



TRANSCRIPTION TRIVIA USING *THE COMPLETE LETTERS OF WILLA CATHER*

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Introduction:

This activity was created for a 300-level Major Authors course in which students read several of Willa Cather's short stories and four novels: *The Song of the Lark*, *My Antonia*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. The course enrollment was small (under 15 students); approximately half of the students were English majors or Integrated Language Arts majors, while the other half of the students were non-English majors taking the course to fulfill the university's literature requirement.

Writing for *Literary Studies in the Digital Age: An Evolving Anthology*, Gabriel Hankins outlines the ways in which digital technology has the potential to transform the study of literary correspondence. As Hankins notes, "the practice of editing modern letters has been among the least theorized"; this

presents some challenges to teachers who wish incorporate robust discussions of literary correspondence into their courses. And yet, as Haskins points out, emerging digital projects make the study of literary correspondence much more accessible than ever before.

Willa Cather's correspondence provides a representative case study. The study of Willa Cather's correspondence has, up until recently, been quite difficult. During Cather's lifetime, she gave permission for a select few letters to be republished (fewer than 10); after she died in 1947, her will stipulated that her correspondence was not to be quoted, even by scholars. As a workaround, scholars who had access to the original documents of Cather's letters that scattered across various repositories developed a system of paraphrasing the letters. In 2013, *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* was published and the public had access to Cather's letters for the first time. As Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout explain in the introduction to *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, significant time and effort went into conversations with the executors of Cather's estate to bring the letters into publication. In 2018, the launch of the digital project, *The Complete Letters of Willa Cather*, would allow scholars, students, and fans alike greater access to not only the content of Cather's letters, but complete scans of the archival documents.

In addition to providing insights into the life and time of an individual author, Haskins argues that “the digital representation of correspondence offers us the chance not just to remediate a central part of our cultural inheritance but also to begin to do justice to the larger social fields in which letters were written and thereby better represent the social dimension of epistolary thinking.” Digital collections of letters provide students not only with a sense of an individual author's social world, but also a connection to a wider scholarly community that is invested in the study of literature.

The activity I used to engage students with these letters is below. See the appendices for further suggestions and potential modifications.

Activities/Handouts/Discussion Questions:

- **Learning Outcomes:**
 - Become acquainted with reading and handling archival documents
 - Practice reading and transcribing handwritten materials
 - Expand your knowledge of Willa Cather

- Collaborate with classmates
- **Task:** Students were placed randomly in groups of two or three and given a letter by Willa Cather to transcribe. For the purposes of this activity, I chose short (1-2 page) letters; this activity was conducted prior to the launch of the *Complete Letters* online, so I selected documents that I had access to through my own research. Appendix A, however, has some suggested letters that may be of interest to students based on either the works that Cather mentions and / or interesting biographical information. If students got stuck on a particular word, they could request a trivia question (see Appendix B below). In exchange for answering a trivia question correctly, I'd give them the word from the transcript. Ultimately, the goal of this activity was to introduce students to the art of transcription in a fun, low-stakes, communal environment.
- **Purpose:** The purpose of this exercise is to have one single class period where novice undergraduate students, with no prior background or instruction in using archives, are introduced to the practice of reading handwritten archival documents. To ease student frustration, I created a gamified activity where students could answer very basic trivia questions about our course content in order to earn transcription clues.
- **Criteria/Grading:** This was an ungraded activity, so students were not assessed on how much of the letter they could transcribe or their accuracy. Instead, students were encouraged to engage with the documents; to voice their frustrations; and to collaborate within and across the classroom groups.

Additional Resources/Further Reading:

- On Willa Cather
 - *The Complete Letters of Willa Cather.* <https://cather.unl.edu/writings/letters>
The goal of this site is to create a digital scholarly edition of Willa Cather's letters; as of June 2024, the site has approximately 2800 letters. The letters include annotations to help guide readers through various references to people, places, events, and Cather's biography and works.
 - *The Willa Cather Archive.* <https://cather.unl.edu/>
A comprehensive site that includes writing from Willa Cather (short stories, novels, journalism, nonfiction essays), images, and scholarship (including links to the journal *Cather Studies*)

