Critics by themselves do not make writers into literary icons. But the iconic status of writers often owes much to the critics and scholars who edit the anthologies read in schools and colleges, write books and articles that teachers read in preparing their literature classes, and write introductions to texts published for students and general readers. In turn, the emergence of a writer as a literary icon may have powerful effects on criticism. Recent studies of Willa Cather show with particular clarity the many ways that Cather's presence as a cultural icon has made an impact on her critics.

The ever-increasing volume of scholarship and critical attention devoted to Cather in itself attests to her prominent place in American literary history. The MLA Bibliographies from 1997 through 2001 cite 230 books and essays on Cather. During an earlier five-year period, from 1970 through 1974, only 63 citations to published Cather scholarship appear. Scholarly papers on Cather's life and work are regularly presented at the annual meetings of the American Literature Association and the Western Literature Association and at the annual spring conference in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Between 1999 and 2003 five volumes of essays were published based on papers presented at conferences on Cather in New York City, Mesa Verde, Quebec City, Winchester, Virginia, and Nebraska City. Cather's place in anthologies of American literature is now as secure as Hemingway's or Faulkner's. So many high school and college students are reading Cather's novels and stories that a biannual journal, Teaching Cather, sponsored by Northwest Missouri State University, was inaugurated to aid teachers from middle schools to graduate seminars.

Undergirding Cather scholarship is the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition, published by the University of Nebraska Press, which issued its first volume (O Pioneers!) in 1992 and its eighth (One of Ours) in 2006. Alexander's Bridge is scheduled for publication in 2007. Each volume contains the text of Cather's work, extensive notes, and a detailed historical essay about the sources, composition, publication, and critical reception of the work.

The burgeoning interest in Cather has revived interest in other artists whom Cather knew or who were in some way important to her. Papers presented at the International Cather Seminar in 2003 at Bread Loaf, Vermont, brought a number of figures—some little known or forgotten until now—into the critical spotlight: Edward Abbey, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Louise Guiney, Burton J. Hendrick, Margaret Matzenauer, Ole Rolvaag, and Edward Steichen, among others.

Another sign of the transformation of author into icon is the interest of critics in the process by which Cather as a cultural...
icon has been constructed. In particular, Joan Acocella, Michael Schueth, Janis Stout, Joseph Urgo, and Deborah Williams have examined how Cather herself acted to create her public image—through interviews, biographical sketches for her publishers, and public letters. In the winter/spring 2003 issue of the *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review*, David Porter analyzes the typescript, recently acquired by Drew University, of an interview, published in the *Nebraska State Journal* as a genuine interview, that Cather herself wrote. (One thinks of Whitman writing laudatory reviews of his own poetry.) Stephanie Thompson, in *Influencing America’s Tastes: Realism in the Works of Wharton, Cather, and Hurst* (2000), analyzes the ways Cather created her “ideal audience” within her novels (127).

It might seem paradoxical that a writer whose protection of her privacy has become almost legendary should have cared so intensely about the way she presented herself and was presented to the public. But as Michael Schueth has astutely observed, Cather created a public image of herself shaped by her childhood, which gave her readers “a sense of personal relationship” with her and at the same time protected her privacy by diverting attention from other parts of her life. Making a similar point, Deborah Williams has developed a compelling analogy between Cather’s creation of a “marketable image” for S. S. McClure in her writing of his autobiography and her own “construction of a public surface” by which she controlled the kind and extent of the public’s knowledge of her life.

Interviews, reviews, memoirs, and reminiscences have combined to create the icon that still endures—Cather, the celebrant of the western pioneers’ heroic strength and courage: “the straightforward prairie writer” in Deborah Williams’s words. The amount of truth in this image and Cather’s success in conveying it are evident in Sharon Hoover’s 2002 book, *Willa Cather Remembered*. Almost without exception, the memories and impressions of Cather written by acquaintances and friends present a writer of resolute strength, determination, and conviction, self-confident and self-possessed, a writer of “clear-eyed, unquestioning certainty,” as her friend Fanny Butcher described her (qtd. in Hoover 109). Such words as strong, sturdy, vigorous, steadfast, fresh-colored, and clear appear repeatedly in their accounts. To these observers, Cather did not seem to have a “mania for privacy” (Acocella’s phrase); rather, she merely seemed determined to protect her time and energies, to save herself for her work.

The image of Cather as the forthright novelist of the plains is reflected and reinforced by photographs, most notably Edward Steichen’s famous photograph of Cather, age fifty-three, wearing a middy blouse and looking directly at the viewer. Films inspired by Cather’s work are based on those novels—*O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*—that portray the triumph of the protagonist over the hardships and privations of frontier life. The program on Cather filmed in Red Cloud in 2001 and shown on CSPAN in the American Writers series captures the spirit of Cather’s “Biographical Sketch” (1926), in which the novelist refers to Nebraska as “home” and her love of the “open plains” as “the great passion of my life” (54).

