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Picturing Cather: A Portrait in American Image & Celebrity Culture

“The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”

--Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

“The camera and plate are prepared, the lady must sit for her daguerreotype...”

--Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* (1855)

The twentieth-century phenomenon of the “icon” celebrity (from Albert Einstein to Marilyn Monroe to Madonna) has a fundamental relationship to the photographic image. As Catharine R. Stimpson contends in her foreword to Brenda Silver’s recent *Virginia Woolf Icon*, the twentieth-century icon “is unthinkable without the presence of the camera.” Photography, Stimpson explains, “accelerates and reaffirms the process of iconization and celebrity making” through modern modes of mass production (xii). With icons such as Monroe and Madonna, we can easily imagine a corresponding image of each, immortalized through the reproduction of those images over and over again.

Monroe standing above the subway grate, for example, or Madonna in her cone-shaped bustier in the early 1990s have become infamous portraits of these women, standing as both a visual shorthand for their personality in particular and the cultural era each represents. (Ever been to a fake 1950s diner without seeing the Monroe photograph?)

Cather’s interest in her image is documented by her legacy of portraits both in photographic form and through her selection of artists Leon Bakst and Nikolai Fechin to paint her portraits. While most of us encounter Cather’s image on literary postcards, on book jackets, and as part of biographical and critical studies, these images are necessarily

pulled away from their original contexts. The need to build that original context back into Cather's visual legacy becomes critical as we investigate Cather's construction of her public personae, giving us insight into how she managed her career and negotiated the ever-increasingly celebrity-driven literary marketplace. In this paper I will explore the relationship between Cather and her image by looking closely at selected photographs of Cather throughout her life, culminating with Edward Steichen's 1927 portrait of Cather in *Vanity Fair*. This essay will also argue that Cather's life-long interest in portrait and amateur photography provided her the tools she needed to negotiate her image in the marketplace to build her literary celebrity. Further, I will tie together the historical forces that brought about celebrity culture and explore how *Vanity Fair* and Edward Steichen's involvement in her portrait positioned Cather as a full-fledged celebrity of her time. But first, I will discuss the critical role photography played in the construction of the modern celebrity figure in nineteenth century American culture.

Photography & the Invention of Modern Celebrity

Upon Cather's birth in 1873, her parents took their baby daughter to Winchester, Virginia (confirm) to have her photograph taken. Like most parents of the time (as ours), it was an opportunity to capture a lasting image of a fleeting age. This baby portrait marked the first in what would be for Cather (and those in her generation) an entire life documented in photographic images. This, it is critical to remember, was a profoundly new possibility. While Cather's parents had their portraits taken as young adults, when photography was an emerging novelty, Cather was born into a generation when photography was now solidified into the culture, and her generation would face new and shifting relationships to the cultural role image and personality played in private and

public life.

Photography rapidly absorbed itself into American life after its invention in 1839 by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, and photographic portraits had taken a major place in the culture as more and more lower and middle-class Americans could afford some type of photographic portrait by the mid 1850s. Family and friends collected portraits of loved ones, and documented ceremonies such as the birth of a child, a marriage, or funeral.

Among many other early pioneers who advanced the science of American photography, Matthew Brady brought the emerging field into the realm of public spectacle. Brady's high-profile celebrity portrait studio capitalized on the public's curiosity of photography by exploiting the public's even greater curiosity of, as Brady termed them, "illustrious figures." Brady photographed such prominent men and women as Abraham Lincoln, General Robert E. Lee, Jenny Lind, Thomas Cole, Clara Barton, Jefferson Davis, Walt Whitman and P.T. Barnum ("Matthew Brady's Portraits: Images as History, Photograph, and Art"). The public flocked to Brady's galleries, paying admission to gaze at the images of public figures whose life-like appearances were, aside from engraved portraits in books and newspapers, wholly unknown to the mass public unless they were lucky enough to see them on the street or stage. Brady's celebrity pictures had a larger effect than merely profiting from the public's desire to see famous faces, the power of the photograph and more specifically, Brady's artistic portrait style, brought about a shift in the "emotional intimacy" between public figures and their audiences; that is, his photographs were suggestive of the underlying humanity of his subjects, and his work helped formulate our modern understanding of the celebrity as a

“real” person, not merely someone who existed in text or abstract lines of illustration. Importantly, he also had a penchant for showmanship and created a public spectacle around his work, yet another hallmark of modern celebrity making. Leo Braudy, in his extensive study of fame, argues that Abraham Lincoln’s selection of Mathew Brady as his photographer was based on Brady’s success as a celebrity creator. Braudy says that Lincoln “exploited” the new medium of photography to develop his “image of solemnity and seriousness,” profoundly altering the image of the president into a picture of “the ordinary man, the representative man, transformed into the extraordinary by both his belief in principle and the demands of history” (495-96).