- ***Willa Cather Review***.
<https://www.willacather.org/discover/educational-resources/readers/willa-cather-review>
 Published by the National Willa Cather Center since the 1950s, all issues of the *Willa Cather Review* are available online. Scholarly articles in the *Review* undergo peer review. Of particular interest to those interested in Cather's letters is the Spring 2013 issue (vol. 56, no. 2) which contains brief reflections on 21 Cather letters.
- **Jewell, Andrew and Janis Stout, editors. *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. Vintage, 2014.**
 For readers who prefer a print copy of Cather's letters, *The Selected Letters* contains over 500 letters and includes brief scholarly commentary and annotations.
- On Teaching with Letters
 - **Hankins, Gabriel. "Correspondence: Theory, Practice, and Horizons." *Literary Studies in the Digital Age: An Evolving Anthology*, 2015. *MLA Commons*.**
<https://dlsanthology.mla.hcommons.org/correspondence-theory-practice-and-horizons/>
 This scholarly article discusses the history of editorial theory concerning digital collections of letters.
 - **Mills, Kelly T. "Analyzing: Making Sense of a Million Sources." *Teaching History in the Digital Age*. University of Michigan Press, 2013. *Project Muse*.**
<https://doi.org/10.1353/book.22708>.
 Although centered on the teaching of history, this particular chapter of Mills is useful for anyone considering including letters in the literature classroom as well. In addition to the exercise described above, Mills' chapter also contains a discussion of the importance of being able to "read" HTML mark ups in digital archives; the potential for using mapping tools and activities to help students better understand geographical context; how text mining may be used to explore relationships between key terms in a digital archive; and the possibilities of making interpretive claims using image mining.
 - **VanHaitsma, Pamela. "New Pedagogical Engagements with Archives: Student Inquiry and Composing in Digital Spaces." *College English*, vol. 78, no. 1, September 2015, pp. 34-55. *JSTOR*.** <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44075096>
 VanHaitsma's article provides a useful survey of scholarly sources related to the use of archives (both material and digital) in pedagogical practice. After this discussion, VanHaitsma outlines an activity for the first-year composition classroom where students examined nineteenth-century documents related to letter writing, with a

focus on romance letter writing; students were then invited to make an archive of contemporary documents related to love and relationships that could be analyzed for tropes, themes, and advice.

Appendix A: Potential Cather Letters to Use for Classroom Transcription

The Complete Letters of Willa Cather has a robust search feature that allows individuals to identify letters based on date, recipient, and works mentioned. Some instructors may want to choose letters for student transcription based on relevance to the course (ex: choosing letters where *My Antonia* was mentioned if students have recently read that work). Other instructors may want to prioritize identifying letters that are short, so that students could try to work out a complete transcription. In the list below, I have identified a few letters that either showcase Cather's personality (in writing to family and friends about her life) and / or, where she mentions popular works. I have also included an approximate number of pages – although the number of words in these letters may vary depending on paper size and Cather's own handwriting.

#0021: Willa Cather to Mariel C. Gere, Ellen B. Gere, Frances C. Gere, Mary Ames, and Althea Roberts, January 2, 1896.

In this letter, sent from Red Cloud, Nebraska, but dated from “Siberia,” a 22-year old Willa Cather writes to childhood friends who are living in Lincoln, Nebraska. Cather updates her friends on some of the “provincial” happenings, like a dance, that have happened in Red Cloud. 12 pages.

#0145: Willa Cather to Sarah Orne Jewett, December 19 [1908]

In this letter written to the writer Sarah Orne Jewett, Cather (at this time in her mid-30s) writes to share about the strenuous nature of her editorial work at McClure's Magazine in New York City, which doesn't leave her much time to work on her own writing. Cather debates if she should leave her editorial work for a few years in order to concentrate on her own writing. 8 pages.

#2255: Willa Cather to Meta Schaper Cather, January 2, 1918

Cather writes to her sister-in-law concerning the novel *My Antonia*. Cather writes about some of the blizzards she is facing in New York City, paper shortages, and the consequences of not finishing her novel on time. 2 pages.

#1845: Willa Cather to Elsie Cather, November 11 [1918]

Cather writes to her sister about the reviews of *My Antonia*; she mentions not getting sick despite the influenza epidemic that is making people sick across the United States. 2 pages.

#2083: Willa Cather to Roscoe Cather [November 28, 1918]

Cather writes to her brother about the publication of *My Antonia* and reviews of the novel. 2 pages

#2861: Willa Cather to Louise Guerber, [October 5, 1925]

Cather writes to the Denver librarian who helped her with research for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. 1 page.

#2560: Willa Cather to Alfred A. Knopf, [January 14, 1926]

Cather writes a brief note to her publisher concerning her wish to be a “good investment.” 1 page.

#1897: Willa Cather to James D. Cather, July 12 [1934]

Cather writes to one of her younger brothers about the differences between “luck” and “success.” 5 pages.

Appendix B: Potential Trivia Questions

Note that, given the challenging nature of the transcription task, the goal of these trivia questions was to be deliberately basic and to review information that students had learned throughout the course.

