

## A Wagner Matinee

Short Story by Willa Cather



**READING 5A** Evaluate how different literary elements shape the author's portrayal of plot and setting. **5B** Analyze the internal and external development of characters through a range of literary devices. **RC-11(B)** Make complex inferences about text.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Willa Cather . . .

- had such a sharp memory for mannerisms and turns of speech that she never took notes.
- wrote six novels about her home town of Red Cloud, Nebraska, while living in New York's Greenwich Village.
- received the Pulitzer Prize in 1923.

### Meet the Author

## Willa Cather 1873–1947

Willa Cather believed that “the most basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of 15.” Indeed, it was the American West of Cather’s early years that inspired the majority of her literary successes.

**The Power of Place** At age nine, Virginia-born Willa Cather moved to Nebraska with her family. The prairie challenged Cather—and almost all other settlers—with its “erasure of personality” and made her feel that she “would go under.” But after a difficult transition, Cather grew to love the harsh prairie and to admire the immigrants—especially women—who struggled daily against an unforgiving climate. Though they lived by hard physical labor, many of these immigrants were educated people. They introduced Cather to French and German literature, also teaching her

Latin and Greek. Nebraska and Cather’s childhood neighbors—whose stories “went round and round in [her] head”—dramatically influenced her writing.

**Seeing the World** After college, where she did some writing, Cather went back east and worked as a journalist, teacher, and magazine editor. During this

time, she met her best friend, Isabelle McClung, who sparked in her a lifelong interest in music, which can be seen in “A Wagner Matinee.” She also formed lifelong relationships with her companion Edith Lewis and writer Sarah Orne Jewett. Cather also saw something of the world on several trips to France and then to the American Southwest.

**Developing a Voice** Around 1906, Cather moved to New York City and began a full-time writing career. Though she never lived in Nebraska again, the prairie was never far from her work. Many of her 12 novels and 58 stories had prairie settings or immigrant characters, showing Cather’s respect for the grit needed to endure everyday life. Some of these characters were directly drawn from real people Cather had known, such as childhood friend Annie (Anna) who formed the basis of the main character in her novel *My Antonia*.

**Choices** Willa Cather chose an artist’s life rather than the everyday family life she so closely observed in her Nebraska neighbors. She once said to a friend that “nothing mattered to her but writing books, and living the kind of life that makes it possible to write them.” Willa Cather lived that life until her death in 1947.



Author Online



Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com). KEYWORD: HML11-716

## LITERARY ANALYSIS: SETTING

In Willa Cather's fiction, the development of the plot and characters is heavily influenced by the **setting**, or the time and place in which the story occurs. In "A Wagner Matinee," the narrator's aunt has moved from Boston to the Nebraska frontier; these places determine the kind of person she becomes. Setting can also serve as a **symbol**. As you read, note the details of each location and what they seem to represent.

## READING SKILL: DRAW CONCLUSIONS ABOUT CHARACTER

Understanding a character in a story is like getting to know a real person. You **draw conclusions**, or make reasonable judgments, about the person by combining the impressions you have already formed with new facts you discover. To become better acquainted with Aunt Georgiana, the main character in "A Wagner Matinee," look closely at the details as you read the story. Create a chart like the one shown, using it to record details and **make inferences** about Aunt Georgiana. At the end of the story, you will use these specific inferences to draw larger conclusions about her character.

<i>Observations About ...</i>	<i>What They Reveal</i>
<i>physical appearance:</i> • •	
<i>major decision:</i> • •	
<i>actions and reactions:</i> • •	

## VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Cather uses the listed words to develop setting and character. Choose a word from the list to complete each phrase.

<b>WORD LIST</b>	callow	overture	tentatively
	excruciatingly	somnambulant	veritable
	myriad	sordid	

1. \_\_\_\_\_ employees with more bravado than experience
2. \_\_\_\_\_ tasks to complete—almost too many to count
3. living in \_\_\_\_\_, disgusting conditions
4. agreed \_\_\_\_\_ to take on the additional work



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

## Does it matter where we LIVE?

Imagine life on an island with only a few dozen other people. How would it shape your social life? your work habits? your relationship to nature? Now think about life in a big city. How would these things be different? The places we live really shape our personality and values.

**DISCUSS** As a class, choose two very different places and discuss the lifestyles of the people who live there. Then consider how life in each place would shape the personalities of its inhabitants.



