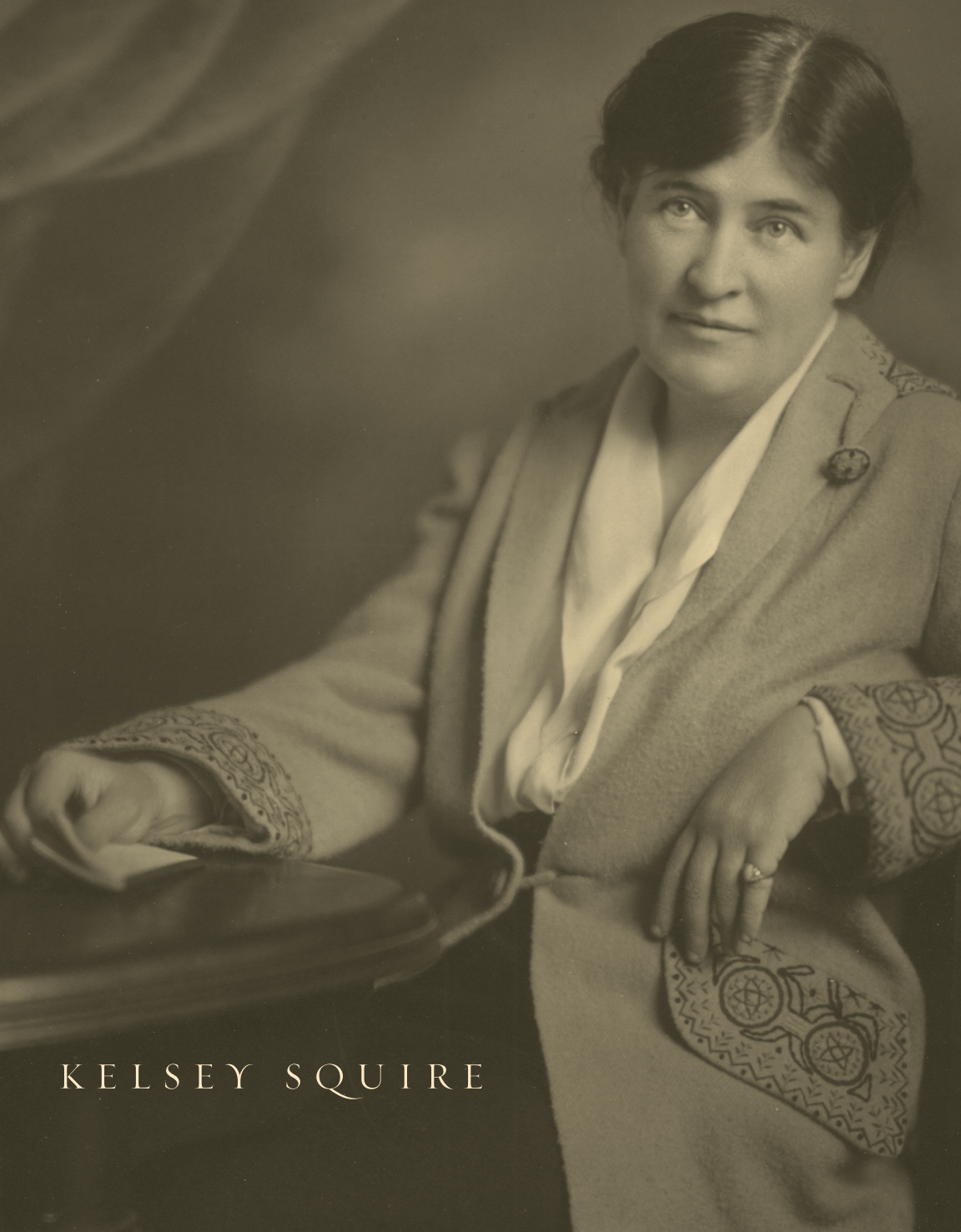


WILLA CATHER

THE CRITICAL CONVERSATION



KELSEY SQUIRE

K E L S E Y S Q U I R E

W I L L A C A T H E R

T H E C R I T I C A L C O N V E R S A T I O N



CAMDEN HOUSE

Rochester, New York

Copyright © 2020 Kelsey Squire

All Rights Reserved. Except as permitted under current legislation, no part of this work may be photocopied, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded, or reproduced in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

First published 2020
by Camden House

Camden House is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt. Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA
www.camden-house.com
and of Boydell & Brewer Limited
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
www.boydellandbrewer.com

ISBN: 978-1-78744-686-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Squire, Kelsey, 1982– author.

