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Willa Cather: The Middle West Revisited

John H. Randall III

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AFTER her "Catholic" novels Willa Cather seems to have grown tired of searching for exotic locales to use as settings for local color stories. Perhaps she felt that she was acquiring too much of a tourist view of life; it is more likely, however, that the illness and death of both of her parents rudely interrupted her search for beautiful sensations and turned her mind back on childhood experiences, pointing up for her the importance of the family in human affairs. Whatever the cause, the result is that her next two books show two characteristics, one new and one old: a nostalgic return to writing about that part of the country with which she was most familiar, the American Middle West, and the previously seen emphasis on the group rather than the individual together with the standards and traditions adhered to by the group. In these two books Willa Cather revisits the Middle West, but it no longer interests her as raw material for the creative pioneer spirit; instead it seems to her to be the environment in which the values of the multigeneration family unit can best be maintained. She now looks at the Middle West through the spectacles of tradition, maintaining roughly the same attitude that she had shown in her "Catholic" novels.

Willa Cather

The Middle West Revisited

JOHN H. RANDALL III

Obscure Destinies (1932) demonstrates this attitude very clearly. The very title forms a contrast with those of her earlier prairie volumes; unlike her earlier self, she is now content to describe "the short and simple annals of the poor." The book invites comparison with Flaubert's *Trois Contes*, upon which she apparently modeled it. Like that book, it starts with the present and moves backward in time (although of course with a much shallower historical reference, since she goes back only to the turn of the century); like that book it is a tacit criticism of the present in its implied praise of the past. Something

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of Flaubert's quiet, cadenced prose is to be found in the volume too. As in *Shadows on the Rock*, she concentrates on the death part of the life cycle; the first two stories end in the death of a person, the last in the death of a friendship.

The first story, "Neighbour Rosicky," was written during the final months of Charles Cather's illness, and is probably a tribute to her father. In it she comes to grips with the fact of death as she was unable to do (at least at the time) in her own life. Although she deals with the same pioneers whose lives she had described in heroic terms in her prairie novels, she now adopts a completely different tone. This is a tired story; even the landscape is passively enjoyed as it was in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

"Neighbour Rosicky" has for its hero the man who in real life was the husband of "my Antonia." In it Willa Cather describes the last days and death of this pioneer farmer; and in so doing she chronicles the end of an epoch, depicting Nebraska as it was after the passing of the pioneer period. The story of the earthly paradise, the yeoman's fee-simple empire founded in the garden of the Middle West, is thus finally brought to a close.

"Neighbour Rosicky" is about an old man who at the end of his life feels he has much to cherish and little to regret. He goes to a doctor in the fall and learns that he has a bad heart, an ailment that kills him the following spring. But, much to his doctor's surprise, he is not at all worried about his condition; death can claim him any time it wants to; he has had a good life and is satisfied. The reason for Rosicky's content is that he has had a happy married and family life. This is the result of the ministrations of his wife, the Antonia of the prairie novel, here called Mary. The only real worry he has concerns Polly, his "American" daughter-in-law; he is uncertain as to how happy she will be at having married into a "foreign" family.

Into the story Willa Cather pours many of her feelings about the source of human happiness in general and the Rosickys in particular. We are told that unlike their neighbors they are not money-minded; they are comfortably out of debt, although they never seem to get ahead very far. The doctor muses, "Maybe you couldn't enjoy your life and put it into the bank too." But according to Willa Cather the secret of their success is that they have learned that the life of the country is preferable to the life of the town. Rosicky's opinion on the subject is based on his own experience, since he has lived in five different places in three countries; aside from a village and farm in his native

Czechoslovakia he has been down-and-out in London and well-to-do in New York. But he finally decided to spend the rest of his life on a farm. He has a vivid memory of the day he made that decision:

