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PREVIEW

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**The evolution of Willa Cather's judgment of the machine and
the machine age in her fiction**

Graf, Nanette Hope, Ph.D.

The University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 1991

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PREVIEW

THE EVOLUTION OF WILLA CATHER'S JUDGMENT
OF THE MACHINE AND THE MACHINE AGE
IN HER FICTION

by 

Nanette Hope Graf

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College in the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Paul A. Olson and Susan J. Rosowski

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 1991

The Evolution of Willa Cather's Judgment
of the Machine Age and the Machine Age in Her Fiction

Nanette Hope Graf, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1991

Advisers: Paul A. Olson and Susan J. Rosowski

This dissertation focuses upon the evolution of Willa Cather's idea of the machine and the machine age in her fiction. As a preface to my discussion of Cather's fictional treatments, I survey the literary and technological backgrounds for the world of Willa Cather when she began her writing career in the 1890's.

Cather did not imitate her forebears, but she drew from those who preceded her; in particular, her fiction demonstrates the influences of two British writers of the nineteenth century-- Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin--as well as that of early twentieth-century French philosopher, Henri Bergson. These literary influences are reflected especially in Cather's handling of vitalistic and mechanistic forces as they affect her characters and their environments in the fiction through 1925. Additionally, Cather's early fiction reveals the impact of McClure's Magazine, where she worked as an editorial assistant from 1906-1912, indicating a connection between the magazine's treatment of technology

and Cather's rendering of it in "Behind the Singer Tower" (1912) and Alexander's Bridge (1912).

Although Cather expressed early optimism in response to modern technology in her 1890 high school commencement address and also in her 1896 short story, "Tommy, the Un-sentimental," by the time of "Paul's Case" in 1905 she began to suggest negative effects of technology, with Paul a kind of human sacrifice to the machine. Gradually, Cather revealed an evolving judgment of the industrial age in her fictional offerings from 1905 through 1925. Her most explicit and overt fictive critique of modern technology appeared in One of Ours (1922), followed by her Nation essay entitled "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" (1923), a real life exposé of machines and the machine age, wherein Cather nostalgically recalled the self-reliance and creativity of a machineless, bygone era. After The Professor's House (1925), she retreated, by and large, into the preindustrial past for her fictional materials.

DISSERTATION TITLE

The Evolution of Willa Cather's Judgment of the Machine and

the Machine Age in Her Fiction

BY

Nanette Hope Graf

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
I. Cather, the Organicist/Vitalist Tradition, and the Machine.....	20
II. Cather's Exploration of the Machine and the Machine Age in Her Short Fiction to 1912.....	39
III. The "Crack" in Cather's Alexander and His Bridge...	70
IV. Cather's Treatment of Vitalistic and Technological Polarities in Her Early Plains Novels (1913-1918)..	99
V. <u>One of Ours</u> : Cather's Machine Age Novel.....	150
VI. <u>A Lost Lady</u> and <u>The Professor's House</u> : Cather's Ruskinian Cynicism after the Death of the Carlylean Hero.....	176
Works Cited.....	203

INTRODUCTION

As an author educated in the classics and also in the literature of her time, Willa Cather wrote mainly within the tradition of British, French, and American "organicist" or "vitalist" literature that included a variety of responses to the machine, ranging from celebrative to negative. She did not so much imitate the styles or methods of her literary antecedents in this tradition but drew philosophic and critical insights from those who preceded her that she could incorporate in her own fictional statements. Cather, I believe, was influenced in her writing about technology by the organicist and vitalist traditions represented by Carlyle, Ruskin, and Bergson.¹ The nineteenth-century British essayists, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) and John Ruskin (1819-1900), seemed to exercise a lifelong influence on her writings, especially in relation to her evolving judgment of the machine and the machine age; in addition, a later influence on her fictional approach to technology was the French philosopher, Henri Bergson (1859--1941), who achieved international celebrity at the time Cather worked for McClure's Magazine (1906-1912) and seems to have affected her early novels.

The purpose of this study will be to show how Cather incorporated the organicists' or vitalists' insights, as well as insights gathered at McClure's, into her statements about the machine or the machine age. I plan to discuss

Cather's fictional subject-matter, revealing an ideological shift from her early acceptance of technology to her ultimate critique of it and tracing the evolution of her judgment of the machine and the machine age from her early story, "Tommy, the Unsentimental" (1896) to the publication of The Professor's House (1925).²

