

Even Samir Kaushik

## Willa Cather's USA

The American Dream explored through *Obscure Destinies*

Bachelor's project in engelsk for lektorstudententer

Supervisor: Domhnall Mitchell

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
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## Content

Introduction .....	2
Adding context: Willa Cather's life and artistic values.....	3
<i>Obscure Destinies</i> .....	4
"Old Mrs. Harris" .....	4
"Two Friends" .....	8
Discussing the American dream.....	10
The duality in Willa Cather's <i>Obscure Destinies</i> .....	11
Conclusion.....	11
Literature and reference list.....	13

## Introduction

During 1928 through 1931 Willa Cather wrote three short stories which were collectively published as *Obscure Destinies* in 1932<sup>1</sup>. “Neighbor Rosicky”, “Old Mrs. Harris”, and “Two Friends” share a common outcome -- the death of a central character in each story, whose life as an American is riddled with hardship, fineness, an aesthetic of struggle, “fineness”<sup>2</sup>, but also making a better life for oneself. Apart from death, all the stories share a common theme of humaneness and the American life during late 1890s/early 1900s. Life at the time is characterized as tough in regards to labor and growing old, but also pleasant and giving as it is the hardship and struggle that brings life joy. Whether or not this way of accepting life is critiqued by Cather, and if so how, is what makes each story interesting to analyze and explore through a deeper reading. In addition, books, essays, articles and other texts from David Daiches, Michael Leddy, Brian Gingrich and Donna Packer-Kinlaw allow for a deeper and more understandable view of Cather as a person and subsequently author and thus her stories and what they symbolize.

The three stories have different characters, but a common denominator is their shared ideas about making a life for oneself, thoughts on their situation and where they came from in life, and consciousnesses regarding how their lives could be. As the later examination will show this is something that Cather’s characters’ lives are riddled with. The focal point of these characters is the way they are concerned with making a life for themselves as foreigners in the USA. Pride and a respect for manual labor are among the values deeply rooted in each main characters’ life. Anton Rosicky, the Templeton women, and Mr. Dillon are among these and it is their life story and goals we primarily follow and are concerned with. We wish for them to succeed, but what is important to consider is what success is for these characters. Supporting characters such as Mr. Templeton, Mrs. Rosen, Doctor Ed, and Mr. Truman provide the reader with an alternative way of understanding the American dream of education and monetary success. As a result, we are able to explore two different portrayals of the American dream due to different narratives and understandings of how life should be. Through how the different characters act, their motivations and beliefs, in addition to understanding Cather as an author, it is possible to explore Willa Cather’s USA and what the American dream is.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lector House LLP republished edition of 2019, purchased from <https://www.adlibris.com/no/bok/obscure-destinies-9789353362393>

<sup>2</sup> Leddy, 1988: 141

## Adding context: Willa Cather's life and artistic values

To grasp how and why Willa Cather chose to write about what one may argue is a mundane topic, life in the rural US of the 1890s, one needs to understand Cather's upbringing and the values she as an author saw as important. At around the age of eight Willa and her family moved to a farm in rural Nebraska, in which she lived until she started preparatory school at the University of Nebraska at the age of 16 in 1890.<sup>4</sup> Cather was thus introduced early to the importance of agriculture and the realities of making a living from the land. We recognize the significance of her upbringing in *Obscure Destinies* as all three of the stories take place in different rural locations in the USA, but also in urban and grand cities like London and New York. We see this in "Neighbor Rosicky". Cather has knowledge of New York and experience of big-city life after moving there in 1906 to work for *McLure's Magazine*.<sup>5</sup> Cather decided to retire from *McLure's* in 1911 to devote all her time to writing independently<sup>6</sup>. This resulted in her writing the three short stories collected in *Obscure Destinies* during the period of 1928 – 1931. The short stories were written and published when Cather was around 58 years old. She had then already lived an eventful life of farming, studying, traveling, and living in both remote rural cities like Red Cloud, but also grandiose ones like New York. Cather had thus been exposed to both the agrarian life of manual-labor on the farms and the more intellect-focused and monetary life in the city.

