

WILLA CATHER

Lesbian Author of American Pioneer Life

(1873 - 1947)



Pulitzer Prize winning American novelist Willa Cather was born near Winchester, Virginia – but it was the vast expanse of Nebraska, where she grew up, that became the setting for her most-revered works. In 1890, Cather began studying at the University of Nebraska. Upon graduation, she moved to Pittsburgh to work as a magazine editor and high school teacher. It was there that she met Isabelle McClung, with whom she became intimately involved. Cather was invited to live in the McClung family home where, for the first time, she had a quiet, private, workspace. It was from there that she first published poetry and short stories; which generated critical praise, if not commercial success. In 1905, she moved to New York City to become editor for *McClure's Magazine*. Her friend and mentor, Sarah Orne Jewett – another lesbian author – advised her to find her “own quiet center” by writing about the people and places that she had known in Nebraska. Heeding Jewett’s advice, Cather left *McClure's* in 1912 to devote herself entirely to penning stories featuring strong female protagonists inspired by the girls and young women who had helped tame the wild land of her youth. Her Nebraska-themed novels included *O, Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), *My Ántonia* (1918), *One of Ours* (1922), and *A Lost Lady* (1923). She is also noted for *The Professor's House* (1925), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) – which has been called “one of the greatest gay love stories in 20th Century American Literature” – and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). Poor health prevented Cather from much productivity during the 1930s and 1940s. She died on April 24, 1947 and is buried in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. Scholarship regarding Cather’s lesbianism began to emerge in the late 1980s, though some have protested this characterization, aided by Cather’s efforts to seal her records upon her death. However, recently published personal letters suggest a more complete understanding of this complex woman is at hand. It is perhaps telling that Edith Lewis – Cather’s companion of 42 years – is buried at the foot of Cather’s grave.



Lesson Plans

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate Prior Experience: Have you ever heard of Willa Cather or read any of her novels?
2. Read the biographical information at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/willa-cather>
3. Group Discussion: Watch the documentary [Yours, Willa Cather](#). Discuss what you have learned about the woman herself.
4. Extend Knowledge: Go to <https://cather.unl.edu/> and explore the Willa Cather Archive’s “Images and Multimedia” pages. View photos of Cather and listen to her speak. Why do you think Cather is so revered as an author?

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Take a virtual tour of Willa Cather’s home and community in Red Cloud, Nebraska: <https://www.willacather.org/learn/virtually-tour-willa-cather-historic-sites>
2. Read about other LGBTQ+ authors on the Legacy Project website, such as [Carson McCullers](#), [Reinaldo Arenas](#), [James Baldwin](#), [Anne Lister](#), or [Walt Whitman](#). Do you detect any similarities in their stories?
3. Cather’s mentor, Sarah Orne Jewett, was a novelist and poet. Study her life and work, starting here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sarah-orne-jewett> Why do you think Jewett had such an influence on Cather?
4. Read [this excerpt](#) from Cather’s *My Ántonia*. What are your impressions? What can you learn of pioneer life on the Great Plains when Cather lived there?

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Willa Cather was born in Virginia, but her family moved to Nebraska in 1883 after many in their community contracted tuberculosis, a contagious and deadly lung disease. Write a reflection about how your own family’s life changed due to the 2020 COVID pandemic.

2. While a student at the University of Nebraska, Willa Cather often dressed as the male students did, in pants and a jacket. She also went by the nickname William. What difficulties might she have faced for being gender non-conforming during this era?
3. Willa Cather once wrote: “There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before.” What do you think she meant by this? Do you agree with her?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Willa Cather wrote about pioneers, most of whom traced their ancestry to Europe. Read about [Pioneer History](#) then about some Native American populations before settlers arrived in Nebraska: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_American_tribes_in_Nebraska Share with your class why you think there was social conflict between these two cultures. What could have helped, if anything?
2. Cather burned many of her personal letters, and her attorneys were forbidden from cooperating with any efforts to produce a biography that might seek to use those letters which survived. Because of this, some scholars object to characterizing Willa Cather as a lesbian because no one has uncovered “conclusive” documentation. Write an essay providing your own answers to the following questions:
 - a. Why do you think Cather put up such road blocks?
 - b. Do you think it is reasonable to just *assume* that *all* people are “heterosexual” – regardless of anecdotal evidence that suggests otherwise – unless they left behind some sort of written *manifesto*?
 - c. How has this attitude impacted our understanding of human history?
 - d. What role does history play in how societies and cultures interact?