



Impressions of a Modern Sunset: The Aesthetics of Willa Cather's *Alexander's Bridge*

انطباعات غروب الحداثة: جماليات رواية "جسر ألكسندر" لويليا كاتر

Phd student. Badia Haffar

Department of English, University of Algiers 2, Algeria

badia.haffar@univ-alger2.dz

Prof. Assia Kaced

Department of English, University of Algiers 2, Algeria

assia.kaced@univ-alger2.dz

Submission date: 19-10-2025-Acceptance date:23-11-2025

Publication date:30-11-2025

ملخص

تستكشف هذه المقالة الجماليات الانطباعية في رواية "جسر ألكسندر" لويليا كاتر، في انسجام مع لوحات الرسام الأمريكي الانطباعي تشايلد هاسام. ومن خلال تحدي النظرة التقليدية التي تعتبر كاتر كاتبة إقليمية لمناطق الغرب الأوسط الأمريكي، تعيد الدراسة النظر فيها كرسامة للحياة الحديثة، حيث تستحضر حساسية حضرية تذكّرنا برؤية تشارلز بودلير في "لوحات باريسية". استنادًا إلى نظرية كاتر الخاصة بـ "الرواية خالية من الأثاث"، تبحث الدراسة في كيفية تحويل "جسر ألكسندر" للمدينة الحديثة إلى لوحة من الانطباعات عبر جمالية التلميح وبلاغة "اللامسمى". كما يبرز حوار كاتر مع جمالية بودلير للحداثة وشخصية المتجول الحضري التوتر بين التجربة الحديثة والحنين إلى الماضي. من خلال قراءة كاتر جنبًا إلى جنب مع هاسام و بودلير، تُظهر المقالة أن "جسر ألكسندر" يجسد جمالية حديثة قائمة على التلميح والكأبة، متأملة في ضعف الجمال في عصر متفتت.

الكلمات الدالة: بودلير؛ كاتر؛ الجماهير؛ المتجول؛ هاسام؛ الانطباعية؛ الكأبة؛ الحداثة.

Abstract

This article explores the impressionistic aesthetics of Willa Cather's *Alexander's Bridge* (1912) in resonance with the paintings of American Impressionist Childe Hassam. Challenging the conventional view of Cather as merely a regionalist writer of the American Midwest, it reconsiders her as a painter of modern life whose urban sensibility recalls Charles Baudelaire's vision in *Les Tableaux Parisiens*. Drawing on Cather's own theory of the "novel démeublé," the study examines how *Alexander's Bridge* transforms the modern cityscape into a canvas of impressions through an aesthetics of suggestion and a rhetoric of the "unnamed." Cather's dialogue with Baudelaire's poetics of modernity—particularly with the figure of the *flâneur*—

articulates the tension between modern experience and nostalgic yearning. By reading Cather alongside Hassam and Baudelaire, the article demonstrates that *Alexander's Bridge* embodies a modern aesthetic of suggestion and melancholy, meditating on the fragility of beauty in an age of disenchantment.

Keywords: Baudelaire; Cather; crowds; *Flâneur*; Hassam; impressionism; melancholy; modernity.

Introduction

The association between urban Impressionism and the writings of Willa Cather may appear unusual for an artist remembered for her Midwestern domestic dramas, her realistic portrayals of prairie folks, and her regionalist depictions of the wild Nebraska settings of her childhood. Yet in her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), Cather shows a refined sensibility for the metropolis and the modern crowd, offering an impressionistic rendering of the cityscape which reveals her receptivity to the artistic culture of her time.

The interest in the visual arts Cather frequently expressed is reflected in her turn-of-the-century articles reprinted in *The World and the Parish* collection. In "A Philistine in the Gallery", Cather praises the works of Jean Baptiste-Camille Corot, often considered as a precursor to Impressionism. Cather's impressionistic touch has often been attributed to her affinities with impressionist artists she admired, and whose artworks she often echoed in her pictorial short fiction as well as in longer works of visual resonance. The emotionally evocative power of Alfred Sisley's "Village on the Shore of the Marne", for instance, with its "marshy, slow-moving river...stretch of wind-blown rushes...pool molted with water lily leaves..." is for Cather "intensely temperamental" and "full of poetry" (Cather, 1970, p.761). Her affinities with the impressionists would later be celebrated in a substantial range of works of visual and graphic significance such as *My Antonia* (1918), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), and *Lucy Gayheart* (1935).

