

Willa Cather

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Cather and the Wolves

Nella Larsen, Willa Cather, and Cultural Mobility

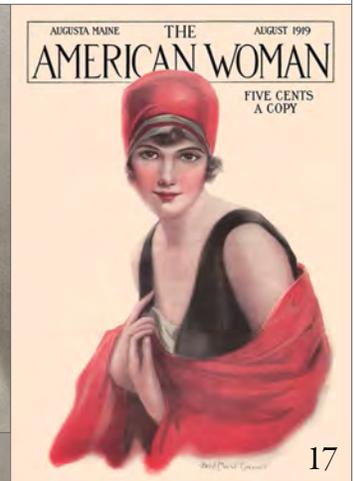
Fitzgerald's Daisy and Cather's Rosamond

Teaching "The Enchanted Bluff"

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On the cover: Sleigh with Trailing Wolves by Paul Powis. Photo courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society’s Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center.

Upwardly Mobile: Teaching “The Enchanted Bluff” to Contemporary Students

Christine Hill Smith | Colorado Mountain College

This essay is about imagination and the dreams of youth—their creation, growth, and how they do and/or do not come to fruition in adulthood. Like many community college professors, I teach five classes per term: one or two classes perceived as “fun” courses and the rest Composition. For my own enjoyment, I often design Willa Cather stories and novels into my writing classes, since that is my only opportunity to teach Cather at all. More important, however, I am convinced that my students’ writing improves when they read accessible, good writing like Cather’s. Several of her short stories prompt my students to think about their own lives and to make meaning of their experiences. Our discussions of Cather’s fiction often become brainstorming sessions for their essays. Cather “teaches” many of the concepts I want my students to learn: perspective, point of view, tone, audience, vivid descriptions, memorable people, and—perhaps most important—the power of writing to connect with other people.

My Composition I and II students read and respond both informally and formally to Cather’s work. At first they write “response pages” about the texts and then later a short research paper, usually around mid-term. Response pages are one full page of their own musings and ideas about the readings. I use them in all my classes: Composition, Humanities, and Literature. I don’t grade them for grammar or usage, but I do put comments on the content to encourage brainstorming and non-linear thinking. Response pages are not summaries, as I have to remind some students at the beginning of each term. In today’s lock-step world of K-12 education, many students are not used to being asked for their own opinions, and it can take a few tries before they are comfortable writing even non-graded personal reactions. Reluctant students can enter the world of ideas, and they can learn to use writing to engage with others. I tell the students my rationale for response pages is to promote critical thinking and to make sure that they really do the readings. Their roommates might take an online multiple-choice quiz for them, but only they can write their own response pages.

The two Composition II classes that read *Great Short Works of Willa Cather* in the spring term of 2014 contained the usual Colorado Mountain College mix of local and out-of-state American-born Anglos and Hispanics, and a few foreign-born

students, in this instance one each from Peru, Mexico, Ukraine, and Russia. I found that Cather’s tales moved and inspired my generally non-literary students. Both low- and high-skilled writers found Cather accessible as we plowed through “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” “A Wagner Matinée,” and “Paul’s Case.” But the story that elicited the most intense response was Cather’s 1909 “The Enchanted Bluff.” This early tale speaks directly to youthful hopes and imaginings, with its callow lads from a place much like her hometown of Red Cloud, Nebraska, enjoying unstructured time together down by a lazy river much like the Republican River of her youth. In their response pages on “The Enchanted Bluff,” my students related to me, without prompting, their own youthful fancies and fantasies. They revealed much about their own educational and career trajectories and successes, as well as the so-far less successful circumstances and outcomes of their childhood peers. Mostly, my students identified with the narrator of “The Enchanted Bluff,” who presumably travelled farthest and became the most successful of the group of boys. On the other hand, my students compared their friends to the narrator’s more place-bound pals; not one of them seemed to relate to those old friends and their narrow, perhaps thwarted lives. Their choices may seem surprising given the life difficulties many of them face, but I believe they reflect the optimism of youth, a theme which reverberates throughout much of Cather’s fiction.

