

# Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter

*The Willa Cather Society*

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"Willow Shade," Virginia, home of Willa Cather (1874-83).

— Photo Courtesy of David T. Parry

## Destinations and Admonitions: Willa Cather's *Obscure Destinies*

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But certainty generally is illusion,  
and repose is not the destiny of man.

— Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.,  
*The Path of the Law* (1897)

*Obscure Destinies* (1932) stands in opposition to the universal application of experience, or to the transference of experience into admonition. Conclusions that seem irrefutable in one of the text's three narratives are inapplicable, even absurd, if transferred to another of the stories. In the introductory paragraph to the last of the three narratives, Cather writes, "we like to think that there are certain unalterable realities," but such certainties have no real existence, not even "somewhere at the bottom of things" (193). Cather's trilogy suggests that what is true in one context or true to one particular destiny has obscure reference to

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## Virginia Seminar Plans for June 21-28, 1997

Plans are taking shape for the Seventh International Willa Cather Seminar, to be held in Winchester, Virginia, June 21-28, 1997. The Seminar topic is "Willa Cather's Southern Connections," and seminar presentations and discussions will focus on the importance of Southern culture and issues throughout Cather's career, on her complex connections to Southern writing and writers such as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Zora Neale Hurston, Ellen Glasgow and others. The intricate and troubling racial dynamics of Cather's fiction, especially *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, will be a major topic, as will the important issues of childhood and continuity raised by Cather's early years in Virginia. And, as always, other issues of ongoing interest to Cather scholars, teachers, and readers will be a part of the week's program as well, and a variety of theoretical perspectives will be represented.

A varied group of international scholars will form the seminar faculty. Familiar figures in Cather

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Co-sponsors of the seminar are the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation in Red Cloud, Nebraska, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

More than 100 Cather scholars and fans from across the United States and around the world are expected to attend. Some events will be free and open to the public. The community will be involved as much as possible.

"This series has been going on since the early 1980s and is usually held every two or three years in places associated with Cather's career," Romines said. "We've never been to Winchester before, and we're very excited about coming."

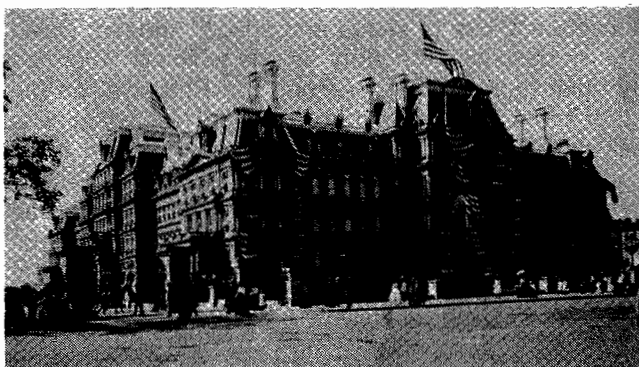
Past seminars have been held in Nebraska; Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Quebec City, Quebec.

"Those places were settings in some of Cather's most famous works," said Romines, an accomplished Cather scholar. "We tend to think of her as a Western writer, but she had strong Southern connections. That tends to be forgotten."

Born in 1873 near Gore, Cather moved with her family at age 9 to Red Cloud. She only made a few trips back to Virginia. But Cather did return to her Frederick County birthplace to write her last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, which tells the story of a female plantation owner in the 1850s who suspects her husband, a miller, is having an affair with a mulatto girl. The plantation mistress' daughter, an abolitionist, helps the slave girl escape to Canada, tearing apart the family. The family reunites when one of Sapphira's granddaughters dies. After the Civil War, the slave girl returns home and a 5-year-old girl is among her greeters. That child is Cather.

"I think it's very telling that her last novel is set in Virginia," Romines said. "It shows the place she came from was on her mind throughout her life."