Rosicky, the old Rosicky, could remember as if it were yesterday the day when the young Rosicky found out what was the matter with him. It was on a Fourth of July afternoon, and he was sitting in Park Place in the sun. The lower part of New York was empty. Wall Street, Liberty Street, Broadway, all empty. So much stone and asphalt with nothing going on, so many empty windows. The emptiness was intense, like the stillness in a great factory when the machinery stops and the belts and bands cease running. It was *too* great a change, it took all the strength out of one. Those blank buildings, without the stream of life pouring through them, were like empty jails. It struck young Rosicky that this was the trouble with big cities; they built you in from the earth itself, cemented you away from any contact with the ground. You lived in an unnatural world, like the fish in an aquarium, who were probably much more comfortable than they ever were in the sea. (pp. 30-31)*

Several interesting attitudes are expressed here. First, the idea of cities being empty is a curious concept, especially for one who has seen Nebraska. It is definitely not the reaction of a city man. Second, the feeling that a life led close to nature is also close to the ultimate realities is acceptable only to somebody who rejects the theory of the stages of civilization as outlined by Condorcet and accepts some form of primitivism. This of course is nothing new in Willa Cather. Third, Neighbor Rosicky (and with him the author) has failed to realize that civilization is not identical with physical comfort; those who think it is are missing the point. After affirming the town in *Shadows on the Rock*, Willa Cather definitely and finally resolves the city-country conflict in favor of the country, a solution which will hold good for the rest of her career, except for "The Old Beauty." This represents a return to the values of her childhood, especially of the years between eight and fifteen.

Willa Cather continues:

After that Fourth of July day in Park Place, the desire to return to the country never left him. To work on another man's farm would be all he asked; to see the sun rise and set and to plant things and watch them grow. He was a very simple man. He was like a tree that has not many roots, but one tap-root that goes down deep. (p. 32)

* This and subsequent quotations are from *Obscure Destinies*, by Willa Cather. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1932.

It need hardly be pointed out that this is not the heroic spirit which tamed the soil. Rosicky is no Antonia; he would be quite content to play the passive spectator's rôle; to work on another man's farm, to see the sun rise, and to plant things and watch them grow. It might be argued that this is the attitude of old age were it not for the fact that these thoughts are attributed to the young Rosicky. Actually, it is not Neighbor Rosicky's old age which is speaking but Willa Cather's.

Willa Cather's view of the superiority of country life is buttressed by two anecdotes, one told by Rosicky himself and the other by his wife Mary. They contrast the relative severity of poverty in the city and in the country. Hard times in the city are illustrated by Rosicky's story of how once in London on a Christmas Eve he was forced to beg from strangers for money to buy a Christmas goose to replace the one he had ravenously eaten which belonged to his poverty-stricken landlord. Hard times in the country, on the other hand, are recalled by Mary's anecdote of how the family had celebrated a Fourth of July picnic in defiance of fate, in spite of the fact that a scorching hot wind had just destroyed their entire corn crop along with that of all their neighbors. As Rosicky muses on the fate of his children and their probable happy future, it seems to him that mere subsistence in the country is better than anything the city has to offer:

They would have to work hard on the farm, and probably they would never do much more than make a living. But if he could think of them as staying here on the land, he wouldn't have to fear any great unkindness for them. Hardships, certainly; it was a hardship to have the wheat freeze in the ground when seed was so high; and to have to sell your stock because you had no feed. But there would be other years when everything came along right, and you caught up. And what you had was your own. You didn't have to choose between bosses and strikers, and go wrong either way. You didn't have to do with dishonest and cruel people. They were the only things in his experience he had found terrifying and horrible; the look in the eyes of a dishonest and crafty man, of a scheming and rapacious woman.

In the country, if you had a mean neighbour, you could keep off his land and make him keep off yours. But in the city, all the foulness and misery and brutality of your neighbours was a part of your life. The worst things he had come upon were human,—depraved and poisonous specimens of man. To this day he could recall certain terrible faces in the London streets. There were mean people everywhere, to be sure, even in their own country town here. But they weren't tempered, hardened, like the treacherous people in cities who live by grinding or cheating or poisoning their fellow-men....

