IN THE 1920S WILLA CATHER ACHIEVED BOTH CRITICAL ACCLAIM AND POPULAR success. So confident was she of her ability to attract contemporary and future readers that in 1927 she asked her publisher Alfred Knopf for a one percent increase in her royalties for Death Comes for the Archbishop. Believing that this novel’s reputation—and sales—would outlast her lifetime, she prophesied that someday Knopf’s son would be paying royalties to her niece.¹

Cather’s literary and economic faith in Death Comes for the Archbishop has been vindicated; considered one of her finest novels, the book continues to sell in paperback. But her literary reputation has not been maintained at the height it attained in the 1920s, when critics and reviewers deemed her a major American novelist. During the 1930s and 1940s, she was increasingly subjected to attacks by reviewers who not only disliked novels like Shadows on the Rock (1931) and Lucy Gayheart (1935) but who also questioned her literary stature, arguing that she was a minor, not a major, writer. As Clifton Fadiman phrased it in a typical commentary that appeared in The Nation in 1932, Cather’s intensifying preoccupation with the historical past might “permanently transport her to regions where minor works of art may be created, but major ones never,” an unfortunate fate since the author of The Song of the Lark (1915) and My Ántonia (1918) had not been a “minor writer, but a major one.”² Fadiman’s assessment was prophetic. Although Cather has won a place in the American literary canon, it is not a high one; she has been considered an important writer and yet somehow not a “major” one, somehow not an equal colleague of Hawthorne, James, or Faulkner, and perhaps not even in the same realm as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, or Dreiser.

Fadiman assumed that he and his fellow reviewers were merely recording,
not constructing, Cather’s decline. Yet recent developments in literary theory have questioned traditional assumptions of literary value and evaluation, requiring that we cease to regard the American literary canon as an objective, impartial list of those classic writers whose works have simply withstood the test of time. Several critics and writers have challenged the view that literary value arises from timeless, universal qualities inherent in the work, qualities most effectively seen and described by trained literary scholars. Reader-response criticism has called our attention to the ways in which meaning and value, as well as the aesthetic criteria used to determine these, are the products of the social, political, and ideological assumptions that readers bring to texts, which are thus not stable or fixed entities. Other studies of canon formation have pointed out that the assessment of literary value and the selection of certain texts and writers as “classic” or “major” are not based solely on aesthetic criteria; rather, the construction of a literary canon results from a complex process of cultural production and transmission in which publishers, reviewers, editors, literary critics, and teachers structure the interaction between the text and the reader.

Understanding the ways in which the literary canon is shaped and perpetuated—a process requiring the inclusion of some writers and the exclusion or marginalization of others—thus can help us to see the role of professional readers in determining literary value, and so give us insight into the “interests, institutional practices, and social arrangements that sustain the canon of classic works.” Examining Willa Cather’s varying reputation offers particularly fruitful insights into the complex dynamics of literary evaluation and preservation. Unlike Hawthorne, whose reputation grew steadily (although for historically changing reasons) from the publication of his first stories, and unlike Kate Chopin, Sarah Orne Jewett, or Harriet Beecher Stowe, women writers who have never been considered “major,” Willa Cather possessed canonical status during the 1920s only to lose it in the 1930s. If we attribute a writer’s literary reputation not to the inherent value and stable meaning of his or her work but to the historical circumstances in which that work is published, read, interpreted, and evaluated, then Willa Cather’s ascent and decline is a case study in the politics of canon formation.

Cather’s unmaking did not result merely from the political and social climate of the 1930s, even though the nation’s economic plight led some left-wing reviewers and critics to attack what they considered her conservatism and escapism. Cather’s literary decline coincided with, and was in part a product of, the self-conscious attempt of reviewers, critics, and academics to create an American literary canon. Although this endeavor began in the 1920s, it flowered during the 1930s and 1940s—the years when college professors and men of letters were struggling to establish American literature as a respectable field of professional inquiry within English departments. In doing so, they
felt the need, as Perry Miller later phrased it, to “make clear which are the few peaks and which the many low-lying hills.” For the most part, the literary men who defined the canon during this period placed Willa Cather in the foothills of American literature—the appropriate landscape, many critics assumed, for a woman writer.

To situate Cather’s decanonization historically, I will first review the social and literary circumstances that led to her establishment as a major writer in the 1920s. Then I will turn to the historical, ideological, and institutional forces that contributed to her demotion from “major” to “minor” writer in the 1930s and 1940s; finally I will explore Cather’s creative (and human) response to her literary decline—an increasing reliance upon nonprofessional readers as her professional readers became more hostile. By examining the making and the unmaking of a major writer, I hope to illuminate the social, political, and ideological dynamics of canon formation in twentieth-century America.

