Paradise Lost vs Paradise Regained:
A Study of Childhood in Three Short Stories by Willa Cather

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Introduction

Willa Cather is a much beloved and critically acclaimed author, awarded the 1923 Pulitzer Prize for one of her novels *One of Ours* (1922), yet her name has not been as celebrated as some of her contemporaries. As Eric McMillan points out: “Willa Cather is one of those quietly achieving American writers, whose works are quietly appreciated in the shadow of the era’s Great Writers … but going on a century later, are still being quietly appreciated when many of the once great ones are no longer read” (§1, 2013-05-02). From the time of the westward pioneering, America’s rise to world power, the Depression to the Second World War, Cather lived through the most significant time of American history. However, her works are centered on Nebraska and the American Southwest. She herself grew up in Nebraska, thus the pioneers and their lives in the area became a main source of inspiration to her.

Cather had a strong emotional tie to her childhood and she seemed to think that childhood is the best years of a person’s life. According to Amy Ahearn, “Cather believed that the artist’s materials must come from impressions formed before adolescence” (*The Willa Cather Archive*, §1, 2012-12-07). The writer finds inspiration from within to create. The experience and memories gained from the carefree days of youth are heart-felt and authentic materials. The stories to be discussed in this essay are set in the West and center on the childhood of three groups of children. Children are not uncommon in Cather’s works. In fact, Mona Pers states that “the habit of using children as a means of characterization developed early in Willa Cather; in fact, it was with her from the beginning of her writing career” (37). Cather used the children’s world to project universal themes: unavoidable disaster, illusions and dreams, as well as dreams coming true.

This essay sets out to compare three of Willa Cather’s short stories: “The Way of the World”, “The Enchanted Bluff” and “The Treasure of Far Island”. All three stories show us a childhood world as experienced by a group of children centered round a leader. These
childhood worlds are portrayed from an adult perspective, with much beauty and nostalgia, giving a sense of the innocence, excitement and magic of a childhood paradise. The essay argues that it is through the power of children’s imagination that their paradise is created and that sooner or later paradise is lost. However, in the last of the three stories, the childhood paradise is regained in adulthood through the artistic imagination. Because the last story entails a hopeful ending to this sequence of stories, they will be discussed in the order as shown above, a chapter devoted to each. The analysis will include Cather’s use of setting and her portrayal of characters, above all, of the leaders of the children. It will also explore the role of the imagination in the creation of these childhood worlds and their development. Finally there will be a pedagogical section in Chapter Four, applying the essay to the secondary-school English classroom.

Literature is a source that enriches students’ language ability on every level and short stories are a form that is suitable for adolescent students. To young people, memories from childhood are still close and vivid. To most these memories are mixed; among games and adventures there are both happiness and disappointments, both childhood friendships and betrayals. It is a topic everyone can talk about and many discussions can be developed from it. In addition, the short story is a genre that can be easily applied to the classroom because of its length. There is no great risk that the students will not remember the content of the story after reading. For students that are not pursuing further academic life, or low-performing students, short stories are definitely a better choice than novels.

In Cather’s life as a writer, her major works are novels, but many ideas and characters recur in her short stories. Most critics analyze her novels such as *My Antonia*, *The Song of the Lark*, *O Pioneers*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. There is not much criticism on the short stories, and there is no comparative analysis of these three short stories. While searching
resources for this essay, Marilyn Arnold’s book *Willa Cather's Short Fiction* has been of some help and guidance; nonetheless the discussion of each story is limited.

Mona Pers’s *Willa Cather’s Children* has also been a very helpful source, which centers on Willa Cather and her use of children as characters and a source for writing. Cather had a rich knowledge of the classics and for her use of imagery and allusions, some critics have provided good insights, for example, Cynthia Chaliff and Bernice Slote.
Chapter I “The Way of the World” – Paradise Lost

“The Way of the World” is the first story to be discussed in this essay; it was published in 1898 when Willa Cather was twenty-five. The story tells us about a play-town, “Speckleville” and the children (six boys, including their leader Speckle) who build it and how at the end it is destroyed. The setting is a small Western town and the time covered is one golden summer. Cather describes a carefree childhood in the opening poem:

O! The world was full of the summer time.

And the year was always June,

When we two played together

In the days that were done too soon…. (“The Way of the World” (WW) 10)

It is an idyllic childhood world, but the sentimental theme is balanced by the narrative tone. James Woodress suggests that the narrator’s tone is ironic but not serious (57). This essay holds a different opinion. As the story progresses, situations are compared with Roman history; it should not be considered as “not serious”, but rather, humorous. The narrator is kind and understanding and ends the story with feelings of sadness and nostalgia.

The story takes place in Nebraska, but unlike the next two stories where Cather richly describes the surrounding countryside, “The Way of the World” is set in a town. Mirroring the town they live in, the boys create Speckleville, which becomes a setting within a setting. The children live in the outer setting and at the same time construct another world in the inner setting. This setting of the story is situated in Speckle’s backyard, which is “the most disreputable back yard in the community” because it is crowded with the boys’ big store boxes (WW 10). Both Marilyn Arnold and L. Brent Bohlke believe that the story about “Speckleville” is likely to have originated from Willa Cather’s play-town “Sandy Point” where the town members were all girls and she was the “mayoress” (Arnold, Willa Cather’s Short Fiction 34; Bohlke 30).
Speckle organizes all the different occupations for the boys, many of which are reflections and imitations of their fathers’ professions. For example, Jimmy Templeton’s father owns a grocery store, so conveniently he “pilfers” some “cheap candy” for his own little store (WW 10). The father of Reinholt Berkner is an undertaker, so naturally he runs a marble shop, serving the customers in need of tombstones for deceased pets. Speckle has learned to follow his father’s trade as well; without the influence of his father, he probably could not run the bank of Speckleville, “[compelling] the citizens to deposit their pins [monetary units in the play-town], charging them heavily for that privilege and lending out their own funds to them at a ruinous usury, taking mortgages on the stock and business houses of such unfortunates as failed to meet their obligations promptly” (10). Speckle has the “executive ability” to make the boys’ dream of a community come true; they are friends and at the same time they are serious and law-abiding businessmen that render services to one another. The six boys have built Speckleville together with friendship and trust. Speckle cannot build a town without his friends, nor can they accomplish much without Speckle.