Title: Willa Cather : the critical conversation / Kelsey Squire.

Description: Rochester, New York : Camden House, 2020. | Series: Studies in American literature and culture : literary criticism in perspective | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020002766 | ISBN 9781571139979 (hardback ; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9781787446861 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Cather, Willa, 1873–1947—Criticism and interpretation—History.

Classification: LCC PS3505.A87 Z857 2020 | DDC 813/.52—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020002766>

This publication is printed on acid-free paper.
Printed in the United States of America.

C O N T E N T S

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	1
1: Willa Cather's Mercurial Position among the Critics, 1918–49	9
2: The Author and the Archetype: Biographical and Thematic Approaches to Cather	37
3: Critical Conversations on Gender and Sexuality	63
4: The Sociohistorical Cather: Approaches to Race, War, and the Environment	93
5: Cather in the Literary Marketplace: Authorial Criticism, Archival Studies, and Book-Historical Criticism	121
Afterword: “Having It Out,” or Continuing the Critical Conversation	149
Works Cited	153
Index	169

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

I have been grateful to share my research with supportive students, colleagues, and friends as I have worked on this book. I have appreciated the opportunity to share my research and discuss Cather's writing with several classes of students at the undergraduate and graduate level. Students, thank you for sharing your insights and arguments about Cather and her work with me. I am grateful for the mentorship that I have received from current and former colleagues in the English department at Ohio Dominican University. I could not have completed this project without the assistance of our amazing library staff. I am also thankful for the support and guidance from Brian Yothers and Jim Walker at Camden House. Their feedback, along with the comments from peer reviewers, provided me with great insights as I revised my manuscript.

My colleagues and mentors from Marquette University have continued to be a source of inspiration and support. I am grateful for the continued guidance of Sarah Wadworth and Amy Blair. Sarah Nestor Babcock, Heidi Seward, Anna Storm, and Shaunna Wilkinson: thank you for your friendship, support, and hospitality. This project would not have been possible without the incredible community of Cather scholars that I have met over the years through conferences: thank you for your fellowship and for responding to my scholarship. I am honored to cite your work here. I am also grateful for the incredible staff members at the Willa Cather Foundation and the University of Nebraska who have responded to my personal questions and provided support for the scholarly activities of the Cather community.

Lastly, thank-you to my family. My parents, Kim and Doug, and my brother Bryan have probably learned more about Willa Cather than they ever expected to. To Keith Powell: your care and support are beyond measure.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

On October 24, 1908, Willa Cather sent two of her short stories to Sarah Orne Jewett. At the time, Cather was thirty-four years old. She had recently relocated to New York and had a successful career at *McClure's* magazine. Jewett was a popular New England writer, known for works such as *Deephaven* (1877) and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). Cather and Jewett had met for the first time earlier in 1908 through Jewett's longtime companion, Annie Fields, the widow of publisher James Fields (of the firm Ticknor and Fields). While Jewett sent a letter of praise back to Cather around Thanksgiving, she followed up with another reflection on Cather's situation two weeks later. In this letter, dated December 13, 1908, Jewett wrote once again to praise Cather's talent—but also to encourage her to do more to nurture her gifts as a writer and not neglect them in favor of her editorial work. Jewett wrote, “Your vivid, exciting companionship in the office must not be your audience, you must find your own quiet centre of life, and write from that to the world that holds offices, and all society, all Bohemia; the city, the country—in short, you must write to the human heart, the great consciousness that all humanity goes to make up.” For her part, Cather acknowledged in her reply, dated six days later on December 19, of the strain that her editorial work was putting on her creative mind. She compared her life to a circus balancing act, writing, “I live just about as much during the day as a trapeze performer does when he's on the bars—it's catch the right bar at the right minute, or into the net you go” (*Selected Letters* 118).

Despite the exhausting nature of attempting to balance both her editorial work at *McClure's* and her creative life, Cather still had her doubts. In her December 19 reply to Jewett, Cather confessed that her

boss “Mr. McClure tells me that he does not think I will ever be able to do much at writing stories, that I am a good executive and I had better let it go at that. I sometimes, indeed very often think that he is right” (*Selected Letters* 118). These doubts notwithstanding, Cather confessed to Jewett that she had been saving her money and could—if she wanted—take time to “pull herself together” and “to write a little” (119). It took nearly four years, but sometime in the spring of 1912, Cather left *McClure’s* permanently, after some extended periods of absence, to focus exclusively on her writing.