Our Nebraska forebears "confronted technological change on a grand scale" in the nineteenth century (Luebke 3), and, in demonstration of this confrontation Cather's life witnessed movement from a pastoral, agrarian society much like that which might have existed in eighteenth-century England before the industrial revolution to a world where the most familiar machines available to modern people were to be the train and the automobile. In the simple life of 1871, before the major technological changes took place, Nebraska's Webster County was organized, and the Hummel farm eleven miles north of Red Cloud (Cather's home from 1882-1895) served as a stopping station for freighters in their covered wagons on the way to Colorado. Sadie Hummel Holdrege recorded that "freighters" stayed overnight at her parents' farm to "fill water jugs" and to rest themselves and their horses. By 1875, her father had "enlarged his stable to accommodate one hundred teams of horses," charging 25 cents for a team overnight and 10 cents extra for hay (Thomas 21). After the Burlington laid track to Red Cloud in 1880, there was no longer a need for covered wagon freighting stations;³

hence, the Hummel farm quit serving freighters and concentrated mainly on farming operations. In 1882, Cather moved with her family from Virginia to Nebraska, leaving a mainly agrarian society for a mainly agrarian society. The Cather family, with young Willa only nine years old at the time, made the trip to Nebraska by train just two years after the first train to Red Cloud began operating (Thomas 22).

According to pioneer dentist, Dr. Elmo Alonzo Thomas (who met Willa Cather and knew her brother Roscoe), hunting buffalo and wild turkey on the plains near Red Cloud was a common way in the 1870's for early settlers to add to their meat supply. Dugouts, buffalo grass soddies, and native stone cabins constituted early housing in the Red Cloud area, although Cather's family and relatives all lived in rather fine frame houses by the late 1880's. Red Cloud and Webster County people traveled mainly by horse-drawn wagons, unless they took the train to Lincoln or Denver. In 1888, the city of Red Cloud provided a horse-drawn street car that went from the train depot to downtown Red Cloud (lasting as a kind of "national curiosity" until 1913), and, by 1890, four trains a day stopped in Red Cloud (Thomas 44).

It was John Deere "who gave the world the steel plow" (patented in 1836), and his is the story that "parallels the settlement and development of the great Middlewest, golden land of promise to the homestead seekers of the 19th century" (Norbeck 26). The celebrated silhouette of the

plow on the horizon as the sun goes down in Cather's My Antonia indicates the horse-drawn implement chiefly used by Nebraska pioneers in the 1870's and the early 1880's, but in 1876 Max O. Maul, living just outside Denver, "bought a J.I. Case horsepower and threshing machine" to do his own and custom work. Then, in 1881, Maul "homesteaded 160 acres and bought a Case steam traction engine." A few Nebraska farmers with money would be using similar equipment by the 1880's (Holbrook 212). The power to operate the more advanced farm implements "ranged from animals to gigantic steam monsters" (Holbrook 218). The J. I. Case Threshing Machine was in fairly common use by the late 1870's and the early 1880's, and it is no doubt the machine Amedée operated while seriously ill, just before he died, in Cather's Pioneers! By the turn of the century, "steam engines were being designed to power not only the thresher but to haul the outfit and plow" (Quick and Bechele 103). The first gasoline tractor "in the history of agriculture" was introduced in 1892, a tractor that was to "revolutionize American farming" after 1914 (Holbrook 152). At this same time, affluent farmers, like Claude Wheeler's father in One of Ours, could afford the latest mechanized farming equipment as well as cars and trucks; some also invested in the Fordson, the first tractor built on an assembly line at the end of World War I (Holbrook 169). No single date or decade "can be fixed as the start of the agricultural revolution

through technology," but it is clear "that the revolution in agricultural work methods and productivity per man got under way about the middle of the 19th century with the development of several new types of machines." The virtual end of the era may be "identified as the First World War or the years immediately after" (Norbeck 6). Obviously Cather experienced the more industrialized world after World War I in Nebraska and earlier in industrial Pittsburgh and New York.

To outline the curve of philosophic and attitudinal changes in Cather work involved in this discussion, I wish to turn to Cather's attitudes as revealed in two non-fictional expressions that indicate her evolving judgment of technology from 1890 to 1923--her Red Cloud High School Commencement Speech (1890) and her Nation essay entitled "Nebraska: the End of the First Cycle" (1923). The title of Cather's commencement speech is "Superstition vs. Investigation," and in the speech, with a confidence worthy of a nineteenth-century captain of industry, she celebrates the movement from "barbarism to civilization," taking sides with civilized science and "progress." She regards "scientific investigation" as "the hope of our age" that must precede "all progress," implying technological as well as scientific progress. With "intellectual swords" and "microscopic eyes," she recommends pursuit of the molecule and the atom for the advancement of the human race (Red Cloud Chief 18

June 1890, 5). At age sixteen, she expresses youthful optimism for the innovative which will result from scientific investigation, and there is no doubt that she values "the comfort of a developing society" after the "deprivation of primitive conditions" (Rosowski "Science, Technology"/Visions 16). She might well have entitled her speech "Progress," for she repeats the word throughout her presentation. Many years later, however, in Shadows on the Rock (1931), her main character, Auclair, will observe that "Change is not always progress" (Shadows 119).