# A Wagner Matinee

Willa Cather

**BACKGROUND** “A Wagner Matinee” takes place in Nebraska and Boston around 1900. At the time, Bostonians could attend concerts of works by European composers such as Richard Wagner (væg'nər). Americans who moved west, such as Willa Cather's family and Aunt Georgiana in this story, left such worldly pleasures behind. Instead, the settlers endured long hours of strenuous labor, and natural disasters such as drought, flood, and prairie fires.

I received one morning a letter, written in pale ink on glassy, blue-lined note-  
paper, and bearing the postmark of a little Nebraska village. This communication,  
worn and rubbed, looking as though it had been carried for some days in a coat  
pocket that was none too clean, was from my Uncle Howard and informed me  
that his wife had been left a small legacy by a bachelor relative who had recently  
died, and that it would be necessary for her to go to Boston to attend to the  
settling of the estate. He requested me to meet her at the station and render her  
whatever services might be necessary. On examining the date indicated as that of  
her arrival, I found it no later than tomorrow. He had characteristically delayed  
writing until, had I been away from home for a day, I must have missed the good  
woman altogether. **A**

The name of my Aunt Georgiana called up not alone her own figure, at once  
pathetic and grotesque, but opened before my feet a gulf of recollection so wide  
and deep, that, as the letter dropped from my hand, I felt suddenly a stranger to  
all the present conditions of my existence, wholly ill at ease and out of place amid  
the familiar surroundings of my study. I became, in short, the gangling farmer-boy

## Analyze Visuals ►

Look at the painting on page 719. What might souvenirs like this signify to a settler who left the city for life on the prairie? Explain.



TEKS 2B

### THEME AND GENRE

When you grow old, will you be satisfied with the life you've lived? That's a question people have been asking for ages. From Philip Roth's recent novel *Everyman* (2006) to comedies like *Dan in Real Life* (2007), writers and filmmakers have created characters who have regrets about their life. Can you think of other 21st-century works that share this focus?

### **A** SETTING

What does the **description** of the letter tell you about the place the letter was sent from? What does the description suggest about the place the letter was sent to? Give details to support your answer.



IMPORTANT INFORMATION INSIDE

BY J. J. BARNETT  
1921

my aunt had known, scourged with chilblains<sup>1</sup> and bashfulness, my hands cracked and sore from the corn husking. I felt the knuckles of my thumb **tentatively**, as though they were raw again. I sat again before her parlor organ, fumbling the  
20 scales with my stiff, red hands, while she, beside me, made canvas mittens for the huskers.<sup>2</sup>

The next morning, after preparing my landlady somewhat, I set out for the station. When the train arrived I had some difficulty in finding my aunt. She was the last of the passengers to alight, and it was not until I got her into the carriage that she seemed really to recognize me. She had come all the way in a day coach; her linen duster<sup>3</sup> had become black with soot and her black bonnet grey with dust during the journey. When we arrived at my boarding-house the landlady put her to bed at once and I did not see her again until the next morning.

30 Whatever shock Mrs. Springer experienced at my aunt's appearance, she considerably concealed. As for myself, I saw my aunt's misshapen figure with that feeling of awe and respect with which we behold explorers who have left their ears and fingers north of Franz-Josef-Land, or their health somewhere along the Upper Congo.<sup>4</sup> My Aunt Georgiana had been a music teacher at the Boston Conservatory, somewhere back in the latter sixties. One summer, while visiting in the little village among the Green Mountains<sup>5</sup> where her ancestors had dwelt

**tentatively**  
(tĕn'tĕ-tĭv-lĕ) *adv.* in a  
hesitant or uncertain  
manner

### Language Coach

**Prefixes** *Misshapen* (line 30) means "badly shaped" or "deformed." The prefix *mis-* means "wrong," "badly," or "not." Using this information, give the meanings of the following words: *misadvise*, *misdeed*, *misunderstood*.

1. **scourged with chilblains:** tormented with painful swelling or sores on the hands or feet caused by exposure to the cold.
2. **huskers:** farm workers who remove cornhusks by hand.
3. **duster:** a long, lightweight overgarment to protect clothing from dust.
4. **Franz-Josef-Land . . . Upper Congo:** Franz-Josef-Land is a group of small, mostly ice-covered islands in the Arctic Ocean, north of Russia. The Upper Congo, in central Africa, is now called the Zaire River.
5. **Green Mountains:** a mountain range in Vermont.

