

Mona Pers, *Willa Cather's Children*. Uppsala 1975. Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia 22. 119 pp. plus selected bibliography. Distributed by Almqvist & Wiksell International, Stockholm.

Mona Pers' *Willa Cather's Children* undertakes to demonstrate that "Willa Cather was a child-centered person" (p. 11) through biographical evidence and examination of her "prolific use of children in her writings" (p. 12). This thesis is important "because the same aspects of the child's personality and situation that

fascinated Willa Cather in life are reproduced in her art" (p. 14). Part I of the book focuses on the stylistic, thematic, and structural use she makes of fictional children, while Part II deals with her "recovery of her own childhood self" (p. 71) by recreating it in the lives of her fictional characters. Ms. Pers takes the author's interest in *children* and in her own specific *childhood* both to be evidence of child-centeredness.

From biographical evidence Ms. Pers establishes that Miss Cather as a young woman dearly loved her own younger brothers and sisters, and that as an older person she was deeply attached to nieces, nephews, and especially the children of friends (the Menuhins). But the argument is overstated by omission of Willa Cather's well-documented other interests: adult friends, the arts, nature, religion, her own writing. The reader remains unconvinced that her concern for children was more than one of a rich variety of interests in her life.

In her art, the study makes a valuable contribution to Cather criticism by demonstrating the qualitative effects of her frequent use of children in selected works. By ignoring the quantitative side of the argument, however, by leaving out half of the short stories and neglecting such adult-centered works as "Neighbor Rosicky" and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Ms. Pers fails to define "the overall importance of children in her writings" (p. 11).

One must nevertheless admire the carefully marshaled evidence of Miss Cather's use of children in theme, structure, and style. In Miss Cather's early journalistic writing Ms. Pers finds that the author was "highly critical of children in general, but interested, to the point of adoration, in individual children who, in her eyes, were special in some way" (p. 30). Since most of her fictional children were modeled on herself or real children that she loved, "they were made to represent everything that is worthwhile in life" (p. 32): capacity for love and admiration, optimism, a sense of belonging, love of nature and animals, curiosity and eagerness, keen perception, honesty, imagination. Such idealization of children as thematic symbols leads Ms. Pers to conclude that "children are mainly responsible for the romanticism we find in Willa Cather" (p. 93).

Her fictional children can also be convincingly realistic, especially when she reminds us of more negative experiences of childhood: how it feels to be small looking up, to lash out in anger and then be sorry, to be oppressed by helplessness in relation to adults. Here the use of a child's point of view helps the reader identify with the narrator. However, Ms. Pers charges that Miss Cather "failed to convincingly depict the reactions of her child characters in the face of human tragedy. The explanation probably lies in her own sheltered childhood" (p. 102).

Willa Cather's Children also contains valuable analysis of real-life child models for fictional characters, including Miss Cather herself as a child, and of structural and stylistic use of children in her fiction, especially in characterization and imagery. Here one wishes for more examples and some measurement of the amount of child imagery as against other kinds. Three similes from *Lucy Gayheart* and three from *One of Ours* are the total evidence cited to support the following generalization:

It is no mere coincidence that child imagery is most diligently used in *One of Ours*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and *Lucy Gayheart*, the three novels with the smallest number of child characters, and where their roles are unusually subordinate. This indicates how much the author's thoughts were occupied with children, even when she was not specifically writing about them. (p. 40)

There is a great deal of such psychological speculation in this study. Sometimes enough evidence is presented to make a convincing case, as in discussion of why Miss Cather's concept of masculinity and femininity is the reverse of the standard pattern: her mother was imperious and out-going, her father gentle, observant, reflective (p. 84). Sometimes a speculation arouses interest but not conviction, as in the explanation of Miss Cather's period of dejection in the 1920s not from the corrupting times or a crisis of faith but from her own personal problem of childlessness, which became acute because she had no children around her then. Why not all three reasons, if not more? There is, however, altogether too much unsupported speculation which reads the author's psychology out of the literary work and the other way around.

What Cécile is to her father [in *Shadows on the Rock*], the author very likely wished she had been to her own. (p. 48)

Her emotional state at the time [the first year in Nebraska] may well have been akin to that of an orphan. That, in my opinion, is the real reason why she conveys her earliest Nebraska impressions from the point of view of an orphan. (p. 84)

In part II Ms. Pers argues that Miss Cather's regret over the passing of her own childhood motivated her recreation of her "childhood self" in story after story, and the loss of this "childhood self" rather than of the pioneer world in which she lived as a child in Nebraska caused the author's famous nostalgia (p. 115). The latter is indeed an original viewpoint, but one which failed to convince this reader. Again, why must the question be posed in terms of either/or? Why not both/and?

Ms. Pers is too inclined toward overstatement. "Without children, there is no love in Willa Cather's works. . . there is always a child at the core of every love relation" (p. 41). Not in Lucy Gayheart's love for her baritone. "There are a few happy marriages in Willa Cather, but they are invariably a continuation of an old childhood affection" (p. 116). Not Neighbor Rosicky's. The reader's recollection of a single exception is thus enough to demolish the proposition, more's the pity.

The main fault of this study is that it distorts its thesis by considering it in isolation. Willa Cather's treatment of children and childhood should rather be analyzed in relation to her treatment of adults and adulthood, because seldom indeed are her characters children *only*. As Ms. Pers herself recognizes,

She either contrasted her characters with themselves at different periods of their lives, using flashbacks or following their development from childhood into maturity, or else she contrasted children with adults. . . . She was a master at depicting the change from child to adult, and is most successful in clarifying how childhood is superior to adulthood when tracing the different stages of development in her characters. (p. 112)

Had the book been based on this its own late insight, it might have been a much more satisfactory study; but it would have to be much longer, including not only those works which would modify the thesis but also some criticism of Miss Cather's concept of childhood. A psychologist would argue that there is no such

thing as "the childhood self," that selfhood emerges first in adolescence. An adult looking back easily attributes to childhood characteristics which cannot have been developed then. It is significant that the fictional children based on Miss Cather herself are viewed through an adult's remembering.

Perhaps Ms. Pers will revise this 119-page dissertation into a full-length study. If so, she should engage a language consultant not only to correct linguistic mistakes but also to improve the infelicitous style.

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