A Wagner Matinée

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLA CATHER

The eldest of seven children, Willa Cather was born to a family whose roots near Winchester, Virginia, extended back to the 1700s. In 1883, when Cather was nine years old, her family moved to Webster County, Nebraska, near the town of Red Cloud, where her grandparents, aunt, and uncle were already homesteading. Moving from northern Virginia to the unsettled prairie had a profound effect on Cather as a child and later shaped her as a writer. Growing up, she spent time exploring the countryside and listening to stories from other pioneers, who were often recent immigrants. After high school, Cather attended the University of Nebraska in Lincoln with hopes of becoming a doctor, but decided to become a writer after one of her essays was published in the newspaper. After graduating in 1895, she spent ten years in Pittsburgh teaching, writing, and establishing herself as a journalist. In 1906, she began working as an editor for the prominent *McClure's* magazine in New York, a breakthrough for her literary career. After many years of establishing connections and friendships across the literary world, the 1910s were Cather's most fruitful period—she published her "prairie trilogy," *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia* (1918). In 1923 she won the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*, a novel of World War I. By the 1920s, Cather had established herself as a leading American novelist, turning to historical subjects with *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1928) and the bestselling *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). Among other awards, she received honorary degrees from Princeton and Yale, and her views on literary Modernism influenced such contemporary writers as F. Scott Fitzgerald. Cather never married. However, she had a number of intimate female friendships throughout her life, living for almost forty years with editor Edith Lewis. Cather divided her later years between New York City and a secluded New Brunswick cottage. She died in Manhattan at the age of 73.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

By the time "A Wagner Matinée" was written, Americans were a decade or two removed from the settling of the Great Plains and were beginning to look back with nostalgia on the pioneer generation, especially in light of increased industrialization in urban areas. The hardworking pioneer wife, vital to the all-consuming work of maintaining a homestead, was an especially romanticized figure. It is worth noting that, in 1904, the Homestead Act was amended in hopes of repopulating western Nebraska, which had seen decline following the initial settlement boom of the 1870s and 1880s; the provision allowed for homesteaders to claim ownership over a new section of Nebraskan counties free of charge, and, as such, homesteading and land use were still live issues at the time Cather wrote. The operatic works of German composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883), hugely influential on modern classical music, would also have been relatively fresh to American audiences at this time.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Cather's prairie fiction fits into the tradition of literary naturalism, which focuses on ordinary farming families contending with their environment. Other examples include Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* (1935) and Ole Rølvaag's *Giants in the Earth* (1927), about Norwegian homesteaders in the 1870s. Much like "A Wanger Matinée," Sinclair Ross' *As for Me and My House* (1941) is the story of a Saskatchewan woman whose passion for music is thwarted by prairie life.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Wagner Matinée
- **When Written:** Early 1900s
- **Where Written:** Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- **When Published:** 1904
- **Literary Period:** Naturalism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Boston, Massachusetts
- **Climax:** The end of the concert
- **Antagonist:** The Carpenters' Nebraska homestead
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Culture on the Prairie. Willa Cather appreciated music from an early age, and she enjoyed attending traveling opera productions at the Red Cloud Opera House, which was built in 1885. She also delivered her high school graduation speech from its stage in 1890.

Operatic Inspiration. Cather's lifelong love of opera is also reflected in the second novel of her prairie trilogy, *The Song of the Lark*, whose heroine, Thea Kronborg, is based on the Wagnerian soprano Olive Fremstad. Cather befriended Fremstad in 1913, and the two exchanged letters discussing their respective art forms over a number of years.

PLOT SUMMARY

Clark, who lives in Boston, receives word from his Uncle Howard that his Aunt Georgiana is coming to visit from rural Nebraska—in fact, she is due to arrive the following day. Clark has not seen Georgiana since his youth, and he is immediately pulled into vivid recollections of practicing music at her side.

The next day, at the train station, Georgiana arrives dusty and disoriented, and Clark is shocked by her weathered appearance. Georgiana, he explains, had been a music teacher at the Boston Conservatory as a young woman, but she met Howard in Vermont one summer and subsequently eloped with him to the Nebraska frontier. Together they established a claim fifty miles from the railroad in Red Willow County, building a primitive dugout. Georgiana had not been away from Nebraska for thirty years.