Cather holds a curious place in the American literary canon. Her decision to begin her writing career in her late thirties made her older than some of her other modernist contemporaries, such as Ernest Hemingway or F. Scott Fitzgerald. While *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* are staples on lists of “classic” American literature, her name is less recognizable than those of Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, or other modernist writers like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, or William Faulkner. Yet it seems safe to say that Cather criticism is flourishing. In the 2015 volume of *American Literary Scholarship*, Joseph C. Murphy wrote that “Cather scholarship in 2015 is distinguished by its sheer quantity and range—some 50 articles and chapters” appeared in that year alone (Singley and Murphy 95). The purpose of my book is not to trace every single publication on Cather that has been produced in the past century. Such a task would not only be daunting; it would perhaps also be redundant, since *American Literary Scholarship* provides a detailed, year-by-year record of Cather scholarship. The purpose of my volume is to focus more on the dynamics of the critical conversations on Cather that have emerged across time and to provide context by identifying overarching patterns that have defined those conversations. Which critical works have become most important? How have critics responded to earlier critics? What were the primary ways Cather and her work were viewed at a given time, and why? What problems or preoccupations have dominated the conversation?

The question of biography has fascinated and stymied Cather critics for decades. Cather incorporated significant autobiographical details and memories into many of her works; as a result, many textual analyses of Cather’s work draw heavily on biographical criticism to interpret the meaning or significance of her writing. During Cather’s lifetime, debates arose concerning her use of autobiographical material. Cather’s novels *The Song of the Lark*, *My Ántonia*, and *One of Ours*

contain extensive descriptions of people and places from Cather's formative years in Red Cloud, Nebraska. To what extent should authors feel free to borrow descriptions, likenesses, and incidents that may be recognized by family members or friends? Some critics maintained that Cather's use of autobiographical material illustrated her weakness as an artist, that it revealed a lack of inventiveness. In a review of *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), Louis Kronenberger argued that "the only novels of [Cather's] which contribute genuine experience are those concerned with childhood and girlhood or with the Middle West of a vanished generation" ("Willa Cather" 382). By associating biography with trivial sources of inspiration—the experiences of children or women or of an insignificant place or time—some critics dismissed Cather's work.

Yet biography has continued to be a tantalizing topic, perhaps because, for many decades, portions of Cather's life remained a mystery. Up until 2013, Cather's biographers faced a significant challenge: in her will, Cather forbade direct quotation from her correspondence. Many assumed that little correspondence existed and that Cather (or her executors) had gathered and systematically destroyed her letters.¹ Early biographers in the 1950s and 1960s had limited archival resources to draw on in composing their work; while new Cather letters and other materials continued to be discovered in the decades after her death in 1947, critics were restricted in the ways they could use that archival material. In the 1980s and 1990s, these restrictions took on new significance as feminist scholars explored Cather's sexuality through letters to and about a college friend, Louise Pound. Cather and Pound had a close friendship during their time as undergraduates at the University of Nebraska. While their friendship was severed after Cather published a fictional portrait mocking Louise's brother Roscoe Pound in a campus publication, Cather's letters to Louise have been preserved. Some critics, like Sharon O'Brien, viewed the emotionally charged language in Cather's letters to Louise Pound as convincing evidence of Cather's lesbianism; other critics remained more skeptical, arguing that inaccurate paraphrases of the material could lead to misinterpretations of Cather's words.

Thus, the publication of *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* in 2013, edited by Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout, represented a significant breakthrough in biographical and archival approaches to Cather's work. As Jewell and Stout explained in their preface to *The Selected Letters*, the publication of documents against the wishes of an author

raises many ethical issues. Ultimately, Cather left the decision to publish in the hands of her executors; they decided that the publication of the letters was necessary for the continuation of accurate scholarship on Cather. The online site *The Complete Letters of Willa Cather*, which was launched in January 2018, will provide scholars with significant resources for new assessments of Cather's life and work grounded in archival and biographical criticism.