Since her death in 1947 Cather has been categorized in many different ways, including as a realist, naturalist, and regionalist; but also a modernist.<sup>7</sup> Her values as an author are therefore not easy to pinpoint, seeing that her writing can be explored and analyzed in many different ways. What is also important to note before doing a close reading of her works in *Obscure Destinies* is the permanent mark the Populist Movement left on her mind. The movement, arising out of the exhaustion of free land in the West and the increasingly precarious position of the farmer influenced Cather's thoughts drastically.<sup>8</sup> She became more skeptical towards

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<sup>3</sup> In Newlin, 2013 the American Dream is based on James Adams' understanding as "hope of a better and richer life for all the masses of humble and ordinary folk" and "belief in the common man and the insistence upon his having, as far as possible, equal opportunity in every way with the rich one" stemming from Adam's 1931 book *The Epic of America*

<sup>4</sup> Daiches, 1962: 11

<sup>5</sup> Ibid: 15

<sup>6</sup> Ibid: 15

<sup>7</sup> In Gingrich, 2020 Cather is categorized as all these terms. It is not before the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph she is categorized as a modernist. My discussion of her values, with the focus on her as a populist is influenced by how Gingrich sees that Cather can be attributed several different categories and as written, that her exact style is difficult to pin-point.

<sup>8</sup> Daiches, 1962: 12



the competitive industrial economy due to her own knowledge of the farming life in the West. She saw the pioneering days as America's lost glory and viewed commercial and industrial progress with suspicion.<sup>9</sup> That skepticism and suspicion suggests that the American dream lies in the opposite direction to urban and commercial life, and this is what this thesis will explore through a deep reading of *Obscure Destinies* with extra attention to "Old Mrs. Harris" and "Two Friends".

### *Obscure Destinies*

Through *Obscure Destinies* Willa Cather described and portrayed the everyday life of the central characters involved in her stories. In addition to portraying their lives we are also given insight into the thoughts and ideas of the characters through dialogue and through the use of free indirect discourse. By using this technique Cather is, to some degree, able to voice her own ideas implicitly through the explicit words spoken by Mrs. Harris and the narrator in "Old Mrs. Harris" and "Two Friends" respectively. In addition, supporting yet important characters such as Mrs. Rosen, and Mr. Truman allow for Cather to portray the other side of life she explores in her portrayal of the USA. What we receive through a deep reading of these characters is a juxtaposition between the simple farm life and the upbeat urban life characterized by capital and industry. To discuss what Cather explores as important in life we can read Anton Rosicky and Dr. Ed in "Neighbor Rosicky" and look at their contrasting values. This will help understand Cather's, for lack of a better word, obsession with the change of life in the USA at the time and subsequently the change in values regarding the American dream.

#### "Old Mrs. Harris"

Set in Skyline, USA, "Old Mrs. Harris" is essentially an exploration of a shift in values and lifestyle among three generations of women living in a newly modernized town during the late 1880s. The Templeton women, consisting of Grandmother Mrs. Harris, her daughter Victoria, and her granddaughter Vickie, have recently moved from Tennessee due to Mr. Templeton deciding to leave Colorado and the mining company after his family became sick from the high altitude.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid: 12

Because of the story's unusual length we receive a lot of information about all three of these women and which values they see as important. Generally, Mrs. Harris is a hardworking elderly woman who wants to keep her family happy by preparing meals and working at the rear of the house, where the invisible labor of washing, and cooking, takes place. Victoria can be seen as a more spoiled and arrogant child who wishes to keep up the portrayal of the family as perfect and happy even though both Mrs. Harris and Victoria struggle with loneliness as a result of the move. On a happier note, Vickie acts like a bridge between these two women in that she combines values from two different worlds. She has the motivation for work and is willing to put in effort to create a life for herself and become independent, which she learns from her grandmother, but she is also intellectual and has plenty of backbone as she is to be the first of the women to go to college.

Even though Victoria can be read as a woman who cares little for the people around her, and is mainly concerned with keeping up appearances, one must also remember that Victoria too has been wrenched from a life she once knew. Her life had been more comfortable, and is confirmed in this exchange between Mrs. Rosen and Mrs. Harris.

"No'm, I can't say I do. Mr. Templeton thought Colorado was a better place to bring up the children."

"But you had things much more comfortable down there, I'm sure. These little wooden houses are too hot in summer."

"Yes'm, we were more comfortable. We had more room."

"And a flower-garden, and beautiful old trees, Mrs. Templeton told me."