* * *

Cather’s first novel—*Alexander’s Bridge* (1912)—was politely praised by reviewers impressed by the beginning writer’s command of style and characterization even as they noted her apprenticeship to Henry James and Edith Wharton. In his review in *Smart Set*, H. L. Mencken observed that most novice writers in America chose to model themselves either after E. Phillips Oppenheim or Marie Corelli, allying themselves either to the “School of Plot” or the “School of Piffle.” Cather had aimed higher, however, and despite a “certain triteness,” she was, Mencken thought, a “promising” writer. Although not proclaiming Cather a major novelist, Mencken thus made an important distinction: here was a serious, not a popular, writer.

After Cather left the drawing room for the prairies and turned to her Nebraska past in *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, she began to draw increased attention from reviewers who saw emerging an authentic American voice, a challenge both to a meritocratic popular taste and a decaying genteel tradition. With the publication of *My Ántonia* in 1918, critics who took it as their mission to define and to encourage an indigenous and vigorous American literature promoted Cather from a promising to a major American novelist. Eager to displace the waning influence of New England literary culture, to challenge middle-class pieties, to establish an American literary tradition separate from (and perhaps equal to) that of England, and to solidify their own roles as cultural arbiters, critics like H. L. Mencken, Randolph Bourne, Heywood Broun and Carl Van Doren linked Willa Cather with Theodore Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson as writers bringing a new realism to American letters. Bourne praised Cather’s breaking of “stiff moral molds” and leaving the ranks
of “provincial” writers with *My Ántonia*; meanwhile, delighted with the “extraordinary reality” he found in the novel, Mencken became Cather’s particular champion. Hoping to wean American teachers and readers from their servile worship of England’s literature, such critics found Cather’s progress from the London of *Alexander’s Bridge* to the Nebraska of *My Ántonia* a paradigmatic, and exemplary, journey.

Cather’s first supporters were, by and large, journalists and men of letters who waged their campaign for a national literature with a “distinctively American spirit” outside the academy. Indeed, professors of English who preferred philological dissections of Chaucer to the living vitality of American authors were anathema to these literary radicals; Bourne, for example, characterized his English courses at Columbia as “dead rituals in which academic priests mumbled their trite commentary.” Among Cather’s first advocates, only Carl Van Doren was an academic; during the ’teens he was teaching American literature at Columbia. But he, like Mencken and Bourne, was a literary maverick whose devotion to the study and promotion of American literature led to his editorship of the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (1917–1921). Although continuing to teach at Columbia, Van Doren soon moved into the literary world outside the academy, becoming literary editor of *The Nation* in 1919 and of the *Century* in 1922.

In the first major assessment of Cather in a literary history, *Contemporary American Novelists: 1900–1920* (1922), Van Doren compared her favorably to her mentor Sarah Orne Jewett (to whom *O Pioneers!* was dedicated), claiming that the “thin, fine gentility” of Jewett’s world faded beside the “rich vigor” of Cather’s pioneer fiction whose “spaciousness” and epic sweep owed more to Whitman than to Jewett. Noting that Cather’s epics featured female heroes, Van Doren nevertheless found them able to represent what he considered a universal American story: “the struggle of some elected individual to outgrow the restrictions . . . of numbing circumstances.” Dedicated to challenging “numbing” social and literary conventions themselves, the critics and reviewers who defined Cather as a major writer in the late ’teens and early twenties saw in her work an analog to their own critical enterprise, the struggle of elected individuals to challenge and regenerate a native American culture.

Endorsed by these important cultural arbiters, Cather enjoyed a remarkably prolific and creative period in the 1920s. Six books appeared in seven years: *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1921), *One of Ours* (1922), *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor’s House* (1925), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). Although some of these novels received mixed reviews, Cather’s literary reputation continued to ascend throughout the decade as she gained the external signs of literary esteem; she won the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*; she was granted honorary degrees from Yale, Columbia and
the University of Michigan; she was invited to Breadloaf and the McDowell colony; she was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters; and she was awarded the American Academy of Arts and Letters Howells Medal for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Further evidence of Cather’s firm position as a major contemporary writer was the selection of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* by the College Entrance Board as a text for high school students to prepare: this was sound cause for congratulation, Houghton Mifflin editor Ferris Greenslet informed Cather, because selection meant that a book had been definitely established as an American classic.11

During the same years Cather enjoyed the American writer’s dream of uniting critical approval with popular success as her aesthetic and financial worth increased: she was given high rankings in several literary polls; she hired an agent; she moved from Houghton Mifflin to Knopf largely because she thought that her Boston publisher did not sufficiently appreciate—and promote—her novels; her sales increased along with her reputation; her novels began to interest Hollywood producers, and *A Lost Lady* was made into a movie.12