Given Cather's manifest interest in the visual arts, this paper examines the impressionistic renderings of the cityscape in her first metropolitan novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), in conversation with selected artworks by the American Impressionist painter Frederick Childe Hassam and alongside Baudelairean themes of modern experience and the urban crowd as depicted in *Les Tableaux parisiens* (1861). What I would like to argue is that Cather emerges as a painter of modern life portraying both the beauty and transience of the urban crowd while mourning the passing of a lost organic community. The study seeks to demonstrate how Cather's novel



reverberates with urban paintings, reflecting an impressionist sensibility through its depiction of the disenchanting multitude and its nostalgic yearning for a lost unity. Ultimately, this article argues that Cather's evocative prose in *Alexander's Bridge* reveals an impressionistic artistry, engaging in dialogue with Childe Hassam's urban paintings and Baudelaire's portraits of modernity, and capturing both the fleeting beauty, and the melancholy of the modern urban crowd.

1. Theoretical and Contextual Framework

1.1 Critical dialogues

Several critics have examined Willa Cather's works through the lens of Impressionism, focusing primarily on the writer's rendering of evocative imagery, emotional perception, and sensory impressions. In "Another Angle of Willa Cather's Artistic Prism: Impressionistic Character Portraiture in *My Antonia*," Piacentino, who refers to Cather as "an advocate of the suggestive," argues—quoting Dorothy Tuck McFarland—that a most significant facet of Cather's talent is reflected in her vivid pictorial prose, "imbued with an ineffable quality of felt reality" (Piacentino, 1982, p.54). In "Cather's Use of Light: An Impressionistic Tone," Al-Ghalith (1996) demonstrates how Cather employs light in ways that align with the methods of late 19th-century impressionist painters, with their emphasis on atmosphere, fluidity, and the emotional impact of light over detailed realism. In *My Antonia: The Road Home*, Murphy (1989) confirms the play of light and color that characterizes most of the art of impressionism in the depiction of the landscape.

Another category of critics have studied the evocative prose of Willa Cather in resonance with the impressionistic compositions of influential artists of her time. In his article "Gilt Diana and Ivory Christ: Love and Christian Charity in *My Mortal Enemy*," Murphy sees the narrator's description of New York on a December afternoon – snow-white and fairylike – mirrored in a Childe Hassam painting, with its "muted outlines and use of reflected light" (Murphy, 1996, p. 80). In *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration*, Urgo draws parallels between impressionist painting and Cather's novel *Lucy Gayheart* (1937), evoking the fragile beauty and tragic destiny of the protagonist who exists only as an "image, an idea, a memory, an impression made on her observers" (Urgo, 1995, p.118). Lucy, with her impressionist aura, remains, Urgo suggests, "among Haverford's spiritual resources" (Urgo, 1995, p.119). In her essay "In the City of New York: Two Artists at Work," Faber offers an impressively rich dialogue between the New York canvases of



Childe Hassam and the evocative passages of Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*, establishing the American novelist as "as much the impressionist painter as is Hassam, her interpretation dips into the same palette that he utilized" (Faber, 2000, p.139). The dialogue between Cather and the Impressionists reveals her fascination with the expressive power of suggestion. Yet her own essay moves this dialogue toward a poetics of the "unnamed," where meaning arises not from what is seen or said, but from what is unspoken.

1.2 Cather and the art of the "unnamed"

While realistic fiction primarily resorts to the faithful representation of materiality, relying on detailed descriptions of places and objects, Cather's concept of the "*roman démeublé*" can be defined as a "break away from mere verisimilitude," following "processes of simplification" through which the novelist seeks to create scenes by "suggestion rather than by enumeration" (Cather, 1992, p.836). In her essay, "The Novel *Démeublé*", Cather presents her theory as an attempt to "disfurnish" the fiction of her age from the confusion of unnecessary material – from objects and commodities left by preceding generations of realistic writers:

How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre, or as that house into which the glory of Pentecost descended; leave the scene bare for the play of emotions (Cather, 1992, p.837).