"Yes'm, we had a great deal of shade."<sup>10</sup>

We thus learn that Victoria found meaning in gardening and kept herself occupied with an activity that she felt was important to her. Now, as they live in Tennessee, Victoria does not have the same opportunities to work in the garden, she no longer has the friends she made, and she has ultimately been reduced to a simple housemother. In addition, she is overly proud;

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<sup>10</sup> Cather, 1931: 30

Cather uses free indirect discourse to suggest her sense of humiliation when she writes that “To be pitied was the deepest hurt anybody could know”.<sup>11</sup>

Cather wants her women to live meaningful lives, lives that they themselves control, and does not want people to feel pity for them even though they struggle to realize their dreams and goals. This sentence is important because it relates heavily to an understanding of the American dream made by James Truslow Adams in 1931. He identified the American dream as the “hope of a better and richer life for all the masses of humble and ordinary folk”<sup>12</sup> and saw dignity and meaning in the lives of common as well as richer people, as long as they had some ownership of their lives. Victoria, who then might already have had the life she dreams of, only for it to be ripped away from her as she is more or less forced to follow Mr. Templeton, is easier to understand in terms of why she acts the way she does. This might also be one of the ways Cather critiques the idea of the American dream, suggesting that it is not easy for anyone to better their life, especially if they are reliant on another person who might have different dreams.

In other cases, as with Mrs. Harris’, we realize that the American dream can be something completely different altogether. Opposing Victoria, Mrs. Harris seems to be fine with the life she lives even though it is not as fulfilling or complete as Adams’ description -- at least on the surface. For Mrs. Harris it seems the best life is one where she is surrounded by the people she loves, especially her children, and in particular Victoria. It is revealed that Mrs. Harris married at only 18 and has eight children, but that some are dead, and some are scattered. She receives joy from following Victoria’s and Mr. Templeton’s footsteps and she “had never thought it possible”<sup>13</sup> to go somewhere else than where Victoria and the children went. Even though Mrs. Harris is read as a kind and loving woman who wants nothing more than to see her family happy, there are also some undertones of exploitation of her by her family. She wakes up early every day, cooks, reads for the children, and keeps control of the house but she also feels sorrow and grief over this life. This is shown through this passage; “...and this little sweater had become the dearest of Grandmother's few possessions. It was kinder to her,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 1931: 36

<sup>12</sup> Newlin, 2013: 3

<sup>13</sup> Cather, 1931: 35

she used to think, as she wrapped it about her middle, than any of her own children had been.”<sup>14</sup>

Mrs. Harris owns few items that are only hers. This is because of Victoria who means that something Mrs. Harris owns should be the property of the entire family. The implication that a sweater is kinder than most of her family, (presumably because it is soft and warm and reliable), is a devastating critique. Cather directly shows how even family members are capable of exploiting or using one another, in order to follow their own dreams of being happier and richer.

Vickie is used as a way of bridging the generational shifts between Mrs. Harris and Victoria, and her character directly symbolizes changing times and changing social norms and values. Vickie, the oldest of the grandchildren, is mainly concerned with winning a scholarship so she may attend college. It is revealed that if Vickie were to attend college she would be the first of the family to do so, as no one from Mr. Templeton's family had attended. One important passage to understand the change of values that is going on during these times, and how different generations perceive following an American dream, is shown in chapter seven.

Mrs. Harris smiled politely. "None of our people, or Mr. Templeton's either, ever went to college. I expect it is all on account of the young gentleman who was here last summer."

Mrs. Rosen laughed and lifted her eyebrows. "Something very personal in Vickie's admiration for Professor Chalmers we think, Grandma? A very sudden interest in de sciences, I should say!"

Mrs. Templeton shrugged. "You're mistaken, Mrs. Rosen. There ain't a particle of romance in Vickie."