The potency of the iconic image has moved many critics in the past twenty-five years to resist it, attack it, or speculate about what it might conceal. For instance, Judith Fetterley’s reference to “the official story” in her 1998 essay on *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* implies that the popular view somehow falsifies the realities of Cather’s life and work. The assumption that Cather was a lesbian (however that term is defined) encouraged a number of critics in the 1970s and 1980s to conclude that the limpid surface of Cather’s fiction concealed homosexual desires that could not be openly expressed and must be hidden in a subtext. Few phrases in literary history have borne so heavy a burden of argument as “the inexplicable presence of the thing not named” in Cather’s essay “The Novel Déméublé” (50). Few critics would now insist that the “thing not named” must be homoerotic desire—the phrase so clearly refers to aesthetics, to the art of evocation and suggestion. Moreover, influential critics such as Joan Acocella, Janis Stout, and Cynthia Griffin Wolff have effectively rebutted claims that Cather’s fervent letters to Louise Pound and her assumption of masculine dress and haircut in adolescence are themselves indisputable proofs of lesbianism. But there is no going back to the time when biographers could write about Cather without any reference to
gender and sexuality. As Joseph Urgo has stated, "Iconic status opens inquiries into all of Cather" (327).

Whether or not critics see "sexual orientation" as a determining source of Cather's art, they have dispelled the idea of Cather as an uncomplicated "plainspoken prairie writer." Words such as *ambivalence*, *anxiety*, *conflict*, and *ambiguity* have replaced the earlier vocabulary. The premise of Janis Stout's biography (2000) is that Cather—far from being a calm and confident person of unwavering convictions—was a "deeply conflicted writer" (xi) with ambivalent views about race, gender, immigration, and America's destiny. Marilee Lindemann, in her 1999 book, *Willa Cather: Queering America*, perceives in Cather's fiction "an uneasy movement between ecstatic optimism and sometimes deadly anxiety" (4), evident in the portrayal of "queer" characters such as Thea Kronborg and Claude Wheeler, who rebel against a system that would enforce conformity to the dominant ideology of race and gender roles.

Whether or not Cather was a "deeply conflicted writer," it is indisputable that her fiction has inspired conflicting views among her critics. The reader of recent criticism is struck by how sharply critics disagree about the meaning of her novels, how differently they interpret characters (e.g., St. Peter and Antonia), and how differently they perceive Cather's attitude toward them. Whether or not Cather gives greater power to men or to women in the prairie novels remains a subject of debate. Does Cather endorse or reject the values, ambitions, and desires of St. Peter in *The Professor's House*? John Swift concludes that we cannot know for certain where she stands: "We cannot tell; the multiple ironies . . . make any single perspective untenable" (19). We will continue to analyze and criticize Cather's novels precisely because she is unfathomable, because scenes and characters may "offer a proliferation of meanings" that cannot be comprehended in one interpretation, as Richard Millington has observed (77).

Critics have mounted a strong challenge to the familiar literary icon, but they have not replaced it with another. When Richard Schickel wrote the script for the celebratory "Into the Morning": Willa Cather's America (1988) for the Films for Humanities series, he chose passages from the novels expressing characters' aspirations and ideals to accompany the famous photographs and beautiful images of western prairies and mountains. In describing Alexandra Bergson as the embodiment of "all the pioneer virtues—patience, courage, imagination," he undoubtedly believed that he was presenting Cather's heroine as most readers see her, or should see her.

Several critics, most recently Jonathan Goldberg and Christopher Nealon, have proposed to make Cather an icon for gay writers—in Nealon's words, "a lesbian forebear," to be claimed through "identification with an ancestor" (94, 96). I am told that a photograph of Cather hangs in one of the rooms of the Pride Institute at Minneapolis. But the recent criticism shows that Cather is a compelling subject for almost every kind of critic—feminist, queer theorist, new historicist, ecocritic, ethnographer, structuralist, deconstructionist, reader-response critic, and psychoanalyst. There is no critical consensus that Cather belongs in any one literary tradition. John Murphy and Amy Ahearn have established her affinities with the naturalists; John Anders places her in the tradition of male homosexual literature, to which Plato, Walter Pater, and Walt Whitman belong. The winter 2001 issue of *American Literary Realism* is devoted to Cather as a realist. Jo Ann Middleton, Guy Reynolds, Phyllis Rose, Janis Stout, and Steven Trout have persuasively defined her as a modernist, but Cather remains a unique, original writer who resists being categorized or definitively analyzed. What Edmund Morgan says of Benjamin Franklin in his 2002 biography—"he kept a kind of inner core of himself intact and unapproachable" (30)—is also true of Cather.

