Willa Cather's German Connections

"Uncle Valentine" and Wertherian Wandering

by PETER M. SULLIVAN

More than 70 years after Willa Cather won the Pulitzer Prize for literature, her novels and stories continue to attract a wide readership. A wave of research has examined the enduring appeal of Cather's works from different perspectives. These approaches often lead back to beginnings: the novels and stories about the immigrant peoples and their struggles against an untamed prairie that Cather knew as a child. Although Nebraska is the setting for many of Cather's writings, her portrayals of the foreign settlers on the lands opened by the railroads emphasize the cultural links between the Old World and the New. Cather's early interest in Europe is well known. Discussion has often centered on Cather's love of France and its ancient civilization (Woodress 160).[1] Cather's interests, though, were far-ranging and included other cultures. References to Germany and its heritage in music and literature appear in many of her writings.

Cather's interest in German music has been widely recognized. In an apprentice story, "The Prodigies," there is a reference to a Schubert serenade, played by the father of the children. Wagner’s music is also meaningful. The children have received gifts from "Frau Cosima Wagner," a portrait of her husband and a book of the Nibelungen trilogy. The boy, Hermann (the name evokes a heroic figure, a chieftain who defeated the Romans at the Teutoburg Forest), says that he and his sister liked reading the book, which was "full of fights and adventures," and he supposes he will one day sing Wagnerian parts (Collected Short Fiction 419).

Cather's attraction to Wagner is seen in the stories included in The Troll Garden (1905). As Richard Giannone observes, in "A Wagner Matinee" the narrator's aunt is confronted with music that stirs a dormant desire for the art she gave up (42), and in "The Garden Lodge" Cather makes a "Wagnerian storm" serve as a symbol of Caroline's disaster: she becomes a Sieglinde and her true twin, her Siegmund, is the financial titan Howard Noble, rather than the tenor, Raymond d'Esquerré (39).

Music is featured prominently in Cather's 1915 novel The Song of the Lark. In this book a girl from the Midwest, Thea Kronborg, attains the height of success as a Wagnerian soprano at the Metropolitan Opera. Along the way she preserves old friendships and meets several people of German origin who assist her: Thea's music teacher, Fritz Wunsch; the Kohlers, a German family in Moonstone; Mrs. Lorch, her landlady; and old Henry Biltmer, who introduces Thea to the art of the ancient people. In this novel the German lyrics that young Thea learns, the lines from Gluck's opera repeated by Wunsch,
and the later descriptions of Thea's Wagnerian roles show Cather's appreciation of the centrality of music in German culture.

Cather's interest in German culture includes literature. She was attracted to Heinrich Heine early on and shared her enthusiasm for his poetry with her Pittsburgh friends the Seibels. She admired Goethe from her student days. In an 1894 article, Cather cited Goethe's maxim "The highest cannot be spoken," adding that actors are blessed who do not try (Slote 267). Cather, like Goethe, affirmed the ineffable nature of the highest art. Later in Cather's career her friend and biographer Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant would write that Cather stands out as closer than any other writer of stature she knew "to living Goethe's dictum: We approach the world through art, and art is our link with it" (qtd. in Wasserman 4-5).

Cather knew Goethe's Faust, and in her drama criticism she commented on American productions of Goethe's work, taking some actors to task for their shabby interpretations of the roles (Slote 278-81). A reference to Goethe's drama appears in Cather's 1932 story, "Old Mrs. Harris," as young Vicki Templeton expresses the wish to one day be able to read the work, which she finds in the library of her neighbors, the Rosens, in the original German (274-75). This desire for knowledge, uttered by a young girl about to leave her family surroundings, suggests a Faustian quest and an abrogation of the innocence associated with a prairie town.

Cather assessed Goethe's criticism of Shakespeare. She did not agree that Hamlet should be made a more dramatic role to be convincing (Slote 428-29). Though Cather perceives this as Goethe's criticism, the comments on Shakespeare's play appear in Goethe's classic Wilhelm Meister and are presented as the views of the young protagonist during his association with a roving theater group. A reference to the novel also appears in Cather's A Lost Lady, as part of a summer reading list suggested to Niel Herbert by his uncle (81). The novel, along with others that depict amorous adventures, suggests an amoral lifestyle and the erring ways of a young man that lead to maturation and acceptance. The novel suggests Niel's development and, simultaneously, recalls the lapse in conventional morality represented by Marian Forrester.

A reference to Goethe also occurs in Cather's next novel, The Professor's House, which appeared in 1925. When Professor St. Peter and his wife, Lillian, attend the opera Mignon in Chicago, she can scarcely believe that the tenor on the stage (in the role of Wilhelm, Mignon's protector) looks like pictures of Goethe. Professor St. Peter agrees, adding that he is also as tall as Goethe was (93-94).

