

Cather, Willa (1873-1947) Encyclopedia Article

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Willa Cather, variously perceived by critics as realistic, regionalist, or sentimental, as well as an unusual literary stylist of unhurried elegance, memorably exploited themes long regarded as part of the American mythos. She wrote 12 novels and over 60 short stories, contrasting nature's wilderness with the social veneer of her characters, and achieved critical and popular acclaim for works such as *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918), which depict the Nebraska frontier, and, most famously and enduringly perhaps, her "Santa Fe" novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), which treats the history of the Southwest after the Mexican War. According to Susan Rosowski, Cather "saw herself as the first of a new literary tradition, yet one which evolved out of the past and from native traditions rather than in revolt against them." Novels like *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Antonia* favor cultural diversity as embodied in the experiences of immigrant settlers, and showcase the strength of their heroic female characters Alexandra Bergson, Antonia Shimerda, and Thea Kronborg, respectively. Cather's work also affirms appreciation for a simpler era when America espoused spiritual ideals. In the 1920s, in novels such as *One of Ours* (1922), *A Lost Lady* (1923), and *The Professor's House* (1925), she indicted a society that had rejected revered traditional values to embrace materialism. Her last novels—*Shadows on the Rock* (1931) and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940)—reflect the writer's retreat to a past further removed from her own time, when order, stability, and noble principles governed human life. Born in Virginia and educated at the University of Nebraska, Cather wrote poetry, and spent six years as a journalist with *McClure's* magazine before devoting her life full-time to fiction. She spent 40 years until her death living in New York with her devoted companion Edith Lewis.

Further Reading:

O'Brien, Sharon. *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1987.

Rosowski, Susan J. *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1986.

Woodress, James. *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1987.