John Jacobs, an English professor at Shenandoah and site coordinator for the seminar, said the university has never hosted a literary seminar of such a high caliber. "It's probably the single most important literary conference we've had here," said Jacobs, who attended last year's Willa Cather Seminar in Quebec City and invited the group of Cather scholars to come to Winchester. "They really liked the idea."



War Department Building, described in *The Professor's House*, as it appeared in the 1890s when Cather visited and worked in Washington, D.C.

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another. Early in her career, Cather forecast the central dilemma of her text: "We are always taking temporary tendencies of humanity and regarding them as final. But the final tendencies and destiny are in the keeping of a greater hand than ours" (*The World and the Parish*, 269). Lived experience amounts to an accumulation of temporary tendencies, and the quest for repose amounts to nothing more than (again, from the opening of "Two Friends") a return "to something . . . known before," something understood as true because it is familiar, "vivid memories, which in some unaccountable and very personal way give us courage." Truths that are very personal are usually considered very true, but it does not necessarily follow that such truths are transferable, or communicable. In this sense, truth, in Cather's trilogy, may be nothing more than the veracity of one's own beliefs.

*Obscure Destinies* contains three discrete narratives, and each narrative closes with the name of a particular city and date: "Neighbour Rosicky" (New York 1928); "Old Mrs. Harris" (New Brunswick 1931); "Two Friends" (Pasadena 1931). In common practice, such place and temporal designation is meant to indicate where and when the preceding narrative was written. "New York 1928" thus marks the narrative of the final days in the life of a Nebraska farmer; "New Brunswick 1931" marks the site of writing about the Tennessee family who moved to Colorado and then didn't do so well; "Pasadena 1931" signals the narrative origins of the story about the memory of two friends who had a falling out. Of course, New York, New Brunswick, and Pasadena are all places where Willa Cather lived, travelled to, and wrote. She moved around a lot. In 1928 she was writing "Neighbour Rosicky" in New York; early in 1931 she wrote "Old Mrs. Harris" on Grand Manan Island; later that year she travelled to Pasadena and wrote "Two Friends." *Obscure Destinies* thus acknowledges the method of its own production as a matter of transience — first New York, then New Brunswick, finally California. Nonetheless, Cather designed the book as a continuous, trilogical text. For example, the fact that "Old Mrs. Harris" would make a larger single volume than *My Mortal Enemy* indicates that Cather saw the three stories in *Obscure Destinies* as related in some fashion and wanted them to be read together, perhaps more like Mrs. Rosen's cross-stitch, but cohesive nonetheless. Each narrative segment in *Obscure Destinies* marks a temporary tendency: a transitory writing place from which the author cast a fleeting indication of the human predicament. The volume must be considered as a whole in order to bring into focus the cross-stitch narrative that emerged from Cather's cross-continental treks.

Movement and juxtaposition are at the heart of *Obscure Destinies*. In the context of mobility, the

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idea of destiny brings to mind destination: how it is that in the space of three years a person could find herself in New York and then New Brunswick and then Pasadena, writing; or how it is that writing, begun in the mind, as an expression of certain unalterable realities, reaches its destination and is construed as stimuli, cross-stitched into another set of experiences as stimulation. Just as one's destiny may be fulfilled upon the arrival at a place or into a predicament that was not willed, so too the destination, or interpreted meaning, of what is written will be transformed as it moves from one mind to another. *Obscure Destinies* may thus be seen to mark Cather's acknowledgment that the final tendencies of her own work were not in her hands. Cather's trilogy thus forms a meditation on ends, on destinations and conclusions, and encourages speculation on the extent to which such finalities might be useful or credible for more than momentary appreciation, or application. The remarkable quality of the narrative sequence as a whole is the unavoidable conclusion, which this essay maps, that there is very little that one can impart from the vantage point of destination. *Obscure Destinies* suggests that those who have come to some conclusion, or whose experience has left them in possession of great insights into life — wisdom, if you will — will find it impossible and probably unwise to apply what they know to the lives of others. Destiny is closure, and closure is irrelevant to the unfolding of present circumstances.