Speckle is the natural leader of the group and creator of Speckleville, so the town is named in his honor. Speckle’s nose has a large yellow freckle and that is how he got the nickname. All the boys had before the creation of Speckleville was “scattered lemonade stands” and “sidewalk booths”, and no matter how many times they may have dreamed about having a play-town, it takes someone to organize and start it and Speckle is the person (10). How does Speckle run this dream-town? He has set some strict rules. In order for the town to function properly, no one can change his trade without the agreement of the town council; no real money is to be used, but pins are the currency (10). Above all, this town is here to stay, and is not “a transient town” that appears by day and disappears by night (10). We can see that this town has a good leader and solid rules, and the members have a strong will to help
create and keep it. Before going any further, a specific quality of the leader must be brought up.

Speckle’s most important contribution as a leader is his imagination. We read that “it was Speckle’s fecund fancy more than his back yard that was the real site of the town, and his imagination was the coin current of the realm, and made those store boxes seem temples of trade to more eyes than his own” (10). Imagination gives a magic aura to Speckleville. Speckle is the mayor, postmaster and bank owner, and if he did not have enough imagination, he would not have been able to come up with exciting ideas which his citizens were eager to carry out. His imagination is original and persuasive which makes him the leader and the others followers. What a bright idea it is to use pins for the currency! This way there will not be fighting over money or stealing between friends; and if he did not run a bank and post office, the town would have been paralyzed. Speckle’s imagination is creative:

one that could invent occupations for half-a-dozen boys, metamorphize an express wagon into a street car line, a rubber hose into city water works, devise feast days and circuses and public rejoicings, railway accidents and universal disasters, even invent a Fourth of July in the middle of June and cause the hearts of his fellow townsmen to beat high with patriotism (10).

Cather and William Martin Curtin believe that “children are not realists as yet and exult in the imagination their elders have lost” (137). On the wings of imagination, children can soar freely. All summer long the boys play in this fantasy town in Speckle’s backyard, no school, no worries but only fun and laughter – nothing else but truly a miniature paradise, “a microcosmic Eden” as Arnold puts it (Willa Cather's Short Fiction 17).

In this Eden, Eve appears. Mary Eliza is her name. We are told that she and Speckle are old playmates “since the days when he had been father to all her dolls and had rocked them to sleep, and until the founding of Speckleville he had openly preferred her to any boy
Thus Mary Eliza is not included when the boys start the town. However, her interest is great and after visiting the boys’ circus in the barn, Mary Eliza strongly feels that there should be a balance of the two sexes in “Eden”, “that six male beings should dwell together in ease and happiness seemed to her an unnatural and a monstrous thing” (10). The kingdom of happiness cannot exist without her. Day in and day out Mary Eliza petitions Speckle for membership of his town (10). Speckle likes Mary Eliza, and he would like to have her in the town, but the other boys strongly protest. They do not think having a town is a girls’ game and Mary Eliza will ruin everything. One of the boys objects because “girls always spoil everything a boy’s got if you give ‘em a chance” (11). Besides, it requires great imagination to be a citizen of Speckleville; Speckle wonders if a girl has such a quality (10). Anyhow, he uses all kinds of diplomatic strategies in order to win over the boys, including bribery, flattery and persuasion; and they finally allow Mary Eliza to join them.

The development of the relationship between Mary Eliza and the boys has three stages. It starts when Mary Eliza enters the town. Arnold suggests that Cather likens Mary Eliza to Eve because “she made it her business to appeal to every masculine instinct in the boys, beginning with their stomach” (11); she tempts them by saying “eat” (Arnold 18). The cream puffs she offers are pleasing to the eyes just like the forbidden fruit which was irresistible to Adam. She is so clever and pleasant that the boys are no longer against her being part of the town. She even becomes so popular and powerful that “[her] word, her lightest wish, was law in Speckleville” (WW 11). Speckle becomes a “deposed” king; he loses his authority and cannot be of service to his people (11). His people have forgotten who the prince and founder of the city is. This is the first stage and the beginning of how paradise is lost when Mary Eliza enters the picture.

The second stage starts “the tragic motif” when “the heavy villain” is introduced, a boy from Chicago who comes to visit his aunt and happens to live opposite Speckle’s house
The boys consider the Chicago boy’s wearing shoes and stockings “disgustingly effeminate” and it is absolutely unmanly that he wears a hat and gloves on Sundays (11). The Chicago boy insults the town members by using real money every time he buys things from Mary Eliza, but it does not bother her. He tells her all about his trips and outings; Mary Eliza listens attentively, feeling “more grown up and important when in his company” (11). Mary Eliza is impressed: the Chicago boy has been to places and seen things. It can not be wrong to listen to him. According to Arnold, the Chicago boy is the serpent in Eden: “The New Boy undoes Speckleville as the serpent undid the Garden, beguiling the woman and tempting her to betrayal” (Willa Cather's Short Fiction 18). He is the demon in disguise that comes to deceive Mary Eliza and destroy all that is good. He is the power behind and Mary Eliza becomes his tool. The Chicago boy pollutes Mary Eliza’s mind and brings the fall of paradise.