*Family and Their Dugout* (1870s), Anonymous. Photo 11" × 14". Near McCook, Nebraska. © Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.



for generations, she had kindled the **callow** fancy of the most idle and shiftless of all the village lads, and had conceived for this Howard Carpenter one of those extravagant passions which a handsome country boy of twenty-one sometimes inspires in an angular, spectacled woman of thirty. When she returned to her  
40 duties in Boston, Howard followed her, and the upshot of this inexplicable infatuation was that she eloped with him, eluding the reproaches of her family and the criticisms of her friends by going with him to the Nebraska frontier. Carpenter, who, of course, had no money, had taken a homestead in Red Willow County,<sup>6</sup> fifty miles from the railroad. There they had measured off their quarter section themselves by driving across the prairie in a wagon, to the wheel of which they had tied a red cotton handkerchief, and counting off its revolutions. They built a dugout in the red hillside, one of those cave dwellings whose inmates so often reverted to primitive conditions. Their water they got from the lagoons  
50 where the buffalo drank, and their slender stock of provisions was always at the mercy of bands of roving Indians. For thirty years my aunt had not been further than fifty miles from the homestead. **B**

But Mrs. Springer knew nothing of all this, and must have been considerably shocked at what was left of my kinswoman. Beneath the soiled linen duster which, on her arrival, was the most conspicuous feature of her costume, she wore a black stuff<sup>7</sup> dress, whose ornamentation showed that she had surrendered herself unquestioningly into the hands of a country dressmaker. My poor aunt's figure, however, would have presented astonishing difficulties to any dressmaker. Originally stooped, her shoulders were now almost bent together over her sunken chest. She wore no stays, and her gown, which trailed unevenly behind, rose in a sort  
60 of peak over her abdomen. She wore ill-fitting false teeth, and her skin was as yellow as a Mongolian's from constant exposure to a pitiless wind and to the alkaline water which hardens the most transparent cuticle into a sort of flexible leather. **C**

I owed to this woman most of the good that ever came my way in my boyhood, and had a reverential affection for her. During the years when I was riding herd for my uncle, my aunt, after cooking the three meals—the first of which was ready at six o'clock in the morning—and putting the six children to bed, would often stand until midnight at her ironing-board, with me at the kitchen table beside her, hearing me recite Latin declensions and conjugations,<sup>8</sup> gently shaking me when my drowsy head sank down over a page of irregular verbs. It was to her, at her ironing  
70 or mending, that I read my first Shakespeare, and her old text-book on mythology was the first that ever came into my empty hands. She taught me my scales and exercises, too—on the little parlor organ, which her husband had bought her after fifteen years, during which she had not so much as seen any instrument, but an accordion that belonged to one of the Norwegian farmhands. She would sit beside me by the hour, darning and counting while I struggled with the “Joyous Farmer,”<sup>9</sup> but she seldom talked to me about music, and I understood why. She was a pious

**callow** (kāl'ō) *adj.* lacking adult experience; immature

**B SETTING**

Consider the **description** of the homestead in lines 43–51. How do you think life in such a place might affect a woman with Aunt Georgiana's background?

**C DRAW CONCLUSIONS**

Reread lines 52–62. What can you **infer** about Aunt Georgiana based on Cather's vivid description of her physical appearance?

6. **Red Willow County:** county in southwestern Nebraska, bordering on Kansas.

7. **stuff:** a woolen material.

8. **Latin declensions and conjugations:** forms of Latin nouns and verbs representing different cases and tenses.

9. **“Joyous Farmer”:** one of a series of musical pieces for children by German composer Robert Schumann.

woman; she had the consolations of religion and, to her at least, her martyrdom was not wholly **sordid**. Once when I had been doggedly beating out some easy passages from an old score of *Euryanthe*<sup>10</sup> I had found among her music books, she came up  
80 to me and, putting her hands over my eyes, gently drew my head back upon her shoulder, saying tremulously, “Don’t love it so well, Clark, or it may be taken from you. Oh! dear boy, pray that whatever your sacrifice may be, it be not that.” **D**

When my aunt appeared on the morning after her arrival, she was still in a semi-**somnambulant** state. She seemed not to realize that she was in the city where she had spent her youth, the place longed for hungrily half a lifetime. She had been so wretchedly train-sick throughout the journey that she had no recollection of anything but her discomfort, and, to all intents and purposes, there were but a few hours of nightmare between the farm in Red Willow County and my study on Newbury Street. I had planned a little pleasure for her that  
90 afternoon, to repay her for some of the glorious moments she had given me when we used to milk together in the straw-thatched cowshed and she, because I was more than usually tired, or because her husband had spoken sharply to me, would tell me of the splendid performance of the *Huguenots*<sup>11</sup> she had seen in Paris, in her youth. At two o’clock the Symphony Orchestra was to give a Wagner program, and I intended to take my aunt; though, as I conversed with her, I grew doubtful about her enjoyment of it. Indeed, for her own sake, I could only wish her taste for such things quite dead, and the long struggle mercifully ended at last. I suggested our visiting the Conservatory and the Common<sup>12</sup> before lunch,  
100 absently about various changes in the city, but she was chiefly concerned that she had forgotten to leave instructions about feeding half-skimmed milk to a certain weakling calf, “old Maggie’s calf, you know, Clark,” she explained, evidently having forgotten how long I had been away. She was further troubled because she had neglected to tell her daughter about the freshly-opened kit of mackerel in the cellar, which would spoil if it were not used directly.