Cather's efforts to produce the "*roman démeublé*" therefore aim to purge her fiction from what she terms "cheap perfumes" and "cheap furniture," what Warren French refers to as the "clutter" of mid-nineteenth-century art:

Certainly, one of the major efforts of artists from Manet to Matisse was to "disfurnish"... their canvases—to eliminate the clutter of the mid-nineteenth-century genre painters as Willa Cather suggests young novelists are trying to escape the clutter of Balzac's fictions (French, 1974, p.238).

According to the "*roman démeublé*" theory, the main concern of the artist is less the representation of the object than the emotional resonance it produces. In Cather's *My Mortal Enemy*, Eichorn observes, the narrator provides no physical description of her hometown. Instead, she muses in reflections that reveal her mixed feelings between fascination for the big city



and her violent disillusionment with it (Eichorn, 1984, p. 231). Whaley (1974) reads *My Mortal Enemy*, in fact, as atypical “*novel démeublé*”, where Cather dismisses objective description to reveal emotional intensity through suggestive and impressionistic methods. Another perfect vehicle of the ‘unfurnished’ novel technique is Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* with its bare landscapes of the Arizona desert. Gatzemeyer reads the minimalist novel as a most evocative prose where objective description leaves way for reflective nostalgia. Similarly, in her quintessential impressionistic novel *Lucy Gayheart*, Cather makes it clear, through the voice of her sensitive protagonist, that “accuracy doesn’t matter” and that pictures are “meant to express a kind of feeling” (Cather, 1935, p.85). The novel, in its whole, becomes an impressionistic work, and Lucy herself is an impression she leaves on the Haverford townspeople: “They still see her as a slight figure always in motion; dancing or skating, or walking swiftly with intense direction, like a bird flying home.” (Cather, 1935, p.3). Cather creates a character that exists only as an “image, an idea, a memory, an impression made on her observers (Urigo, 1995, p.118), which suggests that she has no existence as a material object.

Cather’s concept of the “*novel démeublé*” reflects her mature understanding of fiction as an art of emotional suggestion rather than objective representation; her minimalist scenes and poetic landscapes are rendered impressionistically – almost lyrically – rather than through the techniques of representative realism. She concludes her reflection with a tribute to the suggestive poetics of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel endowed with the melancholy lyricism she values and considers as a most needed enchantment in her consumerist age. Cather finds in Hawthorne’s twilight scenes — where characters are not seen but rather felt in the dark — the ultimate expression of “disfurnished” art. This technique, which she famously calls the “thing not named,” creates the emotional aura of unfurnished fiction. Cather’s “song without words” reminisces the poetry of another artist in constant quest for the lyrical, the ineffable, and the ungraspable essence of the crowd, Charles Baudelaire, the quintessential painter of modern life.

1.3 Baudelaire and the poetics of modernity

In his seminal essay “*The Painter of Modern Life*” (1863), Baudelaire celebrates the modern artist who emerges in nineteenth century Paris as the typical city *flâneur*, less the descendant of the restless and suspicious “man of the crowd” from Poe’s story than the inheritor of the solitary wanderer of the Wordsworthian tradition. The *flâneur* indeed preserves certain relics of the



Romantic spirit, retaining something of the fruitful indolence and the sensitive gaze of his poetic ancestor. He is endowed with a sense of wonder and expectation, and possesses that form of religious insight which enables him to extract what Baudelaire calls the “half of beauty” that belongs to the eternal and the timeless.

Yet in the Paris of Baudelaire, the *flâneur* is engulfed in the crowd. Unlike the solitary walker of Wordsworth, who seeks communion with nature and creates correspondences with the organic world, the city *flâneur* strolls through the streets, cafés, and crystal-covered arcades of a rapidly transforming metropolis. His identity dissolves in the multifaceted multitude. He becomes what Baudelaire calls “a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness,” reflecting the infinite variety of incidents that define modern experience. But amidst the effervescent crowd, his role is not merely to observe; it is to recover a sense of meaning and beauty from the transient flow of modern life. Thus, the task of the *flâneur*, the seer, the sensitive observer, writes Baudelaire, is to patch up the fragments of modernity, to “extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory” (Baudelaire, 1972, p.402). The poetry he extracts often dwells in all those archaic aspects of the city – the old quarters and the picturesque sides – or, more simply, in all that retains an aura of the past. In this sense, the *flâneur* becomes a personage whose task is to patch up the fragments of a tradition gone to pieces.