A novel of Goethe's storm and stress period, The Sufferings of Young Werther, caused a sensation across Europe and established Goethe as a major writer. Though references to this epistolary novel are lacking in Cather's writings, scenes and events in the work suggest parallels with Cather's 1925 story "Uncle Valentine." In Cather's novella-length story, Valentine Ramsay, modeled after her friend, the Pittsburgh composer Ethelbert Nevin, who died in 1901, returns from Europe to the suburbs of an American city that resembles Pittsburgh. At the turn of the century, the time of the story, the rustic environs were still preserved from industrial expansion. It is here, at the family estate, that Valentine spends a "golden year" writing the songs for which he is remembered. Cather's Valentine and Goethe's figure Werther both show inclinations to wander. Goethe's sensitive character has arrived at a German village and is in awe of the natural surroundings, which he describes to a friend in a series of letters. He has come to the locality, he reveals, to take care of an inheritance matter for his mother. After a time he receives a position at a distant embassy, but his temperament renders him unsuitable and here turns, dejected, to the rural setting. In an introduction to Goethe's novel Victor Lange cites Thomas Mann's appraisal of Werther as a "vagabond of feeling" (viii).

Similarly restless, Valentine Ramsay wanders across Europe. He goes to Bayreuth to see Wagner's Ring, hoping to elude his business-minded wife, Janet Oglethorpe, who shows up during the performance. Later in Paris, Valentine takes up with Louise Ireland, a singer with a dubious reputation, deserting his wife for her, "utterly disgrac[ing] himself" (6). He later returns to the family estate.
When Cather’s Valentine arrives home, he resumes a friendship with a neighbor, Charlotte Waterford. She is known as Aunt Charlotte to the principal narrator, Marjorie, a 16-year-old ward at that time. Charlotte is a maternal figure who appreciates Valentine’s talent and recognizes that her own musical ability is limited. She plays the piano and protects him from burdensome contacts with visitors at a reception for him. Since Valentine’s marriage has been tinged with scandal, he has become more interesting to the neighbors in the valley.

In giving names to her characters, Cather often suggests ethnic backgrounds and traits. The name Charlotte suggests the name of a Prussian queen and thus a nobleness that accrues to the image of Valentine’s hospitable friend. In Goethe’s novel the protagonist meets a woman with a shortened form of the name, Lone, and describes her charming simplicity. She soon becomes the focus of his turbulent emotions. Near the end of the novel he worships her at a distance, hearing about her endearing qualities from Albert, her husband, who thinks of him as a family friend.

The configuration of characters in Goethe’s tale suggests a triangular pattern proposed by René Girard in his study *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. As Girard theorizes, novelistic literature often shows arrangements consisting of a hero, a mediator, and an object of desire. When the mediator desires or could possibly desire the object, he begets a second desire in the hero. Thus the reader is confronted during the novel with competing desires. All the while the mediator of the desire perceives the hero to be close to the object and thus an obstacle. If this pattern is applied to Goethe’s novel, it becomes evident that Werther’s desire is hindered by Albert’s presence, as Lotte’s betrothed and later as her spouse. A silent rivalry emerges. As Werther sees it, Albert holds the key to a blissful existence, a paradise from which he is excluded. Albert, meanwhile, remains unaware and treats Werther kindly.

This pattern also suggests the relationships in Cather’s "Uncle Valentine." In Cather’s story the protagonist, a composer of romantic ballads, is referred to as a troubadour. He pursues a relationship with Charlotte Waterford based on their passion for music. Here the mediator is Charlotte’s husband, Uncle Harry. And, since the main character is known to Charlotte’s daughters as Uncle Valentine, a competition is suggested by the identical family titles. Valentine wants to spend as much time as possible with Charlotte. Harry, reminiscent of Lotte’s husband, is a practical man with business interests. As Robert K. Miller points out, though, Valentine’s usurpation of Charlotte’s time produces an unhappy effect on Harry Waterford, and "Valentine Ramsay is capable of injuring the people among whom he lives" (136). Yet Harry, like Lotte’s husband, goes on accepting the main character as a family friend, albeit unenthusiastically.

Charlotte is 10 years Valentine’s senior. And, though Goethe’s Lotte is a young woman, both characters oversee a number of children. Lotte has accepted the role of a mother to her younger siblings since her mother died. Werther, upon arriving, refers to a previous relationship with an older woman in a letter to his friend. Also of interest is that Cather’s Janet Oglethorpe is described as older than her ex-spouse, Valentine. Both male protagonists, then, are attracted to older women, especially to women with family responsibilities. The stability of these women in familial relationships draws the self-absorbed, unattached figures in both narratives.