I asked her whether she had ever heard any of the Wagnerian operas,<sup>13</sup> and found that she had not, though she was perfectly familiar with their respective situations, and had once possessed the piano score of *The Flying Dutchman*. I began to think it would have been best to get her back to Red Willow County  
110 without waking her, and regretted having suggested the concert.

From the time we entered the concert hall, however, she was a trifle less passive and inert, and for the first time seemed to perceive her surroundings. I had felt some trepidation lest she might become aware of the absurdities of her attire, or might experience some painful embarrassment at stepping suddenly into the world to which she had been dead for a quarter of a century. But, again, I found how superficially I

**sordid** (sôr’dîd) *adj.*  
wretched; dirty; morally degraded

**D DRAW CONCLUSIONS**

Reread lines 63–82. What does Aunt Georgiana’s treatment of her nephew reveal about her?

**somnambulant**  
(sôm-năm’byə-lənt’) *adj.*  
sleepwalking

**Language Coach**

**Synonyms** *Concerned* (line 100) and *troubled* (line 103) are **synonyms**, words that have similar meanings. What do *concerned* and *troubled* mean—what is Aunt Georgiana feeling?

10. **Euryanthe** (yŭŏr’ē-ăn’tĕhē): an opera by German composer Carl Maria von Weber.

11. **Huguenots** (hyŭŏ’gə-nŏts’): an opera by German composer Giacomo Meyerbeer.

12. **the Common**: Boston Common, a public park.

13. **Wagnerian operas**: The orchestra will play selections from several operas composed by Wagner, including *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser*, *Tristan and Isolde*, and a cycle of four operas called *The Ring of the Nibelung*.

had judged her. She sat looking about her with eyes as impersonal, almost as stony, as those with which the granite Rameses<sup>14</sup> in a museum watches the froth and fret that ebbs and flows<sup>15</sup> about his pedestal—separated from it by the lonely stretch of centuries. I have seen this same aloofness in old miners who drift into the Brown  
120 hotel at Denver, their pockets full of bullion,<sup>16</sup> their linen soiled, their haggard faces unshaven; standing in the thronged corridors as solitary as though they were still in a frozen camp on the Yukon, conscious that certain experiences have isolated them from their fellows by a gulf no haberdasher<sup>17</sup> could bridge.

We sat at the extreme left of the first balcony, facing the arc of our own and the balcony above us, **veritable** hanging gardens, brilliant as tulip beds. The matinée audience was made up chiefly of women. One lost the contour of faces and figures, indeed any effect of line whatever, and there was only the color of bodices past counting, the shimmer of fabrics soft and firm, silky and sheer; red, mauve, pink, blue, lilac, purple, ecru, rose, yellow, cream, and white, all the colors that an  
130 impressionist<sup>18</sup> finds in a sunlit landscape, with here and there the dead shadow of a frock coat. My Aunt Georgiana regarded them as though they had been so many daubs of tube-paint on a palette.

When the musicians came out and took their places, she gave a little stir of anticipation and looked with quickening interest down over the rail at that invariable grouping, perhaps the first wholly familiar thing that had greeted her eye since she had left old Maggie and her weakling calf. I could feel how all those details sank into her soul, for I had not forgotten how they had sunk into mine when I came fresh from ploughing forever and forever between green aisles of corn, where, as in a treadmill, one might walk from daybreak to dusk without  
140 perceiving a shadow of change. The clean profiles of the musicians, the gloss of their linen, the dull black of their coats, the beloved shapes of the instruments, the patches of yellow light thrown by the green shaded lamps on the smooth, varnished bellies of the 'cellos and the bass viols in the rear, the restless, wind-tossed forest of fiddle necks and bows—I recalled how, in the first orchestra I had ever heard, those long bow strokes seemed to draw the heart out of me, as a conjurer's stick reels out yards of paper ribbon from a hat. **E**

The first number was the *Tannhauser* **overture**. When the horns drew out the first strain of the Pilgrim's chorus, my Aunt Georgiana clutched my coat sleeve. Then it was I first realized that for her this broke a silence of thirty years; the  
150 inconceivable silence of the plains. With the battle between the two motives, with the frenzy of the Venusberg theme and its ripping of strings, there came to me an overwhelming sense of the waste and wear we are so powerless to combat;

**veritable** (və'rɪ-tə-bəl)  
*adj.* true; not unreal or imaginary

**E SETTING**

Reread lines 133–146.  
How does Aunt Georgiana respond to the setting of the Boston concert hall?