My study will thus be invested with the melancholic touch proper to Baudelaire’s yearning for the passing of the old city, with its medieval districts, cobblestoned alleys, and labyrinthine streets, before it surrendered to the process of “Haussmannization,” which erased the old cityscape to erect uniform buildings along wide, tree-lined boulevards (Nesci, 2014, p.70). Yet within this mechanized metropolis, the survival of natural spots—parks, riverbanks, bridges, gardens, and remnants of the old city —revives what might be called an urban pastoral, offering visions of eternal beauty amidst the transient spectacle of the crowd. These pastoral refuges embody the very reconciliation Baudelaire sought between the ephemeral and the immutable, between the bustle of the modern city and the timeless serenity of nature.



2. An impressionistic Reading of Willa Cather's *Alexander Bridge* (1912)

2.1 Crowds on canvas: Cather's dialogue with Hassam

Quiet and peaceful is the opening of the novel by the genteel woman writer who confesses in her *Preface to Alexander's Bridge* that the material for her first novel had been borrowed from the art of writers belonging to another tradition. Indeed, a number of elements in her fiction—such as the international setting, the sophisticated bourgeois society, and a protagonist strangely “reminiscent of a Christopher Newman” with a “problem of the moral consciousness” (Thorberg, 1962, p.148)—help us understand that the writers she means are none other than Henry James and Edith Wharton. Nevertheless, apart from minor scenes of drawing room manners with “elegantly dressed ladies” (p.4) and bourgeois dandies “selecting muffins carefully” (p.6), Cather's novel remains safely distant from what she calls the “clutter” of realistic fiction. In fact, with the process of the “*novel démeublé*” being respected, Cather succeeds in leaving “the scene bare for the play of emotions” (Cather, 1992, p.837) in the opening paragraphs of her first novel:

Wilson was standing quite still, contemplating with a whimsical smile the slanting street, with its worn paving, its irregular, gravely colored houses, and the row of naked trees on which the thin sunlight was still shining. The gleam of the river at the foot of the hill made him blink a little, not so much because it was too bright as because he found it so pleasant. The few passers-by glanced at him unconcernedly, and even the children who hurried along with their school-bags under their arms seemed to find it perfectly natural that a tall brown gentleman should be standing there, looking up through his glasses at the gray housetops. (p.9)

The passage illustrates the shift from the play of material objects to that of sensations, impressions, and emotions in the evocative prose of Cather. More precisely, it reveals the importance of light and color in bringing new life to the work. It also shows how the play of shades distorts the regularity of forms, producing bodiless pictures that refuse to obey physical laws: “Do not define so closely the outline of things,” says the French Impressionist Camille Pissarro. “Don't proceed according to rules and principles,” confirms Paul Verlaine, the French poet who writes songs without words just as the Impressionist paints pictures without bodies (Freeman, 2007, p. 105). Thus, the vision of Boston on a “brilliant April afternoon,” under the effect



of sunlight in the passage above, resembles a Childe Hassam painting—with the same row of almost “naked trees” and “irregular houses” and, more significantly, the same projection of sunlight in the approaching twilight.



Figure 1. Childe Hassam, *The Public Garden (Boston Common)*, ca. 1885.

Watercolor on paper, 26¼ x 38⅞ in. (66.4 × 96.8 cm). Slavin Family Collection.

Reproduced from Weinberg (2004, p.47).

Two elegantly dressed women walking nonchalantly during leisure hours suggest that the place is frequented by fashionable people. A seated figure in modest attire seems to contrast with the stylish character of the setting; yet a more thoughtful eye would rather perceive in this simplicity a certain picturesqueness that reinforces the impressionistic touch of the tableau. The figure’s posture suggests that he is just as idle, but as a sensitive observer, his indolence becomes productive, allowing him to observe, read, and decipher the images of the modern city. He may well be a city *flâneur*—that painter of modern life whose impressionistic vision enables him to grasp the essence of existence in scenes of everyday life, or, as Charles Baudelaire would say, to capture the “eternal part of beauty” in “contemporary” and “circumstantial” elements (Baudelaire, 1972, p. 392).

