burden says that Harling was his picture of a prince.[58] He is the head of a happy, cultured house, an object of great admiration in Willa Cather's fiction. The Forresters' house in A Lost Lady is an example. Another is Ehrlichs' in One of Ours, a kind of paradise for Claude: the antithesis of the dreariness that has surrounded him until he entered it.

Another admirable businessperson in My Antonia is Francis Harling, the oldest daughter. Perhaps the most devoted to business of any of Willa Cather's characters, she often works long hours in the evening, poring over books.[59] But she is also actively kind.

> More than once Francis and Jim's grandfather put their wits together to rescue some unfortunate farmers from the clutches of Wick Cutter, the Black Hawk money lender.... Her interest in these people was more than business. She carried them all in her mind as if they were characters in a book or play.[60]

But not all businessmen in this book are admirable. Wick Cutter is an example of a destructive and loathsome species. He has become rich by cheating naive farmers. He seduces girls who work in his house and has delivered one to a house of prostitution in Omaha. His moral ugliness is symbolized by physical repulsiveness.

Wick Cutter and his wife quarrel a great deal, mostly about money. He "insisted that Mrs. Cutter had purposely remained childless, with the determination to outlive him and to share his property with her people whom he detested."[61] In the end, Wick murders his wife, hails passersby, announces that his wife is dead before him and thus cannot inherit his money, and then kills himself. He is a colorful symbol of the destructiveness and ugliness of the belief that money is everything.

In My Antonia, and other novels by Willa Cather, covetousness warps people and destroys happiness. In Mrs. Shimerda it destroys friendship between her family and the Burdens, who wanted to help them. Her desire for wealth, moreover, took the Shimerdas from Prague, where her husband was happy, and brought them to America, indirectly causing her husband's suicide.

The Burdens' attitude toward money contrasts sharply with both Wick Cutter's and Mrs. Shimerda's. They view it as something to make life happier and more comfortable; and they are always willing to share it. They gladly give the ungrateful Mrs. Shimerda a horse and a coffin. The Harlings have the same attitude.

The most idyllic picture appears near the end of the book in the description of the life of Antonia. She and her family have an abundance of simple things. These make them

happy because they are generous and kind.

My Antonia contains a clear-eyed view of money, its uses, value, and effect on people and their relationships with each other. Business is not seen as necessarily coarse, vulgar, or wicked. Like any other process, it can be used well or misused completely. Money and material possessions make life more comfortable. In the portrayal of the Harlings there is even the hint that wealth often has culture attached to it. But the Edenic farm life of the Burdens and Cuzaks, Antonia's family, make it clear that great riches are not necessary for happiness.

V

The novels of this second phase develop several significant ideas about money that are new in Willa Cather's fiction. There is here for the first time a clear exposition of the positive values of money, in contrast, and as a balance, to the treatment of money in The Troll Garden. The value of material things, which could only be tentatively inferred from Alexander's Bridge, is here emphasized in Alexandra's vast farm, Dr. Archie's plush house in Denver, and Antonia's orchard and larder.

Wealth itself is shown to have positive values. In these books it is the natural, rightful reward for creative accomplishment.

All three of these novels balance this glorification of wealth by showing that it is worthless without culture, an idea that Thea puts into so many words. Wealth is clearly not good for unimaginative people like Alexandra's brothers, and in the hands of someone like Wick Cutter it is a great evil.

These books also contain the first implicit approval of business and businessmen, a considerable change from the picture painted in "The Sculptor's Funeral."

The most significant contribution of these books is their portrayal of balanced attitudes toward money. Both Alexandra and Thea say that ideas, not money, are important. And My Antonia gives a clear picture of the balanced life when it portrays Antonia's farm and family: pleasure without ostentation, comfort without riches.

CHAPTER 5

MAMMON AND THE MODERN WORLD

I

After *My Antonia* the tone and emphasis of Willa Cather's fiction changes markedly. That novel and the two that preceded it portray characters who make great achievements and live happy, civilized lives. But in the next five books--*Youth and the Bright Medusa*, *One of Ours*, *A Lost Lady*, *The Professor's House*, and *My Mortal Enemy*--all published during the first six years of the Twenties, defeat in life has replaced success. In the course of these books no main character makes a significant achievement. And for all these characters civilized life is unattainable, dissolving before their eyes, already melted away, or impossible to enjoy. None is happy.

This grim view of modern life is certainly not a result of the state of Willa Cather's personal fortunes. She was now an established author with a substantial critical reputation. *One of Ours* won the Pulitzer Prize for 1922. In the next year her income from it and *Youth and the Bright*

Medusa alone was over $19,000.[62]

Her disillusionment may have arisen partly from the general malaise that affected the whole Western world in the wake of the First World War. It is interesting that her view of the world grew grim at about the same time a new crop of writers with similarly somber views burst upon the literary scene. Sherwood Anderson's first novel, Windy McPherson's Son, was published in 1916; Winesburg, Ohio appeared three years later, in 1919. Fitzgerald's first novel, This Side of Paradise, was published in 1920, and in the same year Dos Passos' One Man's Initiation--1917 came out. It is doubtful that young writers like these had much influence on an established writer like Willa Cather. But they and she apparently saw the same bleakness in the modern world.

The major problem of this modern world in Willa Cather's fiction is its relation to money. The books of this period, in contrast to those of the preceding one, treat money as a major theme. Every novel of the period is preoccupied with the destructive effects of unhealthy attitudes toward it.

These attitudes add up to the belief that money is very important, more important than beauty, family relationships, and pleasure. This belief has two manifestations in these books. The first is a narrow commercialism that infects the

Middle West. It measures everything solely in terms of cash value. The second manifestation is greed. This infects even refined characters and destroys their happiness and that of those around them.

It is not certain exactly when she began to believe that destructive attitudes toward money dominated American life. As early as 1914 she wrote an article for McClure's about the play Potash and Perlmutter, in which she poured out a vial of vitriol on New York City, picturing it as wholly given over to getting ahead and making money, its values symbolized by the characters of Potash and Perlmutter.[63] One of Ours shows that by 1920 she thought the spirit of Potash and Perlmutter prevailed in Nebraska, and undoubtedly the rest of the country as well.

A comparison of the settings of the works of both this new, pessimistic stage and the preceding, optimistic one shows that there is no one year that divides the modern era, dominated by money, from a previous one. On the contrary, the time settings of several works from this new, pessimistic phase are very close to those of the other, optimistic era, in one case overlapping. The action of all the hopeful novels--O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, and My Antonia--begins about 1880. In O Pioneers! it ends about 1897, after the gold rush to the Yukon has begun. In The Song of the Lark

and My Antonia it continues until about 1912, although the settings are vague and the action could end several years earlier or later.

In the next phase, one novel, The Professor's House, has a setting right after the First World War. The setting of another, My Mortal Enemy, is vague; its action occurs sometime after 1909. But the time settings of the other two novels of this phase are very close to those of novels of the previous one. In One of Ours the setting is 1913-18. Its action thus begins about the same time as that in the last part of The Song of the Lark and My Antonia. A Lost Lady is set considerably earlier--around 1900. Its most important action thus precedes some of the action in The Song of the Lark and My Antonia and comes only a couple of years after that in O Pioneers! The similarity in the time settings for books in both phases shows that the tone and emphasis in Willa Cather's fiction is related not to the time of the action in the books but to the time of writing. By the Twenties Willa Cather seemingly believed that money dominated America and was ruining it. She expressed this concern in fiction with a variety of time settings.