**overture** (ō'vər-chōōr')  
*n.* the orchestral introduction to a musical dramatic work

14. **Rameses** (räm'ɪ-sēz'): one of the ancient kings of Egypt of that name.

15. **froth . . . flows**: happiness and sadness that come and go.

16. **bullion**: gold.

17. **haberdasher**: a dealer in men's clothing and accessories.

18. **impressionist**: a follower of a movement in French painting that emphasized the play of light and color.

and I saw again the tall, naked house on the prairie, black and grim as a wooden fortress; the black pond where I had learned to swim, its margin pitted with sun-dried cattle tracks; the rain-gullied clay banks about the naked house, the four dwarf ash seedlings where the dish-cloths were always hung to dry before the kitchen door. The world there was the flat world of the ancients; to the east, a cornfield that stretched to daybreak; to the west, a corral that reached to sunset; between, the conquests of peace, dearer bought than those of war.

160 The overture closed, my aunt released my coat sleeve, but she said nothing. She sat staring at the orchestra through a dullness of thirty years, through the films made little by little by each of the three hundred and sixty-five days in every one of them. What, I wondered, did she get from it? She had been a good pianist in her day I knew, and her musical education had been broader than that of most music teachers of a quarter of a century ago. She had often told me of Mozart's operas and Meyerbeer's, and I could remember hearing her sing, years ago, certain melodies of Verdi's. When I had fallen ill with a fever in her house she used to sit by my cot in the evening—when the cool, night wind blew in through the faded mosquito netting tacked over the window and I lay watching a certain bright  
170 star that burned red above the cornfield—and sing “Home to our mountains, O, let us return!” in a way fit to break the heart of a Vermont boy near dead of homesickness already.

I watched her closely through the prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*, trying vainly to conjecture what that seething turmoil of strings and winds might mean to her, but she sat mutely staring at the violin bows that drove obliquely downward, like the pelting streaks of rain in a summer shower. Had this music any message for her? Had she enough left to at all comprehend this power which had kindled the world since she had left it? I was in a fever of curiosity, but Aunt Georgiana sat silent upon her peak in Darien.<sup>19</sup> She preserved this utter immobility throughout  
180 the number from *The Flying Dutchman*, though her fingers worked mechanically upon her black dress, as though, of themselves, they were recalling the piano score they had once played. Poor old hands! They had been stretched and twisted into mere tentacles to hold and lift and knead with; the palms unduly swollen, the fingers bent and knotted—on one of them a thin, worn band that had once been a wedding ring. As I pressed and gently quieted one of those groping hands, I remembered with quivering eyelids their services for me in other days.

Soon after the tenor began the “Prize Song,” I heard a quick drawn breath and turned to my aunt. Her eyes were closed, but the tears were glistening on her cheeks, and I think, in a moment more, they were in my eyes as well. It never  
190 really died, then—the soul that can suffer so **excruciatingly** and so interminably; it withers to the outward eye only; like that strange moss which can lie on a dusty shelf half a century and yet, if placed in water, grows green again. She wept so throughout the development and elaboration of the melody. **F**

### Language Coach

**Fixed Expressions** A **fixed expression** is a group of words that are usually combined in the same way to express a specific meaning. The fixed expression “fallen ill” (line 167) has to do with illness. Explain these fixed expressions about illness: *come down with, [have] a bout of.*

**excruciatingly**  
(ĭk-skrōō'shē-ă'tīng-lē)  
*adv.* in a way that causes great pain or distress

### **F** DRAW CONCLUSIONS

Reread lines 187–193. What **inferences** can you make about Aunt Georgiana's feeling for music, based upon her reaction to it?

19. **peak in Darien:** a mountain in what is now Panama, referred to in English poet John Keats's “On First Looking into Chapman's Homer” as a place where the Pacific was contemplated with silence and awe by Spanish explorers.