When the Chicago boy applies for citizenship and Speckleville refuses, Mary Eliza packs up and leaves (WW 11). In this third and final stage, Speckleville is torn apart. Mary Eliza does not realize that she is being used and does not feel guilty betraying the boys. Speckle does not think Mary Eliza is serious and believes she will come back, but she has “transferred allegiance” and is serving a new lord (11). “After the manner of her kind, she had come where she was not wanted, made herself indispensable, and gone again, taking with her, oh, so much more than her parasol and chocolate creams! “ (11). Do we sense the scornfulness of the female when reading “after the manner of her kind”? Jeane Harris argues that Cather has a misogynous attitude towards the female while identifying with the male, giving a very positive image of the boy who created Speckleville and showing all the boys are in harmony before Mary Eliza appears (304). Woodress comments similarly, seeing Cather’s distrust of women in the comparison of Mary Eliza to Eve (57). The point is further emphasized through Cather’s allusion to the good fellowship among the Romans until the arrival of “some ladies from the Sabine Hills” (WW 10). We may wonder why Cather wants
to portray female influence as disruptive, but here we may take note of a comment by Amy Ahern: “Cather’s classmates remembered her as one of the most colorful personalities on campus: intelligent, outspoken, talented, even mannish in her opinions and dress” (§4, 2012-12-07). Manly dress is more pleasing to Cather. It seems that she preferred the image of men, even identified with them and perhaps that is why she gives them finer qualities than women. However, it is more likely that Cather is just being true to the myth of Eden.

Now Speckleville is no longer the same, it has been destroyed. Once it was nice and peaceful; after Mary Eliza joins it is fun and colorful; and when Mary Eliza is gone, a part of the boys is missing. Their dream has perished. “The boys all [fall] to packing their belongings as though fleeing from a doomed city” (WW 11). The magic of Speckle’s imagination disappears under the scorn of the Chicago boy and Mary Eliza’s defection. Nothing can hold the boys together; they cannot go back to the past and no one knows why. The town was based on Speckle’s imagination and now they become aware of this illusion because the Chicago boy unveiled reality – there was no paradise; paradise was only their fantasy. No one escapes the serpent’s snare, all goodness vanishes – nothing fascinating remains.

The title of the story “The Way of the World” relates the events of childhood to the adult world. Partly it can be seen in the references to women. Boys or men cannot survive alone because they will miss the “eternal feminine”, but at the same time the mystery of women has “vexed older heads” (11). Then there are all the historical allusions which give the ironic tone to the narration. Cather compares this childhood world to events in Roman history: Speckle is the prince and founder of the city, Mary Eliza is the Imperatrix and Speckleville is like “the town in Latium” (10-11). When Mary Eliza leaves Speckleville, it is as if Coriolanus had deserted Rome. And after all the boys leave, Speckle is like Marius Caius sitting in the ruins of Carthage. The empires of the adult world must fall, and the small world of the boys cannot avoid doing so either. Arnold explains in detail about Cather’s use of allusions:
“[Cather] used [an allusion] to reveal character, to develop theme, to add concrete detail, and to create resonance. She also used it to enrich and deepen her narratives by insinuating new levels of meaning into her text through complexities of tone and intent” (“The Allusive Cather”, §6). Cather’s knowledge of the classics has given much richness and depth to her works.

So in this story childhood is full of imagination and innocent games, but something unexpected destroys everything. Because Mary Eliza exploits Speckle’s fondness for her and thoughtlessly lets in the Chicago boy, the boys’ illusions vanish before the summer is over. It is childhood imagination which creates Speckleville and perhaps it is inevitable that it must be lost – it is the way of the world.
Chapter II “The Enchanted Bluff” -- Paradise Lost?

In this story, published in 1909, eleven years after the previous story, Cather returns to the idea of a childhood paradise and the magic of children’s imagination. “The Enchanted Bluff” centers on a group of six boys who are a little older than those in “The Way of the World”. The setting is still in a Western town, but the adventures of the boys take place outdoors in the country, away from town life. The narrator is one of the boys, but the perspective is that of a mature man who looks back at events twenty years ago with a sense of loss and nostalgia. The time covered by his reminiscences is a memorable summer with particular focus on the last camp fire. There is no real plot, but the main interest lies in the discussion around the camp fire, when the boys’ imaginations open up to the wonders of the world and their dreams of exploring the unknown.