In Cather’s novel, as in Hassam’s picture, the Common is depicted beautifully – almost poetically – as Bartley Alexander observes in a moment of contemplation, wishing he had asked Winifred to walk home with him so they could admire the boys skating furiously on the pond. Alongside this felicitous domestic portrait – reminiscent of Louisa May Alcott’s winter

pastorals –there is also the Common of Hassam expressed in scenes of *flânerie*, with fashionably dressed ladies and gentlemen of leisure gently strolling through the park, absorbed in their own nonchalant rhythms:



Figure 2. *Boston Commons*, 1901. Childe Hassam.

Oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in. David Gallery, Philadelphia.

Reproduced from Chin (2002, p. 534).

In Cather’s novel, alongside the quiet, leisurely rhythms of the Common, the city is also depicted in scenes of “rapidly moving carriages” and people clad in “flashed furs and flowers and bright winter costumes” (p. 85). Such associations are one manifestation of Impressionist painting which aimed at depicting the city with all the energy and dynamism of modern life (Weinberg, 1994, p. 135). City life was the main subject of Impressionism because of the significant development it knew in the nineteenth century. Such a positive, affirmative way to represent modern urban life was known as the Art of Celebration (Alter, 2005, p. 104), and places effervescent with light, vibrant with



people and hasty carriages were the main subjects of the artists. This energetic depiction of city life finds a visual counterpart in Hassam's *Carriage Parade*, where the vibrancy of carriages along a crowded avenue evokes the same dynamism and celebratory spirit of the modern metropolis.



Figure 3. *Carriage Parade*, 1888. Childe Hassam.

16/4 x 127/s in. (41.5 X 33 cm). From the Haggin Collection, The Haggin Museum, Stockton, California. Reproduced from Hiesinger (1994, p. 41).

2.2 Between memory and desire: Cather's urban pastoral

In *Alexander's Bridge*, the dynamism of modern urban life is represented in the over-active life of the protagonist, Bartley Alexander, the engineer and bridge designer whose life is designed by his numerous bridge plans and scheduled by a succession of business trips from Canada to Tokyo through Vermont, Boston, London, Paris and New York. Throughout the novel, the many references to metropolitan settings reinforce, in fact, the marks of the urban vignette. His business often calls him to New York, where he keeps an apartment that includes what was once a painter's studio, now serving as his study and office. Among the few objects he keeps there is a "large old-



fashioned gilt mirror” and a big canvas of “charming color and spirit of the Luxembourg Gardens in early spring” (p. 97), a gift from a friend of his student years in Paris. Bartley’s study, assimilated to a painter’s studio, may be another confirmation of the aesthetic quality of the book. What is even more significant in the passage is the mention of the painting of the “Luxembourg Gardens in early spring” as if the author wanted to invest the life of her protagonist with a bucolic, nostalgic tone. The evocation of the painter’s studio, the old-fashioned mirror, along with the pastoral serenity of the Luxembourg scene introduces, in fact, a counterpoint to urban dynamism, reconciling industry and art, modernity and memory.

Just as cities, gardens abound in the novel of Cather as she also depicts parks “full of children and nursemaids and joyful dogs” (p. 85), whose image recalls the *Pastoral*, another artistic mode which is closely related to Impressionism. Pastoral art, Stouck argues, is highly impressionistic because it is subjective and emotionally evocative. It is characterized by “vague outline in painting, lyrical description in literature” (Stouck, 1975, p. 36). In *Alexander’s Bridge*, with the predominantly urban setting of the novel, it would be more appropriate to consider the *Urban Pastoral*, a mode explained by “the shift in pastoral’s focus from ‘the working countryman’ to ‘the scientist’ or the ‘tourist’” (Williams, 1973, p. 29). As for Bartley Alexander, the oversensitive engineer of Cather’s novel (who may well be a tourist as well), pastoral sensibilities are expressed in the many passages of reminiscences of the idylls of his youth, memories of London parks and Parisian walks infused with gentle spring breezes and soft lilac scents: “How jolly it was being young, Hilda! Do you remember that first walk we took together in Paris? We walked down to the Place Saint-Michel to buy some lilacs” (p. 52). The passage is one of the most suggestive moments of Cather’s novel that best illustrates the pastoral as it is both idyllic and elegiac and, more significantly, as the protagonist recalls a tragic encounter with a foreseeing gypsy woman on the Quai Saint-Michel: “It was on the Quai we met that woman who was crying so bitterly. I gave her a spray of lilac, I remember, and you gave her a franc” (p. 52):

I expect it was the last franc I had. What a strong brown face she had, and very tragic. She looked at us with such despair and longing, out from under her black shawl. What she wanted from us was neither our flowers nor our francs, but just our youth... They were both remembering what the woman had said when she took the money: “God give you a happy love!” It was not in the



ingratiating tone of the habitual beggar: it had come out of the depths of the poor creature's sorrow, vibrating with pity for their youth and despair at the terribleness of human life; it had the anguish of a voice of prophecy (p. 52).