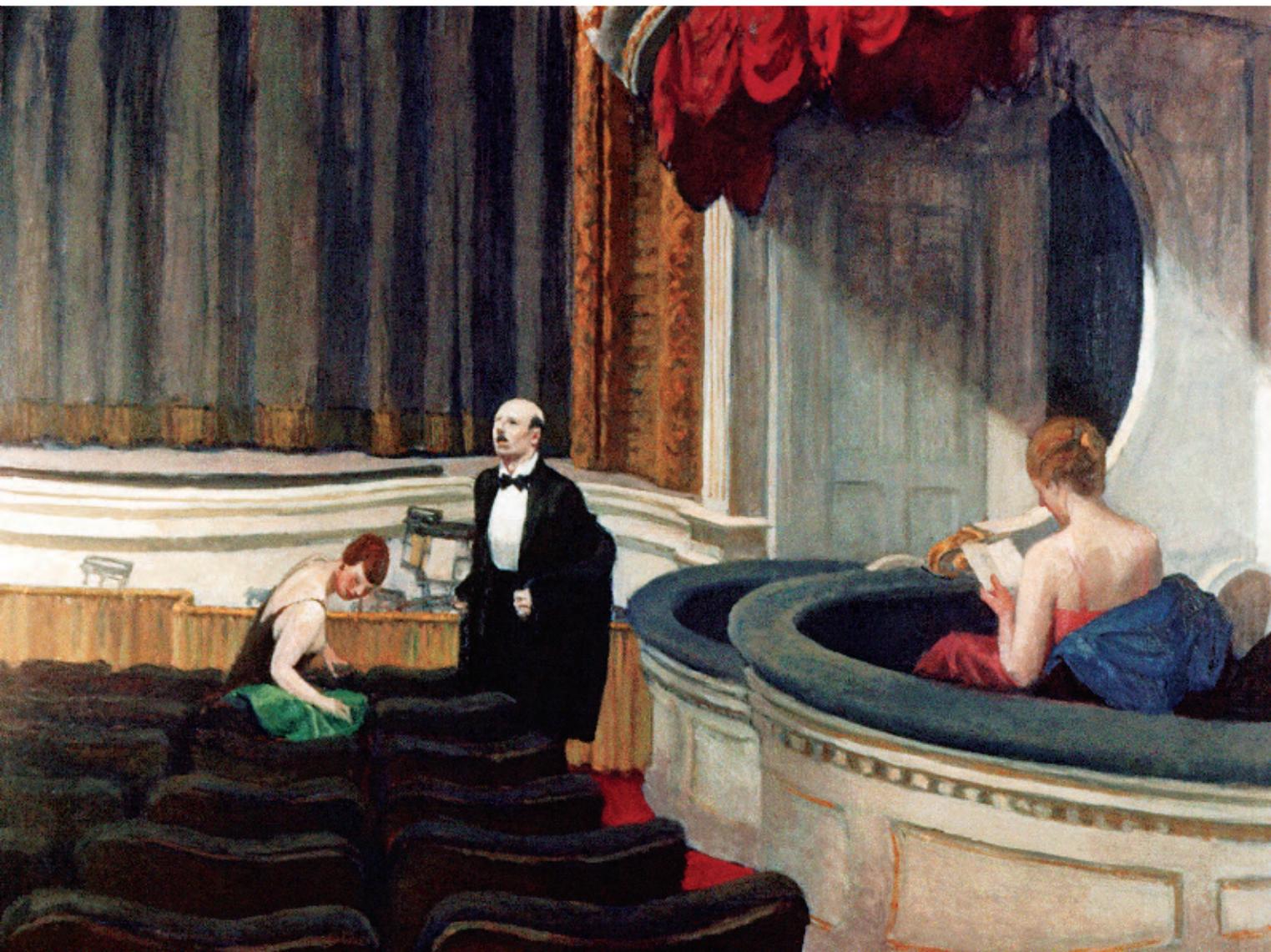
During the intermission before the second half of the concert, I questioned my aunt and found that the “Prize Song” was not new to her. Some years before there had drifted to the farm in Red Willow County a young German, a tramp cow puncher, who had sung the chorus at Bayreuth,<sup>20</sup> when he was a boy, along with the other peasant boys and girls. Of a Sunday morning he used to sit on his gingham-sheeted bed in the hands’ bedroom which opened off the kitchen, cleaning the leather of his boots and saddle, singing the “Prize Song,” while my aunt went about her work in the kitchen. She had hovered about him until she had prevailed upon him to join the country church, though his sole fitness for this step, in so far as I could gather, lay in his boyish face and his possession of this divine melody. Shortly afterward he had gone to town on the Fourth of July, been drunk for several days, lost his money at a faro table, ridden a saddled Texas steer on a bet, and disappeared with a fractured collar-bone. All this my aunt told me huskily, wanderingly, as though she were talking in the weak lapses of illness. **G**

**G DRAW CONCLUSIONS**

Reread lines 194–207. How does Cather use a plot event to further the internal development of the narrator and the external development of Aunt Georgiana?