The boys’ lives and their imaginations have a strong connection with the outdoors. Unlike “The Way of the World” in which the story revolves around the characters and little is mentioned about the town they live in, a great deal of emphasis is on the countryside in “The Enchanted Bluff”. The river binds the boys together: "Other boys came and went and used the river for fishing or skating, but we six were sworn to the spirit of the stream, and we were friends mainly because of the river” (“The Enchanted Bluff” (EB) 774). It is not just some running water, but vital and changeable: “Our water had always these two moods: the one of sunny complaisance, the other of inconsolable, passionate regret” (777). The river is personified; in the imaginations of the boys, the river is a living creature, susceptible to moods. Certainly the bond is not only among the boys, but also between the boys and the countryside. As the narrator relates, “We had been careful not to mar the freshness of the place”, the boys observe and protect the sandbar and the river as though these are their most precious possessions (774). The outdoors gives the boys inspiration and provides them with the time and space for their imaginations to grow freely.
The outdoors also offers a place for games and adventures. During the springtime, when the farmers are busy, the river is completely at the boys’ disposal. In autumn they go miles and miles through stubble along the shore to hunt quails (774). They are the hunters and every hunting game is also an adventure – they may find something interesting or unusual on the way. Though it is cold in winter, the boys are out skating. When it is summer, there is plenty to see as all creation in nature grows and revives in the warm weather. The countryside has so much to offer in every season; everywhere they go it is possible to play different games and have all kinds of adventures, which are inseparable from the children’s imaginations and are a part of their daily lives.

The characters in “The Enchanted Bluff” are more developed than in the previous story. Each boy’s personality and characteristics stand out through Cather’s descriptions. Otto and Fritz belong outdoors; Percy seems to enjoy excitement, for example, reading detective stories; the narrator must be a studious boy, as he later becomes a teacher. A particular emphasis is given to the character portrayal of Tip and Arthur. Tip collects many things from foreign lands which probably fuel his fertile imagination. Arthur is a few years older than the rest of the boys which makes it natural for him to be the leader, though he does not share the same kind of importance as Speckle in the previous story. Speckle has imagination and ideas and he sees to it that they get carried out, while Arthur seems to lack such qualities or any interest in leadership. This essay holds the opinion that Tip qualifies more for the leader of this story as he is the one who brings up the dream/quest for the Enchanted Bluff.

The focus of the story is their last watch-fire of the year; soon they will be taking different paths in life (774). Perhaps it is their sense of an ending of childhood and their uncertainty about the future that trigger the boys’ imaginations. Naturally enough, they begin by star gazing, seeking to identify the different constellations. Then their thoughts go to the great men like Columbus and Napoleon who have watched the same night sky for guidance
and inspiration. The moon “red as an angry heathen god” reminds them of ancient civilizations like the Aztecs, sacrificing their prisoners under such a moon. From there, they move to the Spaniards and their search for gold.

During this discussion, Cather reinforces the magic of the night with vivid imagery. According to Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, “imagery for her was a symbol of meaning to represent the creative force underlying the [work]”; good writers are not satisfied with plain objective descriptions (184). The moon “[comes] up like a galleon in full sail”, which moves slowly and grandly like a ship; the boys see “a long, silvery streak on the water”, which must be something valuable and the boys wonder if there is Spanish gold hidden in the river (EB 778). These images of “a galleon in full sail”, “the silver streak” and “hidden gold in the river” reflect the projects the six boys dream about and their desire to discover and explore the world. Bernice Slote and Cather agree that “a world of quest and discovery” is invoked by their imaginations. They also point out that the moon, “as big as a cart wheel” is similar to “the wheel of a chariot”, reminding the boys of warriors charging forth on chariots (100). It is time to set out and conquer. As David Stouck puts it, “through the eyes of a boy on a sandbank in a sluggish western river the untried world appears as a vista of splendid horizons” (44). The world beyond the horizons is unknown and full of possibilities and adventures. They may not become great people, but no one can stop them from exploring – to boldly venture forth!

Finally the roving imaginations of the boys focus on “The Enchanted Bluff” as the place for a real adventure. Tip’s uncle, who is “a wanderer”, has told him about this Red Rock, where a tribe of Indians settled for shelter in uncertain times (EB 778). Tip tells about these Indians and why they ended up there: “Uncle Bill thinks they were Cliff-dwellers who had got into trouble and left home” (778). They were a big group of Indians hiding on a rock up high, away from the common crowd and the other hostile tribes. Tip wants to go there even if he
finds only bones, ruins and pottery (780). It is an “enchanted” place because no white men have been up there. Such a quest is full of courage and exploration as well as accomplishment and new experience. Tip’s imagination inspires him to this adventure, and this rock becomes a “religious sanctuary” to him (Arnold, Willa Cather's Short Fiction 83). Tip’s tale is so full of magic that the other boys make the Enchanted Bluff their goal as well. They all make up their minds that they will go on such an expedition, and whosoever finds the place first has to tell the rest about it (EB 780). This is going to be their greatest adventure. In the first story, Speckle’s imagination turns his backyard into a town; in contrast, Tip’s imagination calls for a promising adventure. Mona Pers claims that for boys with imaginations, adventures are realities (100). Imagination produces great ideas and adventures put ideas to work – turning dreams to reality. Will this adventure become reality?

The boys are all excited about the idea about exploring the Enchanted Bluff, and then they take it with them to sleep. When the narrator wakes up, “it was still dark, but the sky was blue with the last wonderful azure of night … I turned for another look at the blue night, and it was gone” (EB 781). Perhaps Cather reminds us that life is short like the blue night sky and sleep; and as we turn back for another look, the childhood dream may be gone.

As the story of the campfire is told in retrospect, we get to see what happens to the dream of the quest. The narrator returns to the town twenty years later and we learn that “none of us have ever climbed the Enchanted Bluff” (781). Arnold clearly states: “The childhood past of the Sandtown boys is centered on one great dream, to explore the Enchanted Bluff. But the present confirms the loss of that dream” (Willa Cather’s Short Fiction 83). The boys have different fates in life after twenty years: Percy becomes a stockbroker; Otto loses his foot on the railway and becomes a tailor with his brother; Arthur dies and Tip marries a spendthrift wife and struggles to make ends meet with his growing family. No one has the time, energy or courage, or perhaps even interest, to search for the Enchanted Bluff.
Responsibilities and burdens in adulthood have replaced the imagination and dreams of childhood. We hear Wordsworth’s voice echoing:

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?