| Biography Questions | Answer |
|---|--|
| What year was Willa Cather born? | 1873 |
| In what US state was Willa Cather born? | Virginia |
| What city did Willa Cather live in when her family moved to Nebraska? | Red Cloud |
| Where did Willa Cather attend college? | University of Nebraska-Lincoln |
| Who did Willa Cather live with when she moved to New York City? | Edith Lewis |
| What is the title of Willa Cather's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel? | <i>One of Ours</i> |
| | |
| <i>The Song of the Lark</i> Questions | Answers |
| Where does Thea live in the beginning of the novel? | Moonstone, Colorado |
| What is the name of one of Thea's siblings? | Gus, Charley, Anna, Gunner, Alex, Thor |
| Who did Thea inherit money from? | Ray Kennedy |
| Where does Thea go to study music? | Chicago |

| | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| What type of music does Thea perform as an adult? | Opera (singing) |
| | |
| <i>My Antonia Questions</i> | Answers |
| What city does Jim's family move to in Nebraska? | Black Hawk |
| What does Jim kill in the garden? | A snake |
| What instrument does Mr Shimerda play? | Violin |
| What is the name of one of Antonia's siblings? | Yulka, Ambrosch, Marek |
| Who does Antonia go to work for in town? | The Harlings |
| What childhood friend does Jim socialize with in Lincoln? | Lena Lingard |
| | |
| <i>The Professor's House Questions</i> | Answers |
| Where does Godfrey St. Peter live? | Hamilton |
| What are the names of St. Peter's daughters? | Rosamond (Rosie) and Kathleen |
| Where did Tom Outland find Cliff City? | The Blue Mesa |
| Why isn't Tom Outland married to one of St. Peter's daughters? | He died in WWI |
| Who rescues Godfrey St. Peter at the end of the novel? | Augusta the seamstress |
| | |
| <i>Death Comes for the Archbishop Questions</i> | Answers |
| What are the names of the main priests in the novel? | Jean Marie Latour, Joseph Vaillant |

| | |
|--|-----------------------|
| What are the names of the mules they ride? | Angelica and Contento |
| Where is the diocese located? | Santa Fe |
| What is the name of the Pueblo guide they work with? | Jacinto |
| What does Dona Isabella Olivares lie about? | Her age |

Appendix C: Potential Activity Modifications

The following activities could be added on to transcription activities to make the experience more robust for students.

1. **Transcribe a letter together:** Instructors can lead the entire class through the transcription of a single letter. This instruction could happen in many forms, for example, live in front of an in-person class, or pre-recorded for students to watch on their own. One of the benefits of such modeling is that students can see how a transcription works, particularly in difficult points of the transcription. The instructor can model how we might skip over particular words or lines, for example, and return to those difficult areas once we have more context within the letter.
2. **Reading letters alongside professional annotations:** In *Teaching History in the Digital Age*, author Kelly T. Mills outlines a three-part activity in which students 1) transcribe a letter themselves. 2) examine professional annotations on that same document made by a historian. 3) reflect on how the annotations have helped them to better understand the historical significance of the document. This process could also be used with *The Complete Letters of Willa Cather* or another archive of literary correspondence that contains sufficient annotations.
3. **Composing personal and / or collaborative annotations:** After examining some of the professional annotations for a letter in *The Complete Letters of Willa Cather*, encourage students to identify words or phrases that could use additional annotations, and then to try to write those annotations. For example, these annotations could connect components of the letter to conversations or texts that the students have encountered in their particular course, or their program of study more broadly. Collaborative annotation platforms such as Perusall, Hypothes.is, or even Google Docs can be used for students to share their annotations with the class and comment on the annotations of others.
4. **Writing letters:** In the chapter “Receptive Readers: Teaching American Modernist Literature Through Book Reviews and Letters,” collected in *Teaching Modernist Anglophone Literature* (edited by Mary C. Madden and Precious McKenzie, Brill, 2018, pp. 178-198), I discuss how

to craft writing assignments in which students write their own letters in response to studying the correspondence of authors. In this chapter, I describe a letter writing assignment where students were encouraged to adopt a persona (for example, as an editor or fan), grounded either in the author's time period or our own, and to write a letter to the author about one of their works that we had studied together.

5. **Participate in group transcription efforts:** The Library of Congress will often select groups of materials for [volunteers to transcribe](#) and / or to review transcriptions. Recently, the LOC has used Valentine's Day as a transcription event called "[Douglass Day](#)." Students can be invited to work on a transcription as part of a "transcribe-a-thon" and reflect on that process.
6. **Compare and evaluate digital collections of correspondence:** Invite students to compare two collections of digital correspondence from the following list. Students might be asked to consider questions like: how do the editors establish the value of the project and / or the study of this particular author or field? How easy is it for someone to use the digital archive? Are there any tools or feature that appear in one digital archive but not the other; why do you think that is the case?

List:

Adams Electronic Archive, Correspondence Between John and Abigail Adams:
<https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/letter/>

Darwin Correspondence Project: <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/>

Dickinson Electronic Archives, Emily Dickinson's Correspondence:
<http://archive.emilydickinson.org/wkintronew.htm>

Early Modern Letters Online: <http://emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>

Mapping the Republic of Letters: <http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/>

James Madison Papers:
<https://www.loc.gov/collections/james-madison-papers/about-this-collection/>

Vietnam Center and Archive: <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/>

Walt Whitman Archive: <https://whitman-prod.unl.edu/>

The Library of Congress also houses many online digital collections:

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/?fa=original-format:manuscript/mixed+material>