"But there are several kinds of romance, Mrs. Templeton. She may not have your kind."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1931: 35

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 1931: 55 - 56

We are here introduced to the idea of pursuing a dream based on genuine interest and selfishness rather than because of commitment to a relationship and selflessness. Through this discussion Cather portrays the different views of what is important perfectly. Mrs. Harris voices a concern for the unknown and not understanding why someone would aspire to pursue something different than what is normal. Mrs. Templeton, though more understanding than Mrs. Harris, blames a pursuit based on a love interest. However, what is more important is how Mrs. Rosen voices an alternative and untraditional reason. She explicitly states that romance is not reserved for only one thing, but that there are other ways of loving something. In Vickie's case, it is a genuine interest in books and acquiring knowledge. Still, Vickie does not know herself why she wants to go to college at this point, but she states that she just wants to learn.<sup>16</sup> This shows that Vickie has been able to break a circle of tradition and is on a path of following her own dreams and is on her way to pursue her own American dream – a kind of dream that would grow to be more normal, even tradition, in the future. Mrs. Rosen even notes when hearing of Vickie's plans to attend college that she "...will BE something, you won't just sit on de front porch."<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Rosen refers to the fact that Vickie will be able to acquire an education and follow a career, allowing her to earn money and thus become independent, much as how Mrs. Rosen herself is. However, as Cather also points out, this is not necessarily a positive way of understanding life either.

### “Two Friends”

“Two Friends” is set in an unnamed rural western town and explores a fallout of between Mr. Dillon and Mr. Trueman, The story is narrated by an unnamed young person who gains consciousness after being exposed to the political and economical ideas discussed by the two men. Split into two parts, the first part explores the dynamic of the friendship and how the narrator finds pleasure in their conversations, while the latter explores the breakup and how this creates a conflict in the narrator as he/she understands that good things come to an end.

Even though the story is a great deal shorter than “Old Mrs. Harris” we still receive useful information about the values and ideas with respect to politics and the economy, and how these underwent changes during the 1890s. The main event, and the reason for the end of the men's friendship, is the presidential election of 1896 which led to a 16-year period of

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 1931: 58

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 1931: 58

Republican rule.<sup>18</sup> Both men are concerned with the country's economic problems and it is their disagreement as to how problem should be handled that leads to their friendship falling apart. Mr. Dillon is a Democrat and Mr. Trueman is a Republican. They are both described as prosperous and influential, and to the narrator they represent "success and power".<sup>19</sup> Cather utilizes these two men to show, in a way, how money is the root of all evil, and not a route to happiness. Even though they belong to different sides of the political divide, the men live in friendship until they argue about money, essentially. The disagreement is too serious to ignore, and results in a loss of innocence as symbolized through the narrator.

Even though the story is far from plot-focused, the ideas discussed by Cather through the values the men see as important offer important insight into the changing times, and Cather, clearly sees the movement from agrarian culture to industrial culture as more negative than positive. In addition, it shows how the image of a successful American dream is valued monetary is not necessarily how it should be. Cather expresses a rather harsh critique of wealth via the nameless narrator in this string of thoughts: "I grasped it at once: that gold had been responsible for most of the miseries and inequalities of the world; that it had always been the club the rich and cunning held over the poor..."<sup>20</sup>

Cather, in her critique, addresses a paradox in definitions of the American dream. Even though the ideal outcome is for everyone to live a better life and prosper in wealth, money had and would be meant for the already rich and wealthy. The only way for the ordinary and humble people to have a chance of escaping poverty is through a change in the economic system. This way of thinking is shown through the actions Mr. Dillon takes to attempt an economic reform. He begins a political campaign to influence farmers and merchants, i.e., the regular people like Cather and her family were, to join the Bryan Club to support his presidential candidate. One of Bryan's promises through his presidency was to change the economic system from being based on the gold-standard to the use of free silver. This would, according to Mr. Dillon, ensure a fairer distribution of wealth and the possibility for regular people to prosper. This would allow more of the ordinary Americans to decide whether or not they wish to live an agrarian life or not – thus making their lives more comfortable. Nevertheless, Dillon's candidate loses the election, and a few years later Dillon himself dies; symbolizing that the American dream for ordinary Americans is nothing more than a utopia.