Where is it now, the glory and the dream? (qtd in Peter Coveney 77)

There is only regret and sadness looking back and seeing what is lost.

Should we say that the boys’ dream is lost and so is their paradise? According to Joyce McDonald, this story has the themes “of regret and failure” (31). True, no one has travelled to find the Enchanted Bluff. No one has “fulfill[ed] the dreams of [his] youth (the best that can happen to a man)” (Cather, quoted in Bloom 203). Nevertheless the dream is still alive. Tip has told his son about the Enchanted Bluff and the boy has become as inspired as his father, so for Tip the dream has taken on the new dimension of fatherhood. When his son is old enough, they will go together. Unlike the first story, this story holds the dream intact and leaves us with the hope of future fulfillment.
Chapter III “The Treasure of Far Island” – Paradise Regained

This story was published in 1902 and can be seen as the most developed story of the three. The events and characters are much fuller than in the previous two stories. “The Treasure of Far Island” is about two childhood friends who reclaim their paradise as adults. The story starts with the homecoming of the protagonist Douglass Burnham from New York City after a career as a playwright. He runs into his old playmate, Margie, at a reception in his hometown in Nebraska. They talk about their friends, their childhood, the present, and eventually go back to the island where they used to play pirate games as children to dig up their buried treasure. By doing so, their childhood paradise and happiness are regained. The reader gets to know about Douglass’ imagination, his childhood, parents, home and career, as well as his adult life and dreams. The core of all Cather’s three stories is children’s imaginations and how children enjoy an Eden created thereby. “The Treasure of Far Island”, however, develops a new theme on the side, which is love between the protagonist and his childhood playmate. Unlike the first two stories, “The Treasure of Far Island” has a fairytale-like happy ending.

The time frame of the story covers both childhood and adulthood. The focus is set in the present, Douglass’ adulthood as a playwright, with flashbacks to his childhood. A comparison can be made between the three stories. In the first story, the time frame is rather short, only childhood is covered. In the second, the story is told from an adult perspective but the main focus is on childhood. In “The Treasure of Far Island”, the scene opens when the protagonist returns home after being away for twelve years. Douglass’ childhood memories and present events in adulthood are interwoven throughout the story.

The setting of this story covers both town and country. Cather first writes about Empire City where Douglass has grown up and its society where the governor’s wife leads most activities and the churches hold the citizens together. In addition, there is the refreshing description of the outdoors – especially of Far Island. On this island the flowers are “the
freshest and sweetest of growing things” and there is “an enchanted river flowing peacefully out of Arcady with the Happy Isles somewhere in the distance” (“The Treasure of Far Island” (TFI) 243-244). This is the Eden of the children, where they played their innocent games. The New York circle where Douglass lives his professional life serves as a contrast. When he is back in his father’s house, “the memory of his luxurious rooms in New York, where he lived when he was an artist, faded dim” (238).

As a child, Douglass is full of imagination. Like Speckle in the first story, Douglass dominates among the children because of his imagination; he is the Pirate Chief who has the charisma to make the others follow him and do whatever he says. Similar to Speckle, he is “a founder of cities and a leader of hosts” (243). Speckle’s imagination creates a town and Douglass’ imagination is expressed in the games and adventures of the children. Douglass says: “It is strange how those wild imaginings of ours seem, in retrospect, realities, things that I actually lived through” (247). Perhaps he thinks his actual life is rather commonplace, while the adventures of the imagination, the “sea fights and splendid galleys and Roman triumphs and brilliant caravan winding through the desert” are so exciting that they seem more real (247).

Returning from the East, Douglass is the center of attention because of his successful career. Having been away from home for twelve years, he has become quite established as a playwright. At the reception in Empire City where he is invited to read from his plays, all the townspeople’s attention and admiration are drawn to him. In addition, he seems to be an only child; his father and mother adore and treat him with love and pride. As one of his childhood friends tells him at the reception, “one by one our old townspeople go out to see the world and bring us back tales of [your] glory” (240). He is busy as a playwright, but he is also romantic and determined to follow his dreams – to return to the Island of his childhood in order to “recapture his youth and his love”, as Arnold puts it (39). However, this essay suggests a
further explanation, that Douglass returns to recapture his youth and eventually also finds his love. The reader may notice that compared with the first two stories, Douglass is the only character that is portrayed as successful and happy.

Douglass had a group of childhood friends, now all adults with their own responsibilities. These friends waved Douglass goodbye when he left for the East. They had played games and followed him on adventures. Now they “have scattered” in different parts of the country and one of them has gone abroad to the Philippines (TFI 235). They have taken up diverse occupations: one is a soldier, another is a cattle rancher, and others are a government clerk, a hardware storekeeper and a sewing-machine salesman (244-245). If the reader looks back at the first story, “The Way of the World”, he will find that there are a few familiar names: Rhinehold Birkner, Shorty and Temp. More surprisingly, Speckle’s and Douglass’s surnames are both Burnham. This story seems to be a sequel to the first: could the boy Speckle and the adult Douglass be the same person? If so, the woman’s roll has considerably altered in this story.