One of the American students who liked the story was Nick, who is majoring in Sustainability, one of our new four-year degrees. Down by the Cache la Poudre River near Fort Collins, Colorado, Nick wrote, he and his junior high friends would make fires and “talk about the story’s [sic] we had heard and how we wanted to live after we left our home town.” They would “sit around and make big plans for the future. We had to have made over 20 plans to do something spectacular and more than 90 percent of those plans never happened. Although we never did them it still gave us something to want and think about.” The echoes with Cather’s story are striking. Nick particularly appreciated that even though the boys in the story never got to the Enchanted Bluff, they “still held on to the plan and the story . . . and then when they saw that they would not succeed they passed it down to his son.” Nick was glad to see that Tip’s boy Bert had become as obsessed with the tale as his father and friends had been years earlier. Nick liked





A 1910 view of the Republican River near Guide Rock, Nebraska, ten miles east of Cather's childhood home of Red Cloud.

that the “passion and obsession” had filtered down to the next generation. For him, the passion of a dream is more important than its fulfillment.

I found my foreign-born students’ reactions to “The Enchanted Bluff” particularly profound in light of personal parallels in their lives. Several related that their peers back in the old country clearly had not achieved as many adult goals as they themselves had in the States; their perceived successes perhaps explain why the increasing barriers to upward mobility so talked of these days do not seem to faze them. The immigrant students—mostly documented and legal—still see the United States as a land of opportunity. The American Dream is alive for them in their own successes, no doubt enhanced by the knowledge that their childhood buddies have often stagnated back home, captives of the realities and expectations of their underprivileged upbringings.

One student, a young man of 25 or so from Russia, came to this country six years ago from, as he puts it, “my old, forgotten-by-God village.” Aptí knew only 100 words of English when he arrived in the States, but in May 2014 completed his associate’s degree from Colorado Mountain College. The boys’ river adventures and speculations about their futures in “The Enchanted Bluff” resonated particularly well with Aptí. Apparently, a common pastime for Aptí and his junior high “peeps” was debating which is the most important profession in the world. He related in his papers that his friend Ilya insisted the best job was being a doctor;

pal Alexander put forth military leadership like being a general; and Aptí himself asserted that (of all things) to be a crane operator was the most useful job to humankind. Now in their mid-twenties, the young men have come down to earth. Ilya works at a smoky casino in Russia watching security cameras and has a growing family. Alexander fled to drugs at age 14 when his mother died. Only Aptí was, as he puts it, “fortunate enough to make it out of there”; he left at age 16 when he started university in Sochi, where the recent Winter Olympics were held. Aptí commented on Cather’s story, noting its counterparts in his own life: “When we talked about who we want[ed] to be when we [grew] up, we did not even wonder how it all could come true; but we thought it would somehow.”

Aptí wrote, “[A]fter reading Willa Cather, these forgotten, deep-down-in-my-mind memories start coming back, which I think is just unbelievable.” He added, “It does not happen right away while reading, but some time later, when I sit down to eat or to smoke a cigarette, I think about the story and remember my own life experience relative to that.” Aptí noted that Cather “makes me unconsciously think . . . about the life situations she presented in her stories, and it surprises me every time to find them similar to something that happened to me in my life.” She places “you in the shoes of the stor[ies]’ characters.”

Cather returned Aptí to the time when he was young with dreams of his future, when the sky was the limit, and he was not constrained by realistic, pragmatic, or mature considerations. For





OTTO AND FRITZ CAUGHT THE FAT, HORNED CATFISH

The four captioned illustrations in these pages are by Howard E. Smith and accompanied the first publication of "The Enchanted Bluff" in Harper's Monthly in April 1909.

Aptí, just as for Lucy Gayheart, eagerly contemplating her return to Chicago after a Christmas holiday back in Haverford on the Platte, "the air trembled like a tuning-fork with unimaginable possibilities" (24).

Another foreign-born student, Rosa, noted in her response to "The Enchanted Bluff" that when she visits her old village in Peru, her friends have stayed put and now have many children; none has gone beyond junior high school. Rosa herself has a good job in our valley as a lab technician at the local hospital, but she is going back to school to improve her career options. Without connections, youth in impoverished or corrupt countries often have little opportunity to change their class circumstances much beyond those of their parents. Aptí made his way with what some might call misdirected ingenuity. He went to university at Sochi with no money from home. He wrote to me in a response page later that he supported himself by fixing computers, writing other students' papers for them, and being the liaison between corrupt professors and students who were buying grades. After a year or two at Sochi, Aptí managed a visa to the U.S. and hit the ground

running. Again, the comparison to Lucy Gayheart returning to Chicago seems apt: the rhythm of the train's vibrations reinforced her feelings of "escape, change, chance, with life hurrying forward" (24). Aptí has already exceeded his childhood dreams by getting to the States, succeeding in college, and owning an American car, while his peers in Russia languish. As science fiction writer William Gibson observed long ago, "the future is already here; it's just not very evenly distributed." For Aptí, the U.S. is still very much a land of opportunity.