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<sup>18</sup> Britannica, 2020

<sup>19</sup> Cather, 1931: 74

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 1931: 84

## Discussing the American dream

In a *Twentieth Century Literature* article Brian Gingrich describes Willa Cather and her writing as naive<sup>21</sup>. Negative remarks from other scholars include accusations of Cather having a feminine mind that could not portray big bowwow stuff<sup>22</sup>, and that due to her romantic view of farmers and the old life that her view of history was almost deliberately naive.<sup>23</sup> She is also accused of being an escapist due to her writing style in which she romanticizes the rural world and its inhabitants of simple people living off the land as a way to ignore the real world. The world in which industry was becoming more prevalent and the changes in society led to agriculture becoming less common. However, Gingrich also portrays Cather as sentimental, in that she is reflective and modern, based on ideas by Friedrich Schiller.<sup>24</sup>

The accusations of Cather being unable to portray the important stuff and that her view on history is naïve can be counter-argued through looking at Anton Rosicky's life history in "Neighbour Rosicky". The third part of the story begins with Rosicky explaining his life as happy in New York and that he had much of what he wanted: good wages, a happy home-life, and security. However, as time passes Rosicky becomes dissatisfied with this life and starts to abuse alcohol. It is a few years later he realizes that "You lived in an unnatural world, like the fish in an aquarium, who were probably much more comfortable than they ever were in the sea."<sup>25</sup> Rosicky further explains that all he wanted was to work on another man's farm, see the sun rise, and watch his plants grow. To accomplish this he began saving money so he could "buy his liberty".<sup>26</sup>

Liberty, for Cather as spoken through Rosicky, was to own your own land and not be a wage-earner. Since Rosicky has experienced life as a wage-earner in New York and as a farmer in Omaha he is concerned with the prospect of his son Rudy giving up on the land and being under the control of someone else. Cather explains this as "all your life; to have nothing, to be nothing."<sup>27</sup> Cather, who like Rosicky also lived in both of these worlds and gave up her job to start writing independently, has a clear vision of how life in both worlds is. Both she and Rosicky are the products of living both a simple life of struggle, but free, and of living a more comfortable life but being dependent on others. It is therefore hard to see Cather's writing as

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<sup>21</sup> Gingrich, 2020: 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 2020: 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 2020: 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 2020: 5<sup>th</sup> paragraph

<sup>25</sup> Cather, 1928: 11

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 1928: 12

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 1928: 15

naïve rather than reflected which is the problem Gingrich discusses without reaching a clear conclusion.

### The duality in Willa Cather's *Obscure Destinies*

Had it been the case that Cather was only able to portray one side of contemporary American life and values, it would make sense to depict her vision of the American lifestyle as naïve and even biased. However, she succeeds in showing both sides and lifestyles with complex characters who have different motives, without painting either side as objectively wrong. In "Old Mrs. Harris" the varying definitions of the American dream are performed dialogues between Mrs. Harris, Victoria, Mrs. Rosen, Mr. Templeton and most importantly Vickie who bridges the generation- and gender gap between these characters. A supplementary idea here is how Cather describes Mr. Rosen as "the only unsuccessful member of a large, rich Jewish family"<sup>28</sup>, because he is satisfied with owning a clothing-store, making him a simple merchant. In "Two Friends" neither Dillon or Trueman are portrayed as a villainous character even though they have conflicting economic and political beliefs. Instead, what is seen as negative is how two people who previously were friends fail to keep up their friendship due to self-interest and monetary disagreement.

Duality is also achieved in "Neighbour Rosicky" by the excellent way of showing how his life has both positive and negative regardless irrespective of where he lives. Doctor Ed visits Rosicky's grave and realizes that "Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful."<sup>29</sup> By adding this last piece of inner dialogue Cather emphasizes the fact that the life in which more than one aspect has been explored is the complete life.

## Conclusion

Cather was, through *Obscure Destinies*, able to explore and portray different sides of the American life and as a result look at the different possible outcomes for one's life, subsequently exploring the American dream. Since she herself was critical of industrial hegemony and change from agriculture, her stories are set in rural areas of the USA and explores the lives her characters attempt to create for themselves. Thus, she also critiques the idea of the American dream. She sees the paradox in where it is supposed to be able to better your life, but that the reality is that for the regular people like farmers and merchants this is near impossible due to the system working in benefit for those who already are wealthy.

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<sup>28</sup> Cather, 1931: 38

<sup>29</sup> Cather, 1928: 26



However, as she has later been criticized for being naïve, one must keep in mind that she does not offer a definitive answer as to what the American dream truly is. Even though her ideas lean more towards life in a rural area, on land that you own, as better, she understands that people may also make a comfortable life for themselves in the industrialized cities by earning a wage.

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