In the early 1850s as Walt Whitman was transitioning from journalism to the literary world, he brought with him the kinds of self-promotion and advertising that he must have seen at work in the theatrical world. Much like Lincoln, Whitman used photographs and illustrations of himself as a representation of the “the ordinary man” as well as a mechanism to exploit his public personality. One of the most effective ways Whitman chose to disseminate his public self was by publishing illustrations of himself in his books. Since, as Whitman states in his preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, “the great poet is the equable man,” the visual illustration of himself as “one of the roughs” (50) simultaneously served to illustrate his aesthetic principles and his public recognition. So the image of Whitman with an open collar, posing casually with his hand on his hip was, according to Ed Folsom, “in sharp contrast to the expected iconography of poets’ portraits, portraits that conventionally emphasized formality and the face instead of this rough informality, where we see arms, legs, and body” (140). Indeed, Whitman’s image broke significantly with images of nineteenth-century poets

who were primarily illustrated in strictly formal settings. Personal appearance, too, reflects a class difference between Whitman and the poets such as Longfellow, Lowell, and Howells (check out). While early Whitman critic Emory Holloway felt that it was “a pity that he felt he had to advertise himself or go under” by acting as “his own press-agent,” today critics understand that Whitman was part of a much larger socio-economic cultural shift, and that Whitman anticipated and even embraced that shift with a high degree of skill and savvy. As Daniel Boorstin notes, “Formerly, the public man needed a *private* secretary for a barrier between himself and the public. Nowadays he has a *press* secretary to keep him properly in the public eye” (61). Folsom agrees, arguing that Whitman’s use of his image in *Leaves of Grass* had a “highly influential” effect on “the way most American poets portrayed themselves on their book jackets and frontispieces”(135). While Whitman was not the only writer in the later half of the nineteenth century to exploit his personality, his constant interest in photography and image within his text created legacy that led to huge shifts in the publishing industry. In an 1890 article published in *The Author*, a trade journal for the growing occupation of professional writing, J.A. Bolles notes that,

Articles by distinguished individuals are splendid advertisements for the periodicals in which they appear; articles by other contributors, unless they are very celebrated, are not valuable as advertisements; and, as in all enterprises judicious advertising has become an indispensable factor, publishers are simply following the modern way of doing business by pursuing their present methods (144).

Bolles goes on to note that “distinguished writers know that their success is not chiefly

due to their literary ability,” that now it takes “something besides authorship” to attract public attention.

Whitman had a keen understanding of what that “something besides authorship” meant to develop an audience. Whitman was aware of the power of public personality held well before it became the reality of the American marketplace. Grounded in his early exposure to the daguerreotype in the early 1840s when he was still working as a journalist, Whitman began meeting pioneering photographers such as Mathew Brady, Gabriel Harrison, Jeremiah Gurney, and Thomas Eakins to list a few (insert note here about Folsom’s research avail. on Whitman Archive). As David Reynolds notes, Whitman’s fascination with photography had a major role in the aesthetic development *Leaves of Grass* (281). Through the metaphor of photography, Reynolds explains, Whitman had “a direct mimesis of reality, supporting Whitman’s oft-repeated aim of establishing an honest, personal relationship with the reader” (285). While Whitman certainly wanted to create a personal relationship with his reader, the process of illustrating himself into his printed volume demanded the creation of a personae figure. The character Whitman created, as Ed Folsom argues, “served as a kind of surrogate identification” since Whitman excluded his written name from the title page of the 1855 edition, and, even when Whitman added his name to future editions, his image worked as a critical iconic frame of reference for Whitman’s readers (Folsom 135). Whitman presented his image every chance he could get, whether as a visual image in *Leaves of Grass*, or through textual description in various anonymous reviews and articles he penned about himself. Note how closely this description of himself written in the *Washington Morning Chronicle* in 1899 matches the 1855 pose in *Leaves of Grass*:

On Pennsylvania avenue or Seventh street or Fourteenth street, or perhaps of a Sunday, along the suburban roads toward Rock creek . . . you will meet moving along at a firm but moderate pace, a robust figure, a robust figure, six feet high, costumed in blue or gray, with drab hat, broad shirt-collar, gray-white beard, full and curly, face like a red apple, blue eyes, and a look of animal health more indicative of hunting or boating than the department office or author's desk. (qtd. in Holloway 483).

