

THE LANDSCAPE ACCORDING TO WHOM?:  
PLACE AND POINT OF VIEW IN  
WILLA CATHER'S "A WAGNER MATINÉE"

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*Abstract* This paper is intended to contribute to two separate discussions: the first, taking place within the field of cultural geography, has to do with the reading of fiction for the purposes of geographical research and teaching; the second, taking place within the field of literary studies, has to do with the interpretation of a short story by the American writer Willa Cather. The two discussions, geographical and literary, connect: the analysis of the story functions here as a case study illustrating the need for an awareness of narrative point of view in the reading of fictional presentations of landscape and the experience of place. The consideration of a variety of readings of the story, "A Wagner Matinée," demonstrates the ways in which interpretations of narrative point of view influence the conclusions a reader draws regarding a text's presentation of landscapes, places, and the sense of place.

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Willa Cather's short story "A Wagner Matinée" has been stirring up controversy over its portrayals of landscape since it first appeared in 1904 in *Everybody's Magazine*, when Cather apparently "faced a Nebraska uprising" (O'Brien 1987, 281). Cather's biographer Sharon O'Brien explains this outrage as being the result of the story's portrayal of the west as a "harsh, oppressive, and repressive environment." Its Nebraska readers were insulted. Cather's friends and neighbors "found the grim depiction of Nebraska unfair," and Cather's hometown newspaper published a pointed criticism of writers who "use western Nebraska as material" but "keep their eyes and noses in the cattle yards" (O'Brien 1987, 281). Cather apparently defended herself by insisting that the story was a work of the imagination and not a piece of reporting, and that, as O'Brien explains, she had thought of the story as "a respectful tribute to the courage of uncomplaining pioneer women who had undergone such hardships." From the very first, then, there have been radically

different readings of what this story is emphasizing in its view of Nebraska life—and these differences in the interpretation of what the text says about Nebraska can largely be traced to variations in the way in which the text’s implicit and explicit narrative points of view are seen to relate to each other. The interpretation of point of view goes a long way to determining the significance of the landscape description in this story, and it therefore provides us with a clear case in which the analysis of literary form is vital to a geographical reading.

Geographers, D.C.D. Pocock tells us, have “capitalised on the descriptive power of authors to extract particular passages to justify the concept of region . . . illustrate landscape ‘signatures’ . . . investigate regional consciousness or image” and “in the earliest and most common engagement . . . enhance felicitous regional description” (Pocock 1988, 88). In the context of this paper, it is worth noting that what the geographer-readers described here have been doing is “extract[ing] particular passages”—approaching texts with scissors in their hands. But if we try to do this with a story like “A Wagner Matinée,” we discover an almost immediate difficulty. Looking for an extractable phrase describing the human experience of the Nebraska prairie landscape, we find this: “to the east, a cornfield that stretched to daybreak ; to the west, a corral that reached to sunset ; between, the conquests of peace, dearer bought than those of war” (Cather [1905] 1987, 107). This sounds useful ; we reach for the scissors. But, when we come to use this description we are faced with a problem of attribution: whose description is this? Whose voice is speaking? Is it Cather, the writer, giving us her objective opinion? Could we introduce this description with the phrase, “as the Nebraska writer Willa Cather has told us . . .”? It has been done, but it is problematic, because this is fiction. Even when a story is told in an apparently objective third-person voice it is necessary to acknowledge the possibility of a distinction to be made between the voice and the author ; but “A Wagner Matinée” has a first-person narrator, an “I” in whose fictional voice and from whose point of view the whole story is written. Looking again at the description of the cornfield which “stretched to daybreak” we need to

ask : is this, then, *his* voice—a fictional voice ? If so, then while (of course) it is still Cather writing, what she is describing may well be not so much the nature of a place, as the nature of her narrator, revealed as it is through the place descriptions she attributes to him.

This issue of voice, particularly visible in a first-person narrative such as “A Wagner Matinée,” is clearly a complicated one. Who is the reader supposed to see as having constructed its descriptions : Cather or the fictional “I” ? What is the purpose of its descriptions : objective portrayal or the revelation of character ? The reader’s answers to these questions will determine to a large extent her interpretation of the significance of the story’s landscape descriptions, and thus the uses she can put them to, and the things she can use them to illustrate. But the question of voice and point of view does not end here, with the real author of the text and the fictional narrator of the story. It is part of our responsibility as readers to listen for at least one more voice—an implicit voice belonging to the text itself. In one way, we could say that our separation of the author’s voice and the narrative voice is made on the basis of the assumption that the author and the “I” do not necessarily have the same point of view—and that the question is one of who exactly is supposed to have written these words we are reading. But the third voice we need to consider in “A Wagner Matinée” cannot be envisioned as a writer of words—nor even as a person at all. This voice is a commentary on the “I” and his version of the tale, produced but not necessarily crafted by the writer, evident in structure, detectable in irony : this voice manifests itself at the meeting of writer and reader. It too may be identifiable with the author’s point of view, but this is not inevitable. “Never trust the artist,” D.H. Lawrence has warned us. “Trust the tale.”

