

Part III

Edith Wharton and Willa Cather

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Both Mrs. Wharton and Miss Cather rank very high in American Literature. Every literature critic, who studies Mrs. Wharton thoroughly admits this whenever he comes to the final analysis of Mrs. Wharton. One of them, Arthur Hobson Quinn, has gone so far as to say that Mrs. Wharton has won a secure place, not only in American fiction but in that of the world:

... she (Mrs. Wharton) clothed her unflagging invention, her remarkable character-drawing and her unswerving reality of situation in a style so distinguished that we read and reread her fiction for the sheer joy of tasting again the magnificent phrasing which fits its theme with the unobtrusive nicety of great art. Her own phrase baffles competition. By the "mysterious authority of beauty" she won her secure place, not only in American fiction but in that of the world, as one who touched real life with the imaginative magic of a poet and who amid the shifting standards of a disturbed and disjointed time, steadily refused to depart from that conception of art which from the days of the Greeks has been the highest. She belonged to no school, she was her own master. She followed no fashions because she had become herself a standard by which the writers of American fiction of this period must ultimately be judged.¹

As for Miss Cather, Quinn is impressed by her ability to present life in the West of America with unusual insight and sympathy. He is also attracted by the beauty of her early memories which are made vivid by her skill and artistry. David Daiches is positive that Miss Cather's works are civilized and that her position among American novelists is unique. He says that her novels:

... have a strength and an individuality that it is not easy for the critic formally to describe, virtues which can be experienced even if they cannot easily be talked about. Her position among American novelists is unique; no other has brought to bear quite her kind of perception on the American scene²

And that her search for a culture

... is more than an American theme. It transcends national problems to illuminate one of the great questions about civilization.³

The fiction of Mrs. Wharton and Miss Cather definitely gives the reader pleasure and at the same time reveals certain aspects of America that have never passed into history. Their attitudes are sometimes similar and sometimes radically different. These similarities and dissimilarities make a study of their works all the more interesting. Their different backgrounds are of interest too because one notices how much both novelists drew on their past experiences in producing their fiction which is very much admired even today.

While Edith Newbold Jones was born into a rich and well-established family of old New York, Willa Cather was born into the family of a Virginia farmer. Edith Jones was surrounded by people of high society, while Willa Cather spent her childhood among simple people of farming stock. While old New York, with its kindness, its precise taste and its amenability was presenting itself to the young Edith Newbold Jones, Willa Cather was straining against the rigid social conventions of the South. Edith Jones's upbringing was the conventional one given children of her time and status. Consequently, in spite of living in a well-protected family, the intelligent young Edith Jones found herself extremely bored. Feeling greatly disturbed by her tutors, governesses and relatives she, at an early age, began to write and to show a marked independence of mind. Willa Cather experienced a somewhat similar and even though she was merely a young girl, she reacted against it in a way which showed her independent spirit:

Even as a little girl she felt something smothering in the polite, rigid social conventions of that Southern society -- something factitious and unreal. If one fell in with those sentimental attitudes, those euphuisms that went with good manners, one lost all touch with reality, with truth

of experience. If one resisted them, one became a social rebel. She told once of an old judge who came to call ---- and who began stroking her curls and talking to her in the playful platitudes one addressed to little girls -- and of how she horrified her mother by breaking out suddenly: "I's a dang'ous nigger, I is!" It was an attempt to break through the smooth, unreal conventions about little girls -- the only way that occured to her at the moment.⁴

Edith Jones's teen years were not marked by schooling as were Willa Cather's in Red Cloud, Nebraska. However, she managed to get her own education: she read the works of famous American and English poets and her experience in society was educational in itself. In her own circle she studied the way of a people "who dreaded scandal more than disease, who placed decency above courage, and who considered that nothing was more ill-bred than 'scenes,' except the behavior of those who gave rise to them." There were standards: the word "standard", she confessed later, gave her the clue her writer's mind needed to the world in which she was bred. Bad manners were the supreme offense; it would have been bad manners to speak bad English, to nag servants. Her first literary effort, the work of her eleventh year, was a novel which began: "Oh, how do you do, Mrs. Brown?" said Mrs. Tompkins. "If only I had known you were going to call I should have tidied up the drawing-room." Her mother returned it coldly, saying, "Drawing-rooms are always tidy."⁵ It was in this kind of world that our distinguished Edith Jones moved in her teen years, -- among elaborate luncheon parties, a thousand ceremonial dinners and exquisite tattle. It was a world of graciousness, but it did not satisfy the creative intelligence of Edith Jones. Exactly at about the same age, Willa Cather roamed the great plain on the Divide where she was immediately attracted by the lives of the immigrants on that specious plain. While the good manners and etiquette of high society suffocated Edith Newbold Jones, the prairie atmosphere enchanted Willa Cather. But this was only one significant part of her