In contrast to the 1890 speech, Cather by 1923 in "Nebraska: the End of the First Cycle" makes a judgment of technological progress. She provides a historical background for the development of technology in Nebraska and points out that before 1860 "civilization did no more than nibble" at the eastern edge of Nebraska, when the state was mainly "a highway for dreamers and adventurers." She tells of ex-Governor Furness' relating "how he stood with other pioneers in the log cabin where the Morse instrument had been installed, and how, when it began to click, the men took off their hats as if they were in church" (236). Clearly, she understands this reverent response to the telegraph as it first appeared in Nebraska, and she realizes the awe of sending such first messages. She gives special praise to the early pioneers but regrets that "the splendid story of the pioneers is finished" (238). She objects that

there is "one motor car for every six inhabitants in Nebraska" and also that "the great grain fields are plowed by tractors." Electricity, telephones, and motor cars signify for Cather the end of an era of self-reliance and hard work, and she deplores the fact that the "generation now in the driver's seat hates to make anything, wants to live and die in an automobile." She comes down very hard also on the moving-picture show and bemoans the retreat of the humanities--"having their darkest hour" (237). This essay indicates the route of her own real life disenchantment with scientific technology and its effect on the lives of human beings.⁴

Her life and her work take a pessimistic turn after this essay, and, after 1925, she retreats to earlier eras, by and large, for her fictional settings. Cather tries to be fair in the article, perhaps remembering her own initial enthusiasm for science and technology in the 1890's, but she concludes it with a negative view of the machine world in Nebraska. The Nation essay serves as a capsule version of Cather's evolving views, for within this one article, she shifts from approval to criticism, much like her own lifetime shift and also like the shift expressed by writers in McClure's Magazine, with which Cather was associated over a period of six years under the supervision of S. S. McClure. Since McClure's was an organ of general social criticism, it

may be useful to our understanding of Cather to examine the evolution of its treatment of machinery and industrialism.

Cather met McClure in 1903 and went to work for him in 1906; at the time, McClure's Magazine was a successful magazine with headquarters in New York-"the most lively of all the muckraking periodicals...set in the midst of progressivism" (Cunliffe Art 23). Cather became a good friend of McClure, but working for McClure, friend or not, was no easy task, because to his staff he was known as an erratic, even impossible genius, with "an oldfashioned missionary zeal to cure the ills of society" (Woodress Life 120). Cather worked as an editorial assistant from 1906 to 1912, and it was in this milieu of "missionary zeal" when she began formulating ideas that would affect her writing, especially in "Behind the Singer Tower" (1912) and Alexander's Bridge (1912).

The articles in McClure's Magazine from its inception in the 1890's to the year of McClure's resignation as editor in 1913 indicate a gradual evolution from awe to criticism of the machine and the machine age world. McClure's articles of the 1890's clearly celebrated the machine, but in the early 1900's, though praise of the machine persisted, an element of ambivalence and even of discontent with the machine began to appear in some articles; by the period of Cather's editorial work at McClure's (1906-1912), criticism

of the machine and the machine age had almost become a given.

The 1890's view was, for the most part, positive. In 1895 and 1896, articles heralding the car and the airplane appeared frequently, with titles like "The Edge of the Future: Sudden Rise of the Horseless Carriage" and "The Flying Machine." Famous inventors, like Alexander Graham Bell, spoke out in McClure's interviews and praised scientific experiments and inventions. In 1898, the magazine printed numerous positive articles about the railroad, with occasional reminiscences by railroad men. For the April, 1898 issue, George P. Waldron wrote an article entitled "The Nation's Railroads," expressing amazement that seventy years ago "there was not a mile of steam railroad in the United States, and today 440,000 miles of railroad interlace the earth's surface," with "185,000 miles of railroad" in the United States as of 1898 (McClure's April 1898: 557). In October of 1898, a Kipling poem entitled "The Destroyer" appeared in McClure's, describing a torpedo with the "strength of twice three thousand horse" (McClure's October 1898: 75), and, in the same issue, an article of appreciation for the machine exhibit at the Omaha Exhibition. In 1899, the magazine included articles on "Voyaging under the Sea" and "Marconi's Wireless Telegraph," both technological ventures viewed with enthusiasm by the writers.