Whitman's use of camera-like descriptions of himself throughout his review reveals how he built his image in a variety of ways—either through the camera or through camera-like description. What is vital here is not that Whitman was merely interested in photography, but, moreover, that Whitman fundamentally altered the relationship between the poet and the reader, so that Whitman could be “frequently beloved at sight,” as he claimed (Holloway 485)ⁱ.

As Whitman revolutionized the literary world with his image and bravado, the larger entertainment world was following, using photography to propel actors and actresses into new, unprecedented states of fame. When Jenny Lind, a relatively unknown singer in the United States, toured American cities under the management of P.T. Barnum, she had her photograph taken in virtually every city she stayed, and quickly became one of the most well-known personalities in the country (Taft 81). Photography allowed for the dissemination of actors' and actresses' images relatively inexpensively, especially through *cartes de visite* (small picture calling cards) as well as regular picture postcards, which Cather bought as a child at The Red Cloud Opera House. One of Cather's favorite stars, Sarah Bernhardt, was largely responsible for significantly

changing the ways in which the public interacted with famous theatrical actors. As Heather McPherson argues in her look at actress Sarah Bernhardt's photographic images, "Although not the first to exploit the potential of new technologies and the emerging mass media," Bernhardt was "instrumental in creating a new paradigm...of the modern mass-media star" (78). Bernhardt used photography to "simulate and re-create the visual and emotional dynamics of her performance," and as a "genius" of publicity, she made sure newspapers in Europe, England, and the US carried full-page picture stories related to her every role.

Theodore Dreiser paints a vivid picture of theatrical celebrity in his 1900 novel Sister Carrie. Dreiser's novel focuses on the struggle of his heroine from demeaning sweat-shop labor positions to the pinnacle of modern day achievement: the limelight of the stage. Carrie, we are told, "longed to be renowned like others" in a "showy world" that "completely absorbed her" (348). After being pulled from her anonymous position in the chorus to a leading role, Carrie found a small notice in the paper. As a small first step to building a larger fame, Carrie "hugged herself with delight" (349). Later, Carrie's success grows, and she is renowned for her glamorous pictures which appear frequently in the paper. Dreiser details this celebrity world with characteristic social insight, as he tells us that:

It was about this time that the newspapers and magazines were beginning to pay that illustrative attention to the beauties of the stage which has since become fervid. The newspapers, and particularly the Sunday newspapers, indulged in large decorative theatrical pages, in which the faces and forms of well-known theatrical celebrities appeared, enclosed with artistic

scrolls. (Sister Carrie 349)

As Dreiser notes, the role of the actress in American culture during the 1890s and 1900s exploded, and newspapers and magazines became a new venue for fame and a barometer of success and cultural value. According to an extraordinary 1903 Cosmopolitan article on photography and image, Mrs. Wilson Woodrow notes that, “There is no class of women who are so frequently photographed as actresses.” She goes on to explain that photography “is a part of their professional life as much as learning their parts or looking after their costumes.” Woodrow argues that while actresses are certainly self-absorbed, it was the photograph’s ability to advertise that was “very necessary to her success.” Actresses, according to Woodrow, now needed a constant supply of new stylish photographs ready for public consumption or else “she is subject to the criticism that the public is tired of seeing her in one pose” since the “personal attraction of an actress is one of her trump-cards which she hopes will assist her in winning the game.” Fame, notoriety, and money are all apparent signs of “winning the game,” as Woodrow puts it. “The dream of every actress’ heart,” she tells her readers, “is that she may, with the photographer’s aid, achieve a picture so unusual and so exquisitely delineating her beauty that all the world shall wonder, admire, and hasten to see her in the portrayal of her various roles” (680-81). Self image, then, had become central to life in the public by the twentieth century, and it would demand a stronger negotiation by those in the spotlight to discern between the public and private. Leo Brady says that, “By the later 19th century, all the inner Napoleons, neglected geniuses, and spiritual adventurers—let alone the frankly ostentatious public man—had to put on more of a show to catch the attention of both the audience to which they played as well as the one they sought to reject” (491). It

was impossible, then, to be in the public spotlight and not be necessarily mixed up in the forces that were driving actresses to replicate their image over and over in the hopes of attaining some hope of fame.

