

The aim of this paper will be to introduce Willa Cather's Shadows on the Rock and to discuss its place in the classical tradition. A brief description of the novel will be followed by an equally brief biographical sketch of Willa Cather.

Most of the paper will focus on the themes of memory and immigration as they pertain to Cather's references to Vergil. Cather's explicit comparison between the founding of Quebec and the founding of Rome compels questions about her conception of the continuity of Greco-Roman Culture. Especially the role of religion is interesting here: Cather's sincere reading of Vergil imbues her writing on Quebec with the sense of an eternal ongoing process of religious civilization. Her characters and the town of Quebec itself become symbolic of this never-failing process, which proceeds in spite of the indifference and depravity of the French colonizers.

Memory is the vehicle of this process, and therefore a central theme of the novel. Different qualities of memory, from the actual memorization of Vergil, to the memories of France crystallized in the architecture of the city and the statues of its churches, to the imprint, in the cobbler's shop, of each famous person's foot, are central to the story. Children play an important role in the transformation of these memories into something that responds to their new situation. The novel shows their increasing distance from France and their increasing closeness to Canada as cultural memories and ties are rehearsed, and through their rehearsal become the property of a newly situated generation.

The Vergilian themes of the novel construct the "eternal" background against which this process is given significance in this novel. The individuals in the novel live and die according to their generation. They are "shadows" on the rock of Quebec. The process of achieving and maintaining culture, which was obviously very dear to Cather, is the transfiguring process that endows each individual life with meaning. To this cultural process, Cather opposes the "suffocating wilderness" of the forests that surrounded Quebec. Nature, here, neither changes nor grows, and is hostile to man. Culture is set in clear opposition to the Canadian landscape.

Despite this, the book is a book about Canada for an American audience which Cather saw as almost completely separated from the traditions to which she here gives priority. Her view that European traditions were vastly superior to capitalism has sometimes made her seem a hidebound conservative; in fact I argue that she rebels, in a personal and undisguised way, against the losses she perceives as characteristic of what we now call globalization.