Cather accomplishes the design of *Obscure Destinies* by writing three stories that implicitly contradict one another in terms of narrative implication and dramatic truth. As a result, criticism of the volume tends to center on one or another of the stories, with very few critics venturing to discuss the text as a whole. There are a few exceptions. Kathleen Danker finds unity in the three stories, "use of pastoral themes and imagery." According to Danker, "Cather traces the promise, the decline, and the death of the pastoral as an ideal of human life" (24). Danker's conclusions echo Susan Rosowski's sense that the text anticipates "the dark romanticism of [Cather's] final novels" (204) which follow. Michael Leddy finds unity in the narrative aesthetics of the volume, which features "three variations on the possibilities of observation and narration." Leddy's reading rescues linearity, and he finds that "the volume moves toward obscurity and darkness, from a life that is complete, beautiful and intelligible to lives that are incomplete, isolated, and puzzling" (141). However, these efforts are isolated within the more common critical practice of centering on one or another of the stories in the volume. Critical analyses searching for thematic continuities are inevitably blocked by the absence of such continuities. In fact, Cather's text contains three narratives at odds with one another at the very basic level of plot implication.

In the middle narrative of *Obscure Destinies*, youth and age are at odds, and old Mrs. Harris dies estranged from her daughter and unnoticed by her granddaughter. At her death, Mrs. Harris "slipped out of the Templeton's story; but Victoria and Vickie had still to go on, to follow the long road that leads through things unguessed at and unforeseeable. When they are old, they will come closer and closer to Grandma Harris" (190). The narrative concludes with this hopeful suggestion that the young people will come to appreciate Mrs. Harris as they mature. Thus the discerning reader may conclude that only through their own experience of aging do the young comprehend the predicaments of their elders. But to draw such a conclusion, the reader would have to suppress a reading of the narrative that follows "Old Mrs. Harris" in the text. In "Two Friends," the narrator recalls that ever since she was a young girl she "admired Dillon and Trueman," old as they are, because they were "secure and established" (197) and seemed to represent all that was honorable and enviable in life. If anything, the jack-playing narrator of the volume's final story recalls being a bit too much in awe of her elders. The young girl sees the two men as representative of "certain unalterable realities, somewhere at the bottom of things," and because of this tendency she is sorely disappointed when the friendship proves less than eternal and the unalterable reality breaks in two. Nonetheless, the two men serve as the girl's anchors; they are the vivid memories she holds, the sources of renewal to which she returns again and again, like the seagulls that alight on their remote islands to breed. I don't know if Vickie or Victoria could possibly live long enough to see Mrs. Harris in this way.

The Templeton's move out West was a disaster for the family; there was no greater mistake made in that family than the day that Mr. Templeton "got the idea of bettering himself." His sense that "his boys would have a better chance in Colorado" (132) is regrettable. In fine Catherian understatement, we are told that "So far, things had not gone well with him" (133). One would not want to draw fixed conclusions from the Templeton's experience and apply them to "Neighbour Rosicky," however. Each person in the Templeton household regrets the move from Tennessee and the subsequent loss of status and space. Indeed, David Stouck describes the story as one which is "informed by quiet regret" (221). Among the Rosickys, on the other hand, the move out West, to Nebraska, was salvational. Anton Rosicky's life was lived in three countries, Bohemia, England, and the United States. In New York (where this narrative was written) "he was tormented by a longing to run away" (30) and that longing served him well as he, unlike Templeton, betters himself with each move west. But this success brings tension into his life as he attempts to translate his experience into advice for his sons. Much of Rosicky's final days are spent "trying to find what he wanted for his boys, and why it was he so hungered to feel sure they would be here, working this very land,

after he was gone" (58). In this sense Templeton and Rosicky have something in common, different as they are in spirit and destiny. Neither man's life is instructive, even if one may be preferable to the other. Templeton's failures won't keep his daughter from moving away, and Rosicky's tales of the evil city won't keep his son from becoming an urbanite. Neither man can translate destiny into admonition.