The first decade of the 1900's was different. By 1905, there is evidence of a negative attitude regarding the machine and the machine age; critics surfaced regularly to protest abuses of the machine. An article on "The Subway Deal" exposed behind-the-scenes manipulations by those in high places regarding the New York subway project (McClure's April 1906: 678). Ida M. Tarbell, a respected historian and McClure's Magazine "regular," wrote, in "Commercial Machiavellianism," that "one could easily reconstruct out of the mouths of our captains of industry a modern edition of The Prince" (McClure's November 1906: 456). In August, 1909, an unsigned editorial entitled "The Master of the Air" includes the warning that a "new method of warfare has arrived" (McClure's August 1909: 456). In 1911, an article by Arthur E. McFarlane entitled "Fire and the Skyscraper: the Problem of Protecting the Workers in New York's Tower Factories" appeared, reinforcing the sense of protest at the magazine. In April, 1912 (Cather's last year at McClure's) an article on "American Railways--How They Can Be Taken over for the People" further displayed a growing criticism of technology by McClure's writers, including criticism of the once awesome train and railroad.

Complaints in the early twentieth century about the new era extended far beyond McClure's. Stage actress Blanche Yurka complained about "speed mania," a mania that had even "invaded the theater" (Bent 9). Speed and efficiency would

make war more terrible, with the military capacity of the machine producing "warcraft" more effective but more expensive (Bent 85). It was conjectured that "the invention of the military machine made war "necessary and even desirable" (Mumford Myth 220). There was the charge that Americans had become "solely a bystanding race" because of machines, and "spectatoritis" was cited as a symptom of "the Machine Age temperament, with a large part of the American population dependent upon canned music and movies" (Bent 295, 304, 306). The issue of most concern raised by critics of the machine was whether human beings could master the machine or not. Thomas Carlyle had maintained that it all depends on who is in charge; mastery of the machine must come from a person who masters self first (like the men he describes in On Heroes and Hero-Worship), and the critics tended to agree.

Cather incorporated this debate into her 1925 novel, The Professor's House, with Godfrey St. Peter's response to a student named Miller, regarding the impact of technology on Western Civilization. Machines are to him "ingenious toys" which result from scientific and technological pursuits (The Professor's House 68). In relegating the machine to the level of toy, he diminishes its importance, but his need to satirize indicates its significance for the times. St. Peter tells Miller that "I don't myself think much of science as a phase of development" (69), and, by this time

(1925), Cather herself would concur with the Professor, even though as a youth in the 1890's she praised "scientific investigation" as "the hope of our age" (Red Cloud Chief 13 June 1890, 5).

As Cather grew older, the majority of people welcomed the machine and the machine age; in fact, technological progress, whatever the cost, increasingly attracted the masses. The overall benefits for human beings and the human condition seemed, to most people, to outweigh the dangers or the disadvantages. Via the printing press, the machine "spread literacy" (Bent 16), and, "through the mechanization of the food supply," there was "wide and rapid interchange of food commodities," with a great variety of food for more people (Bent 27, 30, 33). Luebke points out the importance of "the invention of the refrigerator [railway] car in 1868" (Luebke 6), and Cather acknowledges the miracle of food shipment in a letter to Mariel Gere when she comments how amazing it is to have strawberries, tomatoes, and watercress at a wedding breakfast in Red Cloud near the end of winter (12 March 1896). The building of shelters became "a main activity" in the United States, and most Americans had a better chance for good shelter, through modern technology, than people in other parts of the world (Bent 42). Machine-made clothing helped keep Americans well clad as well as gainfully employed (Bent 70). The outstanding merit of the machine, though, to advocates of egalitarianism, was the

cheapening of "commodities for the consumer," thus benefiting the masses as well as the few rich (Bent 188). Veblen felt confident that "the superiority of scientific industry" would lead ultimately to an improved "social overturn" (Veblen Theory 376). Robert Adams called attention to the "democratic mixing" of social strata with the arrival of the railroads in England (Adams 375). Supporters of women's liberation took note that the machine "invites equality" and gave sanction to new instruments of liberation: women drove "their own machines," whereas few women "drove carriages." Women seemed "more directly affected by the Machine Age" than men (Bent 321).

The early machine that most appealed to Cather is the simple bicycle--a "convivial tool" (Illich 21) which demanded of the cyclist self-reliance, expertise, and energy. She rode a bicycle for transportation and recreation in the Nebraska and the Pittsburgh years when "America experienced a bicycle mania" (Albertini 19, 12). However, it was trains, street-cars, steamboats, telegraphs, telephones, automobiles, and agricultural machines that figured most significantly in the life and literature of the times during Cather's fictional career before World War I and shortly after. The output of motor cars was accompanied by "significant gains in technology," so that Ford's mass production of cars in the early twentieth century ushered in the machine warfare of World War I (Landes 445). Cather depicts this steady march of