We can summarize the main points of the paper so far as follows. A traditional part of the geographer’s purpose in reading fiction has been to elicit the insights that texts can give into the nature of landscape and the nature of people’s experiences of landscape. But landscape description and narrative in general always has a point of view, and the assumptions that the reader makes about the narrative point of

view in a fictional text will radically affect the interpretation that the reader places on what the text is saying about landscape, place, and the experience of place. It is sensible to start from the assumption that what the narrative voice says about landscape is not necessarily what the author would say, or what the text is saying.

The separation of narrative voice from textual implication or the extra-textual author is particularly awkward when the real-world writer of the text in question is well known; it is even more difficult when we are approaching the text with an interest in what it has to say about landscape and the sense of place and the author is popularly associated with a particular region. Many people think of Thomas Hardy as the novelist who sets stories in a place which looks and feels like Dorset—and, to add to the confusion, some people also think of Dorset as a place which looks and feels like the setting of a Hardy novel. Hardy and Dorset, Steinbeck and the Dust Bowl, Faulkner and the South, Cather and Nebraska—the names are mutually influential; we identify the author with the region, and we understand the region through the author.

Willa Cather has not only written about but also helped to define the American mid-west. Robert Thacker's book *The Great Prairie: Fact and Literary Imagination* (1989) opens, for example, with a heading taken from one of Cather's prairie novels: "the great fact was the land itself" (1). The same book finishes with an embedded version of the same quotation: "prairie writing attests, that the land does, without question, speak louder than the people. It is, from Castañeda to Butula, the great fact" (224). It is easy to see why Cather's writings would appeal to a geographer. When *O Pioneers!* was published in 1913, one critic apparently remarked "I simply don't give a damn what happens in Nebraska, no matter who writes about it." As Susie Thomas (1990) suggests, Cather's writings have done a great deal to make that attitude less common. It is not surprising, then, that when we read a description of a Nebraska farm in a story by Willa Cather, there is a natural tendency to sense a 'landscape chunk,' a usable description of the lived land that we can take out and refer to as an objective but sensitive picture produced by a writer 'who knows' and

whose landscape pictures as a whole have helped define the region itself. Nevertheless, Cather's strong associations with the Nebraska prairies and her personal experience of them do not mean that every description of that region which we can find in her writings can be taken as either objective or representing the author's point of view.

"A Wagner Matinée" was of course actually written by Willa Cather; but it presents the surface appearance of being a story told by a young man called Clark. The assumptions that a reader makes about the attitude the text as a whole has towards Clark and his story determine the reader's understanding of the attitude that the text is taking towards the landscape and the experience of landscape that appears to lie at its center—a Nebraska farm and the life experience of its pioneer housewife. In 1904 the controversy over "A Wagner Matinée" brought Cather close to "personal disgrace," (O'Brien 1987, 281) and the text has continued to produce a variety of quite contradictory readings. In this next section of the paper I would like to consider four readings of the story, all made within the last decade. This comparison of contrasting readings will develop the argument of this paper by showing how differences in the interpretation of narrative point of view tend to produce different interpretations of the attitude of a text towards its landscape descriptions.

A plot summary of the story would be useful at this point. It is clear, however, from the markedly differing summaries given by the four critics whose readings we are about to consider, that the apparent objectivity of the summary conventionally given at the start of any discussion of an unfamiliar work of fiction is something of an illusion: the summary, far from being neutral, is in itself a condensed reading. Not surprisingly, given that the reader proceeds directly to the commentary from the commentator's version of the story, that commentary usually seems reasonable if not inevitable. The reader then turns to another summary and another commentary, and that, too, seems reasonable if not inevitable. Bearing this in mind, I will give as objective a plot outline as I can, although it seems to me that, at least in

what it avoids saying, this outline still rather clearly reflects a particular interpretation of the text. It would be best if the reader of this paper could refer to his or her own reading of the story and skip over the following paragraph. The reader should also note that I am using the version of the story given in *The Troll Garden* in 1905 and not either of the later versions “more palatable for hometown readers” (O’Brien 1987, 282).

The story is told in the first-person voice by a young man, Clark, who at the time of the action lives in Boston. As a boy he had moved from his home in Vermont to live with his Aunt Georgiana and Uncle Howard and their family in rural Nebraska, where he worked on their farm. There, his aunt gave him his early music lessons and encouraged him in his studies. At the time of the story, which takes place years later in Boston, he is visited by his aunt, who has had to come to the city from Nebraska by train to arrange the settling of a small legacy. Georgiana has lived on the farm in Red Willow County for the thirty years since her marriage ; before her marriage she was a music teacher at the Boston Conservatory. Clark meets his now elderly aunt from her train, takes her to his lodgings, and then, the following day, takes her to an afternoon concert featuring a Wagner program. At the concert he contrasts the scene inside the concert hall with the Nebraska farm, reflects on his aunt’s life and considers the question of whether or not she still has the aesthetic sense to appreciate the music. He wonders if it has “been dissolved in soapsuds.” Georgiana is obviously deeply moved by the music. At the end of the concert, Clark tells us, she bursts into tears and sobs “I don’t want to go, Clark, I don’t want to go !” Clark, the narrator, feels that he understands her cry : the grim reality of Red Willow County lies ready to reclaim her just outside the door of the concert hall.