In *Obscure Destinies*, the transference of experience into common vision accounts for the textual definition of common bonds. Such transference is at the heart of the attraction the narrator in "Two Friends" has for the friendship she witnesses. Dillon and Trueman go to the theater together often, and the narrator waxes over the way in which "they saw the play over again as they talked of it." Their conversation inspires a gloss on Catherian poetics: "perhaps whatever is seen by the narrator as he speaks is sensed by the listener, quite irrespective of words." The thing not named doesn't have to be named, if it is recognized as a shared inclination. The narrator, moreover, is included in the transaction, and "in some way the lives of those two men came across to me as they talked" (218). Sensing the same thing is a valuable quality in human relations. It accounts for the success of the Rosicky marriage ("Life had gone well with them because, at bottom, they had the same ideas about life," [24]) — but the disappearance of such tendencies is what finally destroys the friendship in "Two Friends" and leaves the family at odds in "Old Mrs. Harris." A similar cohesion connects the narratives of *Obscure Destinies*. The trilogy is held together by this sense of transference, often by negation, from one set of circumstances to another, a cross-stitching from one point in time and space to somewhere else, another city, a few years later. It may well be that this impression of cohesion has no referent, that it is more an implication of something, pure and simple, with no anchor, no "somewhere at the bottom of things." The thing not named in this text is not named because it doesn't exist materially, it is only a temporary tendency.

When Dillon dies and Trueman leaves town, the narrator in "Two Friends" grieves the loss of more than the friendship. She expresses "the feeling of something broken that could so easily have been mended; of something delightful that was senselessly wasted, of a truth that was accidentally distorted — one of the truths we want to keep" (230). However, this is exactly what happens to truth in *Obscure Destinies*, it gets wasted in the transference from possessor to interlocutor, it slips into the dust and gets lost, "like the last residuum of material things, — the soft bottom resting place" (212) of ideas. Truth is thus possessed fleetingly, and enlightenment, if it occurs at all, passes through experience like a season. Doctor Burleigh, looking over the view from Rosicky's gravesite, thinks that "Nothing could be more undeathlike than this place; nothing could be more right for a man who had helped to do the work of great cities and had got to it

at last. Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful" (711). These words end the narrative, and Rosicky's life does have a completeness to it, but it is not something he can pass on to his sons. Rudolph and Polly won't last on the farm, and by all indications in the narrative, they are bound for the city. Rosicky's life is complete, but these other lives are yet in the process of completion. What was for Rosicky a destination, the site of repose, is for his sons a starting place. We know as well from the example of the Templeton's that even as a destination, the West does not always lead to metaphors of completion and satisfaction.

Particular destinies in the text are thus obscure, problematic, and ambiguous, as far as their value can be discerned. Rosicky's destiny — a life of completion — is nontransferable, however admirable; the destiny of Mrs. Harris, to regret Tennessee and slip quietly out of the story, is unenviable, though the woman possesses great dignity; and the destiny of Trueman and Dillon, while not uncommon, is certainly unfortunate — and would be unremarkable except for the impression left on the narrator of the story. Indeed, at one point in the volume the value of a clear and precisely understood destiny is negated. When Vickie gets a scholarship to the University of Michigan, Mr. Rosen asks her why she wants to go to college. Their exchange leads to her assertion that she doesn't know why, she just wants it. Mr. Rosen is pleased with her at this point, because her desire conforms to his own beliefs. "Then if you want it without any purpose at all, you will not be disappointed," he says and then quotes Michelet — "The end is nothing, the road is all" — telling Vickie to keep that quotation with her college credentials. "Vickie knew he meant her to take it along as an antidote, a corrective for whatever colleges might do to her" (158-59). It is not easy, in other words, to maintain an *obscure destiny* while all around there are forces insisting upon definition and intention.