experience during her teen years. There was much still waiting in the future to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of this rebellious child whose nature, she herself, at this early stage, did not quite understand. Her search for the finer things in life started, without her knowing it, with her first taste of town life, in Red Cloud, Nebraska. From school, from gifted people in the town, and from books she got intellectual encouragement which was of the utmost importance for her future career. When she entered the University of Nebraska, she was even more thrilled and encouraged by subjects that were new and enchanting to her and with the help of able-minded professors, there opened before her a world of the intellect into which she plunged enthusiastically.

Whereas Willa Cather remained unmarried throughout her life, at the age of twenty-three, Edith Jones married Edward Wharton, son of a well-to-do Boston family. Although he was thirteen years older than she it was apparently a good match. Marriage gave Edith the opportunity to travel in Europe frequently— one advantage which played an important part in her development as a great writer:

Her marriage indeed opened the way, as much as she pleased, to easy travel, and now there were constant and regular flights to Europe... she was a passionate traveller, never so happy as when she took the road to see the world. But still she returned to her place at the journey's end; she helped herself in her wanderings to what she needed, a magnificent lapful and carried it home. It was not for her to be hungering in her native air for things that it didn't provide; of these she could always bring back store in plenty, with vision and memory refreshed and enriched— enough to last till next time and the next. It was no question with her as it was with some, of an air in which she couldn't thrive, a life in which she couldn't accomplish her purpose. She was never one to linger helpless and undecided in conditions that didn't suit her. 6

The Whartons lived a simple but gracious life. Their home, "The Mount" at Massachusettes, was always

highly praised by her friends who visited there. From one of the complimentary notes one learns also that Edith Wharton had a happy life with her husband:

I do not remember any house where the hospitality was greater or more full of charm than at The Mount. As one thinks of it in retrospect the word 'civilised' comes to one's mind. The garden was a great interest to Edith, and the opening of vistas and planting of trees was a constant amusement to Teddy, and they both shared in the love of dogs and horses.⁷

The Whartons however did not stay at "The Mount" as long as they should have in spite of their love of the place. They sold the house and emigrated to France and chose Paris as their second home. Their decision to leave the United States was rather mysterious. Mrs. Wharton made it known to Judge Robert Grant, one of her older friends who had a part in helping her discover herself as a writer of books, that their decision was due to Edward's ill health. However, their decision was so sudden that one suspects an ulterior motive, but even now there seems to be no logical explanation:

My last visit to "The Mount" seemed the happiest at the moment, for each of my hosts gave the impression of being in love with what they builded, and Edith spoke gleefully of hoping to pay for a new terrace with the profits of her next book. Within three weeks I heard they had decided to uproot themselves and live abroad. The decision seemed a mystery at the time. Teddy Wharton was an attractive man, debonair, spruce, and amiable; they had many fastidious tastes in common, but he was not intellectual, and his wife had in this sense outgrown him. We have Edith's printed word for it that his growing ill-health was the underlying cause of their emigration. On the other hand the lure of Europe and wider literary associations were fully understandable as one of her motives, and at the moment it seemed as if Teddy would find the boulevards of Paris thoroughly congenial. But he never fitted in, and they bored him. On the other hand her eager intelligence derived fresh vigour and atmosphere from the old world and from the contacts her growing reputation brought her ...⁸

So it seems that this move was not totally because of Edward's ill-health, but at least partly to provide literary opportunity for Edith. It was a disaster for Edward. One of

their friends was positive that this move caused Edward's mental disturbance and ultimately ended their marriage:

Her marriage until then had been a happy one; but an infirmity of temper grew on Mr. Wharton, unreasoning anger about trifles, which at first puzzled, then worried, finally disturbed Edith beyond measure. Perhaps if the fact that there was some tendency to mental disturbance had been recognized earlier, if the right word at the right moment had been spoken, or if the Lenox house had not been sold, the rift would not have widened and the final separation might not have come to pass. I felt the disposal of "The Mount" deeply, discouraged it in such slight ways as I could, and feared the consequences — more for him than for her. He was devoted to the country; the place at Lenox (where he had passed much of his boyhood) was a constant amusement, and his love of animals and country life gave him deep roots in the soil. To her the change of Paris opened vistas of artistic pleasure and intellectual development; but for him it took away his chief occupations, and he found himself stranded in a society for which he was neither adapted nor inclined. Add to this an illness partly nervous and partly mental, and it is easy to understand the grave differences that later on came between them.⁹

By 1912, things had reached a point where it was evident that no effort or sacrifice of hers could further avail, and the separation that ensued resulted in a divorce in the following year.