Her new perspective also caused her at least partly to re-evaluate the past. In doing so, she saw how deep the roots of modern attitudes toward money were. The early setting of A Lost Lady expresses this realization.

II

Youth and the Bright Medusa contains four stories from The Troll Garden, plus four newly-collected stories: "Coming, Aphrodite!;" "The Diamond Mine;" "A Gold Slipper;" and "Scandal." These new stories, like those from The Troll Garden, are about artists and their relationships with other people. They also deal, in part, with the effect of money on the artist.

"Coming, Aphrodite!" is the story of a beautiful singer who has just begun her studies and Don Hedge, a young modern painter. They live in adjoining apartments, and fall in love. One day the girl, Eden Bower, goes to lunch with some friends at the studio of a conventional and financially successful painter.

When she returns to the apartment house, she begins telling Hedge about the wonders of Burton Ives's studio. Don replies that Burton is "almost the worst painter in the world' the stupidest..."

Eden replies that he's very successful.

"Of course he is! Anybody can be successful who will do that sort of thing. I wouldn't paint his pictures for all the money in New York."[64]

Eden Bower describes Burton's luxuries, and when Don says that painting what he wants is far more extravagant than those luxuries, Eden says, "I give you up. You know

very well there's only one kind of success that's real."[65]

Hedge walks out of the apartment in anger and goes to Long Island to visit friends. When he returns several days later, Eden has packed and gone to Europe.

The story concludes when Eden returns from Europe to New York as a great singer with tremendous wealth. She goes to a gallery and asks if the dealer knows anything about Don Hedge. The dealer says that he has become a very important avant-garde painter, although the dealer never tells her whether or not he is a financial success. Eden Bower leaves with mingled satisfaction and regrets.

This story shows clearly the danger of materialism to the artist. Don Hedge feels certain that he could be financially successful if he were willing to paint conventional pictures. He has been living in shabby poverty for at least four years, doing what he thinks is good work, with no certainty that he will ever be more financially successful than he now is. So the choice is clear: art versus material success.

"The Diamond Mine," the next story in Youth and the Bright Medusa, shows the paralyzing effects of unearned money on both those who get and those who give it. Cressida Garnet is a famous opera singer, rich and generous with her wealth. Unfortunately, her generosity ruins those she bestows it on. And these parasites in turn rob Cressida of happiness and finally life.

At the time of the story, Cressida is surrounded by dependents: her sisters, her son, her manager. Both sisters harrass her, begging for money. Her grown son, Horace, is also dependent on her. He wallows in the luxury she supplies him and shows no intention of ever doing anything worthwhile himself.

Cressida's money has also ruined her husbands and marriages. The only happy marriage was her first, to an organist in her Ohio hometown, with whom she lived in poverty and happiness. The third was to a promising Bohemian violinist, impoverished until Cressida befriended and married him. After marriage and access to Cressida's wealth, however, he limited his exertions to acting grateful and talking to a Bohemian maid about Czeck food. One day Cressida returned home unexpectedly, found him in bed with the maid, and threw him out of the house.

Her fourth husband, Jerome Brown, looks upon Cressida as a source of capital for his speculations. Unfortunately, his ventures are entirely unsuccessful. His affairs become so bad that Cressida has to mortgage the New York townhouse she loves and go on singing tours to raise money. She is returning from one of these tours on the Titanic when it sinks and takes her to the bottom with it.

Even after her death, her money brings no joy to those who get it. Her will leaves a third of it to her manager,

and her family tries to break the will and fights over everything left them.

Money itself is not the villain of this piece. As in Willa Cather's other works, it provides comforts and pleasures, like the townhouse Cressida loves, which enrich the lives of the cultured people who earned it by creative activity. But its effect on those who receive it without earning it is disastrous both for them and those who give it to them. The availability of something for nothing destroys any desire for effort and accomplishment. It creates aggressive covetousness, which is never satisfied. It makes the recipient demanding, contentious, and ungrateful. Ant it destroys the person who provides the largess.

The two other stories collected for the first time in Youth and the Bright Medusa deal with another opera singer, named Kitty Ayrshire. These stories are, in many ways, inferior efforts, but they do clarify Willa Cather's already revealed attitudes toward certain types of businessmen.

The first story, "The Gold Slipper," tells of Kitty's meeting with a staid Pittsburg businessman named Marshall McKann. McKann has no use for art or anything else that tends neither to greater profits nor the greater glory of a Presbyterian God and is soundly defeated by Kitty in an argument.

This story is an attack on a certain type of businessman: narrow-minded, uninterested in art, rigidly and boringly

religious. His type is found frequently in Willa Cather's fiction, from the narrow, acrid men in "The Sculptor's Funeral" to Bayliss Wheeler in One of Ours. Willa Cather has specifically portrayed the Pittsburg variety before in "Paul's Case." Such a businessman is not, of course, the only kind Willa Cather found in America.

"Scandal," the other story tells of a rich, unpleasant, and unscrupulous Jew, who pretends to have an affair with Kitty for prestige. The cast is peopled with other rich, vulgar Jews. This story is disturbing not only for its anti-semitism but also because it portrays a class of people new in Willa Cather's fiction: the big city nouveau riche. They have recently established themselves in powerful positions. They are enthusiastic about art--or want to appear that way. Willa Cather sees them only as vulgar intruders, certain to corrupt everything good.

III

One of Ours takes the reader back again to Nebraska. But there are many differences between the Nebraska portrayed in this book and the one My Antonia describes. Although that book shows many townspeople to be bigots and a merchant like Wick Cutter growing rich by cheating farmers, it also portrays a refined, gracious businessman like Christian Harling; and it shows Antonia becoming very happy.

In One of Ours, however, the only businessman is crass, narrow Bayliss Wheeler, brother of the protagonist. And there is no Antonia.

The action in One of Ours begins about a year before the beginning of the First World War and ends when Claude is killed in France. It is important to note that this is perhaps a few years later than the final setting of My Antonia, but not many. Antonia seems to have come to Nebraska about 1880. She was ten then, maybe slightly younger. The most idyllic scene occurs when the ages of her children indicate that she was between thirty-five and forty. This would put the final, idyllic scene, the happiest in Willa Cather's fiction, somewhere between 1908 and 1912. Also, Claude's parents, like Antonia's, are original settlers.

A comparison of One of Ours with My Antonia, then, underscores the suggestion, noted earlier, that the settings of Willa Cather's fiction are not clearly divided between a modern period in which money dominates and ruins everything and an earlier period in which healthier attitudes prevail. Instead, the tone and emphasis are dictated by the time of writing. In the Twenties Willa Cather believed that the worship of money was destroying the world. She expressed that concern in novels with a variety of time

settings.