20. **Bayreuth** (bī-roit’): a town in the Bavarian region of Germany where annual Wagner music festivals are held.

*Two on the Aisle* (1927), Edward Hopper © Francis G. Mayer/Corbis. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art.



“Well, we have come to better things than the old *Trovatore*<sup>21</sup> at any rate, Aunt Georgie?” I queried, with a well meant effort at jocularity.

210 Her lip quivered and she hastily put her handkerchief up to her mouth. From behind it she murmured, “And you have been hearing this ever since you left me, Clark?” Her question was the gentlest and saddest of reproaches.

The second half of the program consisted of four numbers from the *Ring*, and closed with Siegfried’s funeral march. My aunt wept quietly, but almost continuously, as a shallow vessel overflows in a rainstorm. From time to time her dim eyes looked up at the lights which studded the ceiling, burning softly under their dull glass globes; doubtless they were stars in truth to her. I was still perplexed as to what measure of musical comprehension was left to her, she who had heard nothing but the singing of Gospel Hymns at Methodist services in the  
220 square frame school-house on Section Thirteen for so many years. I was wholly unable to gauge how much of it had been dissolved in soapsuds, or worked into bread, or milked into the bottom of a pail. **H**

The deluge of sound poured on and on; I never knew what she found in the shining current of it; I never knew how far it bore her, or past what happy islands. From the trembling of her face I could well believe that before the last numbers she had been carried out where the **myriad** graves are, into the grey, nameless burying grounds of the sea; or into some world of death vaster yet, where, from the beginning of the world, hope has lain down with hope and dream with dream and, renouncing, slept.

230 The concert was over; the people filed out of the hall chattering and laughing, glad to relax and find the living level again, but my kinswoman made no effort to rise. The harpist slipped its green felt cover over his instrument; the flute-players shook the water from their mouthpieces; the men of the orchestra went out one by one, leaving the stage to the chairs and music stands, empty as a winter cornfield.

I spoke to my aunt. She burst into tears and sobbed pleadingly. “I don’t want to go, Clark, I don’t want to go!”

I understood. For her, just outside the door of the concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs; the tall, unpainted house, with weather-curved boards;  
240 naked as a tower, the crook-backed ash seedlings where the dish-cloths hung to dry; the gaunt, molting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door. 

#### **H** SETTING

Reread lines 220–222.

What does this

**metaphor** suggest about how a place might affect one’s appreciation of music?

**myriad** (mîr’ē-əd) *adj.*  
exceedingly numerous

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21. *Trovatore* (trō’vā-tôr’ē): *Il Trovatore* is an opera by the Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi.

## Comprehension

1. **Recall** Why does Aunt Georgiana travel to Boston?
2. **Recall** Why does Clark take his aunt to the concert?
3. **Summarize** How do Clark and his aunt respond to the concert?

## Literary Analysis

4. **Predict Events** In your opinion, will Aunt Georgiana return to Nebraska, or will she stay in Boston? Give evidence to support your answer.
5. **Make Inferences** Aunt Georgiana warns Clark, “Don’t love it so well, Clark, or it may be taken from you.” What does this suggest about the role of music in her own life?
6. **Draw Conclusions About Character** Look back at the **inferences** you recorded in your chart as you read. Judging from the choices that Aunt Georgiana has made in her life, what conclusions can you draw about her character? What emotions does she seem to experience, and how does she handle them?
7. **Contrast Settings** The two settings in this story—the Nebraska prairie and the Boston concert hall—are both significant for Aunt Georgiana. What do they **symbolize**? Support your answer with details from the story.
8. **Make Judgments** How might Aunt Georgiana be different if she had stayed in Boston? Use examples from the story and your views about the importance of place to support your answer.

## Literary Criticism

9. **Biographical Context** “A Wagner Matinee” created a stir when it appeared in 1904. Cather’s family objected to the fictional portrait of her real-life aunt Franc. One of her friends remarked: “The stranger to this state will associate Nebraska with the aunt’s wretched figure, her ill-fitting false teeth, her skin yellowed by the weather.” Do you agree? Examine the **imagery** and **figurative language** used to describe the people and scenes of Nebraska. Do you think Cather’s Nebraska relatives were justified in taking offense? Cite evidence from the story to support your answer.