Early in Goethe’s novel an opportunity for closer ties between Lotte and Werther is suggested. At a country-dance, to which Werther is invited, the acquaintances withdraw to an adjoining room to observe a retreating thunderstorm. As Werther describes the scene, "and the splendid rain was trickling down upon the land; the most refreshing fragrance rose up to us from the rich abundance of the warm atmosphere. She [Lotte] stood leaning on her elbows, with her gaze searching the countryside; she looked up to heaven and at me; I saw her eyes fill with tears, and she laid her hand on mine, saying, 'Klopstock!' I recalled at once the glorious ode she had in mind" (32). This spontaneous utterance suggests a shared appreciation of the German poet whose pietistic sentiments and awe of nature inspired a large following. Although Cather’s
story does not exhibit the intensity of feeling displayed in Goethe’s storm and stress work, the main figure and his friend Charlotte share a love for music. On one occasion, while strolling through the hills near the Ramsay estate, Valentine and Charlotte witness a mist-shrouded moon rising above the river and exclaim in one breath, “The Rhinegold!” (25). The utterance affirms their shared passion for Wagner. It suggests a happier time when Damrosch was just introducing German music to America, as Valentine recalls with Charlotte (25).

Valentine’s Uncle Roland, though, a specter-like figure at the Ramsay estate, has different remembrances. He had gone to Europe a prodigy and had later studied in Germany. At 28 his career ended without explanation. One story had it that “Wagner had hurt his feelings so cruelly he could never get over it.” (23). So Roland remains a wrecked spirit prowling the darkened rooms of the Ramsay home. Occasionally he ventures out to attend a concert in the city, and then his “waxy, frozen face” can be seen in the audience (23). The deathlike visage suggests the defeated, ruined presence of the uncle whose name, ironically, recalls the hero of medieval romance.

Allusions to medieval romance and to royalty are scattered throughout Cather’s “Uncle Valentine,” evoking a chivalric past. Valentine’s death occurs in Paris, at the entrance to the famous bridge, the Pont Royal. Unlike the kings of the past, though, Valentine dies before crossing it. At the beginning of Cather’s story it is reported that Aunt Charlotte’s music room has been remodeled in anticipation of Valentine’s return. It is described as having a wooden interior and candlelight so that it resembles a chamber “such as the petty kings and grand dukes of old Germany had in their castles” (5). As a boy, it is also mentioned, Valentine had shown an attraction to Charlotte—he “had been her squire and had loved her devotedly.” And, when Uncle Harry first came around as a suitor, “the spoiled neighbor boy was always hanging about and demanding attention” (6). The contest for Charlotte had already begun.

Both Goethe’s Werther and Cather’s Valentine are often seen among children who display a natural affection toward them. When Werther and Lotte take strolls they are accompanied by her younger siblings. Aunt Charlotte has a family of six girls, four daughters and two wards, who eagerly await Valentine’s visits. They take walks with him and Charlotte through the hills and along the creeks of the nearby estate. At home they sing Valentine’s songs while Charlotte accompanies them. Goethe’s Lotte plays a minuet, entertaining Werther and her siblings.

At the conclusion of Goethe’s storm and stress novel, the excesses of feelings lead to Werther’s self-annihilation. Cather’s Valentine does not succumb to extreme emotion, but on one occasion he gets drunk, after a chance encounter with his ex-wife Janet and her new husband, and is seen lying on the couch. As the narrator, Marjorie, reports, “He was deathly white, and his eyes were rolled up in his head” (37). Coming to his assistance, Charlotte kneels down beside him and covers him with her cloak, sending her ward for Uncle Harry as fast as she can go. The ghastly appearance shows Valentine’s devastation after hearing that his ex-wife has purchased the neighboring estate. Valentine feels that she is out to deprive him even of the beautiful surroundings where he had roamed with Charlotte. He returns to Europe and at the age of 30 is struck down by one of the first trucks seen on the streets of Paris.

The characters Werther and Valentine are restless, self-indulgent beings, attracted to matriarchal figures with whom they are fond of strolling in rustic environs. Children are naturally drawn to them. They have, or attempt to establish, spiritual bonds with the matriarchal figures and their presence is a mild annoyance to the husbands, who are benevolent figures. Such parallels suggest a kinship between Goethe’s storm and stress novel and Cather’s 1925 story. Though Cather’s story appeared at the height of her career, her familiarity with Goethe’s narrative could have developed earlier.