By the end of the 1920s, then, Cather seemed to be firmly established as a major writer whose works had attracted both critical and popular acclaim. Yet premonitions of the attacks to come can be seen in the negative, even hostile reviews gained by *One of Ours*, Cather’s novel of World War I. The book was generally dismissed by male reviewers as a woman writer’s romanticized, outmoded view of modern combat. It was, Mencken charged—evidently using the worst epithet he could imagine—very like the work of a “lady novelist.”13 For the first time, Cather was explicitly judged as limited because of her gender. Trespassing on the preserve of masculine fiction in the last section of the novel, in which her hero Claude Wheeler enters the war in France, Cather had trod on forbidden ground and so, many reviewers agreed, exposed the limitations of the female imagination.14

That Cather had feared and anticipated such criticism is evident in an important letter she sent to H. L. Mencken shortly before he reviewed the novel. Cather began by reminding Mencken of their common ground: they were both enemies of a debased, popular American literature, she wrote, both committed to overturning Booth Tarkington platitudes and raising American literature to a higher plane. She went on to reveal many anxieties: that her gender might have prevented her from making a soldier’s story seem authentic and powerful; that male critics might assess her novel more accurately than she could, simply because their gender gave them privileged access to a war story, whether or not they had ever seen combat; and that she might deserve punishment for having attempted such an unfeminine design. Please read the novel soon, Cather asked Mencken, because she might be hit by a taxicab if he delayed. The novel might be a complete mistake, she confided, but he
would be a good man to smell out falsity. If, despite her best efforts, she had told her soldier’s story in a sentimental, old-maid way, she called on Mencken to tell her so loudly, like a man: he should rub it in, because she would deserve it.\textsuperscript{15} Cather’s fear that she might be guilty of being a woman writer attempting a masculine subject and hence deserve punishment was realized when Mencken gave her the pounding she anticipated. The last half of One of Ours, he charged, degenerated to the “level of a serial in the \textit{Ladies’ Home Journal}.”\textsuperscript{16}

Mencken’s and other attacks on One of Ours suggest that Cather—the supposed realist—might not be able to deal adequately with contemporary social and political issues; at the same time, they equate such issues with masculine experience and claim that a woman writer’s imagination could not encompass this expansive territory. During the 1930s and 1940s, the politics of gender evident in the negative reviews of One of Ours became more prominent as a small but influential group of reviewers and academic critics decided to take on Willa Cather.

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In some ways Cather’s reputation continued to rise during the 1930s. She was reviewed well in journals like \textit{The Saturday Review} and \textit{Commonweal}, she gained more prizes and honorary degrees, and \textit{Shadows on the Rock} was an immediate best-seller.\textsuperscript{17} But with this novel—set in seventeenth-century Quebec—she began to anger a new generation of critics and reviewers who, influenced by the economic and social collapse of the Depression as well as by Marxist political thought, believed that art should grapple with the stern social, political, and economic realities of its time. Although their reviews and articles did not dominate in numbers, this rising generation of Marxist and liberal critics and reviewers—including Granville Hicks, Newton Arvin, Louis Kronenberg, Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, Maxwell Geismar, and Alfred Kazin—were highly influential, taking over from Mencken and Van Doren as cultural arbiters and shapers of the canon. As Cather seemed to retreat further and further into the past in search of an orderly and harmonious world, travelling first to the nineteenth-century Southwest and then to seventeenth-century Quebec, the pages of left-wing journals like the \textit{New Republic} and \textit{The Nation} as well as those of the \textit{New York Times Book Review} began to fill with criticism of Cather as a romantic, nostalgic writer who could not cope with the present. Cather wrote, contended Newton Arvin in a typical commentary in \textit{The New Republic}, as if “mass production and technological unemployment and cyclical depressions and the struggle between the classes did not exist,” and so she failed to “come to grips with the real life of her time.”\textsuperscript{18}
By 1933 the attack had infiltrated even the staid pages of the *English Journal*, the publication of the National Council of Teachers of English, which hosted Granville Hicks’ now-famous essay “The Case Against Willa Cather.” Hicks equated Cather’s literary decline with her growing political conservatism. Cather had “never once tried to see contemporary life as it is,” he charged. Fleeing to an idealized conception of a heroic past, she had been “barred from the task that has occupied most of the world’s great artists, the expression of what is central and fundamental in her own age.” Having surrendered to a “supine romanticism,” Hicks argued, Cather could no longer examine “life as it is.” What had seemed like the individual’s rebellion against mediocrity to Carl Van Doren struck reviewers in the 1930s as bourgeois humanism and disdain for the masses: Cather and her literary reputation were caught in the midst of a generational and ideological shift in American literary culture as a new cohort of critics began to apply different standards to determine literary merit. As the writer whose reputation rested on the estimation of the previous generation of reviewers as well as one who invited rebuttal by openly declaring in 1936 that “economics and art are strangers,” Willa Cather was an easy target for socially conscious critics.