Photography and the Catheters

While Brady photographed the rich and famous, photography also began to cater to lower and middle-class Americans. The rapid innovation of photography combined with its inherent ability to produce an image quickly and relatively inexpensively meant that “the camera democratized the image” since “large numbers of people could afford pictures of themselves” (Camera 22). Leo Braudy agrees that photography shifted the ownership of one’s image from a high-brow luxury to a middle-class indulgence. “One of photography’s most important effects,” he writes, “was to take the art of imaging out of the hands of those skilled enough to paint or engrave as well as those rich” (492). At the disposal of “virtually everyone,” Braudy says that Americans found an “immense vogue for individual and group portraits” after the Civil War. He writes that the public’s

desire to be recorded on film, and the desire of their friends, families, and admirers to retain those images was more than just a personal quirk. It also seems part of an overwhelming cultural need that photography half-discovered and half-simulated in order to furnish memory with precise visual details of face, dress, posture, and in the ways one appeared to others (493).

The ability to own a life-like representation of a family member or loved one certainly played into aspects of nineteenth-century sentimentality, in which photographs could be kept as mementos of loved ones, children, and mark other life ceremonies such as

marriages and funerals. Gus MacDonald believes that nineteenth century masses were attracted to photography because it was “infused by the warmth of the past” and would “come eventually to reinvest life with some reminders of its continuity and purpose” (59). In the same 1903 Cosmopolitan article discussed above, Mrs. Wilson Woodrow writes that,

That the desire to be photographed is almost universal is undeniable, else photography as a business would not be a recognized feature of commerce, and photographers would not multiply in numbers through the length and breadth of the land. Photographs! Photographs! They are everywhere; they cover our tables, they lie about our rooms, thick as the leaves of Vallombross (675).

In attempting to understand why women are so attracted to having their portraits taken, she suggests that besides serving women to “retain a record, at least, of the beauty which is exclusively her own—to render lasting and changeless that which in our nature is elusive and subject to imitation,” photographs also serve as a “record” of those “we cannot see...in the flesh...some record of their faces which shall assist our memories” (678;680).

After the Civil War photographic studios became prominent throughout the United States—even remote pioneer towns supported a full or part-time photographer. As with most middle-class American families of the period, photography was a meaningful part of Cather family life well before Willa’s birth. Photographs in the George Cather Ray Collection at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln suggest that Willa’s father, George P. Cather, was photographed as early as 1866 in Winchester, Virginia.

Studio portraits of the nineteenth century offered sitters the promise of an exciting experience. Much like the photographs of actors and actresses who posed in character with scenes and props from their respective plays, the nineteenth-century portrait studio offered everyone the opportunity to “perform.” Besides the theatre, studio portraits took its inspiration from older forms of portraiture, in which sitters were posed in various backgrounds or with various props to suggest aspects of their personality, profession, or social standing. Portrait studios commonly featured such amenities as “interchangeable backdrops, some on long rolls which could be wound through parklands, seascapes, conservatories and palm houses, until one was found to the sitter’s taste.” And studios were equipped with “drapes and classical columns,” “rustic bridges,” and even “swings and bicycles and motor cars” (*Camera* 30). Such theatrical settings can be seen in photographs throughout Cather’s childhood and young adulthood.

As early as 1879, Red Cloud had its first full-time photographer. According to the *Nebraska Gazetteer and Business Directory*, by the mid-1880s Red Cloud was supporting up to four professional photographers: Earle Tennant, W. Dickinson, and J. Wegman, and C. Owen. In 1888 the Bradbrook Studio opened on the Moon Block, and for the next two decades it would be the most stable and longest lasting portrait studio in town. Advertising in the *Red Cloud Chief* that when in town, visitors should “take the trolley to Bradbrook Studio on the Moon Block” (Check Quote), since the novelty of photography served not only Red Cloud residents, but also to rural visitors, in town to buy necessities and spend extra money.

Bradbrook captured the first photographs in which Cather as an adolescent took on a boyish appearance. As scholars have repeatedly pointed out, these photographs serve

to show her innate ability to play with outward appearances. As Sharon O'Brien argues, Cather's early exposure to photography fostered a desire to "express the human possibilities" (101). As Cather grew older, as Janis Stout reads it, she began "to realize that such a [boyish] persona was not entirely necessary" (20). Instead, Cather, seemingly without hesitation, began to dress professionally, adopting dresses, cloaks, and fine hats, all the fashionable items required to take on her new part-time job as drama critic for Lincoln's newspapers. Cather, then, at an early age demonstrated a keen knowledge and ability to transform her public identity through dress and photography. Largely understood through her knowledge and participation in the theatre, and through her reading and knowledge of Whitman, who she wrote a critical review of in 1896.

