

VISION AND DESIGN IN THE
NOVELS OF WILLA CATHER

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A THESIS
PRESENTED TO
THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, DELHI

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF REQUIREMENT
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNDER THE
SUPERVISION OF

DR. SUNITA JAIN

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

SEPTEMBER 1986

CERTIFICATE

I am satisfied that the thesis entitled, "Vision and Design in the Novels of Willa Cather", being submitted by Nirmala Vaidyanathan is worthy of consideration for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, and is a record of the original bonafide research work carried out by her under my guidance and supervision, and that the results contained in it have not been submitted in part or full to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree or diploma. I certify that she has pursued the prescribed course of research.

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CLARIFICATION

I have used British spellings except in quotations and followed the conventions of the MLA Style Sheet(2nd Edition), as far as possible.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to record my deep gratitude to Dr. Sunita Jain, my thesis supervisor, who first introduced me to Willa Cather. She was a constant source of encouragement and help and this dissertation is proof of the unstinting guidance she gave me at every stage and all through its writing.

I thank Prof. Purnima Mathur, Head, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, for her co-operation and counsel, and the staff of her department who willingly extended all help whenever I needed it.

I am grateful to Prof. Anil Vidyalkar, Head, the Department of Education in Social Sciences and Humanities, National Council of Educational Research and Training and Prof.(Miss)S.K.Ram, Head of the English team of the DESSH, NCERT. Their continued support and sincere interest made this thesis possible to a great degree.

Dear friends in Nebraska, USA, took time off from their busy schedule during the Second National Seminar on Willa Cather (in Hastings, Nebraska, U.S.A., in June, 1983), to talk to me about Willa Cather, giving me a greater appreciation of the novelist and her works.

I value the understanding, patience and active interest of the members of my family in this project.

My special thanks go to Mr.M.K.Mohan for the technical assistance he rendered which has been invaluable in this endeavour.

My very sincere thanks go to Mr. Aravamudhan and Mr.Vijay Vaidyanathan for the hours of painstaking work done by them in typing this thesis.

ABSTRACT

"Vision and Design in the Novels of Willa Cather"

"A study of Willa Cather's art involves as well a study of the world as she saw it and recorded it in her fiction, and her search for order and meaning, for stability and eternal values in the midst of the flux and change of life itself", observes Catherine Mclay.

For Willa Cather this quest began early - during her childhood on the prairies. There, her neighbours were European immigrants from Bohemia and Czechoslovakia, Scandinavia and Italy, France and Germany. These hardy pioneers had left their home and people behind and ventured into a strange and hostile land, bringing with them, along with their hopes and aspirations, a courage and determination, endurance and fortitude of a kind that compelled the admiration and respect of the young girl. But what really forged an emotional bond between Willa Cather and her neighbours was the ancient culture and traditions which they brought with them from the Old World to the young, new world they had come to inhabit. This link with a past that had begun in ancient times and endured through centuries into the present times, opened up an entirely new vision of life to her. The world, for Willa Cather no longer ended at the edges of her prairies, or even at

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the frontiers of her country. It deepened and broadened to encompass the world outside and mankind as a whole. Here, amidst the uprooting and transplanting of lives, was a stability and eternal values which gave her a sense of comfort and security; the beginning of an awareness that there was a purpose to man's life on earth.

Her fiction reflects her continuous search for a meaning to man's short span of life. One hears her voice in Claude Wheeler's observation that "life was so short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together". Willa Cather identified the "background that held together" in the links with the past that man's endeavour establishes. It was this "long chain of human endeavour" that gave meaning and significance to one's life.

E.K. Brown, in his Willa Cather: A Critical Biography observes, "No American novelist since the death of Henry James was Willa Cather's equal in vision or in design." Willa Cather sees life as an eternal, unchanging process of birth, life and death in which each individual plays his part. Though man's life on earth is determined and shaped, to a large extent, by "the blind play of chance", the individual who achieves most is the one who has an intense desire to reach his goal of self-realization and brings

to his striving a single-minded determination. The truly fulfilled individual, therefore, is the one who through his positive action, endurance and fortitude finds a certain harmony in life.

This thesis states that there is a deliberate structuring of her novels by Willa Cather in order to project her vision. The pattern in the books, therefore, is only slightly modified according to the setting, the protagonists or the period in which each novel is set. The literary features of this pattern repeated from novel to novel, such as double protagonists and the role of chance in human affairs point up the consistency of her vision. The novels considered in the study are Alexander's Bridge, (1912), O Pioneers! (1913), The Song of the Lark (1915), My Antonia (1918), One of Ours(1922), A Lost Lady (1923), The Professor's House (1925), My Mortal Enemy (1926), Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927), Shadows on the Rock (1931), Lucy Gayheart (1935), and Sapphira and the Slave Girl(1940).

This thesis has 14 chapters. Chapter 1, which forms the introduction, provides a brief biography of the novelist and highlights her major literary achievements. It makes a quick survey of the more discernible trends in the body of Cather criticism upto recent times and concludes with an outline of the topic under study. Chapters 2 to 13 take up Cather's twelve

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novels chronologically and examine them critically against the framework of the thesis. Chapter 14 is the conclusion. It summarizes what has been said in the earlier chapters and reiterates the opinion that Willa Cather designed her novels in such a way that her fiction served as a vehicle for her consistent vision.

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