At first glance, the charges against Cather in the 1930s and later arose from the politics of class rather than of gender. Indeed the left-wing attacks against Thornton Wilder—viewed, like Cather, as an old-fashioned humanist—were, if anything, more vicious than the dismissals of Cather. Hence this was not simply or exclusively an attempt to exclude a woman writer from the company of great writers. Yet a subtext in the attacks on Cather suggests that gender may have been the dominant, if unacknowledged, variable in shaping the case against Willa Cather. In his influential literary history, *The Last of the provincials* (1947), Maxwell Geismar introduced his discussion of Willa Cather by saying: “In approaching our first feminine writer among the dozen or so contemporary American novelists who deserve a full literary consideration, it is essential, of course, not to consider her as a ‘feminine’ writer.” Yet Geismar and his colleagues throughout the 1930s and 1940s invariably did consider Cather as a “feminine” writer as they set up a set of metaphoric equivalences: “feminine,” “romantic,” “sentimental,” “soft,” and “small,” a circle of associations that led them, seemingly inevitably, from “woman” to “minor writer.”

Granville Hicks concluded his review of *Shadows on the Rock* by stating that “today, perhaps even more than in the past, it takes stern stuff to make a novelist. Miss Cather, one is forced to conclude, has always been soft; and now she has abandoned herself to softness.” Hicks’ implicit assumption that the world of contemporary social and economic issues realistically described is “masculine” and that a failure to demonstrate “stern stuff” in writing of this world is “feminine”—and therefore inferior—becomes explicit in Lionel
Trilling’s seemingly more judicious (and certainly more influential) essay in Malcolm Cowley’s important literary history, After the Genteel Tradition (1937). Trilling linked Cather’s decision to write historical fiction with a “defiant” rejection of her own time, which he in turn associated with her fondness for limited female interests. Commenting on Shadows on the Rock (in which Cather uses food preparation and preservation to explore women’s contributions to the establishment and preservation of culture and society), Trilling found that her “mystical concern with pots and pans” did not seem more than an “oblique defense of gentility or very far from the gaudy domesticity of bourgeois accumulation glorified in the Woman’s Home Companion.”24 Seemingly kinder, in On Native Grounds (1942), Alfred Kazin continued this association of “female” and “minor” when he concluded that if Cather’s “world became increasingly elegiac and soft, it was riches in a little room.”25

And so Cather’s demotion from major to minor writer in the reviews of the 1930s and the literary histories which followed was connected not only with the left-wing critics’ explicit application of aesthetic criteria which demanded social relevance from all writers, male as well as female, but also with their implicit application of aesthetic criteria which equated social and literary relevance with masculinity. The question remains, however, why it was that the male critics and reviewers of the 1930s sought to unmake a major writer who had been made by the male critics and reviewers of the teens and twenties. Why was gender any more a factor in the reviewing process in 1930 than in 1920?

That gender became the underlying, and arguably the most important, source of the attacks on Cather has to do not simply with individual male-biased readings of texts by women writers but with the social, political, and institutional situation of Cather’s 1930s reviewers. The 1920s critics who established Cather’s reputation could play a paternal role in relationship to a young woman writer, but the young critics seeking to establish themselves in the 1930s were sons seeking to displace their fathers professionally and ideologically—Mencken, for example, came under fire from the new liberal establishment for his reactionary political stance. At the same time they were sons confronting a maternal presence their fathers had left as a literary legacy, a woman writer of the first rank. In attacking Willa Cather, the leftist critics who came of age in the 1930s were thus engaged in a complex oedipal drama, seeking both to replace the older generation of male critics and to repudiate a powerful maternal literary figure by defining her as limited.