The three narratives about death — death of people and their communities — paradoxically constitute a text which emphasizes the prerogatives of the living to recast their own lives according to present desires, not past exemplars. "The end is nothing, the road is all" — Cather liked this quotation enough to employ it in *Not Under Forty*, to describe the shepherd people in Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*. "A shepherd people is not driving toward anything," Cather observes, and exists free of "the relentless mechanical gear which directs every moment of modern life toward accuracy" (99). An obsession with destination, with ends (or with the bottom line, in present-day terminology) obscures the deeper significance of human life. *Obscure Destinies* suggests in its various narrative and textual representations that little of anything is continuous in life, few lessons hold from one generation to the next, there are no unalterable realities to be gleaned from experience. Paradoxically, it is this observation that holds together Cather's

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trilogy. Cohesion results in the recognition that what binds is temporary, and thus of great value.

Cather's text undercuts seriously any claims to authority based upon experience, age, or textual closure. Vickie Templeton's antidote is thus at the core of the trilogy. As a guard against what colleges try to do, or what motivates anyone who seeks to educate, instruct, or advise, one must preserve the Catherian antidote: living is no application of principles but the unfolding of desires made less obscure in time. However, as obscurity passes and the thing gets named, so to speak, it slips out of life into the dust. In this sense Mrs. Harris' bedroom, in the hallway between the kitchen and the dining room, in a space "rather like a passageway" (92), marks the space of all existence. And although "we yet like to think that there are certain unalterable realities" that can be imparted or transferred from one to another like an estate or a heritage, Cather's trilogy suggests strongly otherwise. Those who don't die in *Obscure Destinies* must move on, must "follow the long road that leads through things unguessed at and unforeseeable" (190). In "Neighbour Rosicky" Rudolph and Polly will move off the farm and into the untried city; in "Old Mrs. Harris" Vickie will move to Ann Arbor to attend college; in "Two Friends" Trueman packs up and moves to California. Each of these characters slips out of the narrative, not into death (as do Rosicky, Harris, and Dillon), but into yet another obscure destiny.

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## News Items from the WCPM Director . . .



Pat Phillips

— Photo by Robert Graning

❖ Normally I start my columns with good news. This time, though, I do not. On June 10, Miss Josephine Frisbie, one of the two remaining founders of the WCPM, died in Omaha. Jo was a pioneer and a visionary. Born in 1903 and reared in Red Cloud and Amboy, Nebraska, she graduated from Red Cloud High School in 1920 and the University of Nebraska in 1927 (B.S.) and 1928

(M.S.). She continued graduate studies at the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, and Omaha University. She taught school in Norfolk, Nebraska; Concordia, Kansas; Fremont, Nebraska; and Omaha. While at Omaha Central High School (1936-1968), she served as chairperson of the English Department. From 1940-1960 she also worked as a guidance counselor. Throughout her teaching career, Jo provided continuous leadership in many Omaha organizations. Jo had the distinction of being the first woman to serve on the Omaha Library Board. She was president of the Omaha Education Association from 1948-1950.

❖ The death of Margaret Cather Shannon, Willa Cather's niece (daughter of Roscoe), was more sad news. Dr. Tom Auld, Willa Cather's nephew (Jessica's son), informed us that Mrs. Shannon had died suddenly and unexpectedly on April 14. With her death comes the loss of one more link to the past. Mrs. Shannon had wonderful childhood and young adult memories of her aunt; she and her husband, Richard, who predeceased her, were very interested in and supportive of the WCPM. We will miss her; I will miss her.

❖ On a brighter note, the highlight of this past winter was Julie Harris's visit to Red Cloud. She was here to film a segment for Nebraska Educational Television's *Plains Voices* series, the one which features Cather's "The Sentimentality of William Tavener" and "Winter Memories," excerpted from *O Pioneers!*, and adapted for *Plains Voices* by Joel Geyer, the producer/director of the series. Filming was done at the Cather childhood home where Miss Harris introduced and narrated the Cather pieces and also a segment from Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules*. The series format is very similar to that of *Masterpiece Theatre*.

❖ It's nice to settle into the "tourist" season. In April visitors came from fifteen states and five