Whitman's influence on Cather is most notable in the title of her first major novel, *O Pioneers!*, named after Whitman's poem by the same title.

Cather and the Snapshot

While Cather's portrait studio photographs provide us with formal images of Cather, the growth of personal amateur photography allowed for another side of Cather to emerge in private photographs, meant for friends, family, and Cather herself. The large collection of known snapshot pictures feature Cather relaxed settings, either on vacation site, or posed with family and friends. Personal picture taking by the mass public began with Kodak's 1888 introduction of the box camera. With a simple and effective design, Kodak advertised it's new camera with the slogan, "Anybody can use the Kodak. Press the button—we do the rest" (*Kodak* 56). At twenty-five dollars, the camera included 100 pictures and developing, and photography a playful amusement for the adventurous amateur. In his history of Kodak, Douglas Collins says that "With its leather carrying

case strung over the shoulder, the Kodak camera was stylish, portable, and conveniently available whenever the occasion called for a picture” (58). The new portable camera meant that people could now integrate photography into their daily lives, taking photographs of landscapes, family, friends and themselves in much more private, intimate ways. Further, amateur photographers were allowed total freedom in how to take pictures and how they wanted to visually record their world. Such possibility meant that amateurs could play with their own sense of style and create a personal aesthetic style. For Cather, it seems that her personal photography was a place to show a private side to her personality, but nevertheless, it was also a place for Cather to experiment with poses, clothing, and photographic techniques.

As photographs from the recently donated in the Philip L. and Helen Cather Southwick Collection at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln powerfully suggest, snapshot pictures were a meaningful part of Cather’s life. As early as her college years in Lincoln, Cather was posing for casual pictures. Perhaps the most well-known snapshot from this period is a picture with Cather posed in front of a famous boulder on the NU campus. Wearing a long dress and a straw hat, she strikes a pose with her arms crossed before her. Importantly, it is the same pose that Cather will strike for Steichen’s Vanity Fair shoot in 1927, and showcases Cather’s early experimentation with a “look” that she would refine throughout her life.

Snap shots effectively document how much of Cather’s public image was a reflection of her own private taste, style, and everyday life. The sailor shirt and tie, a popular women’s clothing item throughout the teens, twenties, and thirties, was a particular favorite for Cather. Find photos to talk about here...In tying her everyday style

into her celebrity portrait for Steichen, Cather was trying pull an authentic part of herself into her public image. This suggests that Cather was very much aware of how her visual celebrity culture worked, and how she tried to construct a more “real” sense of herself in a media system that was, in many ways, dedicated to “a high-stakes game of pursuit and seduction,” as Tyler Cowen puts it in his study of fame (66).

The Graphic Revolution Fuels the Icon

In the 1910s and twenties, Cather was dealing with the after effects of what cultural historian Neil Harris calls the “iconographical revolution,” roughly covering the years 1885-1910. The increasing refinement of half-tone printing processes since the 1880s meant that by the 1920s, magazines and newspapers could mass produce sharp photographic-quality images cheaply. Cather knew first-hand of this emerging technology as she worked at McClure’s Magazine. In S.S. McClure’s *My Autobiography* ghost written by Cather, McClure explains that “The development of photo-engraving made such a publication than more possibleⁱⁱ,” (207) and Cather’s editorial position at the magazine positioned her at the center of this emerging image culture.

The iconographical revolution was further advanced through the growing motion picture industry. The “movie star” became a new phenomenon that tied magazines, Hollywood, and advertising together, giving rise to a much different public personality than that of the nineteenth century; that is, these stars could generate significant public interest and fascination not so much by what they did, but by the sheer fact of who they *were* (Susman 223). In Richard Schickel’s *His Picture in the Papers: A Speculation on Celebrity in America based on the Life of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.*, Schickel argues that the movie celebrity forever altered the expectations the public had toward *all* public

persons. According to Schickel, politicians, writers, artists, intellectuals, and even scientists became “performers so that they may become celebrities so that in turn they may exert genuine influence on the general public” (9). This transformation of the public figure into celebrity figure resulted into two competing realities; on the one hand there was one’s everyday common life and on the other, there was the life one lived through newspapers and magazines, a reality in which celebrities could be “as familiar to us, in some ways, as our friends and neighbors” dominating “enormous amounts” of “psychic energy and attention” even though the closest the average person would ever come to knowing these celebrities was in a half-tone photographic image—literally, ink on paper (8).

