
Joan Acocella. *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. 127p.

PAULETTE SCOTT
EASTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

This book is an expansion of an essay, “Cather and the Academy,” which was published in the *New Yorker* in 1995. The author’s main concern is with the recent political criticism of Cather’s novels, but she also includes chapters on Cather criticism from the 1910s to the 1940s and from the 1950s and 1960s. She points out that “Cather is traditionally regarded as the elegist of the pioneer period, the repository of what America thinks of as its early, true-grit triumphs” (3). The first two chapters, “The Darkling Plain” and “Youth” provide some interesting facts of Cather’s biography. When she was nine, Cather’s family moved from Virginia to the flat, open plains of Nebraska. Like the writers who influenced her most — Virgil and James — Cather writes of exiles, people caught in circumstances strange to them (4-5).

As a teenager, Cather was unsure of her plans for the future. At the age of fourteen, she got a crew cut and began dressing like a man in jackets and suspenders. Her ambition was to become a doctor (9). Although her family could not afford it, she insisted on going to college. When her college essay on Thomas Carlyle was published in the *Nebraska State Journal*, she changed her mind about becoming a doctor and decided to become a writer. She continued her education at the University of Nebraska while writing a column for the *Nebraska State Journal* (11). During this period she developed her ideas on art, one of her main one’s being that the best art did not focus on reality but evoked the state of the soul.

In her third chapter, “Cather and Her Critics: 1910s–1940s,” Acocella finds that critics praised Cather for her broadening of subject matter to include the lives of poor immigrant farmers and for her prose style. Her war novel, *One of Ours*, is according to Acocella both a good and bad novel. Its depiction of Nebraska is first-rate, but the transformation of Claude into a brave infantryman happens too quickly. Although Cather received the Pulitzer Prize for the novel, she was criticized for her positive stance on war. In the 1920s she wrote four novels, including *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in which after the Archbishop builds his cathedral, he is left without any dreams. According to Acocella, for Cather “the only real life is in the imagination, in desire and memory” (21). Acocella judges *Death Comes for the Archbishop* Cather’s most perfect work. But by the late ’20s, Edmund Wilson and other critics found Cather old-fashioned because of her prairie novels. Experimentalism and subjectivity were in vogue, but Cather did not use stream

of consciousness or deal with her characters' sex lives. Since Cather was thirty-eight when her first novel was published, she did not share the values of the younger Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Dos Passos. Yet Acocella sees her forwarding a modern perspective: "Her austere style is part of modernist classicism, her tragic vision, part of modernist pessimism" (23).

Condemned to in the '20s, Cather was openly attacked in the '30s for her lack of interest in economics and her conservative politics. Dismissed by the Left, she was exalted by the Right for writing Catholic books, a label that did not help her reputation. Discouraged by negative criticism of her work, Cather became reclusive, burned letters, and forbade anyone publishing her letters. Like Faulkner, Joyce, and Eliot, she was denigrated by the critics. Having written by then twelve novels on "the great subject of early twentieth-century literature, the gulf between the mind and world," they were judged by critics "according to whether they embraced or opposed the struggle of industrial workers in the cities" (29).

Chapter IV, "Cather and Her Criticisms: 1950s–1960s," finds the treatment of Cather's work discouraging. Critical studies looked for myths and archetypes and traced her sources in the Bible and the *Aeneid*. Cather's work did not lend itself well to the New Criticism then in fashion because it lacked formal intricacies. A few good studies such as that of E.K. Brown or David Daiche tended to depict her as either "the Prairie Elegist" or "the Classical/Christian Idealist" (34). Unlike other writers, she did not write of alienation or use experimental techniques, and she fit no current literary trend until feminism became popular.

Chapters V and VI take up the issues of Cather and the feminists. At a time when feminist critics were attempting to demonstrate a female literary tradition inherited by women, Cather was accurately seen as clearly positioned within the male tradition. Her favorite writers included Virgil, the Bible, and Bunyan along with the works of Tolstoy, Flaubert, and Henry James. While Cather clearly endorsed her male narrators, critics found her fiction "contains patriarchal attitudes, but only because she is decrying them" (42). Critics attempted to show that Cather endorsed unfeminist values and at the same time was in conflict with those values. Janet Rule's *Lesbian Images* (1975) was influential in raising the question of whether Cather was a homosexual. While Cather had a crush on a college friend, Isabelle McClung, and lived with Edith Lewis for thirty-nine years, Acocella concludes that such female intimacies were not necessarily lesbian. Feminist critics attempted to show Cather in conflict and deduce from that she was lesbian. The book that garnered most critical attention with this approach was O'Brien's psycho-sexual study, *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (1987). Prior to this study, only two approaches surfaced to Cather's "insufficient feminisim: one, write her

off; two, claim that behind her unreliable narrators, she really was feminist” (51). O’Brien offered a third choice, that Cather was in conflict with her mother. Following O’Brien was a series of books and articles reconciling Cather with various issues. The Deconstructionists such as Robert J. Nelson found Cather “torn between the “phallogocentric hegemony” and a “vaginocentric” one” (55). Acocella rightly says that Cather is important as a feminist in writing novels which show that women could achieve success in the world and not just give themselves to men. The cutting edge of current criticism focuses on multiculturalism and finds that Cather’s reactionary and racist views were shared by most white people during the early twentieth century.

In Chapter VII, “Politics and Criticism,” Acocella predicts that younger critics will study Cather in terms of antipatriarchalism, anticolonialism, and antihegemony. Political critics typically try to figure out what Cather is attempting to hide by her “gaps” or “silences” and then fill in with such issues as homosexuality or gender conflicts. At the 1973 Cather Centennial Conference, Donald Sutherland spoke of Cather’s loyalty to liberal humanism, thereby affirming her sense of values. In the late 1990s a number of articles protested the distortions placed on Cather’s texts by political critics and predicted a return to “questions of aesthetics” (75).

Chapter VIII, “The Tragic Sense of Life,” points to Cather’s central theme of exile: for her, loss of home was the human condition. Her move to Nebraska, although traumatic, gave her a sense of idealism that behind the disaster of life “there exists some order, some realm of meaning, that explains and dignifies our lives, turns them from a disaster into a tragedy” (81). Acocella asserts further that nature inspired Cather’s irony and tragic vision, and concludes the chapter by stating that such a view does not concur with any political reform since “it gives implicit assent to life’s unfairness,” an unfairness that political reform tries to abolish (89).

Acocella’s study is a must-read for any serious scholar of Cather’s works. In artful prose, she demonstrates how Cather’s writings have been distorted by both the Left and Right. While guiding the reader through the trends and fashions of criticism, Acocella gives us a renewed sense of the tragic vision central to Cather’s works, while highlighting the folly of viewing her works through a political lens; but whichever lens, Willa Cather’s enduring art deserves our ongoing attention.