Among all of Douglass’ childhood playmates as mentioned, there is a girl that stands out: her name is Margie. From the story, the reader learns about her both as a child and as an adult. Unlike Mary Eliza in the first story, who brings disaster to Speckleville, this Margie brought no disasters to their childhood paradise. In their childhood years, Margie was a tomboy, playing pirate games and carrying a butcher’s knife, and Douglass fancied she would grow up to be a man (237). This reminds us of the first story where the boys think some girls would be the best boys in the world if they were not girls (WW 11).

When Margie grows up, she is tall and pretty and no longer a tomboy. Douglass admires her because “there was a wholesomeness of the sun and soil in her that was utterly lacking in the women among whom he had lived for so long” (TFI 245). Talking to Margie after the reception, Douglass remembers how he used to be able to “convey himself wholly to
her”. Margie shared what was on Douglass’ mind, she understood “every tint and shadow and vague association” that went through his head (241). Douglass feels strongly about her because of their childhood memories and the actual presence of the attractive adult Margie.

The memories they share are filled with games and imaginations, with beautiful natural surroundings as the background. The children’s paradise is called Far Island, discovered by Douglass: “a long irregular beach of white sand is exposed along the east coast of the island, never out of the water long enough to acquire any vegetation, but dazzling white, ripple marked, and full of possibilities for the imagination” (234). In their imaginations, the white sandbar becomes “the Uttermost Desert” (240). In this Desert, they make plans to conquer the world. These children call themselves “land-lords and sea-lords” (234). Going out in Douglass’ canvas boat the Jolly Roger, they are fearless world conquerors. Like pirates at all times, Douglass and his friends solemnly bury their treasure, and a map is drawn.

Deborah Karush points out a similarity between the second story and this one. Like the boys in “The Enchanted Bluff”, thinking about venturing to the big Red Rock, these small pirates sit by the camp fire and plan for “the conquest of the world” (TFI 240)(152). Imagining and planning adventures and conquests appears to be natural among these children.

In this story, as in the other stories, children’s imagination is glorified by the narrator, but unlike the other stories it is given a wider context by being related to the gift of the artist. “A child’s normal attitude toward the world is that of the artist, pure and simple. The rest of us have to do with the solids of the world, whereas their form and color exist for the painter” (TFI 243). Both children and the artist are “pure and simple”, not bound by the worries of material things in this world, so that they are able to see the special colors and patterns in the world that surrounds them. Children’s imagination makes them see “maps and pictures formed by cracks in the walls” and the special patterns on carpets that look like “the rose garden of Thousand and One Nights” (243). Children and the artist do not need to receive
“formal learning” in order to appreciate beautiful things (Bloom 147), “[their] rights are granted by a different lease” – they are born with these abilities (TFI 243). Douglass tells Margie: “We were artists in those days, creating for the day only; making epics sung once and then forgotten, building empires that set with the sun. Nobody worked for money then, and nobody worked for fame, but only for the joy of the doing” (247). The child and the true artist are alike because they are only concerned with the joy of creating, not material reward or fame. Their creation is purely inspirational and only for the moment.

In Margie’s point of view, she has grown up and so have their friends, but not Douglass. Margie contemplatively says to Douglass that it is very sad to grow up (244). The reader would agree with Margie after reading Cather’s newsletter: “We have all dwelt once in that kingdom of lost delight, that fair domain where we could be bloody pirates in the bath tub in the morning, and after lunch pilgrims on our way to the Holy Land, stepping painfully with our bare feet over the gravel walks heated to the temperature of desert sands by the summer sun” (Cather, quoted in Pers 110). The friends who they used to play with are all serious and hard-working adults now. In the adult world, imagination is overlooked and no one has time for childish games. The pure joy of childhood can no longer return. This sense of loss reminds us of “The Enchanted Bluff” because the boys’ dream is not realized after they become adults. Margie jokingly comments that Douglass is “a case of arrested development” because he goes on playing and never grows up; whereas she has stopped playing long ago (TFI 241). He is an artist and therefore he can stay young at heart because he is nurtured by imagination, just like children.

Douglass persuades Margie to go to Far Island with him to dig up the treasure they buried long ago. On Far Island, Margie feels the loss: “it was really our childhood that we buried here … seems like unconscious symbolism, and somehow it stands out from all the other good times we knew then as the happiest of all” (247). Margie realizes that by burying
the treasure they closed the door to childhood behind them – their childhood paradise. Now they are adults and can only “look down from the mountain tops upon the happy land we used to rule” (248). For Margie, it is only possible to passively reminisce over the happiest time in life. But Douglass, once the leader of their childhood paradise, again takes the role of the leader. He tries to give new hope to Margie: “If there is to be any Eden on earth again for us, dear, we must make it with our two hearts” (248). Since Douglass’ return to Empire City, he has fallen in love with Margie. He gazes at her “with the abandoned admiration of an artist contemplating a masterpiece” (246). He assures Margie that paradise is not in the past, but there can be an Eden for them again – Eden was created for Adam and Eve after all. The Eden in “The Way of The World” was destroyed because Eve exploited Adam’s trust. This Eden is restored because this Eve trusts her Adam.

The story ends with a fulfilling romantic scene. Douglass believes that it has to take two hearts to re-create their Eden. When Douglass’ and Margie’s lips meet, “out of the east rose the same moon that has glorified all the romances of the world” (249). This moon is different from the moon in “The Enchanted Bluff” which rises like an “angry heathen god” and reminds the boys of some prisoner-sacrifice (EB 777). As Slote puts it, this moon gives light to a romantic moment for two souls, “full in the moment of deepest longing and realization” (99). Here on Far Island, Douglass finds his love and his dream is realized.