The four readings of “A Wagner Matinée” that I would like to consider come from four books, each of which has its own focus and organizing principles. The earliest reading comes from Marilyn Arnold’s study of Cather’s short works, *Willa Cather’s Short Fiction*, published in 1984. The second comes from Sharon O’Brien’s critical biography of Cather, published in 1987, *Willa Cather : The emerging voice*.

The third reading is taken from Susie Thomas's general study *Willa Cather*, published in the Macmillan series 'Women Writers' in 1990. The final interpretation of the story is taken from a recent study of fiction by American women made in light of an understanding of practices and traditions in housekeeping, *The home plot : Women, writing and domestic ritual*, by Ann Romines, published in 1992. Each of these books has its own focus, and to a certain unavoidable extent the readings of "A Wagner Matinée" found in each are being taken out of context in this paper.

The story presented in "A Wagner Matinée" is told by Clark, but his story focuses on his aunt Georgiana. The story opens with the announcement of her impending arrival in Boston ; it closes with her apparently desperate cry "I don't want to go." Who is Georgiana, and what is she like ? How does the story present her ? Our four readers disagree. Indeed, the extent to which Georgiana seems to be open to interpretation is indicated by the fact that in these four readings we find three different versions of her name—we have a Georgiana, a Georgina, and two Georgiannas. To one reader, Clark presents a "wonderful, almost heroic portrait" of Georgiana ; to another, Cather is giving us "a bitter portrait of a farm woman warped and stunted by the demands of serving others" (Arnold 1984, 58 ; O'Brien 1987, 398). Another version of Georgiana is that she is a woman "too downtrodden to rebel against her position or articulate her despair" (Thomas 1990, 25). A final reading focuses not on Georgiana but on Clark's view of her : for him, she is something "subhuman, a piece of domestic machinery" (Romines 1992, 128). Is she heroic, or is she warped and downtrodden ? Can she be both ? The reading of what the story says about Georgiana is intimately related to the interpretation of the reliability of its narrative voice : is Clark speaking for Cather when he calls his aunt "pathetic and grotesque" and yet refers to his feelings of "awe and respect" ? Or, on the other hand, should we consider what Clark says about his aunt to be only that : what *Clark* says about her ? Ann Romines (1992) thinks so : Clark, she explains, "must see his aunt's dilemma in the vocabulary of his own memories" and consequently there is "no place for Georgianna's consciousness" in his telling of her story

(132). And, just as any reading of what the text tells us about Georgiana will largely depend upon a reading of the role of the narrative voice, so the reading of what the text has to say about Nebraska will also depend upon the interpretation of that voice.

Marilyn Arnold (1984) is quite clear about the subject matter of “A Wagner Matinée”: this story and another from the same collection, “Paul’s Case,” both “deal with sensitive characters whose environments shackle their artistic spirits” (57). Aunt Georgiana is the focus of the story, which “is not so much about the contrasting worlds of Boston and Nebraska as it is about Aunt Georgiana and what those worlds have in turn made of her” (59). Arnold summarizes the story from Clark’s point of view—“this portrait is the woman, and this woman is the story”—and suggests that while it may be, as previous critics have called it, “an indictment of ‘the toll exacted by the land’” it is also, because of Clark’s sympathy for his aunt, “a revelation of human love and appreciation” (59). Rather than stressing the pathos or the grotesqueness of the figure that Clark presents, as other readers have done, Arnold suggests instead that “through another pair of eyes [his aunt] would have been a country caricature,” while through Clark’s eyes she is presented as “a symbol of the pioneer spirit” (59). In her summary of the story, Arnold extrapolates from the text to make assumptions about the basis for Clark’s description of his aunt and her life. “His earliest recollections must have come to him secondhand, perhaps as an old family story,” she guesses, for instance. This kind of extrapolation can be misleading: in talking of Clark’s description of Georgiana’s marriage, for example, Arnold says that “he remembers hearing that as ‘an angular, spectacled woman of thirty,’ she conceived an ‘extravagant passion’ for ‘a handsome country boy’” (59). The phrase “he remembers hearing” seems to suggest that Clark heard the story presented in this way and in these words, but in the original it is not at all clear what sources Clark is using for his story, and how much of it is the result of his own interpretation or reconstruction of event. His ‘hearing’ of the story is not mentioned. Crucial to this reading of Georgiana, and thus of the text itself, is



Arnold's explanation that Cather "reconstructs incidents that define Georgiana's character" through Clark's memory; the implication here is that the definition is Cather's, and that there is no significant distance between Clark's voice and the writer's. "When the concert is over," Arnold tells us, "[Georgiana] cannot bear to leave, because 'just outside the door of the concert hall' is the world she must take up again"—Arnold accepts the definition of this world that Clark gives, and the 'because' here is vital: Arnold is also accepting Clark's interpretation of what Georgiana is saying. She cannot bear to leave *because* the "tall, unpainted house" is waiting for her outside the door (58). This reading leads to the conclusion that Georgiana is a woman "who exchanged her artistic loves and drives for the cruelties of frontier life" (60) and that the text "paint[s] perhaps an unfairly harsh picture of life on the prairie" (82).