It seemed to Rosicky that for good, honest boys like his, the worst they could do on the farm was better than the best they could be likely to do in the city. If he'd had a mean boy, now, one who was crooked and sharp and tried to put anything over on his brothers, then town would be the place for him. But he had no such boy. . . . What Rosicky really hoped for his boys was that they could get through the world without ever knowing much about the cruelty of human beings. "Their mother and me ain't prepared them for that," he sometimes said to himself. (pp. 58-60)

In these passages Willa Cather seems to have succumbed completely to nostalgia. She sentimentalizes the countryside, totally distorting the picture she had painted of the Middle West in her prairie novels. When she says that on the farm one did not have to deal with dishonest or cruel people, one wonders whether she ever remembered Krajiek or Wick Cutter or Ivy Peters; they could be kept off one's land, too, but they were still a threat. Rosicky's notion of shipping mean boys off to the city because they would not be out of place there is the old rural-evangelical Populist view of the big town put in milder form. And when Rosicky hopes his children will never realize the full cruelty of human beings because he and Mary had never prepared them for it, the escapist impulse in Willa Cather seems to come close to the surface. His desire for cloistered virtue makes one wish that either he or his creator had studied "Areopagitica."

I have said that "Neighbour Rosicky" was written during the period of Willa Cather's father's final illness. Perhaps this is why in it she resolves the old old conflict between the claims of a calling and human claims in a human direction once more. Neighbor Rosicky is an artist in living; he leads his own particular version of the comely life, which is based ultimately on his capacity to love. Even his "American" daughter-in-law, who feels peculiar at having married a "foreigner," realizes this. Willa Cather writes:

She had a sudden feeling that nobody in the world, not her mother, not Rudolph, or anyone, really loved her as much as old Rosicky did. . . . It was as if Rosicky had a special gift for loving people, something that was like an ear for music or an eye for colour. It was quiet, unobtrusive; it was merely there. You saw it in his eyes,—perhaps that was why they were merry. (p. 66)

No doubt is left in the reader's mind that it is his talent for loving that makes Rosicky's family such a happy one. In this and the other stories written during

the period of her parents' final illnesses, Willa Cather affirms human relations once more.

Rosicky finally dies as a result of overexerting himself on behalf of the land. He takes a buggy-rake and starts weeding out the Russian thistles that have sprung up in his son Rudolph's alfalfa field. He has a heart attack, and is saved from immediate death only by the help of Polly, Rudolph's "American" wife, who gets him to the house and makes him lie down. Before the end of the story all conflict arising from differences in background are resolved as he and Polly come to completely understand and love each other; they are reconciled when faced with the ultimate realities. Rosicky's death when it comes is beneficent and peaceful; he accepts it much as the cowboy Otto Fuchs had accepted the idea of death in *My Antonia*. Willa Cather indicates his attitude toward his end by the quiet tone she uses in describing it:

After he had taken a few stitches, the cramp began in his chest, like yesterday. He put his pipe cautiously down on the window-sill and bent over to ease the pull. No use,—he had better try to get to his bed if he could. He rose and groped his way across the familiar floor, which was rising and falling like the deck of a ship. At the door he fell. When Mary came in, she found him lying there, and the moment she touched him she knew that he was gone. (p. 69)

In the end we are left with the feeling that Rosicky understands death because he understands life. He displays a complete acceptance of death as timely and welcome when it comes after a full life, in its proper place in the sequence of the vegetation cycle.

The second story to be found in *Obscure Destinies* is entitled "Old Mrs. Harris." This piece constitutes a retelling of Thea Kronborg's story but with a difference; it has for its heroine, not a high-spirited young girl, but her group-centered grandmother. The story has a young girl in it, to be sure, in the person of Vickie Templeton, but it is the self-effacing old Mrs. Harris who is the center of emphasis and receives all our sympathy. "Old Mrs. Harris" embodies among other things the theme of the ungrateful child and in this respect is a kind of truncated *Père Goriot* or *King Lear*. For Vickie's mother, Mrs. Victoria Templeton, is inconsiderate of her aged parent, being a vain, frivolous, and self-centered Southern belle. She had been the toast of the Tennessee town from which she came, and continued her self-centered

and demanding ways once she reached the Nebraska frontier. Old Mrs. Harris, on the other hand, is just the opposite. She lives for others only. She is seen through the eyes of Mrs. Rosen, the cultivated Jewish neighbor who comes from a different and more sophisticated culture than the Templetons and is the only adult who really appreciates Mrs. Harris. "You know I care more about the old folks than the young," she tells her. Miss Cather notes:

But she had observed that whenever Mrs. Harris's grandchildren were about, tumbling all over her, asking for cookies, teasing her to read to them, the old lady looked happy. (pp. 81-82)

To keep Victoria different from these "ordinary" women meant everything to Mrs. Harris. She realized that Mrs. Rosen managed to be mistress of any situation, either in kitchen or parlour, but that was because she was "foreign." Grandmother perfectly understood that their neighbour had a superior cultivation which made everything she did an exercise of skill. . . .

Grandmother's own lot could improve only with the family fortunes—any comfort for herself, aside from that of the family, was inconceivable to her; and on the other hand she could have no real unhappiness while the children were well, and good, and fond of her and their mother. . . .

Sometimes, in the morning, if her feet ached more than usual, Mrs. Harris felt a little low. . . . But the moment she heard the children running down the uncarpeted back stairs, she forgot to be low. Indeed, she ceased to be an individual, an old woman with aching feet; she became part of a group, became a relationship. She was drunk up into their freshness when they burst in upon her, telling her about their dreams, explaining their troubles with buttons and shoe-laces and underwear shrunk too small. The tired, solitary old woman Grandmother had been at daybreak vanished; suddenly the morning seemed as important to her as it did to the children, and the mornings ahead stretched out sunshiny, important. (pp. 135-37)

The only other adult who pays any attention to Mrs. Harris is the hired girl Mandy who rubs her feet for her when the circulation gets poor. For the rest, all of them are half indifferent to her and take her services for granted. Vickie, the adolescent young girl of the family, resembles her mother more than her grandmother: she too is self-centered, inconsiderate, and vain.

Willa Cather takes the family through a series of incidents designed to reveal its members' characteristics and show them in a good light or bad. Most prominent is the Methodist ice-cream social at which Victoria is publicly criticized for letting her old mother slave for her in the kitchen. It takes some

time for Victoria to recognize the thrust for what it is, but when she does she gets in a huff, for she cannot bear criticism. This calls forth some remarks from Willa Cather on the contrast between Nebraska and Tennessee, between the Western and Southern modes of living, which result in the following summary:

Mrs. Harris was no longer living in a feudal society, where there were plenty of landless people glad to render service to the more fortunate, but in a snappy little Western democracy, where every man was as good as his neighbour and out to prove it. (p. 133)

Another author might have written a comedy of manners on the subject, but Willa Cather does not choose to make comedy of it. She is pretty impartial in her handling of the conflict between Western and Southern manners. The issue involved seems to be whether or not a "lady" can do housework and still be a lady:

[The Westerners] who belonged to clubs and Relief Corps lived differently, Mrs. Harris knew, but she herself didn't like the way they lived. She believed that somebody ought to be in the parlour, and somebody in the kitchen. She wouldn't for the world have had Victoria go about every morning in a short gingham dress, with bare arms, and a dust-cap on her head to hide the curling-kids, as these brisk housekeepers did. To Mrs. Harris that would have meant real poverty, coming down in the world so far that one could no longer keep up appearances. (p. 134)

The phrase "snappy little Western democracy" and the fact that the one Westerner presented, Mrs. Jackson, is rude enough to publicly insult Victoria Templeton seem to indicate an antipathy for the democratic ideal as opposed to the feudal one. But on the other hand Mrs. Rosen, who represents European civilization and is the most sophisticated character in the whole tale, is closer to the Western point of view than to the Southern one.