My first chapter, "Willa Cather's Mercurial Position among the Critics, 1918–49" traces the early reception of Cather's novels from the publication of *My Ántonia* through the years after Cather's death in 1947. Margaret Anne O'Connor's edited collection *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews* is essential for anyone interested in Cather's early reception. I am interested in situating these earlier reviewers within their historical and cultural moment and seeking to understand how that moment might impact a reviewer's appraisal of Cather's work, or even of Cather herself. This chapter considers how and why Cather was assigned multiple and sometimes conflicting roles in the literary world, from a visionary midwestern writer in the 1920s, to a disengaged historical novelist in the 1930s, to a canonical but isolated figure in the 1940s.

In chapter 2, I address biographical and thematic approaches to Cather's life that defined the period from the 1950s through the 1970s. One of the problems that emerged during these decades was the lack of biographical information on Cather's life. Early biographers attempted to provide detailed portraits of Cather's life from her childhood in Virginia, to her years in Red Cloud, to her writing career in Pittsburgh and New York. In a similar vein, thematic or archetypal critics were interested in providing comprehensive narratives that would shed light on Cather's entire body of work. Large themes—the landscape, sympathy, death, imagination—provided these scholars with a way to investigate how Cather's writing developed throughout the course of her lifetime.

Chapter 3 documents a shift in Cather criticism from the broad thematic studies of the 1950s and 1960s to more focused studies by critics focused on feminism and sexuality. While critics during the mid-twentieth century often attempted to find a grand narrative that would encompass all of Cather's works, critics from the 1970s on displayed an increasing interest in locating specific problems in Cather's fiction and probing for solutions. For example, Jim Burden's role as a problematic,

potentially unreliable narrator in *My Ántonia* becomes the focal point for Blanche Gelfant's 1971 article "The Forgotten Reaping Hook: Sex in *My Ántonia*," one of the foundational pieces of feminist criticism in Cather studies. In addition to examining Cather's fiction through a feminist lens, biographical criticism would turn to examining the role of gender and sexuality in Cather's own life. How did she feel about being female, and how did her gender impact her work? Was Cather a lesbian?

As feminist and gender critics explored new territory, socio-historical critics writing at the same time were interested in probing assumptions about Cather's relationship to history more deeply. Chapter 4 explores how sociohistorical critics deployed methods of New Historicism to examine connections between Cather's fiction and her historical moment. Critics in the latter decades of the twentieth century challenged earlier assumptions about Cather's disengagement with her contemporary moment by examining historical and cultural documents to illustrate how her fiction reflected critical conversations on issues relevant to her time—and ours. In particular, this chapter explores how Cather's fiction engages with issues of race and ethnicity, American imperialism and war, and the environment.

My final chapter turns to critics who examine Cather's relationship with the literary marketplace through authorial and book-historical criticism, which have emerged as significant critical approaches to Cather and her writing. Throughout her lifetime, Cather presented herself as a writer who was completely invested in the artistic elements of her craft, and likewise, she expressed disapproval of producing literature for purely commercial purposes. Yet, as critics using authorial and book-historical criticism reveal, it is clear that financial success was important to Cather; she took a keen interest in how her books were printed and presented to the public, with an eye not only to the artistic elements but also to generating strong sales. These critics argued that, in addition to studying Cather's words, we should also study other elements—illustrations, book covers, binding material, paper, typography, and editorial interventions—that reflect Cather's artistic and business sensibilities.

Several resources have been instrumental in writing this volume. Margaret Anne O'Connor's aforementioned *Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews* (2001) serves as the most comprehensive collection of reviews of Cather's books. *Willa Cather and Her Critics*

(1967), edited by James Schroeter, provided the first major collection of reprinted scholarly criticism on Cather; *Willa Cather: Critical Assessments* (2003), edited by Guy Reynolds, is the most recent and comprehensive. Bernice Slote's essay on Cather that appeared in *Fifteen Modern American Authors: A Survey of Research and Criticism* (1969), edited by Jackson R. Bryer, provided another valuable snapshot of Cather criticism through the 1960s; the annual Cather sections in *American Literary Scholarship* also contain valuable summaries of publications on Cather. The *Willa Cather Review* has just passed its sixtieth volume; beginning as the *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter* in 1957, this publication has published several decades of original scholarship, discussions of Cather-related publications, and documents the preservation efforts of the Willa Cather Foundation. The publication of *Cather Studies* began in 1990 with volume 1, edited by Susan Rosowski; not only does this ongoing series gather the most recent Cather scholarship, but the thematic focus of many volumes has provided insights into how Cather fits into larger literary trends. The Scholarly Edition of Cather's works also contains important insights, especially in its historical and textual essays, that are relevant to historical and book-historical approaches to Cather. Digital preservation has emerged as an important component of Cather criticism; my own research has benefited from the *Willa Cather Archive* online site, which provides digital access to items like the Scholarly Edition volumes and *Cather Studies*.