While Mrs. Wharton was having years of both happy and bitter marital experience, Miss Cather at the same age was beginning a career as a journalist. From Lincoln, Nebraska, she headed for Pittsburgh where she first experienced real city life, and then to New York, the center of civilized living — the city that this little Nebraska prairie girl had always longed to visit. In both Pittsburgh and New York Miss Cather finally had an opportunity to come in contact with the artistic beauty that her drab Western town had failed to offer. So ambitious was her quest that she was not satisfied with what she got on the east coast but she even continued her quest by traveling to Europe where she came to appreciate deeply the old world. Back from Europe, she was full of a desire to seek in her own country values such as

she had found in Europe. Thus she began to appreciate the valuable qualities of prairie life -- the life that she had previously rejected when she was searching for beauty. For this reason she revisited her Nebraskan plains and after that even made an extensive study of the Southwest -- the vast region she had not been interested in before. From these vast journeyings she came to believe that the civilization of her country was not superficial but deeply rooted in a glorious past: in the heroic spirit and simple life of the pioneers and in the culture of the Cliff-Dwellers of the Southwest.

It is very important to remember that Mrs. Wharton and Miss Cather were contemporaries who had witnessed similar changes in their country resulting from various causes, one of the most revolutionary of which, was the coming of the industrial age at the turn of the century. As seen in their works, both of them reacted to this change, especially in their presentation in their principal novels of the characteristics of America before the turn of the twentieth century. They regretted that past and viewed the changes with nostalgia. Yet because of their great social differences, their subject matter which mostly reflected their own experiences was radically unlike and provided a sharp contrast which helps the reader to see the United States -- east and west -- in different periods in the past.

While Mrs. Wharton revealed to us aristocratic old New York society in the eighteen seventies, Miss Cather presented the simple pioneer community on the Nebraska plains.

However, before Miss Cather wrote about the lives of the pioneers, she had written about the people who yearned for artistic beauty and who had thus overlooked the precious qualities in life on the plains. This is because Miss Cather herself in her youth had not tasted the luxurious living that was taken for granted by Mrs. Wharton. For this reason Mrs. Wharton never showed in her fiction a similar search for beauty. This then is one of their contrasts in theme. Mrs. Wharton presented a high society that was quite accustomed to this beauty. Her main protagonists who represent the old New York aristocrats for example Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden in The House of Mirth, Countess Ellen Olen-ska and Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence or the Mar-vells in The Custom of the Country are therefore people who were born into an atmosphere of culture and artistic beauty. Miss Cather's artists, on the contrary, are originally young Westerners who desert their native towns to seek a more promising life of aesthetic development. They are characters like Thea Kronborg in The Song of the Lark, Harvey Merrick in "The Sculptor's Funeral" or Claude Wheeler in One of Ours.

Whereas Miss Cather occupied herself with the search for beauty, Mrs. Wharton was preoccupied with the role of convention. She reveals her awareness of the influence of convention and shows clearly that because of its set rules and traditions sometimes it is hostile to the members of that same society. There is in spite of its orderly condition and behavior, little chance for an individual with an independent spirit to develop his potentialities. Every