One of Ours shows how inhospitable the money-dominated world is to sensitive, idealistic young people like Claude. Bayliss embodies the qualities that make it inhospitable. In his mind nothing is as important as making money. He sneers at the Ehrlichs, Claude's cultured friends, because they spend so much money entertaining. He thinks they will fail in business because of it.[66] That to him is the ultimate judgment. In France Claude thinks of Bayliss and says, "Before the war, the world seemed like a business proposition."[67]

In One of Ours, as in "The Sculptor's Funeral," those who worship money disdain beauty, art, and romance. Bayliss Wheeler symbolizes this attitude, too. In school he preferred factual subjects, like arithmetic and geography, to stories.[68] Bayliss buys the Trevor place, the only house in the area with style. But he doesn't live in it because he thinks it might be inconvenient. He says that if he ever does move up there, he will "pull down that old trap and put up something modern"[69]

Bayliss is completely uninterested in ideas. He sees such interest as weakness. When Claude tells him Julius Ehrlich is going to study in Germany and become a professor, he asks, "What's the matter with him? Does he have poor health?"[70]

It is significant that Bayliss is a farm machinery dealer. For in One of Ours, Nebraskans, instead of using money for things that give pleasure, use it to buy things--

ugly, shoddy things.

> The farmer raised and took to market things with an intrinsic value; wheat and corn as good as could be grown anywhere in the world, hogs and cattle that were the best of their kind. In return he got manufactured articles of poor quality: showy furniture that went to pieces, carpets and draperies that faded, clothes that made a handsome man look like a clown. Most of his money was paid out for machinery,--and that, too, went to pieces. A steam thresher didn't last long; a horse outlived three automobiles.[71]

Claude's younger brother, Ralph, epitomizes this love of things, whether they contribute to happiness or not. He works to convert his mother to the use of more machines. The Wheeler's whole basement is full of machines Ralph has bought but no longer has use for. Claude thinks to himself that Julius Ehrlich could study abroad for a whole year on less than Ralph wastes on machinery in that period.

People like Bayliss are unable or unwilling to enjoy themselves. The Wheelers are rich; "a new thresher or a new automobile was ordered without question [but] it was considered extravagant to go out to a hotel for dinner."[73] When Claude first visits the Ehrlichs, he has on a "second-day shirt and a broken collar, wretched economies he had been trained to observe."[74]

The Ehrlichs' way of life contrasts sharply with this. Claude discovers that they "knew how to live."[75] They spend much of their money for entertaining rather than business.[76]

Good living for them includes music, flowers, and books. When Claude first meets them, he supposes them to be rich, but discovers that they are really poor.

> They merely knew how to live, and spent their money on themselves, instead of on machines to do the work and machines to entertain people. Machines, Claude decided, could not make aggreeable people, either. In so far as he could see, the latter were made by judicious indulgence in almost everything he had been taught to shun.[77]

The apparent success of the Ehrlichs in coping with Nebraska makes it clear that Willa Cather did not believe it was impossible for sensitive people to live rewarding lives there. The difficulty is that the money-dominated environment is so strong that it confuses young people like Claude who have no cultural background. In a country like France, traditions of civilized living would have guided Claude into making the right decisions about life. But in modern Nebraska there are no such traditions; only a general belief that money is everything. Claude is so confused that he makes precisely the wrong decisions: he leaves Lincoln, where he at least has a chance for culture and marries a fanatical girl.

At one point, Claude decides that wealth itself is destructive. But both his Bohemian friend, Ernest Havel, and Mrs. Ehrlich, who are more worldly than Claude, insist that the danger is not from wealth but from the wrong attitudes toward it.[78]

One of Ours is a bitter portrayal of modern America. It is a particularly bitter statement about life on the Plains. O Pioneers! and My Antonia revealed the possibilities that the Plains had offered to people from all over Europe--opportunities for independence and wealth that would permit civilized life on a scale never attained before.

But One of Ours shows the settlers and their children taking advantage only of the opportunities for wealth. It shows a society hostile to beauty, new ideas, and true civilization. In the end Nebraska is seen as distinctly inferior to France, which had learned much better how to shelter the human spirit.

The portrayal of the Ehrlichs shows that Willa Cather did not at this point believe it impossible for sensitive people to survive in this environment if they had deep enough roots in genuine culture; but the forces of the environment were against it. The remaining three novels about modern American life make clear her belief that the modern world is stony ground for the growth of civilized and pleasant life.

IV

A Lost Lady tells of the decline, moral and otherwise, of Marian Forrester, mistress of a gracious house in Nebraska and a member, with her husband, a retired railroad contractor,

of a Western railroad aristocracy. This aristocracy is composed of railroad executives, their relatives, and prominent ranchers along the road. These people have both money and sensibility, and they live graciously.

A Lost Lady goes back considerably before One of Ours for its setting. Published in 1923, the novel begins by saying "thirty or forty years ago..." This puts the initial setting close to either 1880 or 1890. Then, early in the novel, there is a gap of unspecified length, probably ten years or more, because during that time the narrator moves from childhood to late adolescence. The second part of the novel, during which the most important action occurs, is thus set sometime around either 1890 or 1900. The later date is more likely; the book mentions young men, hardened by hard times, a probable reference to the depression of 1893-96.

The later of these settings would be close to settings of the novels of the previous, hopeful phase. It would be almost contemporary with that of O Pioneers! and earlier than those of The Song of the Lark and My Antonia. It would also be at least ten years earlier than the setting of One of Ours, a work of the pessimistic phase. Thus, pessimism and optimism are not related to time settings, but to Willa Cather's viewpoint, which in the first half of the Twenties was preoccupied with the destructive effects of erroneous

ideas about money.

With Captain Forrester, the husband of the book's protagonist, Willa Cather adds another character to her collection of noble pioneers. To Captain Forrester--as to most other of these characters--wealth comes as an almost certain reward for vision, intelligence, and hard work. And to these pioneers, money is something to make life more comfortable; it is never an end in itself. This attitude is the opposite of that of vicious men like Ivy Peters and Wick Cutter; of money grubbers like Bayliss Wheeler; of the unimaginative like Alexandra Bergson's older brothers and Claude Wheeler's father and brother.

The pioneers are different partly because they love beauty more than money. Captain Forrester's decision not to drain his marsh and turn it into profitable farmland symbolizes this attitude.

> Anyone but Captain Forrester would have.... But he had selected this place long ago because it looked beautiful to him, and he happened to like the way the creek wound through his pasture, with mint and joint grass and twinkling willows along the banks.[79]

Captain Forrester--like other true pioneers--is distinguished also by what Alexandra Bergson in O Pioneers! called "imagination": the ability to "enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves."[80] This is symbolized by his fascination with astronomy and his pleasure with his

sundial.

Another point of contrast between the attitude of the true pioneer and the other, materialistic Westerners is a sense of social responsibility. Captain Forrester's conduct epitomizes this sense. Whenever trouble had broken out in one of his camps, he had told his wife, "Maidy, I must to to the men."[81] This is far more personal and protective than a mere commercial desire to minimize loss. Common people sense that the Captain feels this way. Because they do, they put their money in his Denver bank.[82] Their faith is confirmed by his choice of poverty rather than betrayal of trust.