James Woodress dedicated his 1987 biography, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, to "the community of Cather scholars, past and present." I cannot think of a more fitting dedication for a work of scholarship. According to "How Long to Read" it would take the average reader eight hours and fifty-one minutes to read *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. While this would no doubt strike many readers as a "long read," it is sobering to consider how long it would have taken readers to discover all the information Woodress's book contains on their own: sifting through archival documents, tracking down leads concerning the details of Cather's life. Many of the scholars I reference in this volume have dedicated a significant portion of their working lives to studying Cather, and it is heartening to consider how works of criticism produced one hundred years ago or more can still provide us with valuable insights into an author's life and works. I have truly found Cather scholars to be a community of passionate and dedicated individuals. My hope in composing this volume is not only to provide a useful resource for the

current Cather community but especially to provide an introduction to the field for future Cather fans and scholars.

Notes

1. In their introduction to *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout discuss the various assumptions that critics held for decades concerning Cather's letters, including the belief that Cather destroyed her correspondence or wished it to be destroyed. Jewell and Stout argue that "except for an isolated incident or two, there is no evidence that [Cather] systematically collected and destroyed her correspondence" (vii).

CHAPTER ONE

W I L L A C A T H E R ' S M E R C U R I A L P O S I T I O N A M O N G T H E C R I T I C S , 1 9 1 8 - 4 9

In 1929, psychologist John M. Stalnaker and anthropologist Fred Eggan applied their knowledge of data collection in the social sciences to the field of literature. In “American Novelists Ranked: A Psychological Study,” published in the *English Journal*, Stalnaker and Eggan established their purpose to “rank a group of American novelists according to their literary merit” (295). As part of their study, they noted a growing public interest in such rankings, including lists of best sellers in newspapers and magazines, annual collections of the “best” short stories, and other markers of distinction like book prizes and the Book-of-the-Month Club selections. But what criteria should influence such rankings, and what method of evaluation should be employed? To gather their data, Stalnaker and Eggan presented notable authors and literary critics with a list of seventy-two authors and asked them to develop a 1 to 10 scale ranking all authors of the same quality with the same number. Thirty-one critics replied. These included Van Wyck Brooks, known at that time for his criticism on Mark Twain, Henry James, and Ralph Waldo Emerson; Fanny Butcher, a book critic for

the *Chicago Tribune*; author Upton Sinclair; Henry Seidel Canby, a Yale professor and the founder and editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*; Burton Rascoe, the literary editor at the *New York Tribune*; folklorist and linguist Louise Pound (a former college friend of Cather's who would go on to become the first female president of the Modern Language Association in the 1950s); and Joseph Wood Krutch, Mark Van Doren, and Dorothy Van Doren, all involved in the *Nation*.

In terms of criteria, Stalnaker and Eggan left the parameters for their critics quite broad. The researchers asked their participating critics to rank authors based on their "*general literary merit*, as evidenced by their novels" (299, italics original). Stalnaker and Eggan suggested that "morality, sales popularity, style, entertaining qualities, 'pure beauty,' historical importance, or value as a psychological document," could be considered as possible points of evaluation.

In collecting their data, Stalnaker and Eggan asked participants to sort their novelists into groups, with "group 1" consisting of the most superior writers, "group 2" consisting of writers just below the first group, and so forth. Stalnaker and Eggan reported that two individuals—Willa Cather and Edith Wharton—were the only two authors to be listed by general consensus in the first group. As the authors explain, this does not mean that all the critics voted Cather and Wharton as part of their first group. Concerning Cather specifically, out of thirty-one responses, "30 of the critics ranked Miss Cather," with twenty critics voting her into group 1 (303). Stalnaker and Eggan expressed clear satisfaction in their experiment and the results. "The impossible has been accomplished," they asserted, "and by the literary critics themselves. Novelists, we have shown, may be ranked with fair accuracy; and we have presented the actual rankings" (307). Of course, readers may scoff at the "scientific" accuracy of the survey; the researchers themselves reported that critic John Macy responded to their query by stating that "it is impossible to rank novelists or other people who think. Psychologists can be ranked with fair accuracy as sub-morons" (qtd. in Stalnaker and Eggan 295). But all critics—including Macy, the author of *The Spirit of American Literature* (1913) and *The Critical Game* (1922)—engage to some degree in the sort of evaluation that Stalnaker and Eggan explored, as they assess the merits of particular authors or works.