unusual practice is shunned by these tradition-minded people. For this reason one of Mrs. Wharton's main themes is always the conflict of protagonists who because of their independent spirit are at war with their environment, and they generally become the victims of society. Two factors that contribute to the destruction of the old aristocratic society are: the inflexibility of convention and the increased power of the new materialistic generation. Protagonists representing this new generation are, for example, Simon Rosedale in The House of Mirth or Elmer Moffatt of Apex City in The Custom of the Country. Miss Cather also reveals her awareness of the influence of this new generation whose greed for money destroyed the pioneer spirit and whose lack of appreciation of art discouraged artists. They are characters like the money-minded Bayliss Wheeler in One of Ours and Ivy Peters in A Lost Lady. However when both novelists had shown their awareness of the hostility of this new generation, they in a way yielded to the power of these newcomers. Both realized that it was beyond their power to resist the Elmer Moffatts or the Ivy Peters of the modern world. Mrs. Wharton accepted this reality normally. She retired graciously to live in the past, writing about her old New York but she did not show her great annoyance with the new generation. She even revealed in her novels that she could not help admiring their struggle and eagerness to win their place in **society**. Miss Cather did not accept this reality as normally as Mrs. Wharton. In portraying characters like Bayliss Wheeler in One of Ours

or Ivy Peters in A Lost Lady, she showed that she had no sympathy and no excuse for these people. Her reaction was wild and strong. When she knew that it was impossible to resist them, she even made an escape into the remote past, writing about seventeenth century Quebec and eighteenth century New Mexico to portray the old past civilization of America.

Both Mrs. Wharton and Miss Cather had done a lot of traveling in Europe and both appreciated European civilization. The former had been so much inspired, especially by France and her culture, that she chose that country as her second home where she remained until her death while the latter, from journeys in 1902 in both England and France, had her first experience with "all the heaped-up riches, the accumulated treasure, of European civilization, feeling deeply its weight and glory, its past and present."¹⁰ In the little domain of the Pavillon Colombe, lying round the corner, off the village street of St. Brice-sous-Forêt, some few miles to the north of Paris, Mrs. Wharton had found a very charming place for developing her art. There she learnt to appreciate more deeply the French sense of beauty and French taste. She also learnt about the old French principles as well as the strong ties in old aristocratic French families. In "Madame de Treymes" she depicts most completely these French characteristics.

During her tour in France Miss Cather observed these same characteristics. She travelled most of the time with humble French people, and everywhere observed them closely.

These simple people always caught and retained her attention. From her visit to Avignon she found it easy to conclude that "People know how to live in this country."¹¹ At a hotel in Avignon, the hotel dining-room, converted from a Gothic chapter house, and the lavish meal of generous Provençal cooking only confirmed her satisfaction. In Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock, this French food has become a symbol of the nourishment derived from Latin culture. In Rouen she was so impressed by the architectural beauty that she found words of moving beauty to describe her first glimpse of the cathedral, its arches and its vaults, and its two great rose-windows. Twenty years later, in 1922, she expressed through Claude, the sensitive, diffident young boy from Nebraska who was the hero of One of Ours, the high meaning of France in the awe with which he first viewed Rouen. Miss Cather's deep appreciation of old-world values is also seen clearly when she presented the difficulty in adjustment of the delicate and refined immigrants from Europe to the crude American frontiers as seen in the case of Mr. Shimerda in My Antonia.

Mrs. Wharton is considered a novelist of manners and she deserves to be called thus for her presentation of the old aristocratic New York society in the eighteenth seventies. Readers of her novels can get a complete picture of the manners observed in that high society: the etiquette of ladies and gentlemen at the opera and at social events; their polite speech; their avoidance of scandal even though

it meant their own destruction. Manners are of the utmost importance in old families like the Marvells in The Custom of the Country, the Mingotts and the Van der Luydens in The Age of Innocence. But Miss Cather in her fiction deals with pioneers and, therefore, she stresses the pioneer code of behavior. In her prairie novels one learns of pioneer devotion to the land, their neighborliness especially in time of trouble, and their enjoyment of simple pleasures like dancing to native folk music. Besides, in the novels of the Southwest, one feels the charm of the primitive way of living and the culture of the Mexicans and the Cliff-Dwellers. Every detail shows how careful a study Miss Cather has made to make her novels as true to life as possible.

One great difference between Mrs. Wharton and Miss Cather in theme is their attitude toward human relationships. Mrs. Wharton's own marriage has taught her that the relationship between men and women is natural no matter whether it brings happiness or misery. For this reason Mrs. Wharton's protagonists are always those who experience marriage and later marital problems. Through her novels she reveals how irrevocably marriage bound a married couple of her generation together. On the other hand she always brings in divorce which is one of her recurrent themes. Treating divorce in her fiction, Mrs. Wharton at the same time presents the reaction of her contemporaries to divorce. Her treatment of marriage and divorce is lively and spirited and having learnt of her own failure in marriage, the