Like the two previous stories, this story is enriched by Cather’s many classical, historical and literary allusions. Cynthia Chaliff repeats Cather’s words that it could be “hard to write about the things that are near to [her] heart, from a kind of instinct of self-protection you distort them and disguise them” (Cather, quoted in Chaliff, 65) It is therefore understandable that she sometimes uses allusions to provide some distance. Thus history gives an ironic twist to the young couple’s quest: “[Far Island] was graven on their hearts as Calais was upon Mary Tudor’s” (TFI 244). Cather has a rich knowledge of the classics and therefore
Margie’s wholesomeness is compared to “Diana’s women [speeding] after the stag down the slopes of Ida”; and she waited so long for Douglass, it felt “longer than the waiting of Penelope” (246, 248). These classical allusions link Nebraska and the protagonists to universal human experience. Likewise, her literary allusion to the moon that lighted “the feet of young Montague to the Capulet’s orchard” points to the recurring theme of young love (249). Judith Fryer refers to Slote’s comment that Cather links Nebraskan prairie life with biblical or classical allusions because the melancholy and nostalgia are really “the elemental core we find in folk songs and tales, in sagas and legends” (252). So Cather’s allusions have at least three purposes: to add color to the narration (the first story is an example), to disguise her personal feelings and to share a recurrent theme and experience of mankind.

To conclude, because Douglass does not lose his childhood gift of imagination, this paradise is restored. Burying the treasure is the symbolic end of their childhood, but by digging up the treasure, Douglass and Margie are re-opening their Eden and facing a bright future together. Standing on the beautiful Island, they “[look] about over God’s world and saw that it was good” (TFI 249). This biblical allusion gives a complete and happy ending to a paradise regained.
Chapter IV Cather’s Stories in the Classroom

This chapter will discuss the pedagogical application of the three stories “The Way of the World”, “The Enchanted Bluff” and “The Treasure of the Far Island”. The reasons for including literature in a secondary-school English curriculum (for students aged sixteen to eighteen years old) will first be brought up, followed by a discussion of the benefits of teaching short stories and the suitability of Cather’s work for the students’ English studies. A detailed lesson plan will also be outlined.

Why is literature taught in the secondary school? Lindsay Clandfield points out a few good reasons for using literature in the classroom. First, literature is “authentic material”: the language within authentic materials has a context and therefore students learn the language as a whole, not as broken pieces of information. Secondly, literature “encourages interaction”: discussions of literary works in the classroom create interaction among the students and between the students and the teacher. Thirdly, literature “expands language awareness”: difficult words and expressions encourage the students to pay attention to language usage. Fourthly, literature is “motivating”: literature has a high status in many countries. Being able to read and understand different works gives students sense of accomplishment and thus encourages them to go on with further endeavors (§3, 2013-01-13).

Other scholars have additional reasons for using literature in the secondary school. Holly Koelling argues that literature gives the reader “a trip through history”. Students get to learn about people’s lives and historical backgrounds from different periods of time. Likewise, literature is a rich source of the culture of different countries and it constitutes “an intellectual challenge”. Hence, the literature studied in secondary education is the “educational foundation” for higher education, which is essential (10-22). Additionally, the National Council of Teachers of English in the USA comments that studying literature gives students “broadened thinking and experience”, that it is “a source of pleasure” and “the place of the
emotions” which the student and the writer share (128-130). This essay agrees with the aforementioned scholars’ opinions. Literature provides learning with many positive facets and teachers will have difficulty ignoring these many benefits. It is also worth noting that adolescent students are still forming their values and judgments of the world, and the literature and characters they meet in reading will serve as an inspiration and as good role models.

Short stories are a good choice of literature in many ways. Murat Hismanoglu suggests that students will find short stories easier to finish than long works, thus maintaining more motivation. Furthermore, the stories also provide a good opportunity for “critical thinking”, as adolescent readers are not mature in this area. Short stories thus serve as very appropriate material to practice on. Finally, following globalization, the classroom has students from different cultures and it is constructive for them to exchange ideas on “universal” themes (61-62). The second and third reasons apply to novels as well and therefore short stories can be considered as a springboard for studying larger works in literature. They can be seen as an interesting yet limited challenge for students which can easily fit into the syllabus.

Cather’s three stories are suitable for the secondary-school English classroom because of all the points mentioned above and the theme of childhood. Skolverket states that “students should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (English, Aim of the Subject 2013-04-03). Through these stories students get to know about early 20th century American childhood and society in a much more detailed and vivid way than “history and science” lessons can provide, according to Edward Proffitt (quoted in Carol Rzadkiewicz, 2013-04-02). Everyone has experienced childhood and the situations described in the stories should be possible to relate to for the students. Thus they will be able to exchange their own memories and ideas, compare the childhood shown in the stories to their own; childhood at two different times and in two different countries. They also get to examine the friendships
and dreams in the stories, asking themselves if they are still holding on to their dreams. There are boys and girls that play important roles in the stories and therefore it is suitable for a Swedish class with both male and female students to comment on the gender roles. Moreover, these pastoral stories, as many others written by Cather, are pleasant to read. It is good to combine work with pleasure.