The plot summary that Sharon O'Brien (1987) gives of "A Wagner Matinée" also reflects a reading which takes Clark's point of view as definitive. Georgiana, O'Brien explains, "gives up a promising musical career for an 'inexplicable infatuation' with a 'handsome country boy'" and "finds that the goblin fruit of romantic love offers insufficient nourishment. Isolated in a grim, sterile Western landscape, she is physically and psychologically twisted and vitiated by her deprivation, her plight externalized in the 'crook-backed ash seedlings' and the 'naked house on the prairie, black and grim as a wooden fortress'" (274). The line that this reading is taking on Georgiana, Nebraska and the narrative point of view is made clear here by O'Brien's assumption that it is Georgiana's life that is "externalized" in the landscape description and not Clark's attitude towards it. This identification of Clark's voice with Cather's means that this reading produces specific value-laden readings of the story's settings. Georgiana "returns to life" for example, "in the 'hanging gardens' of art—the 'sunlit landscape' of the concert hall . . . . But the last image in the story . . . prophesies her return to a landscape of desolation and starvation—the 'silence of the plains'" (274). Placing her reading of this story in the context of a discussion of Cather's artistic development, O'Brien believes that

Cather made Boston an “oasis of culture” in stories like “A Wagner Matinée” (316); Nebraska, in contrast, is “harsh, oppressive, and repressive” (281).

Susie Thomas (1990), too, sees a distinction between the “‘hanging gardens’ of art” and the “silence of the plains” as basic to the story. “A Wagner Matinée”, she argues, is “the clearest expression of the opposition in Cather’s mind between Wagner, the apogee of civilization, and the cultural wasteland of Nebraska” (24). Thomas reads Clark’s narrative as reliable: his interpretations of Georgiana’s thoughts are presented in summary without comment—in fact, his interpretations are seen to be speaking *for* Georgiana, as she is “too downtrodden to . . . articulate her despair” and it can only be “guessed at by the narrator” (25). Following Clark’s lead, Thomas tells us that “as [Georgiana] hears Wagner’s music again, for the first time in thirty years, she is filled with a sickening sense of loss” and that “the tragedy of Aunt Georgina’s life is revealed through her response to the music,” a response presented to us in Clark’s words. Thomas believes that this tragedy “is not so much that she fell in love . . . but that she ended up Nebraska” (25–6). Disagreeing with the specificity of a previous critic’s association of the Venusberg motif from Tannhauser with the temptations of desire as represented by Red Willow County, Thomas quotes Clark’s first use of “the tall, naked house” landscape description. While admitting that this is the farm “in Clark’s memory” Thomas concludes the quotation by remarking that “only a masochist would have been ‘tempted’ by that” (26). This reading is thus identifying Clark’s version of the Nebraska prairie farm with Cather’s; indeed, in discussing the contrasts Clark marks between the cornfields of Nebraska and the scene inside the concert hall, Thomas explicitly refers to the way in which “Cather deftly fuses her descriptions so that one world comments on the other” (26).

Arnold, O’Brien, and Thomas agree in their reading of Clark as a narrator whose version of Georgiana’s life and her Nebraska home is reliable. All three of these readings would support the interpretation of the Nebraska landscapes in the story as Cather’s view of the land at that time. Ann Romines (1992), however, places a

very different emphasis on the role of the narrator in this text and thus questions the significance of these landscape descriptions. The story, Romines says, is “a private meditation” in which the reader is forced to “perceive Georgianna through Clark,” her “opposite” (139). Romines feels that the story “is suffused with Clark’s horror of domestic prairie life and what he thinks it has done to his aunt,” and that “Clark’s panic incapacitates him to see his aunt coherently” (128–9). This reading radically alters the significance of the Nebraska landscape in the text : from being the determining environment of Georgiana’s tragedy it becomes instead the metaphoric expression of Clark’s remembered past.

Where Arnold (1984) tells us that Georgiana had “turned her back on [the] world” of the Boston Conservatory when “she fell inexplicably in love with a shiftless young New Englander” (58), Romines tells us that his aunt arrived in Nebraska “as the result of a classic (female) courtship plot, which Clark regards with contempt as an ‘inexplicable infatuation’ for a ‘handsome country boy’” (129). In these contrasting summaries, Arnold is paraphrasing and quoting from Clark’s story without comment, while Romines is giving her quotations from Clark’s narrative in ironic quotation marks, in order to support her reading of the way in which the text distances itself from its first-person narrator.