The elegiac tone of the passage is suggested by a sequence of somber images like the lilac-colored evening sky. The tragic figure of the beggar crying reinforces its melancholic tone reminiscent of a very evocative painting by Hassam:



Figure 4. *The Quai St Michel, c. 1888. Childe Hassam.*

Oil on canvas, 21 ¾ × 28 in. (55.3 × 71.1 cm). Private collection. Reproduced from Hiesinger (1994, p. 47).

In Hassam's painting, many elements of the pastoral are again represented. The young woman at the bookstall on Quai Saint-Michel, the parents, the child, and the dog observing, the two people watching the Seine River, and, more significantly, the old beggar in bohemian dress, are all pastoral figures contemplating the beauties of a place still endowed with the colors of a golden preindustrial age. The beggar may be another version of the modernist seer with a foretelling eye. As for the prophecy of Cather's beggar in *Alexander's Bridge*, it predicts the disaster that will claim both the life and the construction projects of Bartley Alexander at the end of the book.

In fact, the last chapters of the novel assume a naturalistic turn as the protagonist becomes increasingly dominated by uncontrollable drives, or, what Thorberg calls the "tragic flaw" which Cather links to "the structural



weakness of the bridge” (Thorberg, 1962, p. 150). The tragic web of the story starts to take shape when the happily married engineer is trapped in “the emotional vortex of a youthful love affair” (Geismar, 1947, p. 157). The emotional dilemma consuming all his energy, his Moorlock Bridge in Canada starts to suffer “serious trouble” (p. 104). A succession of events of naturalistic drift precipitates the death of the hero and the collapse of his new cantilever bridge. Cather’s depiction of Bartley’s fall thus resonates with Baudelaire’s vision of the modern individual lost in the crowd — a being torn between memory and desire, between the call of the past and the restless impulses of modern life.

3. Cather’s Poetics of Suggestion in *Alexander’s Bridge*: Discussion

3.1 *Alexander’s Bridge* or Cather’s “Song Without Words”

In the light of our analysis, Cather’s *Alexander’s Bridge* emerges as a strong vehicle for her theory of the “*novel démeublé*” – one that disfurnishes fiction of unnecessary commodities to leave the room bare for emotional and spiritual expression. Similarly, in *Alexander’s Bridge*, Cather breaks with realistic accuracy and verisimilitude to paint blurred pictures with vague contours that resonate with the impressionistic technique, which aims to create pictures without bodies. The opening description of the Boston street scene, with its bare pavements, “irregular, gravely colored houses,” and “thin sunlight,” confirms the suggestive aesthetics of “disfurnished” art, where the material world dissolves into an interplay of tones and atmospheres. Cather also creates “songs without words” in the muted settings of her impressionistic novel, for her sensitive characters say nothing that is not already charged with powerful emotions, just as the muted interior of Bartley’s study retains nothing of realistic description except objects of nostalgic significance. Cather’s Boston is not so much seen as it is felt, a space of inward reverberation rather than external precision. Impressionistically rendered, in its bustle and colorful picturesqueness, it conveys both the energy and the peculiarities of modernity. In a Baudelairean sense, it mirrors the kaleidoscopic variety of the metropolis, and Bartley Alexander—with his dynamism and enthusiasm—emerges as the “man of [its] crowd.” As a successful engineer, he moves through incessant activity and restless travel, epitomizing the mobility of modern life, that “half of beauty” linked to “the transient, the fleeting, [and] the contingent.”



