

## "Emerging Self in the Characters of Willa Cather's Selected Novels"

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### **Abstract :**

The main purpose of this research work is to study the "Emerging Self in the Characters of Willa Cather's Selected Novels" The Descriptive survey and historical research method has been applied in the present study.

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**Key Word :** Emerging Self, Novel

### **Introduction :**

During the 1920' s Willa Cather was among the most venerated living authors. Although she did not receive much recognition until her fourth book, O Pioneers! Was published in 1912, throughout Cather' s long career H. L. Mencken, Edmond Wilson, Randolph Bourne and other well known critics gave her much praise. She was also admired by respected contemporary authors such as Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald (Lindemann ix). Now, nearly six decades after her death, her work continues to be studied and esteemed.

As a novelist she is closely identified with the south-west region, and was one of America' s first modern writers to discuss the frontier experience as a subject matter worthy for high-quality fiction, bringing the Great Plains on the American literary map. Her reflections towards immigrant life and the enveloping environment extensively contribute to the fast changing American scene at the turn of the twentieth century, and the human self accommodating in it. The type of perception towards country and its people as created by the writer has hardly been attempted by any other. Although her setting often revolves round Nebraska, the literary reputation of Cather

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risers above the limitations of a specific region or gender. Her novels have such a power of distinctiveness that it poses a challenge for the critics to formally describe her art under a specific genre. The singularity of her art bears such virtues which can only be experienced and not explained. As an American she saw life in terms of the possibilities provided by the New World, and her vision darkened only when those possibilities seemed to fail. For Cather —Americanism is Europeanism|| addressing the issues of a new environment in its own way (Daiches 18).

The uniting characteristic of Cather' s fiction, however, is not her use of immigrant characters in the American West, but their quest for individuality. This theme shows up even in Cather' s work not set in the West —The Professor' s House and Alexander' s Bridge are two examples. If readers examine Cather' s life and work closely, they can see that her characters' struggles, views, and admirable qualities are rooted not in the novel' s setting but in their need for individuality.

### **Importance of Proposed Research Work :**

The study of self emerging in Cather' s writing is important. Often, critics point to certain works and narrow them to one specific theme — feminism in *O Pioneers!*, an artist' s attempt for success in *The Song of the Lark*, the loss of pioneering days in *A Lost Lady*. Cather has many themes in her fiction and most of them can be better understood if one remembers how vital it was to Cather (and her characters) to maintain a strong sense of self.

Each of Cather' s novels has a different ambience, and each of her characters is unique. Some of the women she creates are described with masculine characteristics, others are almost dangerously feminine. Some of her protagonists, both male and female, are trapped in dull unhappy marriages; others staunchly hold on to their independence and deny any union but friendship. Some of her protagonists never have children or express any interest in them; others have many children. Some characters rarely reflect on their childhood years; others seem almost obsessed by youth, constantly seeking a way to return to it. The rich variation in her writing and her ability to create a feeling without stating fact have allowed critics to walk away with a

great number of interpretations. Many of these interpretations, however, would be altered if they were examined in the context of Cather' s beliefs about self.

### **Objectives of the Study :**

The objective of the present research is not to narrow Cather' s writing and claim that a quest for self is the main theme of all her novels. As previously stated, her work is rich and ambiguous. Her novels have a number of themes, many of them “ unspoken.” To reduce her work to one would be misleading. This research examines the theme, self, and discusses how it changes throughout Cather' s career. The following chapters consider what was occurring in the world and in Cather' s own life that may have affected her work. They show that even though her novels' characters and ambience may change dramatically and self remains a theme throughout her career.

### **Methodology :**

The present study is a primary research investigations into the various facets of ‘ self and identity’ done through an exhaustive examination of the select literary texts. To achieve the set objective the research takes aid of both the primary as well as the secondary literature. The research design being used is naturalistic and the methods of analysis are qualitative and context sensitive in nature. The critical framework used includes the ecocritical aspect, psychological theories of ‘ self’ and ‘ identity’ and the changing gender roles of the time.

### **Conclusion of the Study :**

Willa Cather was perhaps one of the most individual authors of her time, both in her writing and life. Beginning in Virginia' s socially restrictive atmosphere, she moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska when she was nine. The move was heartbreaking for her at the time, but she later learned that it was the best thing that could have happened to her as an artist. She spent her formative years able to roam free amidst the Nebraska country, meeting immigrants and listening to interesting stories that would later become material for her novels.

Although Nebraska gave her the opportunity to assert her independence and individuality, it also made her more aware of her differences from those around her. She sought out the non-conformers, but still found Nebraska more and more stifling as she grew older. By sixteen, she was thankful to leave Red Cloud and begin her studies at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. It was there that she discovered she wanted to become a writer.

Cather began publishing material right away, but she struggled with the need to balance her work responsibilities with her desire to write. Most of her time was spent devoted to the long hours required for newspaper work. The material she produced during this time was very mechanical and committed to accepted forms. For much of it, she consciously tried to mimic authors she admired, most notably, Henry James. It was years before she developed her own voice.

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