
Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and the Idea of France

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Abstract

Edith Wharton (1862-1937) and Willa Cather (1873-1947) are authors who are often perceived as very different, and yet whose lives, thought, and work share many striking underlying similarities, one of which is their love of France and French culture. Wharton visited France as a young child and as an adult lived there for thirty years, while Cather had "a lifelong love affair with France" (James Woodress), reading French literature in the original and visiting the country on five extended visits. For them as for many Americans, going back to Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, French culture offered a welcome relief to the underlying Puritanism of much American culture. It also offered an alternative to an issue that deeply concerned both Wharton and Cather: American culture's obsession with the profit motive and its profound underappreciation of beauty and the arts. In France they found a culture that balanced practicality and a disciplined energy with a love of beauty, including artistry in everyday things. Drawing on Wharton's and Cather's letters and published writings, including their World War I-related novels, Cather's *One of Ours* (1922) and Wharton's *A Son at the Front* (1923), this paper argues for the centrality of French culture, or perhaps more precisely Wharton's and Cather's idea(l) of it, in their lives and fiction. It also notes the similarity of these authors' urging Americans abroad to see not "what they could teach France," but "what France could teach" them, in Wharton's phrase. Paradoxically, however, it was not the expatriate Wharton but the very American Cather who, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*, portrayed the synthesis of French and North American cultures.

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