reader understands why Mrs. Wharton is superb in dealing with such matters. Her success with this theme definitely springs from a biographical impulse. Miss Cather, who remained unmarried all her life, never ventures to treat the theme of marriage and its subsequent problems, except as a spectator. On the contrary, she avoids it as much as possible and even goes so far as making marriage a means of destruction for the ambitious. If happiness in human relationships should exist, it has to come after one's aim in life has already been achieved. Thus Alexandra Bergson in O Pioneers! is a symbol of pioneers — she must succeed in taming the hardness of the land before she finally gets married and once she gets married, the novel comes to an end. In the case of her artists, success comes to those who reject human relationships but those who refuse to reject personal attachment reap failure. Miss Cather, for example, sometimes puts her heroine in a condition that does not seem true to life as in the case of Thea Kronborg, the heroine of The Song of the Lark, who is not allowed to marry until she has succeeded in reaching her artistic goal. The same treatment is seen in the case of Don Hedger, the hero of "Coming, Aphrodite!" who, because of separation from the girl he loves, achieves his ideal of becoming a great painter; or in the case of Cressida Garnet, the heroine of "The Diamond Mine," who is completely destroyed because she cannot detach herself from human ties. Or if an individual enjoys a happy married life he is generally doomed to a life that will never be prosperous. Antonia

Shimerda in My Antonia and Rosicky in "Neighbour Rosicky" are appropriate examples. Miss Cather also presents unsatisfactory married lives in One of Ours, My Mortal Enemy and My Lost Lady.

On the whole one sees that the themes of Mrs. Wharton and Miss Cather are different. Mrs. Wharton reveals, in dealing with the nature and influence of old New York convention, her deep interest in social ideas; in using the themes of victimization and illegitimacy, her preoccupation with moral principles; in presenting the picture of aristocratic society in the eighteen seventies and the materialistic new generation in the early twentieth century, her regret and nostalgia; in using divorce as one of her main themes, her acknowledgment of human relationships and in discussing European, particularly French, taste and culture, her appreciation of the values she finds lacking in Americans. Miss Cather, on the other hand, reveals, in her novels and short stories rejecting of life on the vast Nebraska plains and in dealing with artistic aims, the depth of her pursuit of beauty and the finer things in life; in the prairie novels, her appreciation of life on the plains that she had previously overlooked; in her presentation of seventeenth century Quebec and the eighteenth century Southwest, her nostalgia for the past and her search for national identity; in discussing the maladjustment of the refined immigrants from the Old World and the deep-rooted characteristics of the French-Canadians, her appreciation of Old World values and in dealing little with marriage or showing matrimonial failures, her negation of human ties.

Of the two novelists, Mrs. Wharton seems to have started off her career and continued it with greater maturity and confidence. After she has chosen any theme for a book, she pursues that theme resolutely and relentlessly, never letting her reader discover any uncertainty or hesitation. She makes her reader feel that she has no other aim than to present what she has really seen or known. Even though she is often engaged in supporting high moral standards, her fiction has no didactic quality. Her themes also tend to be universal since the pictures of the high society she paints in her books and the tribal or personal problems arising in that society can apply to any aristocratic society in the world. Old New York society reminds one of a society where social manners and etiquette are still observed as ceremoniously as in the old New York circle. The integrity, honor and hypocrisy displayed in Mrs. Wharton's fictitious high society either in old New York or in the Faubourg St. Germain are exactly the same characteristics one discovers in the past or present high society in Thailand. This makes Mrs. Wharton's fiction more interesting. The nature of Miss Cather's themes makes her readers feel that she began her career like an experimenter. The characteristics of her first novel, Alexander's Bridge, and her early short stories make one feel that the writer was not sure of herself and was seeking appropriate materials. However, this experimentation is good for her since she is much more confident when she writes the prairie novels and is successful with them. It