As this chapter will show, the publication date of Stalnaker and Eggan's study, 1929, represents a fascinating crux in critical appraisal of Willa Cather's work in the United States. It comes just after the

publication of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in 1927, which was very well received by critics; by the mid-1930s, however, influential critics would routinely find fault in Cather's novels as old fashioned and out of touch. This chapter begins with the publication of *My Ántonia* in 1918 as a critical entry point into the contemporary reception of Cather's works by literary critics and traces Cather's critical reputation through her death in 1947. The qualities that Stalnaker and Eggan outlined in judging novels—beauty, morality, psychological depth, historical value, entertainment, literary prizes, and sales—each makes an appearance in critical disagreements about Cather's work during her lifetime. These critics asked questions like, What technical features make a novel beautiful? Can a moral novel be an entertaining one? What obligation does a writer have to represent her contemporary moment? Beyond the words of these critics, however, there are other indicators of Cather's reputation during her lifetime, including major literary prizes like the Pulitzer, honorary degrees, and sales. As this chapter indicates, Cather herself was also an active force in making decisions that would shape her literary reputation during her lifetime. Stalnaker and Eggan concluded that Cather had one of the highest levels of “general literary merit” in 1929: this chapter seeks to understand how and why.

A Growing Reputation, 1918–29

While Cather published four novels prior to 1920—*Alexander's Bridge* (1912), *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918)—true engagement with Cather's works by literary critics began in response to *My Ántonia*. One of the most important factors shaping the perception of Cather's work in the 1920s was her status as a regional writer. Cather's affiliation with the Midwest and the West encouraged reviewers to situate her work alongside others from those regions and within larger literary trends, such as the “revolt from the provinces,” that shaped literary realism in the early twentieth century.¹ Cather's inclusion in the canon of influential midwestern writers was especially solidified through the critical work of H. L. Mencken and Carl Van Doren.

One of the best places to begin to understand Willa Cather criticism in the 1920s is H. L. Mencken's essay “Willa Cather.” Published in *The Borzoi: 1920*, an anthology released by Cather's publisher Alfred

A. Knopf to promote his authors and their works, Mencken's essay highlighted Cather's accomplishments in light of the current literary moment. He explained that "four or five years ago, though she already had a couple of good books behind her, Willa Cather was scarcely heard of. When she was mentioned at all, it was as a talented but rather inconsequential imitator of Mrs. [Edith] Wharton." What had changed in those "four or five years"? First, Mencken suggested that Cather "mastered the trade of the novelist"; he praised her writing as "penetrating . . . accurate . . . delicate . . . brilliant and charming" (29). He noted her improvement in character development ("her drama is firmly rooted in a sound psychology") and style ("her grasp of form has become instinctive"). But Mencken suggested, more importantly, that Cather's improvement as a novelist was connected to her abandonment of the New England setting associated with her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), for the Midwest, or "Middle West," as Mencken and many writers in the 1920s labeled the region. *Alexander's Bridge*, published first in serial format as "Alexander's Masquerade" in *McClure's* in 1911, centers on Bartley Alexander, a bridge engineer, as he attempts to navigate the demands of his work and his family life. Because of the novel's setting and focus on realism, it has often been compared to those of Henry James and Edith Wharton. Mencken used the stark differences between *Alexander's Bridge* and Cather's pioneer novels as a means of highlighting broader literary trends in the United States. "If the United States ever becomes civilized and develops a literature," Mencken argued, "no doubt the Middle West will be the scene of the prodigy" (28). It is only in the Middle West, Mencken claimed, that one is to find authentic America—and that is reflected in Cather's fiction, culminating with, Mencken suggested, *My Ántonia* (1918). Of this novel, Mencken wrote, "Here, unless I err gravely, was the best piece of fiction ever done by a woman in America" (30). While his comment was unfortunately so gendered in limiting Cather's greatness to that of a female writer, it was clear in the essay itself that Mencken saw Cather's work as strong and deserving of praise. Mencken's essay anticipated the intersection of three areas—craftmanship, regional affiliation, and gender—that defined Cather criticism in the 1920s and would continue to shape the reception of her work for decades to come.