But writers do not become literary icons because they seem unapproachable or create characters who inspire controversy. Writers become icons when they come to embody or are recognized as literary creators of an era, a region, a city, a culture, or a way of life that we recognize as an essential part of a nation's history and character.
Cather’s ambition to be a literary creator is revealed most clearly in her best-known novel, My Ántonia, itself an icon, now in print in more than twenty-five editions, chosen in 2002 for the third installment of the citywide reading program One Book, One Chicago. Within the novel itself, Cather, through her narrators, Jim Burden and the unnamed “I” of the introduction, creates Ántonia as an icon. The narrator of the introduction states: “More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood” (x-xi). When Jim Burden returns to the scenes of his childhood after twenty years and sees Ántonia again, he reflects that she “had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade—that grew stronger with time. . . . She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true” (397-98).

This view of Ántonia has provoked much controversy, very much like the controversy surrounding the familiar iconic image of Cather herself. Many early readers and reviewers saw Ántonia as the embodiment of vitality and indomitable strength, a triumphant, heroic figure, a “symbol of calm and faithful endurance” (Acocella 33). Such readers saw Jim’s vision of Ántonia at the end as the fitting climax to a novel “unique in its serenity,” “a glorious celebration of life” (qtd. in Murphy 18, 13). Recent critics, however, have dwelled on the darker sides of the novel—the scenes of violence, attempted rape, and suicide, the melancholy sense of exile and loss, Ántonia’s endurance, above all, of the exploitation, rejection, and betrayal of her by most of the male characters.

For every critic like Stephanie Thompson, who perceives Jim as the “ideal narrator” who best “realizes what [Ántonia’s] powers are over others” (144), a dozen are skeptical of Jim’s celebratory vision of Ántonia and regard his making of the woman into an icon as an attempt to control her, to make her “safe” by turning her into a fixed symbol. No doubt many of the novel’s early readers saw Jim as Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant saw him, “in some sort an incarnation of the author” (qtd. in Hoover 73). That many readers still see Jim in this way is suggested by Schickel, who refers in his film to Jim Burden, “who is in fact Willa Cather.” But by the 1970s Jim had become a suspect figure—an unreliable narrator, a mask to hide the author’s presumed lesbian desires, an androgynous figure, more feminine than masculine, a romantic mythmaker, “a more disingenuous and self-deluded narrator than we supposed,” according to Blanche Gelfant (79). The degree of irony with which Cather viewed her narrator has not yet been established.

Surely Cather was aware that she was creating in Jim Burden a character who often failed in charity and compassion. One may well feel that he has not earned his ecstatic vision of Ántonia after his absence of twenty years, that his celebration of her at the end therefore seems sentimental and self-indulgent. But the power that Jim invests in Ántonia is the power that Cather wanted her own novel to have. She wanted her novel, like Ántonia, to “leave images in the mind that did not fade—that grew stronger with time.” To convey her purpose, she needed a narrator with a “romantic disposition,” which the narrator of the introduction ascribes to Jim Burden (x). She needed a narrator who feels the vast emptiness of the prairie as Jim feels it: “nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made” (8).

Cather’s ambition to be the maker of a country is expressed indirectly, in the words from book 3 of the Georgics, in the lecture on Virgil given by Jim’s teacher, Gaston Cleric, as recalled by Jim in book 3 of the novel: “for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country.” Jim remembers Cleric’s reading of the passage in the Georgics: “This was not a boast, but a hope, at once bold and devoutly humble, that he might bring the Muse (but lately come to Italy from her cloudy Grecian mountains), not to the capital, the palatia Romana, but to his own little ‘country’; to his own little fields, ‘sloping down to the river and to the old beech trees with broken tops’” (299).

Cather sets between herself and Virgil two figures—Jim Burden and Gaston Cleric. Thus she avoids presuming to identify herself with the Latin poet, or to compare her novel to the work praised by Dryden as “the best poem of the best poet.”
But the parallels are there for the reader who cares to draw them. Both the *Georgics* and Cather's novel were completed in the authors' prime years of middle age, in their forties. Both writers celebrated a *patria* from which they had for years been separated (Virgil having lived near Naples for many years before finishing the *Georgics*). The following observation by Gilbert Highet could apply to the author of *My Ántonia* as well as to Virgil, who would bring the Muses "in triumph from the Aonian peak": "Roman civilization . . . was to Greece as the culture of America, North and South, is to that of Europe—a new variety, formed and strengthened by transplantation" (66).

That Cather has become a cultural icon is evidence that she succeeded in her ambition. In bringing the Muse into her own country, she did for the frontier prairies and plains what Hawthorne did for the Puritans, what Mark Twain did for the Mississippi River, what Fitzgerald did for the Jazz Age. And in doing so, she, like them, inspired readers to look beyond the famous images, the icons, to seek the depths and mysteries that give to the images the power they continue to have for us.

**WORKS CITED**


The Post Modern Frame is when the artist takes an image from one source and they reuse the image in their own unique way, this is called appropriation. They give the image a new context, meaning and they make the artwork their own.

whatever happened to the supervisor? Art critic, didn't heed the warning about vacating Keats art gallery before 6pm. It seems he stayed behind one night. Art criticism is more about how successful the artist was in achieving his goal.