As an educator, I sometimes wonder why the future plays out so differently for certain of Cather's young characters than others. Similarly, after reading their responses to "The Enchanted Bluff" I wonder, "Why do Aptí, Rosa, and some U.S.-born students succeed in this country while others are left stunted by their circumstances?" An answer might be a mixture of the "winter dreams" of their youth, to use F. Scott Fitzgerald's label from his well-known short story of the same title, combined with temperament, opportunity, and training.



TIP WORKED IN HIS FATHER'S GROCERY STORE



HE WAS ALWAYS OFF SOMEWHERE WITH HIS GUN

Last fall, when I wanted my students to think self-consciously about factors that cause certain groups to succeed more than others, my students and I spent some time with a *New York Times* essay by Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld exploring “What Drives Success?” I hoped my charges might apply some of the lessons to their own lives.

Chua—she of *Tiger Mom* fame (or infamy)—and Rubenfeld assert that when individuals or groups have a certain “triple package” of traits, they climb the ladder of upward mobility better than others. The package consists of (1) a sense of personal or cultural confidence or superiority, (2) an insecurity—the urge to prove themselves, and (3) self-restraint and discipline. Whether or not Chua and Rubenfeld have got it right, I maintain that Cather is right—young people need dreams first; then, armed with those dreams (or burdened by them), people learn or acquire attitudes and behaviors. The vivid force that one’s dreams impart must somehow come from within, often ignited by something, someone, or chance.

Early on, even before most of her fiction, Cather looked back to her youth in Red Cloud as a place of ambitious dreams—which

in her case came to fruition. Her early poem “Dedicatory,” to her closest brothers Roscoe and Douglass, recalls their childhood by the riverbank and summons “happy shadows / Of the three who lay and planned at moonrise, / On an island in a western river, / Of the conquest of the world together.” Cather recreates this adolescent realm of promise, the “vanished kingdom” of the poem, often, from the sentimental fantasy of 1902, “The Treasure of Far Island” to 1935’s *Lucy Gayheart*. Cather’s own youthful friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote in a 1949 letter to Mildred Bennett that Cather perceived the importance of early feelings: “[Willa] felt, and said in print several times, and often in conversation, that for her the only part of life which made a real impression on her imagination and emotion was what happened to her before the age of twenty” (quoted in Bennett 151). In an essay titled “Willa Cather, Learner” Thomas J. Lyon recognizes “. . . what was crucial in Cather’s developing years was that there was no lid on discovery, no limit on the confidence one could feel in one’s own mind” (94). Lyon perceives this presence of an unfettered imagination in Cather characters Nellie Birdseye,



HE LED US INTO MARSHES AND STUBBLE FIELDS





"Their dreams speak to them . . ." *Enchanted Mesa, 1929, by Carl Redin (1892–1944), from the private collection of the painter Billy Schenck, exhibited at the Tucson Museum of Art in 2004.*

Claude Wheeler, and Niel Herbert: "In their youthfulness, discovery shimmers just ahead of them" (97). Certainly for the boys of "The Enchanted Bluff," no matter how their futures would unfold, anticipated discoveries were more real on that summer night than all of the practical barriers they faced. Their hoped-for futures were, as Lyon writes, "the almost felt, mysterious something just ahead" (94).

Dreams, of course, are often derailed. Many children engage in daydreaming and fantasy en route to adult realities, but their visions too often do not reflect their eventual position in life. The truth of Cather's coda for "The Enchanted Bluff" is poignant. Indeed, Cather gives readers plenty of young romantics whose dreams are not realized, from Paul in "Paul's Case" to Marie Shabata in *O Pioneers!* to Tom Outland in *The Professor's House*. Claude Wheeler in *One of Ours* and Lucy Gayheart get a taste of self-actualization, only to have it dashed by seemingly uncontrollable or random circumstances. Even characters who make it out of places like Red Cloud and are successful by the standards of the world—Harvey Merrick in "The Sculptor's Funeral" and Jim Burden in *My Ántonia*, for example—often have diminished lives. Yet there are also Thea Kronborg and Anton Rosicky, who achieved satisfactions even greater than they were able to dream.

Not surprisingly, my students are similar. Some who have seemed so bright and promising leave college and go off track, caught up in various by-ways: pot-induced slacker-dom, unexpected family responsibilities, a beguiling job offer. From what I've observed, with students whose upwardly mobile options are shaky or marginal, any setback, small or large, can be fatal to their trajectory: a DUI, a pregnancy, financial problems, a couple of bad grades, car trouble, or a move across country to nurse a sick relative—a task that somehow falls on them even if they have a substantial extended family. Such anecdotal tales seem

to confirm community college professor Kate Geiselman's recent claim in *Salon* that most community college students—and by extension most young millennial Americans today, especially those of color—are falling through the cracks of upward mobility. She decries community college administrators who, at graduation ceremonies, trot out poster students of color or disadvantaged backgrounds who have 4.0 GPAs, as if to imply that anyone can overcome adversity.