Ivy Peters, a local shyster who finally has an affair with Mrs. Forrester, is the opposite of Captain Forrester. Forrester has built railroads--a constructive activity. Peters cheats Indians. He symbolizes a new class of businessmen who destroy the natural beauty of the West.

> They would drink up the mirage, dispel the freshness, root out the great brooding spirit of freedom, the generous easy life of the great land-holders. The space, the colour, the princely carelessness of the pioneer they would destroy and cut up into profitable bits, as the match factory splinters the primeval forest. All the way from the Missouri to the mountains this generation of shrewd young men, trained to petty economies by hard times, would do exactly what Ivy Peters would do when he drained the Forrester marsh.[83]

The effect these two men--and, by implication, their attitudes toward money--have on other people is also opposite. Their treatment of Marian Forrester symbolizes this. Captain Forrester gives his wife an emotional framework in which she thrives.[84] The last time Niel sees Ivy Peters, Peters is standing with his hands on Mrs. Forrester's breasts, symbolically destroying human beauty, just as he destroys the beauty of nature.

A Lost Lady is the first of Willa Cather's novels in which the loss of money is closely connected with loss of happiness and general decline. In this book, Captain Forrester suffers a disabling stroke immediately after he loses most of his money in the collapse of his Denver bank. This destroys the gracious way of life the Forresters had previously led. Eventually, it provides Marian Forrester with impetus and excuse to engage in unsavory business and personal relations with Ivy Peters.

Are we then to conclude, as John Randall does, that Willa Cather had begun to see money as essential for civilized life in America? Such statements as the following seem to give credence to this view:

> Niel...felt a foreboding gloom. He dreaded poverty for Mrs. Forrester. She was one of the people who ought always to have money; any retrenchment of their generous way of living would be hardship for her--would be unfitting. She would not be herself in straitened circumstances.[85]

A consideration of other novels Willa Cather wrote both immediately before and after A Lost Lady, however, makes this view improbable. One of Ours was written barely more than a year before A Lost Lady and deals with a period twenty years later: One of Ours, 1912-18; A Lost Lady, 1890-1900. As noted previously, One of Ours contains an extensive attack on the belief that money is essential to happiness. It also presents the poor but cultured and happy Ehrlichs.

The Professor's House was published two years after A Lost Lady and portrays a period almost thirty years later. It shows moderate poverty to be more congenial to worthwhile life than sudden riches.

To hold, therefore, that Willa Cather in A Lost Lady sees wealth as necessary to cultured life in modern America, one must also hold the following views: (1) Willa Cather changed her mind about an important subject twice in three years: from One of Ours to A Lost Lady and then back again in The Professor's House. (2) Willa Cather was greatly concerned with money, but was confused and unable to make up her mind. These conclusions--and this view-- are implausible.

Most of the curtailment of Marian Forrester's activity comes about not as a result of the loss of money, but from

her husband's failing health. It is Captain Forrester's fall from his horse and consequent injury that prevent the Forresters' going to Colorado during the first winter described in the novel. It is one of the Captain's strokes that causes Mrs. Forrester to allow the town women into her house and allows her to become their prey. And the first step in Mrs. Forrester's fall, her adultery with her house guest, Frank Ellinger, occurs after Captain Forrester's injury but before he loses his money. Loss of money does not cause her fall; but her belief in the creed of the modern world--that money saves--accelerates it.

Mrs. Forrester thinks wealth is indispensable. She tells Niel Herbert:

> Money is a very important thing. Realize that in the beginning, and don't be ridiculous in the end like so many of us.[86]

Believing that only a life of wealth is worthwhile, she also subscribes to the logical consequences of this belief: that any means are legitimate to get money.

> "Mrs. Forrester [Niel says,] rascality isn't the only thing that succeeds in business." "It succeeds faster than anything else, though," she murmered absently....Mrs. Forrester's hand tightened on his arm. She began speaking abruptly. "You see, two years, three years more of this, and I could still go back to California--and live again. But after that....Perhaps people think I've settled down to grow old gracefully, but I've not. I feel such a power to live in me, Niel."[87]

This belief leads her to ally herself with Ivy Peters, the symbol of vicious and destructive forces in the West.

In the portrayal of Captain Forrester, A Lost Lady recapitulates many of Willa Cather's previously-expressed ideas about money: that comfort is important, that money must not be an end in itself, that money is the natural reward of the true pioneer, and that money can be satisfying only to those with imagination, a love of beauty, and a sense of social responsibility. A Lost Lady describes the harmful results of wrong attitudes toward money. And, disquietingly, it shows cynical, vicious attitudes winning out. Willa Cather should not, however, be seen here as approving those who embrace such attitudes. On the contrary, A Lost Lady is a vigorous if despairing protest against this trend and its consequent destruction of everything worthwhile.

V

The Professor's House tells the story of Professor Godfrey St. Peter during the year in which he becomes fifty-two. St. Peter teaches at a Middle Western university and is the author of a brilliant fifteen-volume history of Spanish adventurers in North America. He is now moving reluctantly from an old, inconvenient, and uncomfortable house into a new one, built with the prize money he received

for his history.

Despite his reluctance to move from his study in the old house, comfort and pleasure and quality are important to him. He likes the wordliness of his wife that has prevented her or her daughters from being shabby, as many of the faculty members' wives were.

> They hadn't much, but they were never absurd. They never made shabby compromises. If they couldn't get the right thing, they went without.[88]

The professor himself "was by no means an ascetic. He knew that he was terribly selfish about personal pleasures, fought for them. If a thing gave him delight, he got it, if he sold his shirt for it. By doing without many so-called necessities he managed to have his luxuries."[89]

St. Peter also believes in remaining financially independent, regardless of the sacrifices required to do so. This idea appears first in The Song of the Lark. In that book Thea stands ready at a crucial point in her development to give up singing rather than take money from Fred Ottenburg and feel dependent on him. In The Professor's House, St. Peter refuses an allowance from his rich daughter Rosamond, even though it would enable him to stop teaching and concentrate on research, his main love. And when he goes with her to Chicago to shop for furniture for her house, he insists on paying his own way. "Any other arrangement,"

he says, "would be humiliating."[90]

Rosamond had been engaged to Tom Outland, a brilliant student at the university who had invented a vacuum device and had then been killed in the First World War. His will gave the rights to the device to Rosamond, and Louie Marsellus, the man she eventually married, developed it and made a fortune. This fortune has stirred up covetousness and greed, which are destroying the professor's family.

One day he arrives at daughter Kathleen's house just as Rosamond is leaving. On her face he sees an almost frightening haughtiness. Inside he finds Kathleen just as unhappy:

> Her apple skin had taken on a greenish tinge--there was no doubt about it. He had never happened to see that change occur in a face before, and had never realized to what ugly, painful transformation the common phrase "green with envy" referred....[Kathleen] looked at him intently and her eyes, in their reddened rims, expanded and cleared. "It's everything. When we were at home, Rosamond was a kind of ideal to me. What she thought about anything decided it for me. But she's entirely changed. He [Louie] and his money have ruined her.[91]

A bitter attitude also infects Rosamond. When she and her husband Louie are about to move into their new house, Louie proposes giving some of their old furniture to the McGregors. Rosamond opposes this bitterly:

> "You can do as you like with your own things, Louie. But I don't want any of mine in the McGregor's bungalow. I know Scott's brand of humor too well, and the kind of jokes that would be made about them."[92]

This mustrust has caused Rosamond to believe, almost eagerly, that her brother-in-law has blackballed Louie from admission to a local club.

