A Conflict Between the Old Society and the New One in Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*

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A whole group of important writers in American fiction was produced in the interval between two World Wars. Besides the main stream of writers represented by Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Farrell and Dos Passos, there were other groups of writers such as writers on the left, proletarian writers and writers of various ethnic backgrounds including Jewish and Afro-American writers. World War I was the greatest single cause of an attitude toward human nature in general. They have found out that things commonly believed in are false. Joseph Warren Beach observes:

Various as are the talents and methods of these men, and various as are the fields in which human nature is shown by them in action, they are at one in their disposition to show it in a distinctly unflattering light. In their general view of it they are uncompromising realists in the historical sense of that term. They are determined not to be taken in by the imagination, by man's pretensions to be heroic.¹

They have shared the same doubts as to the ideology that inspired the war, and the same disgust with that world-wide commercial spirit which was largely responsible for it.² Willa Cather must have shared the same disillusionment about the war. She later wrote: "The whole world broke in

²Ibid., p. 11.
two in 1922 or thereabouts."

But her reaction represented in her works is somewhat exceptional. Instead of becoming a hard-boiled realist like other writers mentioned above, she turns backward toward the past looking for the old value such as heroic idealism represented by Captain Forrester in *A Lost Lady*. Therefore, it is no wonder that "elegiac" and "nostalgic" are the words often used to describe her work.

She said in a tribute to Nebraska penned just as she finished *A Lost Lady*:

*We must face the fact that the splendid story of the pioneers is finished, and that no new story worthy to take its place has yet begun.... The generation now in the driver's seat hates to make anything, wants to live and die in an automobile.... They want to buy everything ready-made: clothes, food, education, music, pleasure. Will the third generation—the full-blooded joyous ones just coming over the hill—be foiled? Will it believe that to live easily is to live happily?*

According to Willa Cather, the new generation hates to make anything creative and prefers everything cheap and ready-made. They are materialistic and do not have any aesthetic values while the old generation represented by the pioneers in this book cherishes the old values such as ideal, dream and beauty.

When society changes rapidly there has been a transitional period; and the conflict between the old society represented by the old people and the new society represented by the younger generation is inevitable. This was especially true in America in the 1920's when American society was in upheaval between two World Wars. In this study, I want to examine how Willa Cather describes such a conflict in *A Lost Lady*. The term "society" in this paper is not used in a broad sense, rather it is used in a narrower sense: it represents the majority of people living in it.

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*quoted in Henry Steel Commager, "Search for Historical Perspective," *Willa Cather and Her Critic*, p. 214.*