The fact that many of the 1930s reviews refer not only to Cather’s softness and smallness but also to the size and power of her matriarchal heroines—and to the size and power of her previous reputation—suggests that the critics’ overt stress on the weakness and smallness of her imagination arose, at least
in part, from a covert acknowledgment of the strength and expanse of Cather's heroines, of her literary imagination, and of her literary reputation. Cather's "dominant and increasingly inaccessible women" seem to be "always surrounded by little men," complained Maxwell Geismar, and this observation characterizes the relationship between Cather and the new generation of critics at the beginning of the decade: a dominant and increasingly inaccessible woman surrounded by men concerned with the issue of size.26

Several members of this new generation of critics and reviewers were playing a new professional and institutional role that also contributed to Cather's displacement as a major writer. Whereas most of Cather's early critics were journalists, professional reviewers, and editors who combatted gentility and Philistinism from outside the academy, the majority of Cather's critics in later decades were, for all or part of their professional careers, teachers of literature within English departments as well as book reviewers and authors of literary histories: Newton Arvin (Smith), Alfred Kazin (CCNY), Granville Hicks (Rensselaer), Maxwell Geismar (Sarah Lawrence), Henry Seidel Canby (Yale), and Lionel Trilling (Columbia).

Those who attended college or graduate school in the 1960s and 1970s—when American literature and American studies held firm, if not always highly respectable, positions within the academy—may need to be reminded of the ideological and institutional pressures faced by scholars and teachers of American literature in the decades before World War II. "To those of us who had a special interest in American literature," remembers Jay B. Hubbell, "it seemed that, as Vernon L. Parrington once phrased it in a letter to me, "'There are too many Anglo-Saxon hounds guarding the sacred degree.' . . . It seems clear to me now that some of us who were interested in American literature were suffering from feelings of inferiority.' . . . Such feelings are easy to understand. Not only were pioneers of American literary study like Hubbell surrounded by critics and colleagues who doubted that their native literature was worthy of serious study, but there was almost no institutional recognition of American literature in the teens and twenties: very few courses in colleges and universities, little encouragement of graduate studies, no journals, and no sessions devoted to American literature at the Modern Language Association.28

By the end of the 1920s and throughout the 1930s and 1940s, however, important changes took place as the study of American literature became increasingly professionalized. These decades were marked by the increasing presence of American literature in curricula and the development of graduate programs in American civilization; the founding of professional journals (New England Quarterly [1928] and American Literature [1929]); convention sessions on American literature at the MLA (beginning in 1928); and the publication of literary histories and studies of individual American writers.29
Seeking to stake out the new territory of American literature as an important field of scholarly inquiry, surrounded by Shakespearians and Miltonists who questioned whether Americans had produced a worthy national literature, after 1930 scholars, critics, and reviewers were increasingly concerned with defining and codifying an American literary canon, the establishment of which would both reflect and justify their own professional enterprise.

In so doing, they systematically overlooked or excluded women writers from the highest reaches of the newly emerging canon, defining their work as either “minor” or as “major” but second rank: if Americans were to have a first-rate canon to compete with that already possessed by the British, it would have to be male. Hence from the late 1920s through the 1940s we have the phenomenon of academic critics simultaneously defining American women writers as minor and promoting American male writers as major, as if these were yoked, interdependent aspects of the same project: F. O. Matthiesson praising Sarah Orne Jewett in his 1929 biography, even as he defined her art as regional and limited and went on to exclude her and other women writers from his American Renaissance (1941); Newton Arvin dismissing Cather at the same time that he was elevating Hawthorne and Whitman; Granville Hicks demoting Cather and Wharton while he promoted Dreiser and Anderson in The Great Tradition (1933); Henry Seidel Canby comparing Cather unfavorably to Lewis in Robert Spiller’s The Literary History of the United States (1948). Canby’s assessment of Cather in LHUS summarizes and preserves her literary decline, at the same time revealing the important role the ideology of gender had played in her diminishment:

Her art was not a big art. It does not respond to the troubled sense of American might and magnitude realized but not directed, and felt so strongly by such men as Sinclair Lewis in the same decades. It is national in significance, but not in scope. Her colleagues among the men “sweated sore” over that job, whereas her books rise free and are far more creative than critical. She is preservative, almost antiquarian, content with much space in little room—feminine in this, and in her passionate revelation of the values which conserve the life of the emotions.

The equation Canby makes between gender and literary size (“feminine” = “little”) raises an important issue. It is possible that the same pattern that social historians see characterizing the establishment of the medical profession in America also informs the professionalization of American literature in the 1930s and 1940s: during the informal, uncodified beginnings of a profession women may play powerful roles, but the process of professionalization is also one of masculinization. Hence—just as midwives were exiled as the American Medical Association became established—women writers were required to leave the highest reaches of the canon, as if their presence there would somehow make it questionable that the American literary canon and the work of those who sought to establish it were serious enterprises.
Willa Cather was aware that a male-dominated publishing and critical establishment was attempting to reduce her stature, an awareness that informs her changing literary relationship with Sarah Orne Jewett during the 1920s and 1930s. Jewett had been an important influence in Cather’s personal and professional life, and when Cather dedicated *O Pioneers!* to Jewett she was acknowledging her mentor’s role in her literary emergence. By the mid-1920s Cather was the established writer and Jewett the diminished one, however, and when she edited her collection of Jewett’s fiction in 1925 for Houghton Mifflin Cather was determined literally and figuratively to increase Jewett’s size. She told editor Ferris Greenslet that the existing editions of Jewett’s fiction were simply too small—people would refuse to take them out of libraries, she explained, because they assumed they were children’s books.33 Greenslet promised her a larger edition, and in her introduction Cather addressed her real aim—increasing Jewett’s literary stature—by grouping *The Country of the Pointed Firs* with *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Scarlet Letter* as three American texts which would, in her view, withstand time and change.