Professor St. Peter sees that covetousness and greed are destroying his family:

> But when he looked up from his writing as the Angelus was ringing, two faces at once rose in the shadows outside the yellow circle of his lamp: the handsome face of his older daughter, surrounded by violet-dappled fur, with a cruel upper lip and scornful half-closed eyes, as she had approached her car that afternoon before she saw him; and Kathleen, her square little chin set so fiercely, her white cheeks actually becoming green under her swollen eyes.... Was it for this the light in Outland's laboratory used to burn so far into the night?[93]

Outland's fortune, St. Peter says, has corrupted honest men.[94] Even St. Peter's wife has been affected. He observes that "since Rosamond's marriage to Marsellus, both she and her mother had changed bewilderingly in some respects--changed and hardened."[95]

In My Antonia the family is a shelter from the false, materialistic values in the world outside.[96] In The Professor's House the family itself is torn apart by materialism.

This is all the more tragic because St. Peter has devoted his life to ideas rather than things. In the university St. Peter has fought for emphasis on ideas for their own sakes. He has fought to keep purely cultural studies in the curriculum and purely vocational ones out. But he has regularly lost battles over the years.

Now even the students seem to have deteriorated:

> "There have been many changes, Langry [another teacher], and not all of them good. Don't you notice a great difference in the student body as a whole, in the new crop that comes along every year now--how different they are from the ones of early years here?....in the all-embracing respect of quality! We have hosts of students, but they're a common sort."[97]

His great accomplishment is a history--which he wrote for the pleasure of exploring ideas rather than for money.

> "Godfrey," his wife had gravely said one day, when she detected an ironical turn in some remark he made about the new house, "is there something you would rather have done with that money than to have built a house with it?" "Nothing, my dear, nothing. If with that cheque I could have bought back the fun I had writing my history, you'd never have got your house. But one couldn't get that for twenty thousand dollars. The great pleasures don't come cheap.[98]

But even his accomplishment has resulted in a thing, the new house.

Tom Outland, too, was interested in ideas and beauty rather than money and things. He had a "backspringing thumb which had never handled things that were not symbols of ideas."[99] Unlike his partner, Roddy Blake, Tom had had no interest in the money they might get from the cliff-dwellers' artifacts. He had wanted only to preserve them for their beauty and the knowledge they gave about the people who made them.

The cliff-dewller villages themselves represent ideas rather than things. Father Duchene, the learned Belgian

priest, says:

> "I am inclined to think that your tribe were a very superior people....There is evidence on every hand that they lived for something more than food and shelter. They had an appreciation of comfort, and went even further than that....There is unquestionably a distinct feeling for design in what you call Cliff City.[100]

Cliff City contrasts sharply with the modern village nearby, which was interested in the ruins only when it heard that Blake was getting money for the things he was digging up. Unfortunately, the materialistic village is the modern one, a symbol of the modern world, which is constantly becoming more materialistic.

The Professor's House is a protest against that trend. It reiterates many of the basic ideas about money in Willa Cather's fiction. It re-emphasizes the importance of comfort. It strikingly portrays the corrosive effects of covetousness and greed. And it vigorously condemns materialism, which it shows taking over the modern world. This protest against destructive attitudes toward money is one of the things that gives it continuing value in this materialistic age.

VI

My Mortal Enemy tells the story of Myra Henshawe, who ran away from her rich, Roman Catholic uncle to marry Oswald Henshawe, a Protestant, and thus gave up both Roman Catholicism and her uncle's money. After her marriage

she lives in reasonable comfort in New York. There her friends include musicians and other artists and her husband's business associates.

In the second part of the book, Nellie, the narrator, finds the Henshawes poverty-stricken and living in a jerry-built hotel in a Western city, far from New York and the gaiety and happiness of earlier times. Myra Henshawe is mortally ill.

The Henshawes' poverty has destroyed the comfort they once enjoyed. Thin walls and ceilings in the apartment hotel they now live in make them victims to the noisy, vulgar tenants above them. Since the Henshawes are too poor to hire a nurse, Oswald's whole life is circumscribed by Myra's needs and wishes.

But poverty does more than circumscribe the Henshawes' outward circumstances. It dominates Myra's thinking. Money cannot, perhaps, buy happiness. But in Myra's mind it can at least prevent discomfort. "Now I am old and ill and a fright," she says, "but among my own kind I'd still have my circle; I'd have courtesy from people of genteel manners and not have my brains beaten out by hoodlums.[101]

"Poverty," she says, "leaves you at the mercy of such pigs. Money is a protection, a cloak; it can buy one quiet and some sort of dignity."[102]

But to Myra money is much more than a cloak. She

believes that without it happiness for her is impossible.[103] She even comes to believe her grand romantic gesture of defying her uncle and marrying Oswald was a mistake because it lost her her uncle's money. "We've destroyed each other," she says. "I should have stayed with my uncle. It was money I needed. We've thrown our lives away."[104] Myra now says that she was never happy with her husband. He is now her mortal enemy.[105]

Her views come thus to parallel those of her uncle, who said, "It's better to be a stray dog in this world than a man without money. I've tried both ways, and I know. A poor man stinks, and God hates him."[106]

Her poverty-stricken life contrasts with her uncle's magnificent funeral, perfumed with incense and resplendent with the color and ceremony of the Roman church, a paean, John Randall says, to the power of money.[107]

Randall believes that the views of Myra Henshawe are those of Willa Cather.[108] He sees Willa Cather saying in My Mortal Enemy what he also finds her saying in A Lost Lady: without money, civilized life in modern America is impossible.[109]

But Willa Cather did not necessarily share the views of her protagonists. In My Mortal Enemy, as in A Lost Lady, she uses a narrator to put distance between herself and the protagonist. In both books the narrator begins by admiring the protagonist and then, though sympathetic,

becomes more and more troubled as the protagonist's destructive behavior reveals serious flaws of character.

If Willa Cather really believed when she wrote My Mortal Enemy that money was absolutely essential for civilized life in contemporary America; that it is better to have money than romance and adventure; that poverty, not materialism is the worst affliction a person could have; then she underwent one of the most complete reversals of belief in American, or any, literature. In previous books she had always praised romance over money, condemned materialism, and portrayed the cultured poor as better off than the vulgar rich. If she now says about money what Randall finds her saying, she has completely repudiated almost all her most passionately held and expressed beliefs.

It seems much more likely that Willa Cather is here portraying the corrosive effects of covetousness upon personality and character--a theme she dealt with in The Professor's House, written immediately prior to My Mortal Enemy. Nellie, the narrator, for example is alarmed soon after meeting Myra at her greed and envy.