is not disparaging to say that she is the type of novelist who is good at developing novels on her own experience, telling the events that she really came across or basing her characters on the people she knew personally. Miss Cather herself must have realized that this kind of writing suited her since one notices that the stories she wrote after that are always based on real experiences. The majority of Miss Cather's characters always take after people that she knew herself and this is one marked difference between Miss Cather and Mrs. Wharton. Antonia Shimerda in My Antonia is in fact Anna Pavelka, a Bohemian woman whom she had known very well, when they were girls. Thea Kronborg is in reality Olive Fremstad, a famous contemporary singer. Claude Wheeler and his artist friend David Gerhardt in One of Ours are moulded respectively after G. P. Cather, Jr., her young cousin, and David Hochstein, a young violinist, both of whom had become soldiers. In presenting Mrs. Forrester and her husband in A Lost Lady, Miss Cather nearly found herself in difficulty since although Mrs. Garber, after whom Mrs. Forrester was drawn, and her husband, Governor Garber, both of whom Miss Cather knew well, were dead, some of their relatives were still living and might be offended.¹² The characters in Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock are not drawn from her acquaintances, but they are the people she learnt about in history. In her last novel and short stories she portrays even her own relatives. Old Mrs. Harris is believed to be nobody but her own grandmother

and the characters in Sapphira and the Slave Girl are the people living at a time when her grandmothers were young women. It is true that because of her almost constant use of autobiographical material Miss Cather appears inferior to Mrs. Wharton; but one cannot deny that these abundant details that she has put into her stories have made her stories vigorous and true to life.

Another thing that should be noticed about Miss Cather is that she delights in humble people. Her protagonists are generally humble people struggling for their living -- she depicts with warm understanding. She herself while touring Europe, was much more interested in the humble folk she met in the streets or in the trains than the fashionable people. When she comes to write about the problems of her humble protagonists, she showers her sympathy on them. Take for example the case of Antonia. When Antonia is deceived by Larry Donovan, a railroad conductor, the Widow Steavens, who relates Antonia's tragic story to Jim, never blames Antonia. She is able to accept the fact that there is a tragic incomprehensibility in the fates meted out to human beings; she can admit that Antonia had made a mistake and still believe in her. Antonia remains an object of pity. If one expects the birth of Antonia's illegitimate child to form the climax of the book, one is disappointed. This is quite significant since it shows that Miss Cather does not overemphasize any sort of serious human conflict that shows the unworthy side of human nature. The really emotional situations, the scenes in

which it is necessary to face up to the hard facts about human nature and passions Miss Cather seems to avoid if she can. Of My Antonia she said:

There was material in that book for a lurid melodrama. But I decided that in writing it, I would dwell very lightly on those things that a novelist would ordinarily emphasize, and make up my story of the little, every-day happenings and occurrences that form the greatest part of everyone's life and happiness.¹³

Mrs. Wharton and Miss Cather use different techniques in presenting their works. On the whole, Mrs. Wharton is a master of style and technique whereas Miss Cather always seems to be groping. Mrs. Wharton's plots in all her stories are well done since she is able to keep her reader's interest all through the stories. One feels that her works are the products of finished art: she knows where to begin and end her stories and she is perfectly aware of the forms of both novels and short stories. Her stories move naturally and logically. She does not put in details or incidents that do not advance the story. The fact that she views things with a kind of detachment makes her works even more successful. One has no feeling that she is being subjective and this quality has unquestionably made her works more dramatic. In plotting her short stories her genius is shown even more clearly. Each story, having usually a single theme, is drawn cleverly, using only necessary details to build up the climax of the story and once the story reaches its climax, it ends usually with ironical unexpectedness — a technique which surprises and pleases the reader. The best example is seen in her famous

Ethan Frome, a long short story, where little incidents accumulate quite naturally to form an unexpected climax. The conclusions of her short stories are usually so pointed that they are easily remembered. Her diction is outstanding. She always selects the apt words, uses expressive and, unlike Miss Cather, frequently ironical language that appeals to nobler and better-educated minds. In "After Holbein" the stroke, that suddenly overcame old Anson Warley when he was leaving the house of old Mrs. Jasper, is very cleverly described:

He smiled again with satisfaction at the memory of the wine and the wit. Then he took a step forward, to where a moment before the pavement had been — and where now there was nothing.¹⁴

Or notice the mastery of irony displayed at the end of "The Other Two" when Alice Waythorn entertains her three husbands, each with a cup of tea:

She swept aside their embarrassment with a charming gesture of hospitality.

"I'm so sorry — I'm always late; but the afternoon was so lovely." She stood drawing off her gloves, propitiatory and graceful; diffusing about her a sense of ease and familiarity in which the situation lost its grotesqueness. "But before talking business," she added brightly, "I'm sure everyone wants a cup of tea."

She dropped into her low chair by the tea-table, and the two visitors, as if drawn by her smile, advanced to receive the cups she held out.