Many commentators have drawn parallels between the pre-union, pre-labor law Gilded Age and our own "99% vs. 1%" era. They toss out statistics showing it is more difficult to rise through education and other avenues now than it was some decades ago. Geiselman and other jeremiahs are probably correct that the odds are worse for advancement these days. Nonetheless, at my community college, optimists like many of my students (and me, I might add), still believe in upward mobility. I see plenty of students who, despite being from circumstances narrowed and constrained by economic, family, and cultural pressures, still have dreams and manage to fulfill them. Young or middle-aged, they are psychologically and cognitively able to take advantage of wider opportunities, new technology, and more expansive ways of thinking. They plow ahead, term by term, rent check by rent check, first earning

their associate's degree with us and then going on to four-year schools and fulfilling jobs. There is enough of that to keep me positive about this country and our educational pathways.

Ultimately, as Cather knew, Youth is youth. The green aspirations of my sometimes provincial and untraveled U.S.-born students and their hopeful immigrant counterparts are not much different from those of Cather's boys by the Republican River in the 1880s. And the reasons they sometimes get off course turn out to be not so different from those of Cather's river boys (as the Sandtown lads were afflicted with alcoholism, family responsibilities, the seduction of materialism, a railroad accident—not unlike my students' problems). My students who succeed always have dreams first, and then with willpower and grit stick to them and learn how to achieve them. Their far-off Enchanted Bluff is like the "point of silver light" from the winter evening's first star that overwhelms Lucy Gayheart. Their dreams speak to them, as the star spoke to Lucy: "like a signal, [it] released another kind of life and feeling" (11). The "flash of understanding" may last "but a moment" (12); nevertheless, it helps them focus on their goals, not their barriers. My former student Jeremy Tafoya, now thriving in math, physics, and German at a private university in Denver after putting himself through Colorado Mountain College with little family support or understanding of his accomplishments, says that when he was introduced to the world of ideas and knowledge at CMC, it blew him away. "I just have to keep learning," he exults now. "It makes me feel that I want my brain to be like a well—the deepest well in the world. People can drink from my well but it will never run dry." Jeremy's persistence and hunger to learn echo Chua and Rubenfeld's prescriptions for success and also Cather's descriptions of youthful yearnings.

As Cather knew, dreams light fires under us. It doesn't matter if Lucy's silver star is a fanciful vision or if the legend of the Enchanted Bluff is fictitious. Maybe Tip's cherished artifacts in the story are not really from the Holy Land, nor are the great cities of the boys' dreams as wonderful as they believe. A personal, sacred dream is enough for many; it helps bolster those who get away and, interestingly, offers some solace for those who don't. My students recognize that Cather's ending to "The Enchanted Bluff" is ambiguous. None of the boys makes it to the Enchanted Bluff, and they have all known disappointments. Cather, however, does not dwell on the negative. Percy is wealthy. There is no indication that Otto and Fritz Hassler are unhappy as the town tailors. Tip's difficulties are in the past, and he believes he has "come into easy water." Even Arthur, who dies before he is twenty-

five, remains "unabashed" and his eyes stay "clear and warm" (96). Many of Cather's word choices for her story's final four paragraphs have negative connotations: none, nowhere, lost, died, untidy, not steady, stopped, broken. But she balances these with positive words: succeeded, clear, warm, laugh, comfortable, easy, revived, romance. The dream of seeing the bluff has survived twenty years; the narrator and Tip "quite revived the romance of the lone red rock" (96). Not forgotten, it now lives in Tip's son. The expectation that Tip and his son will visit the Enchanted Bluff is probably unrealistic, but recall that my student Nick wants to believe it.

The castles in the air Cather and her characters created on lonely river islands remain, in both dreams and realities. Sparks still stimulate my more determined students. In the contest between imagination and reality, imagination can win even against the stark truth of poverty, family responsibilities, sickness, or poor choices. Despite national economic trouble and, arguably, the successful machinations of the "1%," my students are fiercely reenacting the American Dream. Contradicting gloom-and-doomers, people in my corner of rural Colorado keep the American Dream alive and well. Their enchanted bluff remains attainable and has lived on into subsequent generations.

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