> We were jogging happily along under the elms, watching the light change on the crusted snow, when a carriage passed from which a handsome woman leaned out and waved to us. Mrs. Henshawe bowed stiffly, with a condescending smile. "There, Nellie," she exclaimed, "that's the last woman I'd care to have splashing past me, and me in a Hansome cab."
>
> I glimpsed what seemed to me insane ambition. My aunt was always thanking God that the Henshawes

> got along as well as they did, and worrying because she felt sure Oswald wasn't saving anything. And here Mrs. Henshawe was wishing for a carriage--with stables and a house and servants, and all that went with a carriage! All the way home she kept her scornful expression, holding her head high and sniffing the purple air from side to side as we drove down Fifth Avenue. When we alighted before her door she paid the driver and gave him such a large fee that he snatched off his hat and said twice: "Thank you, thank you, my lady." She dismissed him with a smile and a nod. "All the same," she whispered to me as she fitted her latchkey, "it's very nasty being poor."[110]

Willa Cather condemns just such a view as this in numerous previous books. And we have only to look at The Professor's House to find a vivid portrayal of a character who wanted money so much she literally turned green. A related facet of her personality--extreme and touchy jealousy--leads Myra to break off her friendship with Nellie's aunt, her oldest friend and accomplice in her romantic elopement. It seems reasonable, therefore, to find in the tragedy of Myra a merciful but pointed portrayal of the effects of covetousness and also, perhaps, of a society that places such high value on money.[111]

Like The Professor's House, My Mortal Enemy is about growing old and dying. These books both suggest that this process must not be resisted but must be borne with grace, dignity, and resignation, as St. Peter does. Willa Cather previously dealt with a similar theme in Alexander's Bridge, in which Hartley Alexander brings disaster upon himself by trying

to regain his lost youth.

In The Professor's House and My Mortal Enemy aging and death occur against a background of the meanness and greed of the modern world, which believes in the supreme efficacy of money. Myra shares this belief. She is convinced that wealth is absolutely necessary.

O Pioneers! and My Antonia show the family as the one institution that can shelter man. Myra's hysterical desire for money destroys her ability to take advantage of even this comfort. Significantly, Willa Cather's next novel is also about death, but death in a more civilized society.

VII

These five books present a picture of the modern world as a place inhospitable to civilized life and sensitive people. It is ugly, graceless, rude, and vulgar. Its dominant characteristic is a tendency to see everything only in terms of money. This world no longer cares about intrinsic value: about whether a thing brings pleasure or whether it is beautiful or original, but only what a vast, unimaginative mass will pay for it. As might be expected, such a world treats artists with hostility or attempts to exploit them.

The protagonists in these books move through this world with varying degrees of perception of their situations. The world's distorted values confuse them and lead them astray.

Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours* makes exactly the wrong decisions. Marian Forrester and Myra Henshawe are themselves infected with the modern world's belief in salvation through money.

In the last three books money destroys the world's finest things. In *A Lost Lady* it destroys the beauty of the Western countryside, symbol of the world's natural beauty. In *The Professor's House* it debases the university, the home of ideas. In both *The Professor's House* and *My Mortal Enemy* it rips apart the family, the center of love and security, and the basis of social stability. Without these not much is left except history and memories, the subjects of Willa Cather's remaining books.

CHAPTER 6

THE DAYS THAT ARE NO MORE

I

After My Mortal Enemy Willa Cather's fiction underwent an abrupt shift. All her works up to this time had been about the United States. The previous five books had reflected her feelings about modern America. Now, however, she abandoned English-speaking America altogether. Her next two novels are about French culture on the North American continent in historic times. In striking contrast to the previous five books, life in these new settings is pleasant and civilized. And in further contrast money is not very important.

The contrast cannot be unintentional. The juxtaposition suggests that because of the undivided worship of money in modern America civilized life there is very difficult. In order to describe civilized life one must look for another culture--one in which money is not so important.

Willa Cather had long admired Roman Catholicism and French and Spanish culture. O Pioneers! contains an admiring portrayal of French Catholics in Nebraska. The

belief that Spanish conquerors had gone as far north as Nebraska provides a romantic note in an account of a picnic in My Antonia. And The Professor's House has a half-French hero who is an expert on the Spanish conquerors and admires Roman Catholicism.

Willa Cather had always been interested in pioneers too, of course, and in the possibilities for transplanted European culture to flourish in the freedom and prosperity of America. But whatever culture the pioneers in Nebraska had brought with them was being swallowed up in a vulgar mass culture now.

But the French in North America offered a new opportunity to explore this idea again. By using priests in one instnce and placing her story far enough back in history in the other, Willa Cather had control of the situation and could show a paradise that was not being ruined by greed and commercialism.

II

Death Comes for the Archbishop emphasizes the balanced attitudes toward money and material things found in earlier Willa Cather fiction. In this book the simple pleasures are important. Good food is especially prominant. Latour's Christmas letter home one year talks of almost nothing else. While visiting a rich Mexican, Latour's French deputy makes a point of cooking his own lamb in the

French way.

Order and domestic neatness are also important. They are characteristic of the archbishop. Sharply contrasting is the household of the priest at Taos, whose slovenliness is a symbol of his moral corruption.

Negative attitudes toward money, which dominate the lives of the American characters in the books of the preceding phase, intrude infrequently in the healthier, more civilized society in which this novel is set. One that does is miserliness, a personal trait that prevents one from enjoying simple pleasures, the basis of civilized life. Previously, in One of Ours miserliness is a concomitant of the narrow materialism that makes Nebraska inhospitable to civilized life. In Death Comes for the Archbishop, Latour rebukes his deputy for it. But it is more a characteristic not of the French, the Mexicans, or the Indians but of the English-speaking church members in Denver. This is a significant reminder of the reason for Willa Cather's displeasure with American society and culture and its attitudes toward money.

The novel implies disapproval of extravagance, too. The priest at Acoma lives sumptuously, at least when compared to his Indian parishioners. At his behest they have for years carried great quantities of water up the steep paths to the top of the rock to make his garden possible. One day the

priest invites two other priests to be his guests. At a meal that represents the height of luxury the villagers revolt and slaughter him and his guests.

III

The same values are emphasized in Shadows on the Rock, a novel about Quebec in the late Seventeenth Century. Money is relatively unimportant in this novel, although the evils of extreme poverty are not ignored; Louis XIV is condemned for the effects of his regime on the common people in Paris. But most of the main characters are relatively poor and still live civilized lives.

What is important is that civilized life flourishes under these conditions. The essence of this civilization is order, neatness, ritual, and simple pleasure, epitomized in the middle class household of Euclide Auclair and his daughter, Cecile. As Madame Auclair explains to Cecile, good linen sheets changed often, good food, and order and regularity are what made France the most civilized nation in Europe and the envy of other nations.

As in Death Comes for the Archbishop good food is one of the most important elements of life. There are long and detailed descriptions of shopping, preserving, cooking, and dining. According to Auclair, dining properly is what distinguishes a Frenchman and makes a person civilized.

The civilized life portrayed in these two books about French culture in America is similar to the civilized life of the Ehrlichs in One of Ours. It is carried on amid poverty. It consists of making the most of simple pleasures: good food, companionship, neatness, and order. But Willa Cather did not find this sort of life a prominent part of modern America, and it reappears in her fiction only after she had turned away from modern America to write about an alien culture in historical settings.