By the mid-1930s, however, Cather had less confidence in her ability to guarantee Jewett—and herself—a place in the American literary canon. Just as her literary value was beginning to be questioned, so was Jewett being relegated to a footnote in American literary history by the shapers of the canon. Granville Hicks’ assessment of Jewett is typical of the more generous evaluations: although declaring her “only a minor writer,” he acknowledged that she was “master” of delicate insights, and so a “master of a tiny realm,” a “little world.” But Hicks undercut even this faint praise (which echoes the metaphors of size used to limit Cather’s significance), indulging in an *ad feminam* attack: after granting Jewett “powers of perception,” he went on to say that “in other respects she was merely a New England old maid, who had a private income, traveled abroad, read the *Atlantic Monthly*, and believed in piety, progress, and propriety.”34

Distressed by such dismissals of Jewett as a minor writer whose spinsterish eccentricity and genteel prudishness prevented her from addressing important subjects, Cather revised her 1925 preface to *The Country of the Pointed Firs* in her essay “Miss Jewett,” published in *Not Under Forty* (1936). She removed her prediction of Jewett’s longevity and classic status, attributing the fact that Jewett possessed a “limited audience” to the development of a new class of unsympathetic readers: young urbanites, born in New York City and educated at New York universities, “violently inoculated with Freud,” and most likely of foreign descent, perhaps Jewish or German.35 In “Miss Jewett” Cather describes these unpleasant people as readers, not as critics, but a letter she wrote to Zoë Akins shortly after *Not Under Forty* was published reveals that
she had in mind professional readers: those reviewers and critics whom she termed her “haters,” among them Trilling and Geismar. In a 1945 letter to Ferris Greenslet, she added a reference to Hicks as one of her tormenters. Nowhere does Cather suggest that she was changing her own estimation of Jewett’s work or that her own fiction was declining in quality; rather, her essays and letters throughout the 1930s suggest her recognition that the social, political, and institutional structures defining the production and the reception of literary texts were changing, relegating both Jewett’s and her fiction to marginality. She sensed that the politics of gender might have something to do with this decline: the critics cursed her, she wrote to Sinclair Lewis, because she did not write like a man.

The essays Cather included in Not Under Forty reflect her one attempt to fight the power of professional readers and critics on their own terms, by seizing power herself and publishing her own book of literary and cultural criticism. Her essays on the “novel démeublé,” on Mrs. Fields, on Sarah Orne Jewett, and on Katherine Mansfield show her distaste for a contemporary society that dishonors the past; they also show a woman writer’s attempt to claim and to preserve a female literary heritage. Not Under Forty itself received negative reviews from critics who saw here only more evidence of Cather’s escapism and marginality, and she was so distressed by the attacks that she resolved never to express her critical opinions in print again. She realized that she had revealed herself particularly in her essay on Jewett, she told Zoë Akins, and although the criticism made her angry she had learned her lesson: she would be silent.

Unable to silence reviewers and critics or to affect the cultural climate, Cather sought to control the way her books would be read and interpreted by refusing to let them be shaped and defined by literary and academic institutions. She limited the excerpts from her fiction that could appear in anthologies and refused permission to include any of her work in anthologies intended for use in high schools or colleges; she also successfully prevented the publication of cheaper editions of her books. As Alfred A. Knopf recalls, Cather did not want her books to be read in the classroom, because if readers were exposed to her in a coercive environment they might “grow up hating her.”

Cather refused such dissemination of her fiction because her view of the relationship between writer and reader was based on the private model of friendship. “When we find ourselves on shipboard, among hundreds of strangers,” she wrote in “Miss Jewett,” “we very soon recognize those who are sympathetic to us. We like a writer much as we like individuals; for what he is, simply, underneath his accomplishment.” Since the act of reading, ideally, was like striking up a friendship—with the same qualities of freedom, choice, and sympathy—Cather did not want readers to be forced to read her. So strongly did she wish readers to discover her novels independently that
she even refused to allow her books to be adopted by book clubs throughout the 1920s. She relented only with *Shadows on the Rock*, in part responding to the private claims of friendship: her good friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher, then one of the judges of the Book-of-the-Month Club, wrote her a long letter defending the club’s policies.