The portrait of the Templetons is interesting as the first sign of Willa Cather's renewed interest in the South of her extreme childhood (before the age of eight) which she was later to use in the last novel she wrote, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. The picture she paints of Southern middle-class manners (with aristocratic pretensions) is not very savory. It involves a sense of clan-nishness (the Templetons do not like it when somebody else sits down at their picnic table) and an excessive admiration of superficial qualities (re-

spectability and the keeping up of appearances are far more important to them than they should be, and the Templeton children have an extravagant admiration for their mother's good looks). But more serious is Victoria's reaction to the insult hurled at her by Mrs. Jackson:

Mrs. Templeton didn't at once take it in. Her training was all to the end that you must give a guest everything you have, even if he happens to be your worst enemy, and that to cause anyone embarrassment is a frightful and humiliating blunder. She felt hurt without knowing just why, but all evening it kept growing clearer to her that this was another of those thrusts from the outside which she couldn't understand. The neighbours were sure to take sides against her, apparently, if they came often to see her mother. . . .

Nothing ever made Victoria cross but criticism. She was jealous of small attentions paid to Mrs. Harris, because she felt they were paid "behind her back" or "over her head," in a way that implied reproach to her. Victoria had been a belle in their own town in Tennessee, but here she was not very popular, no matter how many pretty dresses she wore, and she couldn't bear it. She felt as if her mother and Mr. Templeton must be somehow to blame; at least they ought to protect her from whatever was disagreeable—they always had! (pp. 127-28, 129)

These passages not only show Victoria to be lacking in insight and unable to take criticism; they also show her as given to indiscriminate politeness which makes her helpless before those who are impolite. The fact of her wanting to blame someone else for her troubles reveals a rather frightening conception of a woman as a spoiled child who must always be pampered and petted. This particular Southern tradition is a foolish tradition; the Templetons are victims of immature social standards. Willa Cather shows her awareness of this by the mordant portrait she paints of Victoria. The neglected Mrs. Harris is the unsung heroine of the piece, but it is not the standards she adheres to but the unswerving fidelity to her family whatever their standards that Mrs. Rosen and Willa Cather herself find admirable.

Another sign of Mrs. Harris's superiority is her acceptance of pain as an inescapable consequence of life. This comes out in the description of the death of Blue Boy, the tomcat. Blue Boy, who has been likened to Mrs. Harris and whose death foreshadows her own, comes down with distemper, to the consternation of the entire family. The Templeton twins have never seen suffering before, and are aghast as he begins to froth at the mouth and goes into

spasm after spasm. "Oh, Gram'ma, can't you do anything?" they ask. But Mrs. Harris only replies, "Everything that's alive has got to suffer." This attitude is completely different from Victoria's escapist reaction to the same thing: "I'm sorry about your cat, boys," she said. "That's why I don't like to have cats around; they're always getting sick and dying." This amounts to a saying no to life because of the danger it involves.

A little later in the story the granddaughter Vickie wins a long-coveted scholarship to go to college at Ann Arbor, but does not have the money to go. Her father lets her down by failing to find any way of raising the necessary cash, and for a while Vickie thinks the whole world is against her and feels herself to be a solitary rebel, like Willa Cather's early heroines. Here she becomes another Thea Kronborg—but without eliciting the sympathy that Thea got when Miss Cather too was young and ardent for success. Finally the necessary three hundred dollars is lent to her by Mrs. Rosen's husband through the intercession of old Mrs. Harris, who keeps her rôle in the affair a strict secret. Vickie never even knows who her benefactor is.

Meanwhile other members of the family are having troubles of their own. Mrs. Templeton discovers that she is pregnant once more, and cannot bear the thought of going through another confinement. Using the excuse of a business trip, Mr. Templeton leaves her, just as he always does in times of trouble. In the midst of these domestic crises Mrs. Harris realizes her time has come to die, and, self-effacing to the last, resolves to do so as quietly and unobtrusively as possible. She recalls a passage from *Pilgrim's Progress*, where Christiana and her band come to the arbor on the Hill of Difficulty: "Then said Mercy, how sweet is rest to them that labour," a quotation which sums up her entire life. The bound girl Mandy tries to rub the cold out of her legs, but Mrs. Harris is under no illusions about the meaning of that cold. Her final lapse into unconsciousness is quite peaceful:

Grandma fell to remembering the old place at home: what a dashing, high-spirited girl Victoria was, and how proud she had always been of her; how she used to hear her laughing and teasing out in the lilac arbour when Hillary Templeton was courting her. Toward morning all these pleasant reflections faded out. Mrs. Harris felt that she and her bed were softly sinking, through the darkness to a deeper darkness.