A plausible source of Cather’s familiarity with Goethe’s work relates to her interest in the opera. As a journalist, Cather contributed drama and music criticism to newspapers in Lincoln. In the first column she sent back from Pittsburgh in 1896, Cather reviewed the opera Eve by French composer Jules Massenet (Curtin 377). In another review Cather discusses a
concert selection, *Vision Fugitive*, taken from Massenet's *Hérodiade*. This piece she finds "like all Massenet's music . . . full of vague, delicious yearning" (Curtin 520). This comment hints at Cather's awareness of Massenet's works, and one of these, the opera *Werther*, was based on Goethe's narrative. *Werther* was first performed in Europe and came to the United States in 1894, playing in New York, Chicago, and New Orleans. It achieved worldwide popularity after Albert Carre's revival in Paris in 1903 and since then has been performed 1,300 times in Paris alone (Sadie 1141). It seems likely that Cather, who loved concerts, wrote music reviews early on, and had a passion for the opera, would have been aware of Massenet's *Werther*.

Cather's awareness of Goethe's novel also remains plausible, for as Bernice Slate writes, in Cather's student days she was enthusiastic about French authors but also liked Heine and "knew something of Goethe" (38). Cather had recognized Goethe’s stature in world literature as a young reporter and was influenced by his thoughts on art. During her career she referred to his works often. [2] In a much discussed 1936 essay titled "Escapism," Cather refers to the exceptional figures in Western civilization, who are less valued by contemporary writers bent on causes. As Cather affirms about the past thinkers whom she admires, "their exceptionalness, oftener than not, comes not only from a superior endowment, but from a deeper purpose, and a willingness to pay the cost instead of being paid for it" (970). Cather’s exceptions include "Goethe, Rousseau, Spinoza, Pascal, Shakespeare and Dante" (971). Thus, late in Cather's career, Goethe was securely enshrined in her pantheon of philosophers and literary geniuses.

The appearance of the story "Uncle Valentine" in 1925 prompts questions about the prominence of Wagnerian motifs. Cather's interest in Wagner's music had been documented in earlier stories and shown extensively in the 1915 novel *The Song of the Lark*. Later Cather focused on different material: the immigrants' struggles on the Divide that she knew as a child in *My Ántonia*, the experience of war in *One of Ours*, and the loss of idealism at the end of the pioneer era in *A Lost Lady*. Appearing in the same year as "Uncle Valentine," Cather's *The Professor's House* describes a college professor's deep crisis in a materialistic world and the loss of conventional family relationships. In Cather's short fiction of this period Wagner is not emphasized.

Loretta Wasserman, in her study of Cather's short stories, suggests a reason for the lateness of Cather's "Uncle Valentine." Wasserman comments on Charlotte and Valentine's walk in the hills and their uttering in one breath "The Rhinegold," adding that there was something in the two voices that awed even the little girls (49). She also mentions that Valentine plays the Rhine music and adds this information: "(Cather also wrote a preface for the republication of a book on Wagner's operas, so that his romantic themes would have been much on her mind)" (49).

That Cather was writing a preface to a new edition of Gertrude Hall's *The Wagnerian Romances* is significant. Cather had read the book earlier on one of her trips to the Southwest, according to Woodress. And Cather admits in her preface that she was so impressed by Hall's portrayal of the Wagnerian scenes that she had to pay her the highest compliment one author could extend to another—she stole from her (Woodress 358). Cather, then, knew the book and used it as a guide for her literary work.

A further explanation for the references to Wagner might lie in his style of music. Wagner's music dramas recall a mythical Germanic past and this powerful, symphonic music contrasts with the ballads by Valentine Ramsay and their simpler, gentle themes. The Wagnerian motifs, though, are reminiscent of a happy time that Valentine eagerly recalls. Through this fictional character, then, Cather could also pay tribute to the memory of a friend, Ethelbert Nevin, whose songs appeared at a time when life still had its glorious moments of beauty and passion.

NOTES
1. Woodress refers to Cather as a Francophile with an interest in French culture since childhood. Robert J. Nelson shows the French influence as pervasive in Cather's life and writings. (Go back.)

2. Cather had access to Goethe's works during her stay in Pittsburgh. The Allegheny Regional Branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, dedicated in 1890 and the model for thousands of public libraries funded by Andrew Carnegie, contains a card file with the title *Novels and Tales* by 'Göthe, Johann Wolfgang von' (nineteenth-century spelling of the name). The book was published in London in 1890 and includes in its contents *Sorrows of Young Werther* [sic]. This and other late-nineteenth-century editions of Goethe's works are listed in the card file but are no longer in the library. Cather taught at nearby Allegheny High School from 1903 to 1906. (Go back.)

WORKS CITED


Willa Sibert Cather (7 December 1873 – 24 April 1947) is among the most eminent American authors, known for her depictions of US life in her novels. No one can build his security upon the nobleness of another person. Two people, when they love each other, grow alike in their tastes and habits and pride, but their moral natures (whatever we may mean by that canting expression) are never welded. The base one goes on being base, and the noble one noble, to the end. Alexander's Bridge (1912) Ch.