This celebrity culture formulated itself most powerfully in the pages of popular magazines, and no other magazine between the two world wars so expressed that celebrity culture than *Vanity Fair*, a gem in publisher’s Conde Nast’s crown that included best-selling *Vogue* and later, *Home & Garden*. *Vanity Fair* was founded in 1914 as a competitor to H.L. Mencken’s *The Smart Set*, and *Vogue*’s success allowed Condé Nast to make *Vanity Fair* a “slick” magazine that incorporated all the costly elements that the financially rocky *Smart Set* was unable to give its readers: high quality paper, graphic design, and a plethora of images. Editor Frank Crowninshield bought a small New York “peekaboo” magazine by the name of *Vanity Fair* in 1913, with a short-lived intention to reincarnate it into a *Vogue*-like fashion magazine. In 1914, however, Crowninshield decided that he wanted *Vanity Fair* to be a magazine “read by people you meet at lunches and dinners” covering “the things people talk about at parties—the arts, sports, theatre, humor, and so forth” (qtd. in Douglas 96). Crowninshield’s main interest was making

Vanity Fair something to talk about by publishing the first stories on European and American *avant garde* literature and art. In particular, *Vanity Fair* printed some of the first images of Picasso and Matisse, ran poems by Dorothy Parker and articles by Robert Benchley. As magazine historian George Douglas says of *Vanity Fair*, “it was as appealing to the eye as it was to the tastes of its intended readers...it always had substance and it always had guts” (94). With style and substance, *Vanity Fair* attracted the attention of New York’s educated and its rich, and while it never attained mass market appeal (the circulation rate hovered below 100,000), the expensive advertising rates *Vanity Fair* was able to charge its elite advertisers gave Conde Nast a profitable income.

Although it began in 1914, the magazine didn’t hit its stride after WWI, when, perhaps due to a mixture of toying with the magazine’s content formula and the birth of the Jazz age, it became stylish to read. Readers of *Vanity Fair* are said to have conspicuously read the magazine in public and placed copies of the magazine on coffee tables before parties. The popularity of the magazine suggests how it so masterfully captured the spirit of the post-war era: witty, playful, experimental, and rich. As John Russell says in his introduction to *Vanity Fair: Photographs of an Age*, “Vanity Fair was not in the business of aesthetics. It was in the business of getting people talked about” (xvii). Those talked about included the obvious group of Hollywood and Broadway celebrities such as Charlie Chaplin and Gloria Swanson, but also included a surprisingly eclectic group of personalities including scientists, professional tennis players, golfers, boxers, conductors, composers, writers, critics, and even dog breeders. This construction of celebrity within Vanity Fair intermixed full-page portraits of well-known Hollywood

and Broadway stars with the less well-recognized, putting a glamorous face to writers, intellectuals, and composers while at the same time giving an intellectual flair to the Hollywood celebrity. *Vanity Fair*, I suggest, defined celebrity in much more inclusive and even intellectual terms than other popular magazines of its time. Within *Vanity Fair* one could be a celebrity without the narrow definition of the “movie star.”

Crowninshield assumed his readers were, as he said, “people of discriminations, clever, and full of a wide and varied culture,” and so he assumed that such readers would naturally be interested in those he and his friends were interested in, from the stage actor to writer to sportswoman (qtd. in Russel xii).

The Image Maker

Perhaps one of the most key aspects of the magazine’s popularity stemmed from its use of photography within its pages. Crowninshield’s belief that fine fashion photography could be elevated to an art form had helped *Vogue* become one of the most popular fashion magazines of the time, and he had similar revolutionary plans for photography in *Vanity Fair*. Hiring portrait artists who included Edward Steichen and Man Ray, relative unknowns in the high art world since museums and collectors had no interest in buying portrait photography, Crowninshield gave these photographers “privacy, discretion, unstressed commitment” and paid Steichen (at least) a salary of \$35,000.