III

After the two novels about the French pioneers, Willa Cather's fiction changed once again. Her remaining works consist of two novels--Lucy Gayheart and Saphira and the Slave Girl--and two books of short stories--Obscure Destinies and The Old Beauty and Others (published posthumously). Unlike books of previous phases no major unifying themes link these works to each otner. The only similarity is in the restricted scope that they share.

Previously, Willa Cather's books had dealt with themes that had important implications for society. In addition, the structure of these works provides a survey of the society in which the story has its setting. O Pioneers!, for example, shows the conquest of the land and the early development of Plains society. The Song of the Lark, My Antonia, One of Ours, and the other books are concerned with society as a whole. Both French pioneer novels provide a view of the

societies in which they are set. But with the partial exception of Saphira and the Slave Girl, none of the works in this last phase has this scope. Instead, they are focused on a character or single aspect of life, and focused so sharply that everything else is blurred. Artistically, the technique sometimes produces very satisfactory results--"The Best Years," for example. Generally, however, the results are disappointing.

This approach effectively limits the treatment of contemporary problems, including money. Money appears occasionally but less frequently than in previous phases. When it does appear, the civilized attitudes expounded in previous works are repeated. "Neighbor Rosicky," for example, repeats the values of the Ehrlichs in One of Ours: the love of pleasure, especially good food, and the refusal to sacrifice immediate pleasure for future wealth. Mostly, however, money as a theme has disappeared.

There seem to be three basic causes of this narrowed scope and consequent failure to describe society as a whole. First, as we have seen, Willa Cather had found modern America repugnant in its worship of money. This was at least partly the reason for her turning to French historical settings in the previous phase. If she had turned away once from American culture, it is unlikely that she would immediately portray

the whole range of a society she had previously found dominated by attitudes hateful to her.

Second, Willa Cather seems to have written out of a conscious desire to keep memories of her childhood and youth alive. Her father died in 1928, and her mother closed up the family home in Red Cloud and went to stay near one of her brothers in California. This was the first death in Willa's immediate family. Up to this point life had gone on in Red Cloud pretty much as she had remembered it from childhood. Even Margie, the servant the Cathers had brought with them from Virginia, was there. Now this world was broken up, and Willa Cather saw her memories slipping away. The sharp, narrow focus is an ideal technique for capturing memories. It enables the author to preserve the essence of an experience--a detail of scenery, a smell, a single moment. Nostalgia and memory are, of course, important elements in much of Willa Cather's previous fiction. But never does the desire to preserve memories seem to dominate the fiction as it does here.

Third, in addition to Willa Cather's general dispiritedness about deaths in her family and among her friends, her health declined from 1932 onward. While writing Lucy Gayheart her wrist became inflamed and was so painful that she was unable even to type. She often wrote in her journal during this period that she was very tired. This general state of

health goes a long way toward explaining why the scope of her works was so narrow.

One wishes that Willa Cather had dealt once again with the problem of money in modern America and had perhaps found a way out of the dilemma that she earlier presented for modern Americans. But all she left us is a set of stirring pictures of civilized life and a stern warning.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION:
MONEY IN WILLA CATHER'S FICTION

In the first book-length discussion of Willa Cather, David Daiches summarizes his thinking about her fiction by saying that it is above all civilized. Civilized is perhaps the one word that best describes Willa Cather's attitudes toward money as revealed in her fiction. Money and civilized life are closely linked throughout her books. For wherever the right ideas about money prevail, life is civilized. And wherever wrong ideas dominate, civilized life is impossible.

Willa Cather's fiction reveals four basic beliefs about money. First, comfort and other kinds of physical pleasure are important. To live fully, one must appreciate good food and drink and beautiful surroundings. Second, money is useful because it can buy many things; but great amounts of it are not necessary for civilized life. The poor can also live civilized lives.

Third, money is not a yardstick of value. Beauty, pleasure, accomplishment, kindness, and many other things

are far more important. Fourth, wrong attitudes toward money--greed, covetousness, miserliness--must be avoided.

These ideas are developed in a series of phases in Willa Cather's fiction. The first phase, which includes The Troll Garden and Alexander's Bridge, emphasizes the danger that money poses to the artist, or anyone who wants to live a rewarding life. The second phase, which centers on pioneers and includes O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, and My Antonia, shows that money is valuable and that wealth should be a natural reward for the creative genius. Most important, the books of this phase describe the balanced, civilized life.

In the third phase the emphasis changes abruptly. The five books in this phase concentrate on the destructive effects of placing too much value on money. This attitude destroys civilized life and all that makes life livable: natural beauty, the love of ideas for their own sake, and family relationships.

In the fourth stage there is another change of emphasis. Here the novels are set not in modern America but in French or Spanish culture of the past. In contrast to novels of the previous phase, these works contain few references to money. And in further contrast almost all the characters in them live civilized lives. This contrast suggests strongly that a major reason that Willa Cather turned to settings diatant in culture and time was her belief that modern American

attitudes toward money made living a civilized life almost impossible.

In the fifth stage there is once again a change of setting and character type. The reasons for this change are not so clear as for the previous changes, but health and family problems seem to be key factors. Money plays a relatively unimportant role in the fiction of this stage, and the quality of this fiction is generally lower than in previous phases.

It is clear then that Willa Cather's views on money are closely linked to her views on the world, and understanding her attitudes toward money is essential in understanding her work as a whole. But Willa Cather's attitudes toward money are important for other reasons too. These attitudes illuminate a central problem of our time and culture: what does the good life consist of? The Ehrlichs in _One of Ours_ and the culture described in _Death Comes for the Archbishop_ and _Shadows on the Rock_ provide dramatic examples of what the good life is. The novels of the third phase provide a grim warning of how over-emphasis on money destroys civilized life. It is a warning applicable to all money-worshipping societies.

NOTES

[1]David Daiches, Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction (Ithaca, New York, 1951).

[2]James Woodress, Willa Cather: Her Life and Art (New York, 1970).

[3]Dorothy Tuck McFarland, Willa Cather (New York, 1972).

[4]McFarland, p. 81.

[5]Ibid., p. 465.

[6]Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale, Ill., 1962).

[7]John H. Randall, III, The Landscape and the Looking Glass (Boston, 1960), pp. 151-152.

[8]Ibid., pp. 158-159.

[9]This change occured between Alexander's Bridge and O Pioneers!. According to Willa Cather, she became dissatisfied with Alexander's Bridge very shortly after writing it and came to feel that she could reach her own standards only by using a completely different type of setting and characters--as she did in O Pioneers!. Willa Cather's great dissatisfaction with Alexander's Bridge did not abate over the years, and she forbad its republication. See Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art (New York, 1949), pp. 91-92.

[10]Mildred R. Bennett, The World of Willa Cather (New York, 1951), pp. 66, 24, and 119.

[11]E. K. Brown and Leon Edel, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography (New York, 1953), p. 34.

[12]Bennett, pp. 37-38.

[13]Harold U. Faulkner, Politics, Reform, and Expansion: 1890-1900 (New York, 1959), p. 53.

[14]Brown, p. 25.

[15]Ibid., p. 65.

[16]Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order: 1877-1920 (New York, 1967), p. 4.