We will now turn to the practical application of Cather’s short stories to the classroom, using Hismanoglu’s three-level, student-centered approach. Hismanoglu’s approach starts with “the literal level” where the students define the facts of the stories, such as characters, setting and plot. The second level is “the inferential level” where the students explore what the author is trying to show. Here the students make collaborative interpretations of the characters and events in the stories. The final level is “the personal/evaluative level”, where the students relate the story to their own world and lives. They are encouraged to think imaginatively and build on their problem-solving ability, or in other words, be creative. After these three levels, further oral and written activities may follow (57).

When implementing Hismanoglu’s approach, “pre-, while- and post-reading stages” suggested by Tricia Hedge will also be used (209). These stages are widely used for teaching reading in the modern classroom. The “pre-reading” stage starts from a group discussion about the students’ own childhood. They can try to recall the make-believe games they used to play when they were children. This is a starting activity and will prepare them for the later tasks. The “while-reading” stage can be carried out with Hismanoglu’s “literal level”. First the teacher will check if the students understand all the texts (as it may take a long time to read all three stories at one go, the teacher can ask the students to read the first two stories at home), go through the vocabulary and parts that the students have difficulty with, then discuss the facts and background information of the stories. Information on Cather will also be provided, either by the teacher or the Internet to make it easier to understand the works.
The “post-reading” stage corresponds to Hismanoglu’s “inferential level” and the final “personal/evaluative level”. For “the inferential level”, discussion questions will be given to groups for deeper understanding. Questions such as: If we consider that the children in the three stories have an Eden or paradise, what are these paradises like and what happens to them at the end? Do you think it is inevitable that Eden is destroyed (first story)? Do you think the boys’ paradise is lost (second story)? Why do you think Douglass and Margie can regain their paradise (third story)? What is the role of the imagination? What is Cather trying to tell us about childhood? The students will compare the three stories as in the essay. The teacher should allow the students to make their own speculations and interpretations, encouraging them to express themselves and speak freely. Finally, the findings of this essay can serve as a sample or comparison for the students’ opinions.

For the final “personal/evaluative level”, the whole class can be divided into groups and brainstorm how they can apply the stories to their own lives; possibly discussing the importance of friends and dreams and how they can make their dreams come true. The following questions may also be raised: is childhood always happy? What are their own happy/unhappy childhood memories? Should dreams always be pursued? After reading the three stories and pondering over the children’s childhood and their adulthood, the students in the classroom may also discuss whether they agree with Milton (comparing Speckle’s, Tip’s and Douglass’s childhood and adulthood):

The childhood shows the man

As morning shows the day.

~John Milton (Paradise Regained 58, 2013-06-11)

For an extended task, the teacher can give a written assignment in which the students can make good use of their imaginations and creativity. Such a written assignment could be re-writing the stories or re-creating the characters or endings.
Teacher students who major in English spend much of their time studying literature because it is a lifelong investment and an important asset. Their task is to pass on this precious asset to the younger generation to enrich their lives with culture and to broaden their views. To be able to apply their university essays to a secondary-school classroom is worth the time and effort. Indisputably, there are innumerable ways of teaching and many theories to fall back on. As every individual has different needs, the teacher students have a long way ahead of them to try out and find the best teaching methods and ideas that would work for their students.
Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to compare Cather’s three short stories, examining the similarities as well as the differences. The essay argued that childhood paradise is created through children’s imagination. Paradise in the first two stories is lost, while in the last story paradise is regained through the artistic imagination and love.

All three stories are set in the West, but the emphasis of the setting varies. “The Way of the World” focuses on the town, whereas the story of the boys in “The Enchanted Bluff” takes place in the countryside. “The Treasure of Far Island” is wider than the others in that it has both town and country as its setting. The groups of children are predominantly male, but in the first and third stories there is a female character among the boys. However, their impact on the boys is completely opposite – one destructive, one uplifting. In the first and third stories, it is clear who the leader is as well as the role he plays, but this is more diffuse in the second story. All three stories are narrated from an adult’s perspective. “The Way of the World” is narrated by a third person who knows the entire episode of the children. In “The Enchanted Bluff”, the perspective is developed into a wider time frame of twenty years later, with the main focus on childhood. In “The Treasure of Far Island”, the main story is set in adulthood and the childhood episodes are delivered in flashback. Thus in terms of setting, development of characters and the action, “The Treasure of Far Island” is by far the richest story.

In all three stories the imagination plays a vital role in the creation of the childhood worlds. The imaginations of the leaders are most evident in the first and the third story, while in the second story all the boys take part in the creative process. The childhood paradise is lost in all three stories. In “The Way of the World” it ends abruptly; in “The Enchanted Bluff” it gradually fades; while in “The Treasure of Far Island” it also fades, but is re-created with the return of Douglass, whose artistic imagination brings it back to life, together with his
childhood playmate who now becomes his lover. The nostalgic and affectionate tone of the narrator is enhanced by the many literary and historical allusions, which relate the childhood scenes to adult life and universal human experiences.

The three stories can be seen as the Cather’s exploration of the role of the imagination in human life. She seems to see it as a power which can widen lives even in the most limited and circumscribed situation, adding a touch of magic to the trivial and practical pursuits of everyday reality. For many individuals it is present in childhood, but it seems to fade away as the troubles and responsibilities of adulthood take over. To Cather it is the role of the artist to preserve the gift and to use it to bring back its magic to others.

The stories provide good material for secondary-school lessons. Apart from the widened language study entailed in good literature, students are given the opportunity to apply the stories to their own memories and examine their relationship with friends. They may ponder the role of the imagination in childhood games and in adult life, and to what extent each individual should pursue his or her dreams. In this way the teacher may transmit the enrichment of culture experienced through university studies to the next generation.
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