Edward Steichen had been in the art world for over twenty years by the time he signed onto *Vanity Fair*. Slightly younger than Cather, Steichen was born in 1879 in Luxembourg, and came Michigan as a small boy. As a young teenager he taught himself photography while apprenticing as a lithographer. He moved to Paris to study drawing

and painting, but quickly became well known for his innovative photography and for his photo portraits of famous artists. Moving back to New York in the early 1900s, Steichen became involved with Alfred Stieglitz's circle and he was a founding member of "291" and Photo-Secession galleries. During WWI, Steichen helped develop aerial photography and it was during this period that he began a process of greatly re-evaluating his aesthetics. Moving from the early photographic style of soft focus pictorialism, Steichen's work with aerial photography began to peak his interest in sharp lines and clean detail—the fundamental aesthetic qualities that he used to transform portrait photography. By the early 1920s, Steichen attained fame for *avant garde* work, yet, according to Joanna Steichen, his "photography brought Steichen more fame than income" (xx). That all changed in 1923, however, when Steichen accepted his position with Vanity Fair and Vogue. The high salary commanded from Condé Nast raised eyebrows among Steiglitz's crowd, who saw Steichen's venture into commercial photography as selling out on their quest to improve the stature of photography in the art world. But, according to Joanna Steichen, he believed in "the photograph's potential as a medium for mass communication," viewing his work with magazines as an artistic and aesthetic challenge to raise the everyday pedestrian magazine photo into an artistic object (xx). No doubt, Steichen's knowledge of mass communication directly led to his ability to produce what we now recognize as iconic photographs of his subjects.

Cather first appeared in Vanity Fair in a 1922 article titled, "American Novelists Who Have Set Art above Popularity: A group of authors who have consistently stood out against Philistia," Cather is featured in group of authors including Theodore Dreiser ("among the most extraordinary phenomena of American letters"), James Branch Cabell

(“quite unlike anything else in American fiction”), Edith Wharton (“The greatest living American novelist”), and Sherwood Anderson (“Foremost among those who are using the novel as a means of criticizing American civilization”). For Cather, the magazine cited H.L. Mencken’s belief that “My Antonia is the best novel ever written by an American woman writer” (page reproduced in Amory, Vanity Fair: Selections From America’s Most Memorable Magazine 58). The magazine’s title for this page suggests some critical tensions with its own view of celebrity culture as it highlights the fact that this group of authors puts “Art Above Popularity” even though the magazine itself centers itself around that celebrity culture. Perhaps the key here is the magazine’s reference to the “Philistia,” or the low-brow common reader who did not read *Vanity Fair* and thereby defined the intellectual superiority of the *Vanity Fair* reader. Yet, no matter how *Vanity Fair* positioned these writers to its readers, the fact remains that this first mention in *Vanity Fair* marks her entrée into the developing celebrity culture of the 1920s.

Her inclusion into celebrity culture came to full fruition in 1927 when Cather’s Steichen portrait was featured in Vanity Fair. Cather and Steichen had dinner plans in February 1927, most likely making plans for the sitting. Certainly Steichen and Cather shared common interests and his work (which included portraits of some of Cather’s early heroes such as Duse and Bernhardt) must have fascinated her. Further, Cather must have realized that, as David Friend notes in his recent *Vanity Fair* article, Steichen was so well known for his images that “fellow photographers snapped up issues of the magazine each month, hoping to detect new nuances in his lighting or backdrops which they could then mimic” (370).

In the portrait published in Vanity Fair, Cather is featured as Steichen captured most of his writers, sitting. She is looking slightly downward to the camera with her arms on the chair, looking comfortable, relaxed and self-assured. Titled “An American Pioneer—Willa Cather,” with the sub-heading, “The Noted Novelist Has Just Completed Her New Work ‘Death Comes for the Archbishop’,” the accompanying text names Cather “the heir apparent to Edith Wharton’s lonely eminence among America’s women novelists.” The text further notes that

She writes in a way that seems utterly transparent and forthright but that conceals in its overtones a vast and subtle interplay of ironical intelligence. The depth and variety of her understanding is implicit in a swift, muscular style, wrought with an economy that discovers the inevitable word and the inevitable idea.

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Joanna Steichen notes that in many of Steichen’s photographs of women subjects that “no matter what the pose, the era, the woman’s age or position in the world, her eyes confront the camera directly, holding their own, challenging the observer” (89). Certainly this estimation fits aspects Cather’s portrait, especially in terms of her body language in which crossed arms signify confrontation. But perhaps Cather’s gaze here is more complex than a simple challenge to her viewer: there is a warmth in her eyes that gives the portrait a rich sense of Cather’s sympathy and at the same time, there is a sense of self-assuredness, as though she is telling her audience that she has proven herself in the world, and she has done it on her own terms. Further, the softness of her linen shirt and the loose tie around her neck, rather than giving an effect of a stuffy masculinity, give the

viewer the sense that we have found the writer at work.