In addition to highlighting the critical threads of craft, regionalism, and gender, Mencken also considered the relationship between Cather and criticism itself. He concluded his essay with an admonishment of

Cather: "I once protested to Miss Cather that her novels came too far apart" (31). Mencken indicated that Cather was "greatly astonished" and replied that she was, quite simply, unable to write more quickly. "I work all the time," Mencken recorded Cather responding. "It takes three years to write a novel." In reflecting on this exchange, Mencken suggested that "there is a profound criticism of criticism here." Mencken's conclusion that Cather's deliberate pace of composition presented a critique of literary criticism is far fetched and, perhaps, a playful jab at his own line of work. This exchange, however, did anticipate tensions that would arise between Cather and her critics during her lifetime, especially those critics who thought that Cather's work did not keep pace with current events.

Carl Van Doren's inclusion of Cather in his *Contemporary American Novelists* series for the *Nation* in 1921 marked another significant moment in critical recognition of Cather's work. Van Doren was one of the first critics to discover and articulate a link between two of Cather's favorite subjects in the 1920s: the artist and the pioneer: "The passion of the artist, the heroism of the pioneer—these are the human qualities Miss Cather knows best. Compared with her artists the artists of most of her contemporaries seem imitated in cheap materials. . . . only now and then do they have the breathing, authentic reality of Miss Cather's painters and musicians" (Van Doren 93). Van Doren, like Mencken before him, emphasized the "authenticity" of Cather's work; while Mencken's "Willa Cather" essay strongly emphasized Cather's affiliation with the Midwest as a particular *place*, Van Doren's essay considered Cather's work in more abstract terms of the "pioneer." His discussion of Cather's artist figures also provided added complexity to critical assessments of her work, as Van Doren's emphasis on the "universal human qualities" of the artist and pioneer figures provided a contrast to the potentially narrow or limited field of midwestern regionalism.

Cather herself recognized the significance of Van Doren's essay, one that provided an engaging and intricate assessment of her cumulative body of fiction to that point. On July 30, 1921, Cather wrote a long letter to Van Doren; her response is worth quoting at length, for it identified the critical strengths of Van Doren's piece, while also documenting how Cather engaged with her critics.

I have been watching with the keenest interest your hair-raising feat of writing about a group of most dissimilar writers, each in his own

manner; from the lumpy mountain range of Mr. Dreiser to my own comparatively calm vegetable garden. I am naturally most interested in the article on myself, and I think you have done well and generously by me. I have never tried to puzzle out why my bow had two such dissimilar strains; except that when one lives in the cornfields the people in *The Musical Courier* look very dazzling, and after one has lived a good deal among the dazzling, the cornfields have their distinct merits. Since you have managed to find some sort of logical connection between these two obsessions, I am very glad to accept it. (*Selected Letters* 302)

Cather's description of her own work as a "comparatively calm vegetable garden" and Nebraska, or the Midwest more broadly, as "the cornfields," reflected contemporary critical discussions of her work and the role of the Midwest in literature. Although H. L. Mencken suggested in his "Willa Cather" essay that the Middle West represented the most American section of the country, this positioning was not exclusively a compliment. In his 1918 review of *My Ántonia* (which was also dedicated to reviewing Kansan William Allen White's novel *In the Heart of a Fool*), Mencken situated the "tawdry stuff of Middle Western *Kultur*" as something authors must overcome ("Mainly Fiction" 88). The *Nation's* review of Cather's 1920 short story collection, *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, contained a similar suggestion, arguing that her work "represents the triumph of the mind over Nebraska" ("Short Story Art and Artifice" 99). Through the criticism of Willa Cather, the Middle West emerged as a region that was the most American thing about America—but also, paradoxically, a place to escape from.

Book reviews of individual works by Cather also played an important role in establishing the earliest critical opinions. Critical engagement with Cather's work grew exponentially during her publications of the 1910s. From the publication of *My Ántonia* onward, Cather's works were reviewed routinely in major periodicals (including the *Nation*, *Bookman*, the *Smart Set*, and the *New Republic*) and newspapers (such as the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Daily News*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*). Her work was routinely reviewed by many of the most active critics of the 1920s, including Randolph Bourne, Burton Rascoe, Heywood Broun, Fanny Butcher, and Zoë Atkins. In broad survey of critical reviews of Cather's novels from *My Ántonia* in 1918 through *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in 1927, several major topics emerged in line with Mencken's