Old Mrs. Harris did not really die that night, but she believed she did. Mandy found her unconscious in the morning. Then there was a great stir and bustle;

Victoria, and even Vickie, were startled out of their intense self-absorption. Mrs. Harris was hastily carried out of the play-room and laid in Victoria's bed, put into one of Victoria's best nightgowns. Mr. Templeton was sent for, and the doctor was sent for. . . . But Grandmother was out of it all, never knew that she was the object of so much attention and excitement. She died a little while after Mr. Templeton got home. (pp. 188-89)

"Old Mrs. Harris" compresses a great deal of the history of Willa Cather's own family into a short space: Victoria Templeton being Willa Cather's mother; Vickie, Willa herself. It shows quite clearly some of the less pleasant aspects of the multigeneration family: the oppressive claustrophobic atmosphere of a crowded house and the inability of the generations to understand each other until it is too late. The story is a tribute to Willa Cather's grandmother, and the main impulse behind it seems to be a regret that she had not earlier appreciated her forebear, while there still was time to express her gratitude to her. This idea is borne out by the story's concluding paragraph:

Thus 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 to Grandma Harris. They will think a great deal about her, and remember things they never noticed; and their lot will be more or less like hers. They will regret that they heeded her so little; but they, too, will look into the eager, unseeing eyes of young people and feel themselves alone. They will say to themselves: "I was heartless, because I was young and strong and wanted things so much. But now I know." (p. 190)

"Old Mrs. Harris" is the second story in the book to chronicle a timely and kindly death coming at the end of a long honorable life. However, its heroine is much more self-effacing than "Neighbour Rosicky" ever was; she bears a much closer resemblance to Euclide Auclair. This story's treatment of life in Nebraska is at the opposite pole from that found in the prairie novels; here unbridled individualism is severely criticized, and subordination to the family is praised. In her loyalty, strength, and simple enduring qualities Grandma Harris resembles Félicité in Flaubert's *"Un Coeur Simple,"* and, like Félicité, she is a kind of saint. Willa Cather's sympathies are completely with the unassertive grandmother who gives her loyalty to the South and the feudal order rather than to the West and democracy. The story thus restates the theme of *Shadows on the Rock* but in a Middle Western setting; as in *Shadows on*

the Rock the group is all-important. Finally, the story is a convincing one, and not particularly sentimentalized, as are the next stories with which we will have to deal.

Not much need be said about the short story entitled "Two Friends"; of all the stories in *Obscure Destinies* it is the weakest. It describes through the eyes of a child the friendship of Mr. Trueman the cattle rancher and Mr. Dillon the banker and business man, and the breakup of that friendship due to a political argument over the nomination of William Jennings Bryan. It is tempting to see the story as an allegory of the split between commerce and agriculture, business and creativity, fact and value, but more likely it represents the breakup of Willa Cather's childhood world, her first realization that the adult world contains conflict and pain. It is interesting because it shows vividly her own peculiar interpretation of conflict. According to her view, people either agree completely or else completely break off with each other—there is no conception of compromise or of people agreeing to disagree. Needless to say, this is not a very mature view. Not only does she insufficiently motivate Trueman to break off a lifelong friendship on the basis of a political argument; she insists that "After the rupture nothing went well with either of my two great men." Dillon dies within three years of that time; Trueman moves out of town and presumably leads a frustrated life until his demise within a decade of the quarrel. The concluding passage voices a regret for lost human relationships that makes one sympathize with Willa Cather's old age and reminds one of the remorse of Tom Outland:

When that old scar is occasionally touched by chance, it rouses the old uneasiness; 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. (p. 230).