How pre-determined this pose was set up is perhaps difficult to speculate. According to one biographer, Steichen liked to improvise on his *Vanity Fair* portraits—since these last-minute improvisations usually led to his best work. Joanna Steichen says that her husband often “set up” last minute changes “to transmit the essence of a play or a personality in a single image,” and that he was interested in capturing “private character in the public fasces he photographed” (89-90). This famous picture of Greta Garbo, for example, was taken after Steichen complained about her “fluffy” hair, and in frustration she pulled it back (515). Steichen is known to have worked closely with his famous models, putting them at ease and drawing out of each the real person behind the public face (514).

While there is little evidence of Cather’s participation and reaction to the Vanity Fair issue, what we have suggests she was proud of the picture. Blanche Knopf was so impressed with the Vanity Fair issue she sent a telegram to Cather in Wyoming writing, “HAVE JUST SEEN STEICHEN PHOTOGRAPH IN VANITY FAIR SIMPLY SUPERB DON’T YOU THINK WOULD LIKE TO USE IT TOO IF THEY PERMIT AND YOU APPROVE WITH MY LOVE”(17 June 1927, HRC). Cather quickly replied that by contract the photo belonged to Conde Nast (WC to BK 19 June 1927, HRC). Later in the late ’30s, Cather approved the Steichen photo for her Autograph edition with Knopf.

The Iconic Cather

Much like Whitman, Twain, and Charlie Chaplin, the building blocks of the American iconic figure seem steeped in a tradition of visual repetition through dress, what Sarah Burns calls “key markers of the public self” (223). While Cather never

developed a strict costume as Twain's post 1906 white suit ensemble, Cather developed and maintained a visual look that the public could easily recognize after her break with *McClure's*. In doing so, Cather built her iconic image in a subtle, but nevertheless effective, visual manner through her white middy blouse with loose-fitting tie. The look, much in the tradition of Whitman, ties Cather to her middle and working class readers since the look was popular, comfortable, and relaxed. Snap shot pictures reveal that this look was not a staged fiction, but rather an expression of her everyday daily style. The "Cather" constructed in the glamorous Steichen photo is the same Cather captured in private snap shot photographs at Grand Manan.

That Cather continued to wear the middy blouse and tie after 1927 reflects her interest in this look. In 1933 and 1940 newspaper features on Cather, for example, she reappears in her middy blouse and tie, and affirms the former iconic image she created years before. While the Steichen photograph highlights the celebrity culture and image of the 1920s, the outdoorsy, snap-shot style of these photographs presents the same Cather in nature. Authors of both features pick up on Cather's image as a writer of the prairie, and ties her physical appearance into her literary style. For example, in Dorothy Canfield Fisher's 1933 essay on Cather, the sub-head reads, "Willa Cather Lived Her Books Before She Wrote Them. Her Girlhood Was Spent on the Unfenced Prairie; She Knew the Trials and Triumphs of the Pioneer." In the New York *Herald Tribune* article, authors Stephen Vincent and Rosemary Benet similarly describe Cather as a real, unaffected person, having "no ivory tower about" her, as the say, since "she is too hearty for that." Of her appearance they write, "Of medium height, with clear blue eyes, she gives an impression of great intellectual vitality and serenity combined, calm strength and lively

independence” (6).

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ⁱ Unlike many other 19th century writers who created *non-de plums* to invent a literary character to help separate the private writer from the public eye, such as Fanny Fern and E.D.E.N. Southworth, Whitman's creation of "Walt Whitman" was a more authentic public personae, and that personae complicated the line between public and private life, fact and fiction. While the images he published of himself were largely life-like representations, they were nevertheless staged creations--staged as any studio portrait is an artificial pose created by the photographer's expertise and the sitter's imagination. Perhaps the most famous Whitman photograph that documents the "unreality" of his personae is his early 1880s portrait in which Whitman sits in profile with arm resting on his chair, gazing at a butterfly on his finger. Although Whitman is quoted as defending that it "was an actual moth," the butterfly was actually a cardboard cutout, found after Whitman's death. The butterfly, then, becomes an interesting metaphor in discussing Whitman's image and the layers of possible fictions that lie between Whitman and his viewer. While photographs provided Americans with a new realistic look at life, it was not without its visual tricks. As Folsom notes, the butterfly acts as an important metaphor throughout *Leaves of Grass*, and so in looking at images of Whitman or any other writer for that matter, the viewer must read under the various layers of visual meaning that may be at work ("Notes on Whitman Photographs" n. 18).

ⁱⁱ). Indeed, as magazine historian David Reed notes of *McClure's*, "photographs had come to play a ... prominent role on the magazine's pages at 49% of all reproductions used"