She glanced about for Waythorn; and he took the third cup with a laugh.¹⁵

By comparing the description of Mrs. Forrester in Miss Cather's A Lost Lady and Countess Ellen Olenska in Mrs. Wharton's The Age of Innocence, one sees the difference in skill of these two writers clearly:

How strange that she should be here at all, a woman like her among common people! Not even in Denver had he ever seen another woman so elegant. He had sat in the dining-room of the Brown Palace hotel and watched them as they came down to dinner; — fashionable women from "The East," on their way to California. But he had never found one so attractive and distinguished as Mrs. Forrester. Compared with her, other women were heavy and dull; even the pretty ones seemed lifeless, — they had not that something in their glance that made one's blood tingle. And never elsewhere had he heard anything like her inviting, musical laugh, that was like the distant measure of dance music, heard through opening and shutting doors.¹⁶

In the middle of the room she (Ellen Olenska) paused, looking about her with a grave mouth and smiling eyes; and in that instant Newland Archer rejected the general verdict on her looks. It was true that her early radiance was gone. The red cheeks had paled; she was thin, worn, a little older-looking than her age, which must have been nearly thirty. But there was about her the mysterious authority of beauty, a sureness in the carriage of the head, the movement of the eyes, which, without being in the least theatrical, struck him as highly trained and full of a conscious power.¹⁷

By indirect means the protagonists of Mrs. Wharton are so skilfully brought out that one has complete living pictures of the characters. Among her woman protagonists one cannot forget the refined but luxury-loving Lily Bart in The House of Mirth; the tragic figures of Ellen Olenska in The Age of Innocence or Charlotte Lovell in The Old Maid; the "innocent" May Weeland or the conventional Delia Ralston in The Age of Innocence and The Old Maid respectively; the authoritative Madame de Treymes and the mean Zeena in Ethan Frome. If the male protagonists are less forcefully drawn perhaps it is because Mrs. Wharton feels

that they are less complicated than the women yet a character like ambitious Elmer Moffatt of Apex City in The Custom of the Country gives one a vivid picture of the materialistic generation while Newland Archer in The Age of Innocence symbolizes outstandingly the refined aristocrats. One can say that Mrs. Wharton's works are well put together. She is an excellent craftsman.

The plots of Miss Cather's stories, in comparison with Mrs. Wharton's, are rather weak. If one considers Ethan Frome and Alexander's Bridge which both novelists considered exercises in writing, one sees clearly that Alexander's Bridge cannot be compared with Ethan Frome. Even in Miss Cather's masterpieces like O Pioneers!, My Antonia and Death Comes for the Archbishop, the plots are not very well put together and sometimes as in My Antonia there seems to be no plot at all since Miss Cather seems to insert extra episodes and details that have little to do with the main theme of the story. However one has to admit that these extra little stories are generally exciting and so perfectly drawn that one does not care whether the book has a plot or not.

The device that Miss Cather often uses to tell her stories is the method of narration. Miss Cather always has narrators of the stories who sometimes are nearly as important as the main protagonists as in the case of Jim Burden in My Antonia, but sometimes these narrators are unnecessary. For this reason Miss Cather appears rather less accomplished as a craftsman, but she compensates for

this defect with her mastery of beautiful, lyrical language — a language which few writers can equal. She is also often attacked for being too subjective since, through most of her protagonists, she voices her own reactions toward and conception of problems and conditions.

While Mrs. Wharton prefers to reveal her characters by indirect means, Miss Cather tends to describe her characters directly. The characters in Mrs. Wharton's fiction are individuals, but each character seems to symbolize a type of person. The fictitious characters of Miss Cather, on the contrary, are based mainly on people of the novelist's own acquaintances. Miss Cather has also tried to portray characters that symbolize people as a group when she presents the money-minded Ivy Peters in A Lost Lady or Bayliss Wheeler in One of Ours but this is the exception rather than the rule for her.

In spite of the fact that from the point of view of craftsmanship, Miss Cather is inferior to Mrs. Wharton and they are not on the same level, they are both important among famous American modern writers. With their original, interesting themes, remarkable language and distinguished style and technique Mrs. Wharton and Miss Cather have proved that they belong to no school but are their own masters. Their literary genius has given much of value and beauty to American literature. Their works deserve full literary consideration. It is consequently not surprising that both Mrs. Wharton and Miss Cather have won secure places in American fiction and that they are two early twentieth-century women novelists of whom America can be proud.