Paradoxically, Cather’s attempts to ensure that readers would approach her work freely and sympathetically were cutting off institutional means for ensuring the accessibility of her novels and for solidifying her literary reputation. So to us it may seem that Cather was limiting her readership by restricting the ways in which people could encounter her books (and so revealing literary and social elitism), but from her perspective she was trying to preserve her novels from the cultural and literary institutions that were seeking to define, interpret, and limit her work. In a sense, she was trying to preserve the independence and autonomy she valued in the writer/reader bond from the social and institutional forces that were increasingly structuring it in the 1930s and 1940s—reviews, scholarly articles, anthologies, book clubs, high school and college curricula. Cather could have faith in the endurance of this bond, separated from the power of professional readers and critics, because during the period of her literary decline she was receiving hundreds of letters from readers who reaffirmed her faith in herself and in her work. Some of these she included in her own letters to old friends and supporters, thus creating an informal, supportive network of readers through her correspondence.

The links Cather maintained with readers through letter-writing became particularly important during World War II, years of pain, isolation, and depression that were occasionally lightened by the hundreds of letters she received (and answered) from soldiers who were reading her books in Armed Services Editions—a form of cultural transmission that she did not find offensive. During the last years of her life, Edith Lewis tells us, Cather took increasing pleasure in her correspondence with readers from all over the world:

> ... letters that were truly from “the people,” not from any particular class of people, bringing to her their gratitude, their homage, their affection, in the kind of language she most appreciated—the language art cannot invent—were a sort of giving back to her, a return in kind, of the qualities of feeling she had herself expended in her writing career.

Although, sadly, we do not have these letters, Lewis selects some quotations to suggest their range and quality: “‘I would love to count myself your friend.’—‘Your books have somehow helped me, a boy from Wisconsin, to take heart again in my effort to rebuild my health and life.’... ‘I am glad you are alive, and have written so many splendid books.’” Finding a “great anonymous affirmation of her art” in these private voices, Cather tried to answer each one personally.41
So Cather found in these letters evidence that the writer/reader relationship could resemble the private bonds of affection and friendship; her letters from readers doubtless helped her to keep writing by offsetting the criticisms of her professional readers. Perhaps she found some assurance in them that her work would continue to be read and appreciated, even if not considered “major” by scholars and critics. In a sense she has been right; although not placed among the “peaks” of the American literary canon, Cather has continued to have a wide popular readership, a readership which preceded (and may be independent from) the recent revival of interest in her work in the academy.

Although Cather would have wanted to attribute this continuing readership to the same private, intuitive sympathies that create friendship, literary and cultural institutions have played a central role in keeping Cather’s work alive—paradoxically by modifying the restrictions she sought to place on them. After her death Cather’s executors negotiated an agreement with Houghton Mifflin, publisher of Cather’s first four novels, that allowed the publication of *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!* in educational editions for high schools and the inclusion of *My Antonia* in college anthologies. Twenty years later, seeing that Cather’s sales were declining (in part because hardback editions were becoming too expensive for classroom use), Alfred Knopf persuaded Edith Lewis to agree that Cather’s novels should be brought out in paperback. Currently all of Cather’s novels and most of her short stories are available in this form. Thus, even though individual readers may regard discovering a Cather novel as comparable to beginning a friendship, her continuing readership must be connected with the social, economic, and institutional structures that have kept her work in print and available to readers.

Over the last fifteen years Cather’s stock in the academy and the canon has also been slowly rising, judging from the increasing appearance of her fiction in college curricula, the number of sessions at the Modern Language Association devoted to her work, and the publication of numerous articles in professional journals, biographies, and book-length studies of her fiction. A new consensus about her literary values has still not emerged, however, in part because past evaluations like “Her art was not a big art” still have shaping power, and in part because many of the feminist scholars and critics who are focusing new attention on her work are simultaneously questioning the politics of canon formation. What is clear is that a new generation of professional readers—looking at Willa Cather through different interpretive frameworks from those of her 1930s reviewers—is seeing a more significant, complex, and interesting writer than the conservative, “antiquarian” novelist described by Trilling, Hicks, and Canby.

Since Cather valued the nonacademic over the professional reader (no matter how sympathetic), she might not be entirely pleased by this development. For
a student to encounter *O Pioneers!* in a course on American women writers rather than in a high school anthology might not strike her as an improvement, since she valued only acts of reading arising from choice and affinity. Yet Cather herself did not fully recognize that the seemingly private act of reading is itself structured by public forces and power relationships: we simply do not read writers whose work has not been published, evaluated, preserved, and transmitted by social, economic, and literary institutions of some sort. In fact, Cather could imagine the act of reading as private and intuitive only because she had attained at least a minimal place in the canon and a secure place in the structure of publishing as one of Alfred Knopf’s most important authors.