Romines makes two points in her reading of “A Wagner Matinée” which have particularly important implications for a geographical reading of this story : the first relates to the beginning of the story, where Clark describes his reaction to the imminent arrival of his aunt, and the second relates to the very end of the story, where Clark describes what he assumes to be his aunt’s reasons for not wanting to leave the concert hall. When Clark receives the letter telling him that Georgiana is coming to Boston, he experiences an extreme reaction to the idea. As Romines points out, the “mere mention of her name is a powerful threat to Clark.” Clark describes his sense of this threat in a strong spatial image, talking of “a gulf of recollection” that “opened before my feet.” He explains that this ‘gulf’ is so vast that his sense of place is disturbed : “I felt suddenly a stranger to all the present

conditions of my existence, wholly ill at ease and out of place amid the familiar surroundings of my study” (Cather [1905] 1987, 102). Romines explains the threat Clark feels as being that of “the abyss, a fall back into a world that predates civilization,” a fall that she associates with Clark’s feeling that “the prairie is the very image of desolation, a place abandoned by art” (129–30). In this way, the strongly negative images Clark produces of the Nebraska farm are the expression in place metaphors of his own sense of the tenuousness of his grip on the world of culture and art and the narrowness of his escape from ‘desolation.’ Turning to the story’s ending, Romines decides that Georgiana’s final cry is “ambiguous.” While Clark specifically claims to understand the meaning of the cry, Romines offers an alternative reading. “All we know of Georgianna’s response,” she insists, “is that she has been deeply moved by the concert and does not yet want to leave the site of that powerful experience” (131). The fact that Georgiana cries “I don’t want to go,” not “I don’t want to go back” or “I don’t want to go home” does allow for the possibility that she is simply talking about leaving the concert hall. Perhaps what she dreads is not so much being plunged back into Nebraska as being plunged back into conversation with her nephew. Still, from Clark’s point of view, for Georgiana to leave the concert hall *is* for her to be back in Nebraska : as Romines suggests, in Clark’s story “the prairie is antagonist, and he thinks in blunt oppositions . . . the story can have no middle distance” (32).

All four of these readings of “A Wagner Matinée” have been extracted from book-length studies, and, given that one of the premises of this paper is that readers wielding scissors need to cut with caution, we should pause here to put these readings back into their original contexts and acknowledge that all readers bring their own purposes and assumptions to text. None of the four readings discussed above come from studies which declare any explicit interest in the issue of reading fiction for geographical purposes ; none is even primarily concerned with Cather’s importance as a ‘regional writer’ or with her landscape descriptions. Nevertheless, considered as a group, these different versions of “A Wagner Matinée” reveal

clearly how fundamental the interpretation of narrative point of view is to any reading of fiction, and how it will therefore also inevitably affect the perceived significance of any fictional landscape descriptions. I would like now to develop this line more explicitly, by taking another look at the story in detail while considering three main points: the identification of point of view in the story; the results of the attribution of the landscape descriptions in the story to the narrative voice; and the ways in which the story as a whole can be seen to be geographically informative. This final discussion develops the idea that a reading of fiction made with a strong sense of narrative point of view complicates the landscape “extraction” method of geographical reading but offers compensatory possibilities for discovering geographical significance within fiction.

It is important to remember when reading Clark’s story—for whatever purposes—that he, the narrator, (as constructed by Cather, the writer) is supposed to have written it. Cather has produced a unified first-person narration by a fictional character, and this narrative method asks the reader to believe that everything within it is has come from that character: the story’s structure, tone, vocabulary, and interpretations—all of these reflect Cather’s understanding of Clark’s point of view. The fact that Cather actually wrote the story should not distract us from asking why (within the fiction) Clark has chosen to tell this story in this way. The motivation behind the telling of this story, the way it is told, the language and the images used to tell it—all of these are part of the exposition of Clark’s character. Throughout our reading of the story we need to ask not “Why does Cather say this?” but “Why does Cather have Clark say this?”

It is possible, of course, that there are three words connected with the story, if not exactly in it, that come to us unfiltered by Clark’s controlling point of view—these three words make up the story’s title. But whether the title comes from Clark or not, it supports the point of view of the story as a whole, placing the narrative from its very beginning in Clark’s world and not Georgiana’s. The title begins with the indefinite article: this is a story about “a” Wagner matinée. This particular concert,

then, functions as one among many, and this emphasis immediately places the center of the story in Clark's experience, and not Georgiana's. The closest Georgiana has previously come to a Wagner concert is the piano score of *The Flying Dutchman*. Perhaps this "a" also places the story in Boston and not Nebraska; certainly, the distinction of its being a "matinée" suggests that the story is set in a place where there are enough concerts for them to be distinguished by time of day. Finally, the title presents us with an English article, a German proper name, and a French noun. Can we detect a hint to the reader to pay attention to the fact that we are in an atmosphere of self-conscious cosmopolitan culture?

The title places the story firmly in Clark's world, and his opening words not only draw our attention to the fact that this is a story being told in the first person, but suggest at once where his interest and his emphasis lie. "I received one morning a letter," Clark begins. The narrative starts from the "I", and the inversion of the sentence structure suggests immediately that the focus of the narrative will be on the pattern of Clark's life and not on this particular letter. Another possible opening, "I received a letter one morning," would have emphasized the letter much more, the pattern of Clark's mornings much less; the tone would have been more conversational and less self-consciously literary. We proceed to learn a great deal about Clark's view of this letter as a physical object before we learn anything at all about its contents. We hear about its ink, its paper, its postmark, the fact that it is "worn and rubbed" and looks "as though it had been carried for some days in a coat pocket that was none too clean," all before we learn that it is announcing the arrival of Clark's aunt (102). Clark is simultaneously exhibiting his sensitivity and postponing or even distancing himself from the message of the letter. Clark's character is developed here through the way in which he sees and describes, and the way in which he structures his narrative. The essence of Clark's narrative style—one of distance and interpretation—is established in the story's opening lines.