[17]Richard Hofstadter's Social Darwinism in American Thought (Boston, 1955) gives a full treatment of this subject.

[18]John Kenneth Galbraith, The Affluent Society, Mentor ed. (New York, 1958), p. 55.

[19]Galbraith, p. 54.

[20]Brown, p. 144.

[21]Edith Lewis, Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record (New York, 1953), p. XIV-XV.

[22]Brown, pp. 143-144.

[23]Lewis, p. 55.

[24]Ibid., p. 177.

[25]Bennett, pp. 215-216.

[26]Lewis, pp. 148-149.

[27]Brown, p. 298.

[28]Bennett, p. 51.

[29]Ibid., pp. 54-55.

[30]Willa Cather reveals precisely this antipathy in "The Sculptor's Funeral."

[31]Some books list 1875 as the year of Willa Cather's birth; and 1876 is inscribed on her gravestone. E. K. Brown, however, found references to her in letters written by her father and uncle in early 1874 and thus established her birth year as 1873 (Brown, p. 17).

[32]Lewis, pp. XIV-XV.

[33]Brown, p. 98.

[34]Willa Cather, The Troll Garden (New York, 1905).

[35]Willa Cather on Writing, pp. 91-92.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Lewis, p. 93.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Randall also sees this in Willa Cather's pioneer novels, (Randall, p. 151).

[40]Randall also sees a strong will as an important characteristic of Willa Cather's pioneers, (Randall, p. 70).

[41]O Pioneers! p. 68.

Alexandra even traces the Bergson family intelligence back to her great-grandfather, who had become a prosperous businessman in Sweden. "He had come up from the sea himself, had built up a proud little business with no capital but his own skill and foresight, and had proved himself a man." (O Pioneers!, p. 214). Randall thinks this is an endorsement of the principle of hereditary aristocracy (Randall, pp. 69-70). But O Pioneers! does not support that deduction. In the first place, not all the members of John Bergson's family are more intelligent than average. The older brothers are ponderous, unimaginative, spiritless, and dull. In the second place, the laws of primogeniture, essential in maintaining a hereditary, landed aristocracy, would undoubtedly exclude both Emil and Alexandra, the only bright and sensitive members of the family; Emil because he is the youngest, and Alexandra because she is a woman.

[42]Ibid., p. 57

Speculation receives Willa Cather's implicit blessing in other books, too. In The Song of the Lark Dr. Archie becomes rich through speculation in mining stocks (although that is economically different from real estate speculation), and Mrs. Kronborg becomes rich through the appreciation of farm lands that she owns but does not herself farm.

Real estate speculation, in which the speculator gains value without producing anything, is dubious economically and ethically. It was, of course, vigorously attacked by Henry George and his followers in the late Nineteenth Century, when Willa Cather was growing up, and the period O Pioneers! describes. It is interesting, therefore, to see it receiving such enthusiastic endorsement, almost as if it were a divine system for the benefit of the deserving.

[43]Ibid., p. 51.

[44]Ibid., p. 67.

[45]Ibid., p. 48.

[46]Ibid., p. 97.

[47]Willa Cather, One of Ours (New York, 1922), pp. 101-102.

[48]Willa Cather, The Song of the Lark (New York, 1915).

[49]Ibid, pp. 389, 391.

[50]Ibid., p. 472.

[51]Samuel Eliot Morison, The Oxford History of the American People (New York, 1965), p. 833.

[52]The Song of the Lark, pp. 369-370.

[53]Ibid., p. 50.

[54]Ibid., p. 391.

[55]Randall, p. 17.

[56]The Song of the Lark, p. 265.

[57]Willa Cather, My Antonia (New York, 1918).

[58]Ibid., p. 179.

[59]Ibid., p. 170.

[60]Ibid., p. 150.

[61]Ibid,

[62]Lewis, p. 115.

[63]Brown, pp. 183-184.

[64]Youth and the Bright Medusa, p. 51.

[65]Ibid., p. 62.

[66]One of Ours, p. 90.

[67]Ibid., p. 419.

[68]Ibid., p. 88.

[69]Ibid., p. 111.

[70]Ibid., p. 90.

[71]Ibid., pp. 101-102.

[72]Ibid., p. 102.

[73]Ibid., p. 10.

[74]Ibid., p. 39.

[75]Ibid., p. 43.

[76]Ibid.

[77]Ibid.

[78]Ibid., p. 60.

[79]Willa Cather, A Lost Lady (New York, 1923) p. 11.

[80]O Pioneers!, p. 48.

[81]A Lost Lady, p. 49.

[82]Ibid., pp. 90-92.

[83]Ibid., p. 123.

[84]Ibid., p. 78.

[85]Ibid., p. 83.

[86]Ibid., p. 114.

[87]Ibid., p. 124.

[88]Willa Cather, The Professor's House (New York, 1925). pp. 160-161.

[89]Ibid., pp. 26-27.

[90]Ibid., p. 155.

[91]Ibid., p. 86.

[92]Ibid., p. 169.

[93]Ibid., pp. 89-90.

[94]Ibid., p. 150.

[95]Ibid., p. 161.

[96]Randall, pp. 111, 142.

[97]The Professor's House, pp. 9-10.

[98]Ibid., p. 33.

[99]Ibid., pp. 260-261.

[100]Ibid., p. 219.

[101]My Mortal Enemy, p. 91.

[102]Ibid., p. 83.

[103]Ibid., p. 91.

[104]Ibid.

[105]Ibid., p. 113.

[106]Ibid., p. 22.

[107]Randall, p. 237.

[108]Ibid., pp. 236-237.

[109]Ibid., pp. 151-152.

[110]My Mortal Enemy, p. 108.

[111]Cf. Woodress, p. 216.

[112]Brown, p. 294.

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LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY

Graduate School

MONEY IN THE FICTION OF WILLA CATHER

by

Vincent A. Clark

An Abstract of a Thesis

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree Master of Arts

in the Field of English

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The subject of money is important in the fiction of Willa Cather. She discusses it frequently and often at great length. In some works it is a major theme.

Despite its importance, a number of Willa Cather's critics have ignored the subject or have given it only cursory mention. Several writers, however, have discussed the subject at length. John H. Randall, III, in particular, analyzes it in great detail. His analysis, however, goes astray at several key points.

This thesis shows that Willa Cather's attitudes toward money were balanced, humane, and consistent. These attitudes can be summarized as follows: (a) Money is important. It can buy comfort and pleasure, which are necessary for a satisfying life. (b) Large quantities of money are not, however, essential for happiness. (c) As a matter of fact, wrong attitudes toward money--miserliness, greed, covetousness--can warp character and destroy happiness. (d) Honest business is honorable and praiseworthy. Consequently, honest, intelligent, sensitive business people are admirable, especially if they are successful. These ideas are developed in a series of phases, in each of which the works deal with similar problems and have similar emphases. Between the phases there are abrupt changes in tone. Two of these changes result largely from Willa Cather's perception of the dominant

attitudes toward money in America and her reaction to them.

This thesis examines the subject of money in the fiction of Willa Cather by studying these phases, with primary emphasis upon the fiction itself, but also with consideration of pertinent biographical and historical material to understand the social and intellectual environment in which she lived.