Her relatively privileged position allowed Cather to ignore the social and institutional forces that had granted her a certain amount of literary power. Had she even more disenfranchised during the 1930s and 1940s, as was a writer like Zora Neale Hurston, she might not have been able to compare reading with friendship because she would have seen more clearly the powerful forces that limited her ability to attract friendly readers. In fact, Cather’s metaphor of the shipboard friendship—based on her experience as a passenger on the luxurious ocean liners of the 1920s—reveals this paradox, suggesting she could envision the writer/reader bond as private precisely because of public institutions that placed her at least in the lower levels of the American literary canon. To develop such a shipboard friendship, one must be already a member of an elite, privileged group of travelers that includes a few people while excluding many more, much the way a literary canon exalts some writers and eliminates others.

NOTES


8. Bourne, quoted Vanderbilt, American Literature, 207.

9. Quoted in ibid., 206.


12. For a survey of the polls, see Jay B. Hubbell, Who Are the Major American Writers? (Durham, 1972), 201–35.


15. Willa Cather to H. L. Mencken, 6 Feb. 1922, Enoch Pratt Library, Baltimore, Md.


17. For a selection of the positive reviews and assessments, see Schroeeter, Willa Cather and Murphy, Critical Essays.


19. Schroeeter, Willa Cather, 139–47.


22. Schroeeter, Willa Cather, 171.

23. Granville Hicks, Forum (Sept. 1931).

24. Schroeeter, Willa Cather, 148–55. The critical attacks by Trilling and others on Shadows on the Rock support Nina Baym’s argument that theories of American literature exclude women authors because the myth of America—the story of the untrammeled individual confronting an untamed wilderness—is in fact gender-coded (see Baym, “Melodramas of Beset Manhood”). Interestingly, Shadows—the novel that signified Cather’s peripheral status to many reviewers—is a version of the mythic American story, the establishment of a society in the wilderness. Cather, however, was challenging the gender-coded myth of America: her protagonist is not the individual male but the collective culture, and the culture manages to inscribe itself upon the wilderness without the acts of violence and domination which, in Cather’s view were not as central to the story of settlement as the acts of peace and accommodation. “And really,” she wrote in a letter published in The Saturday Review in 1931, “a new society begins with the salad dressing more than with the destruction of Indian villages” (Willa Cather on Writing, 16). Critics could view the novel as peripheral because, although it addresses the central American story of immigration, transplanting, and resettlement, it does not tell the male version of that story.

25. Schroeeter, Willa Cather, 170. The same imagery of size was used by Fred Lewis Pattee who praised Cather’s novels, which he nonetheless described as “cameo cuttings” (The New American Literature, 1890–1930 [New York, 1930], 265).


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28. For a discussion of this period in the history of American literary study, see Vanderbilt, American Literature, 243–70, and Hubbell, South and Southwest, 3–48.


30. See Lauter, “Race and Gender,” for a fuller analysis of role played by the politics of gender in the shaping of the canon.


32. See Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, For Her Own Good: One Hundred and Fifty Years of the Experts’ Advice to Women (New York, 1979) and Margaret W. Rossiter, Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies in 1940 (Baltimore, 1982). Lauter also correlates the establishment of the canon with professionalization and the consequent marginalization of women writers (“Race and Gender,” 446–48).


34. Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature since the Civil War (New York, 1933), 104–05. Waldo Frank was even more contemptuous in a 1925 review of Cather’s edition of Jewett’s stories: “We must all snatch from our coming days the nodding wish to turn from the rot of our world into a sweet-scented realm of senile wishes, in order to enjoy Miss Jewett” (New Republic 44 [Oct. 14, 1925]: 204. Van Wyck Brooks’ assessment makes clear the role played by gender in Jewett’s decline: “Her vision was certainly limited. It scarcely embraced the world of men, and vigorous, masculine life of towns like Gloucester, astir with Yankee enterprise and bustle, lay quite outside her province” New England: Indian Summer (New York, 1940), 347–48.


37. Willa Cather to Sinclair Lewis, n.d., Beineke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.


40. “Miss Jewett,” 94.


42. For an account of these negotiations, see Knopf, “Miss Cather,” 222–24.

43. I include myself among such critics. My biography of Willa Cather (Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice [New York, 1987]), which draws on feminist and psychoanalytic theory, describes Cather’s attainment of literary identity and authority but does not argue that her fiction deserves a higher rank in the literary canon.