### *Does it matter where we LIVE?*

What effect has frontier life in Nebraska had on Aunt Georgiana? In what way has place had no effect at all on Aunt Georgiana? In your opinion, how does the place we live affect our true character, if at all?



**READING 5A** Evaluate how different literary elements shape the author’s portrayal of plot and setting. **5B** Analyze the internal and external development of characters through a range of literary devices. **RC-11(B)** Make complex inferences about text.

# Vocabulary in Context

## ▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Choose the word from the list that best completes each sentence.

1. Though uncertain whether Aunt Georgiana would enjoy the concert, Clark \_\_\_\_ made plans to go.
2. Earlier, his aunt had seemed dazed, walking around in an almost \_\_\_\_ state.
3. Her life on the farm, while not \_\_\_\_, was certainly harsh and difficult.
4. She was worn down from the \_\_\_\_ jobs she performed from dawn to dusk.
5. But Aunt Georgiana was not a(n) \_\_\_\_ young girl with no experience or culture.
6. She was a(n) \_\_\_\_ treasure chest of musical knowledge.
7. When the \_\_\_\_ was played, she became a new woman.
8. Yet she found it \_\_\_\_ difficult to listen to the beautiful music.

### WORD LIST

callow  
excruciatingly  
myriad  
overture  
sommnambulant  
sordid  
tentatively  
veritable

## ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

• apparent • confine • expose • focus • perceive

Assume the role of Aunt Georgiana, and write several paragraphs describing your return to Boston. **Expose** Aunt Georgiana's innermost feelings during the concert, when she **perceives** what she has missed by living on the frontier. Use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your response.

## VOCABULARY STRATEGY: MUSIC TERMINOLOGY

Knowledge of the academic vocabulary used in specific content areas is important to your success in school. Many academic vocabulary words have their origins in other languages. For example, *sociology* comes from the French *sociologie*, *history* from the Latin word *historia*. Many of the academic words associated with music come from Italian or French. For example, the vocabulary word *overture*, which refers to the introductory piece in an opera or other musical drama, is derived from a French word.

**PRACTICE** Match each term in the lefthand column with its definition in the righthand column. Research the origin of each word to determine whether it is Italian, French, or some other language.

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| 1. concerto  | a. an elaborate melody in an opera, sung by one person   |
| 2. contralto | b. a moderately slow tempo, or pace                      |
| 3. aria      | c. a man who sings with a higher voice                   |
| 4. diva      | d. a woman who sings with a lower voice                  |
| 5. andante   | e. a leading woman soloist in an opera company           |
| 6. tenor     | f. a piece in which a soloist performs with an orchestra |



**READING 1A** Determine the meaning of academic English words in multiple content areas derived from Latin or other linguistic roots and affixes.

Interactive Vocabulary **THINK** central  
Go to [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com).  
KEYWORD: HML11-728

# America's Literary Regions

Indiana author Edward Eggleston made this claim in 1892.

*"It used to be a matter of no little jealousy to us, I remember, that the manners, customs, thoughts and feelings of New England country people filled so large a place in books, while our life, not less interesting, not less romantic, and certainly not less filled with humorous and grotesque material, had no place in literature. It was as though we were shut out of good society."*

By the end of the 19th century, however, virtually every region of the country—from the cities of the Northeast, to the mining camps of California, to the Southern bayou, to the northern plains—had its own local colorist capturing the region's distinctive features in writing. These local color writers portrayed the dialects, dress, mannerisms, customs, character types, and landscapes of their regions with an eye for accurate detail.

## Writing to Synthesize

Make a chart like the one shown, listing each of the selections you've read in this section (pages 658–728). On your chart, note what you've learned about the way the people in each region speak, the way they dress, their customs, and their landscapes. Then use your chart to write a one-paragraph description of each region you've encountered in your reading.

	<i>How People Speak</i>	<i>How People Dress</i>	<i>Local Customs</i>	<i>Local Landscape</i>
<i>The Autobiography of Mark Twain</i>				

## Extension

### VIEWING & REPRESENTING

Create a **single-frame cartoon** to represent the region you live in. You may want to focus on the way people speak and dress, or you may prefer to characterize the landscape.



**WRITING 15A** Write an analytical essay.

A homesteader's dugout house in Pie Town, New Mexico