This sense of a consciously distanced and interpretative point of view is strong throughout this story, and it is clear that it comes in part from Clark's need to feel

in control ; he needs to understand and to interpret, and he also needs to distance himself from his story's Nebraska elements. One way in which he achieves this is by implying an intimacy with the reader based on the assumption of a shared distance from Red Willow County. The way in which he describes his aunt's marriage gives a good example of this method. Georgiana's love for her husband Howard, he tells us, was "one of those" passions which "an angular, spectacled woman of thirty" develops for "a handsome country boy." Howard Carpenter "of course" had no money, and after marking out their land themselves on "the Nebraska frontier" the couple live in "one of those" dugout houses "whose inmates so often reverted to primitive conditions." Whether they like it or not, they share their water with buffalo and their provisions with roving Indians. This is a carefully generalized picture of a pioneer homesteader. In phrases such as "one of those" and "of course" Clark emphasizes the way in which for him, as for his implied reader, such lives are part of shared myth rather than shared experience ; Clark's tone makes it clear that he places himself with his sophisticated reader and not with his aunt in Nebraska. The distance from Red Willow County and his own past there that Clark suggests he has achieved is reflected in the way in which in his narrative he emphasizes his role as guide and interpreter, comfortably distant both from his own boyhood and from the painful drama of displacement or replacement that his aunt seems to experience in Boston.

Throughout the story Clark writes as if he understands everything : he mentions several times that he understands his aunt, his tone implies that he understands his reader, and his remarks about his landlady, Mrs. Springer, indicate that he understands her, too. Because it is all too easy to trust a first-person narrator's view of events, it is worth examining in detail how Clark uses his 'understanding' of Mrs. Springer to support his own version of Georgiana's Boston visit. Clark leaves for the station to meet his aunt "after preparing my landlady somewhat," and the preparation seems to have been effective, because although Mrs. Springer knew nothing of Georgiana's history and "must" therefore, according to Clark, "have been consider-

ably shocked at what was left of my kinswoman” she manages not to show her feelings. “Whatever shock Mrs. Springer experienced at my aunt’s appearance, she considerably concealed,” Clark tells us—and on reflection we realize that as any shock she felt was “concealed” we only have Clark’s word for it that she felt any shock at all (103). There is something of the confidence trick in all of this, and Clark’s revelations tell us more about him than they do about his apparent subject.

Throughout the story, Clark’s choice of words and images, as well as his narrative tone, reveal a great deal about his attitude towards his aunt and her life. Georgiana is for Clark both the woman who provided him with his escape from “silence” into the concert halls of Boston, and also the living example of what his life would have been had he not escaped. The resulting deep ambivalence that Clark feels about his aunt—the way in which he both reveres and is repelled by her—is reflected in the careful distance he keeps from her in his narrative. Even in his most sympathetic moments of description, Clark is distancing himself from his aunt. When she cries at the concert, for example, he tells us, she weeps “as a shallow vessel overflows in a rain-storm” (108). Visually, the image is apt ; but the reverberations of the word “shallow” are unavoidable. “From time to time,” Clark goes on to tell us, “her dim eyes looked up at the lights which studded the ceiling.” The choice of the word “dim” is similarly double-edged, and Georgiana comes across in Clark’s words here as a rather pathetic old lady, to whom, as Clark suggests, the lights “were stars in truth” (109). The point Clark seems to be making is that even if Georgiana has become shallow and dim, he hasn’t. He, after all, is not to be defined by a backyard with turkeys.

The main point about the narrative point of view of “A Wagner Matinée” is that it belongs to a fictional character who is telling a story in a particular and self-revealing way : the text as a whole is therefore telling a story about the narrator. Once we approach the text and its use of landscape descriptions with this in mind we can see how the question of Cather’s own attitude towards the land in question is both elusive and to a certain extent irrelevant. The landscape descriptions in “A



Wagner Matinée” are not, primarily, descriptions of landscapes. As pictures created by the narrator in his organization and interpretation of the story of his aunt’s Boston visit, these landscapes function as simplified images of a life escaped. In this way, the landscape descriptions are not, in fact, descriptions, but images. They are metaphorical expressions of an attitude towards a way of life, not a picture of its setting. And if we take a larger perspective, of the text as a whole, it is still clear that they function not to describe Nebraska but to describe Clark.

The images of Nebraska presented to us by the narrator in “A Wagner Matinée” are just as much a product of his urge to generalize and simplify, and thus to distance himself, as are the pictures he gives us of his aunt’s life as a pioneer. It is surprising that despite our sense that the story shows Nebraska in a very harsh light there are really only two extended descriptions of what it looks like. Apart from the formulaic description of the early pioneer days discussed above, and a few passing images (the “green aisles of corn” image, for example), we are given only two place descriptions. More remarkable still, these pictures are almost identical—in fact, rather than being two pictures, they are one stylized image viewed twice, reappearing the second time like the backdrop for a recurring nightmare. During the Wagner concert, Clark experiences “an almost overwhelming sense of the waste and wear we are so powerless to combat” and associates it immediately with a particular landscape :

I saw again the tall, naked house on the prairie, black and grim as a wooden fortress ; the black pond where I had learned to swim, its margin pitted with sun-dried cattle tracks ; the rain gullied clay banks about the naked house, the four dwarf ash seedlings where the dish-cloths were always hung to dry before the kitchen door. The world there was the world of the ancients ; to the east, a cornfield that stretched to daybreak ; to the west, a corral that reached to sunset ; between, the conquests of peace, dearer bought than those of war (107).