3.2 Bartley Alexander and the melancholy city

Bartley's contemplative gaze over the snow-covered Common in the opening scene endows him with the spiritual insight of the Baudelairean *flâneur*, seeking the other "half of beauty," bound to "the eternal and the immovable" (Baudelaire, 1972, p. 403). In this sense, Bartley is haunted by a sense of loss he seeks to mend through his pursuit of timeless beauties, glimpsed in images infused with a sentimental aura. Like the vagrant figures of Hassam's paintings, he cultivates a taste for the decayed and the old-fashioned—such as the antique mirror that adorns his office, once a painter's studio. His sentimentality surfaces in his recollections of youthful romances tied to pastoral scenes, bridges, and riverbanks, in memories of London walks and Parisian parks, of "warm, soft spring evenings" and the scent of lilacs—all sensory images that act, in Cather's fiction, as nostalgic relics of a vanished world. The painting of the "Luxembourg Gardens in early spring" that decorates his studio thus epitomizes this aesthetic longing.

Cather's poetics of yearning resonates with the melancholy lyricism that Baudelaire voices in "The Swan", a poem lamenting the passing of pre-Haussmann Paris and the loss of its medieval charm. Like Baudelaire's vision of the city haunted by ruins, Bartley's wistful recollections of his youthful days by the Quai Saint-Michel are equally charged with melancholy, while the recurring image of the lilac becomes the sensory vehicle of his nostalgia. The beggar woman on the Quai Saint-Michel crystallizes this melancholic yearning. Much like Hassam's beggar on the riverbank, she embodies the moral consciousness of modernity—a reminder of the human cost of material progress. Her prophetic words reverberate throughout the novel as an elegy of transient love, echoing the Baudelairean vision of fleeting romance born in the crowd and dissolved in evanescence. This episode recalls Baudelaire's sonnet "To a Woman Passing By," that "miniature drama" which, as Nesci observes, "intertwines with present urban conditions" (Nesci, 2014, p. 69), epitomizing the brevity of modern experience. The drama of Cather culminates in the downfall of the melancholic hero, who fails to keep pace with the modern, overactive crowd.

Through the techniques of the "*roman démeublé*," the *flâneur's* vision, and Baudelairean themes of the search for eternal beauty and melancholy, Cather's *Alexander's Bridge* is revealed as a meditation on art in an age of transition. In this early novel, Cather translates impressionistic motifs into prose, creating a portrait of urban life that captures both the beauty and the



transience of modern experience. Alongside the impressionistic paintings of Hassam, the suggestive art of *Alexander's Bridge* answers the modern artist's call for evocative representations of one's own epoch and transforms the transient into the timeless.

Conclusion

Willa Cather may have established her reputation as the writer of the *Prairie Trilogy* through her romantic portrayals of rural communities and rustic characters, yet her depictions of street scenes in her first novel reveal her as a genuine painter of modern life. The art of *Alexander's Bridge* indeed reflects her awareness of the hidden truths one can find in scenes of city life—the subtle richness one discovers when, as Childe Hassam once wrote, the artist “paints his own time and the scenes of everyday life” (Weinberg, 2004, p. 7). As shown in this paper, Cather's depiction of urban experience parallels the methods of the Impressionists, transforming the metropolis into a canvas of fleeting impressions. Her technique of the “*roman à l'impression*” purges the text of descriptive clutter and excessive realism, privileging emotional suggestion over realistic accuracy. Through this economy of form, Cather develops a poetics of the “unnamed,” where things are felt rather than said.

Cather's rendering of the modern city also resonates with the poetry of Baudelaire. In her impressionistic portraits of Boston, London, and Paris, she captures both the energy and the dissonance of modern experience, just as Bartley Alexander—the engineer and bridge designer—appears as a “man of the crowd,” one absorbed into the vortex of corporate life, ruled by schedules, incessant travel, and the implacable terms of business time. Torn between the restless mobility of the engineer and the romantic yearning of the idealist, he embodies the contradictions of the modern artist. Within Cather's urban picture, he stands as a city *flâneur*—the seer and sensitive observer whose task is to extract the “antique” from the modern. His contemplative description of the snowy Common, along with his memories of pastoral London and pre-Haussmannian Paris, crystallize in the urban tableau as eternal spots of beauty and harmony within the mechanical world of Cather's novel. Her *flâneur* embodies the modern condition itself, and his tragic downfall is less a failure than a meditation on the fragility of beauty in an age of speed and fragmentation. Through him, Cather explores the duality that haunted Baudelaire's verse, where beauty is forever divided between the transient and the eternal, the contingent and the immutable.



