



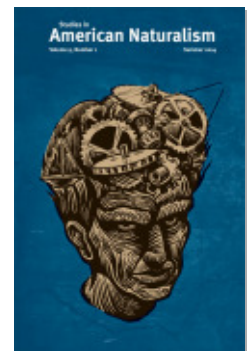
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Willa Cather and Aestheticism: From Romanticism to Modernism
edited by Sarah Cheney Watson and Ann Moseley (review)

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Studies in American Naturalism, Volume 9, Number 1, Summer 2014,
pp. 109-111 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/san.2014.0002>



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Willa Cather and Aestheticism: From Romanticism to Modernism, edited by Sarah Cheney Watson and Ann Moseley. Teaneck NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012. xvi + 239 pp. Cloth, \$70.00; E-book, \$69.99; Paper, \$36.99.

Willa Cather's enigmatic look—askance rather than direct—in her studio portrait that serves as the frontispiece in Sarah Cheney Watson's and Ann Moseley's collection of essays, *Willa Cather and Aestheticism: From Romanticism to Modernism*, seems to be challenging the authors and their readers to define her, to align her definitively with a specific period, philosophy, aesthetic. Watson and Moseley bring together fourteen essays that attempt to do just that. To say all essays fail to do so is not an indictment of the authors; rather, it is a compliment to Cather. In her essay "The Nude Had Descended the Staircase': Katherine Anne Porter Looks at Willa Cather Looking at Modern Art," Janis Stout captures the essence of this volume and of Cather's aesthetic: "we err when, in the effort to define a Catherian aesthetic, we try to place her in one and only one category, for whatever reason." Watson and Moseley compile essays that offer compelling interpretations (Peter Betjemann's, Jacqueline H. Harris's, and John J. Murphy's excepted) of Cather's writing which expand our understanding of her art, her talent, her aesthetic(s).

In the preface, the editors tie Willa Cather to Walter Pater and his treatise *The Renaissance*, a connection woven throughout the volume, and distinguish "Aestheticism"—the art movement—from "aestheticism"—the concept. Their introduction offers a succinct literature review that situates Cather within and as influenced by the Aesthetic Movement. The volume includes seventeen illustrations, in part to honor Cather's appreciation of the arts and to serve as examples of what influenced her own art. Appropriate among them is Jules Breton's *The Song of the Lark*, the painting that mesmerized Thea Kronborg in Cather's eponymous novel. Unfortunately, some of these illustrations are such poor reproductions that their beauty and effect are lost. The book is divided into four sections: The Aesthetic Movement, The Visual Arts, Movement toward Modernism, and Art and Religion.

In Part I: The Aesthetic Movement, Cather is aligned with and contrasted to the key figures of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde. For Cather to be compared with Wilde, someone she denounced, might seem incongruous, but to discuss aestheticism and omit Wilde would be a glaring oversight as Wilde is synonymous with aestheticism. Some essays take

an either/or stance insisting that one is more influential than the other. Whether she is embracing Pater or reacting to/against Wilde, these essays taken as a whole reasonably purport that Pater and Wilde differently yet equally contribute to Cather's aesthetic. In "Exit Smiling: The Case for Paul's Dandyism," Timothy W. Bintrim offers a credible argument situating the presence of the dandy within one of Cather's most anthologized and disputed short stories. Taking a Wildean approach, Bintrim contends that dandyism explains everything illusive, misunderstood, and mysterious about the eponymous character in "Paul's Case." Nicholas Birns comes at his essay "Aestheticism and the Dispossessed: Cather's Dual Europe in America" from a Paterian perspective as he insists that "Pater was Cather's favorite English writer," and that she demonstrates this in her prairie novels through two Europes, one of "high culture" and one of "struggle." To close Part I, Watson's "Willa Cather's Disenchanted Epicurean: Godfrey St. Peter in *The Professor's House*" succinctly differentiates "Paterian 'Epicurean' from a Wildean 'aesthete'" rather than claiming Pater *or* Wilde had the greater influence.

Eleven of the volume's seventeen illustrations appear in Part II: The Visual Arts as evidence of Cather's appreciation of, influence by, and use of American and European paintings in her work. Opening this section is Leona Seveck's "The Arts and Crafts on Willa Cather's Frontier," in which she argues that the Arts and Crafts movement allowed Cather's characters to enter modernity while maintaining traditions of the prairie. Seveck maintains that "*The Song of the Lark*, Cather's most fully realized alignment with the Arts and Crafts philosophy, held that folk art forms, traditional values, and primitivism . . . could help to thin the divide between worthwhile craft and fine art." Joseph C. Murphy includes four illustrations in "Cather's 'Twilight Stage': Aestheticism, Tonalism, and Modernist Sentiment." Unfortunately—or ironically—these illustrations are too "murky," a characteristic of tonalism, to enhance Murphy's claim. The problematics of these illustrations aside, Murphy writes an essay that balances an explanation of tonalism and a discussion of Cather's art reviews as avenues to analyzing her novels. He praises what he calls Cather's "tonal interludes," which allow her "characters to construct futures around loss, absence, and memory." "Blessed Damsels, Lost Ladies, and Cather's Real Women," by Angela Conrad, compares specific Pre-Raphaelite paintings with Cather's female characters—up to a point; unlike the subjects in the painting, Cather's women reject expected behavior and create their own subjectivity by defying roles men try to assign them.

Part III: Movement toward Modernism opens with Stout's essay, which predominately disputes Porter's "Reflections on Willa Cather." Stout uses Cather's letters to retrace a few of her real—and some imagined—museum visits and her interests in specific painters to offer a thoughtful glimpse into Cather's modernist aesthetic. Pater reappears in Olga Aksakalova's "With the 'Hand, Fastidious and Bold': Bridging Walter Pater's Aestheticism and Willa Cather's Modernism" to augment her position that in *The Professor's House* Cather "is comfortably looking backward, but going certainly forward." "From British Aestheticism to American Modernism: Cather's Transforming Vision," by Jo Ann Middleton, closes this section by asserting that Cather's eclectic reading experience informs her new aesthetic, one Middleton maintains is "a very American form of modernism."

Unfortunately, the volume ends with a single, muddled essay in Part IV: Art and Religion: John J. Murphy's "Willa Cather's Sheltering Art: Cather's Cathedral and the Adams Factor," which attempts to discuss Cather's "Catholic Novels" against Henry Adams's *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres*. This essay, much like Peter Betjemann's and Jacqueline H. Harris's, is both overwritten and unfocused. These three essays excepted, Watson and Moseley compile a volume that delivers on its promise to "increase our understanding of Cather's aesthetic beliefs and practices and contribute immensely to our critical understanding of her work and her life."

—Theresa DeFrancis, *Salem State University*

The Radical Fiction of Ann Petry, by Keith Clark. Baton Rouge:

Louisiana State University Press, 2013. xi + 257 pp. Cloth, \$40.00;

E-book \$16.99.

Ann Petry lived from 1908 to 1997, a period spanning several peaks of African-American literature. The Harlem Renaissance blossomed during her childhood and adolescence; *Native Son*, *Invisible Man*, and *Go Tell it On the Mountain* roughly coincide with the time in which Petry wrote most prolifically; and the generation of writers including Toni Morrison and Alice Walker began writing before Petry's career ended. Despite the longevity of her life and her career, Petry remains a marginal figure, never receiving the same attention as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Morrison, or Walker. Certainly *The Street* (1946), the widely anthologized "Like a Winding Sheet," and to a lesser extent, *The Narrows* (1953) haunt the edges of our modern canon, but Petry has neither the critical, nor the