Shortly after this, at the end of the concert, Clark sees the same scene again, this time in response to his understanding of his aunt’s cry, “I dont want to go.”

I understood. For her, just outside the door of the concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs ; the tall, unpainted house, with weather-curved boards, naked as a tower ; the crook-backed ash seedlings where the

dish-cloths hung to dry ; the gaunt, moulting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door (110).

The ways in which these two descriptions resemble each other suggest that they are functioning as images rather than as descriptions. They certainly do present us with an unappealing picture : but this is not Nebraska, it is the metaphoric realization of what Clark associates with Nebraska—what “Nebraska” signifies to him.

Clark’s Nebraska landscapes are not, therefore, suitable material for “extraction” to be used to illustrate the artist’s exemplary sensitivity to landscape (for example) or to enhance regional description. It is possible that they could be used to illustrate one particular line of development in a regional image, but as it seems possible that the story has influenced the image mainly through a misreading this illustration would need to discuss the ‘chunks’ within the context of the whole story and the history of its reading. In fact, the significance of Clark’s Nebraska landscapes only becomes clear when they are read in context.

If its landscape descriptions are finally unextractable, does “A Wagner Matinée” have any particular significance for a reader with a geographical focus ? It certainly does, if we concentrate on the whole story rather than its landscape ‘bits,’ and read it as the investigation of Clark’s sense of his own identity in place, seeing one of its major themes, therefore, as the connections between sense of self and sense of place. In such a reading, Clark’s landscapes indicate the ways in which images of place are used to construct and support a sense of self. They also indicate the ways in which people associate particular places with particular times, and suggest that places are perceived as being, in a sense, time-specific. In this view, the significance of Clark’s Nebraska landscapes is not that they describe Nebraska (or even one view of Nebraska) but that they function as the structures through which Clark is able to articulate his sense of self by choosing between two landscapes, separated in his mind by both space and time. In repeating his rejection of the Nebraska past, Clark reaffirms his identity. There is a gulf separating past and present, a gulf of distance, time, and social forms ; the Nebraska ‘now’ is somewhere back in Boston’s mythic

past, and the Boston 'now' is somewhere in Nebraska's future. Georgiana, like the old miners in the Denver hotel, has been left on the wrong side of the "gulf no haberdasher could bridge," which is why it is so disorienting for Clark in his Boston 'now' to have her manifest herself like a misplaced ghost in an impossible outfit, dressed for the farm and visiting Newbury Street, somehow existing in the past and the present at the same time. Her arrival, not surprisingly, threatens the basis of Clark's sense of space and time—and hence his sense of self.

Georgiana's apparent ability to be in two places at the same time—from Clark's point of view—is basic to the question of what prompts him to tell this story, and why he shapes it as he does. Why does he choose to start his tale with the arrival of the letter, and to end it as he sits with Georgiana in the concert hall after the concert? If we start from the idea that this story is essentially not about Georgiana but about Clark then we can say that the arrival of the letter is the significant beginning of his self-revelation, because it is the sudden appearance of his aunt's name that jolts Clark into semi-awareness by compressing space and time and threatening the sense of order that depends on their separation. Ann Romines talks of the ways in which Georgiana's name threatens Clark, and it is clear that the arrival of the letter shocks and disorients him in ways that the physical arrival of his aunt does not—by then he has had time to cope with the issue by pushing it sideways. With the arrival of the letter, Clark's suddenly reawakened memories of his boyhood in Nebraska completely unsettle him: he feels himself at once to be "a stranger . . . out of place amid . . . familiar surroundings" (102). But by the time he meets his aunt at the station he has managed to regain his equilibrium and shift his focus on to her: he regards her "with that feeling of awe and respect with which we behold explorers who have left their ears and fingers north of Franz-Joseph-Land, or their health somewhere along the Upper Congo" (103). Clark is now the stay-at-home, Georgiana the stranger out of place. These early passages, and their use of images relating to space, place, and exploration, suggest the ways in which the story as whole is concerned with the theme of the connection between familiar place and

a sense of self, in Clark's case a *chosen* familiar place and a recreated or rescued self.