This paper has attempted to read Cather's *Alexander's Bridge* through an impressionist lens, in resonance with both Hassam's urban paintings and Baudelaire's portraits of modernity. Through her economy of description and her poetics of the "unnamed", Cather depicts the city as a canvas of impressions where beauty reverberates with fragility and where the rhythms of modernity intersect with melancholy and disenchantment. Through this impressionistic reading, this article ultimately challenges Cather's reputation as a regionalist writer and positions her instead as a perceptive chronicler of modern experience, revealing both the vitality and the disillusionment of urban life.

References

1. Al-Ghalith A., 1996. *Cather's use of light – An impressionistic tone*, In S. J. Rosowski Ed., *Cather studies* Vol. 3, pp. 267–282. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
2. Alter R., 2005. *Imagined cities: Urban experience and the language of the novel*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
3. Baudelaire C., 1972. *The painter of modern life: Selected writings on art and literature*, London: Penguin Books. Original work published 1863.
4. Cather W., 2010. *Alexander's Bridge*, New York: Vintage Classics. Original work published 1912.
5. Cather W., 1995. *Lucy Gayheart*, New York: Vintage Classics. Original work published 1935.
6. Cather W., 1992. *The novel démeublé*, In *Willa Cather: Stories, poems, and other writings* pp. 834–836, New York: Library of America.
7. Cather, W. 1970. *The world and the parish: Willa Cather's articles and reviews, 1893–1902*, Vol. 2. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
8. Chin B. A., 2002. *Glencoe literature: The reader's choice—American literature*. Columbus: Glencoe McGraw-Hill.
9. Eichorn H. B., 1984. *A falling out with love: My Mortal Enemy*, In J. J. Murphy (Ed.), *Critical essays on Willa Cather* pp. 230–243. Boston: G. H. Hall & Co.
10. Faber K. H., 2000. *In the city of New York: Two artists at work*, In M. M. Skaggs (Ed.), *Willa Cather's New York: New essays on Willa Cather in the city* pp. 121–143. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
11. Freeman N., 2007. *Conceiving the city: London, literature and art 1870–1914*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.



12. French W., 1974. *Directions: Additional commentary*, In B. Slote & V. Faulkner (Eds.), *The art of Willa Cather* pp. 236–247. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
13. Gatzemeyer J. (n.d.). *Regionalism démeublé: Reflective nostalgia*, in *Cather's Death Comes for the Archbishop. Cather Studies*, 14. University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Willa Cather Archive. <https://cather.unl.edu/scholarship/catherstudies/14/cs014.gatzemeyer> Accessed October 12, 2025.
14. Geismar M., 1947. *The last of the provincials: The American novel, 1915–1925*. London: Secker & Warburg.
15. Hiesinger U. W., 1994. *Childe Hassam: American Impressionist*, Munich & New York: Prestel.
16. Murphy J. J., 1989. *My Antonia: The road home*, Boston: Twayne Publishers.
17. Murphy J. J., 1996. *Gilt Diana and ivory Christ: Love and Christian charity in My Mortal Enemy* S. J. Rosowski, (Ed.), In *Cather's studies*, vol. 3, pp. 67–99. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
18. Nesci, C., 2014. *Memory, desire, lyric: The flaneur*, In K. R. McNamara (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to the city in literature* pp. 69–84. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
19. Piacentino E. J., 1982. *Another angle of Willa Cather's artistic prism: Impressionistic character portraiture in My Antonia*. In D. D. Anderson Ed., *MidAmerica IX* pp. 53–64. East Lansing: The Midwestern Press.
20. Urgo J. R., 1995. *Willa Cather and the myth of American migration*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
21. Stouck D., 1975. *Willa Cather's imagination*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
22. Thorberg R., 1962. *Willa Cather: from Alexander's Bridge to My Antonia*, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 7(4), 147–158. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/440922>
23. Whaley E. G., 1974. *Cather's My Mortal Enemy*, *Prairie Schooner*, 48(2), 124–133. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40629016>
24. Weinberg H. B.; Bolger D.; Curry D. P., 1994. *American Impressionism and Realism: The painting of modern life, 1885–1915*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
25. Weinberg H. B., 2004. *Childe Hassam: American impressionist*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



26. Williams R., 2016. *The country and the city*, London: Vintage Classics, Original work published, 1973.