Clark's narrative starts at the moment of his first shock of displacement, and thus self-doubt, delayed though it is for the reader by his detailed description of the letter bringing the news. It is not the letter, with its Nebraska postmark, that disturbs him so much that he drops it, it is the name of his aunt. This seems to suggest that it is not so much the reappearance of his past that disturbs Clark, but the reappearance of this particular figure. Clark feels his sense of place and sense of self doubly threatened—his aunt is both a figure from an escaped past and a version of the person he would now be had he not made that escape. Clark's narrative ends at the moment when his aunt finally seems to articulate vicariously for him the dread that has been haunting him since he first received the letter announcing her arrival : to move back, from Boston (or the concert hall) to Nebraska (or the farmyard) is impossible : it would be the loss of self. As Romines suggests, Clark is thinking in simple opposites. Just as he dismisses his aunt's long train journey across country from Nebraska to Boston—"to all intents and purposes, there were but a few hours of nightmare between the farm in Red Willow County and my study on Newbury Street"—so he makes the door of the concert hall lead straight into his nightmare farmyard, with its crooked seedlings and its moulting turkeys. The story ends here because Clark has finally been able, through his 'understanding' of his aunt's words, to articulate through her the strong sense of disorientation in place and time that so unsettled him at the story's beginning. Having rejected his former self and his former place, Clark has been brought face to face with it again, has compared his two selves and two places and reaffirmed his identity as the Boston self, the modern man. He is no longer a "gangling farm-boy" for whom Verdi represents the pinnacle of operatic achievement : he has become urbanized, sophisticated, and converted to Wagner.

The social, time-specific aspects of Clark's artistic sophistication are vital to his sense of identity and connected to his sense of place, and he displays that sophistica-

tion for his reader in contrast to his aunt's outmoded tastes. She may have a soul, he implies, but it is sadly out of date. Clark describes the scene in the concert hall, for example, in terms of an impressionist painting, full of colour and texture but without discernible line or contour. He imagines that Georgiana, in contrast, can only see the picture before her as a collection of "daubs of tube-paint on a palette" (106). The impressionists are too modern for Georgiana: she has been transported into the future but she has not yet learned to see it.

Clark's Nebraska landscapes, in contrast, are anything but impressionist scenes: they are perversely full of lines and contours and lacking in colour. The aisles of corn, admittedly, are green, but he walks through them "as in a treadmill... without perceiving a shadow of change." The farm house is naked, black, unpainted and grim; the pond where he learned to swim is black, too, and surrounded by cattle tracks. Even where it is green, this landscape is grim; even where there is water, the water is black. In contrast, the scene in the concert hall is full of life and colour. For Clark the orchestra is "clean," with a "gloss," full of "beloved shapes" and "patches of yellow light thrown by... green shaded lamps;" it is a "restless, wind-tossed forest of fiddle necks and bows" (106). His representative image of Nebraska is one of dry sordid sterility, his parallel image of Boston is one of elegant living colour. Fittingly, his interest in whether or not Georgiana's aesthetic sense, her "soul," has survived her time on the frontier is described in terms of apparently withered vegetation: the soul, he discovers, "withers to the outward eye only; like that strange moss which can lie on a dusty shelf half a century and yet, if placed in water, grows green again" (108). This is the crux of the matter: life outside the 'water' of a place like Boston is life "on a dusty shelf." Life, the real Clark, can only exist in water. The final image of the story—Clark's arid Nebraska wastes—are prefigured by the picture Clark gives us, immediately before Georgiana's cry, of the orchestra packing up to leave. As they remove their promise of life, Nebraska threatens to return: "the flute-players shook the water from their mouthpieces; the men of the orchestra went out one by one, leaving the stage to the chairs and music

stands, empty as a winter cornfield” (109).

In interpreting Georgiana’s responding cry, “I don’t want to go!” to mean, specifically, that she dreads going back to Nebraska, Clark makes it clear that he believes his aunt to be protesting against being put back on the dusty shelf, to the sleep from which he believes he has awoken her. Clark’s musical aunt Georgiana, the woman who can be carried by Wagner’s music out “into the grey, nameless burying grounds of the sea,” only exists in Boston. In Nebraska she merely sleeps, a strange, withered moss. And just as the Boston Georgiana only exists in Boston, so the grown-up sophisticated Boston Clark can only exist within reach of his concert halls. Clark’s Nebraska landscapes are constructed as they are in order to keep them and Clark’s earlier self at a distance. True, this distance is at times not distant enough—sometimes it is just outside the door, and sometimes it arrives in the mail (or on the train)—but that is partly a function of the fact that, for Clark, Boston and Nebraska are the only possibilities, the only places. Everything in between is “a few hours of nightmare.”

In the end, Boston and Nebraska are not separated just by time and space. It is not simply that one is “there” and the other is “here,” one “then” and the other “now.” For Clark, telling his story, the farm in Red Willow County is an image, not a place, and it lies not in the past but outside time. It is the absence of meaning and the denial of self.

In the end, then, the Nebraska landscapes in “A Wagner Matinée” are not descriptions of places, but both metaphorical reconstructions of a past life and images of placelessness representing the loss of self. As a whole, the story is deeply suggestive of the relationship between the sense of self and the sense of place, of the subjective experience of distance, and the relationship between the sensations of time passing and of miles traveled. As we have seen, although the complexities of Cather’s method of narration make the extraction of chunks of landscape description very problematic, the narrative point of view of “A Wagner Matinée” does not ‘complicate’ the story—in many ways it *is* the story. Furthermore, the specificity of

the narrative voice does not preclude a geographical approach to this story. On the contrary, the story's point of view can be taken as the central factor in a geographically oriented reading which focuses on the way in which the narrator defines his identity through landscape images and by reference to his sense of place.

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