Clark had spent much of his boyhood on his aunt and uncle's homestead, and he owes to Aunt Georgiana most of the good he experienced as a child. After long days of farm work, he studied Latin, literature, and music while his aunt did chores and offered him encouragement. Now Clark hopes to repay her for her kindness by taking her to the Symphony's Wagner concert. However, the day after her arrival, Georgiana still seems detached, distracted by problems back on the farm. Clark worries that the matinée was a bad idea and that his aunt will feel embarrassed at reentering a cultured environment. Upon their arrival at the concert, however, he realizes he has misjudged her. She has a dignified bearing and is quickly engaged by the rich sights and sounds of the concert hall.

As the concert begins, Clark finds Georgiana's reactions inscrutable, and he wonders if she can relate to the music, given her many years of estrangement from higher culture. Eventually he notices that she is **weeping**, and he realizes that her soul, which has suffered so much, is still the same underneath the shockingly changed exterior. By the concert's end, Georgiana is sobbing, and she pleadingly tells Clark, "I don't want to go!" Clark understands that beyond the concert hall, there is nothing for Georgiana except for the drudgery of the **colorless** homestead.

CHARACTERS

Clark – Clark, the narrator of the story, lives in a boarding-house on Newbury Street in Boston, though he was born in Vermont and spent a significant part of his youth living on Georgiana and Howard's Nebraska homestead. Clark reveres his Aunt Georgiana, who taught him Latin, Shakespeare, and most notably music, even after he had spent hard days tending the herds or husking corn for his uncle. Self-described as having been "a gangling farmer-boy … scourged with chilblains and bashfulness," Clark seems to have been a sensitive child, not particularly suited to farm labor; he recalls that Howard spoke sharply to him on occasion, and that he was "near dead of home-sickness" for Vermont. His primary consolations on the farm were Georgiana's company, her encouragement of his music, and her stories of concerts attended in her youth. Still a devoted nephew at the time of the story, he tries to repay his aunt for some of her kindnesses by treating her to a Wagner concert when she visits Boston. At first shocked by Georgiana's battered appearance and timid demeanor, he briefly regrets the idea, but upon arriving at the concert hall, he realizes he has judged his aunt superficially. He is puzzled initially by Georgiana's seeming detachment from the music, but later he is moved by her tears and realizes that her longing for music and culture persist underneath her worn-out, unsophisticated exterior.

Georgiana Carpenter – Georgiana, the protagonist of the story, is Clark's aunt and Howard's wife. In the 1860s she had been a music teacher at the Boston Conservatory and seemed to have a promising career ahead of her. Instead, she eloped with the penniless Howard and took up homesteading on the prairie of Red Willow County, Nebraska. Besides her work in managing the homestead, which included raising six children, she cared for Clark and even took the time to teach him music in the evenings. These duties meant that she was often up before six o'clock and working until midnight. Despite her apparently unstinting efforts on the farm, she continued to harbor a deep, if seldom expressed, love for music. When the story begins, Georgiana has not traveled more than fifty miles from the farm for thirty years; she now must visit Boston to settle a bachelor relative's estate. When she first arrives, she seems helplessly out of place—dazed, timid, distracted by farm duties, and dressed conspicuously in country clothes. However, when Clark takes her to the Wagner matinée, the concert hall brings Georgiana to life, and she displays an aloof dignity that belies her awkward appearance. As the concert goes on, she becomes more and more engaged, remembering a Wagnerian piano score and telling Clark about an opera-singing cowboy who once visited the farm. During the last few pieces, she begins to **weep**, finally sobbing to Clark, "I don't want to go!" as she faces the prospect of returning to Nebraska. This makes clear that the cultured woman of her youth never died, and the loss of her musical aspirations has been a devastating sacrifice.

Howard Carpenter – Howard is Georgiana's husband and Clark's uncle by marriage. He does not appear directly in the story. Howard and Georgiana met when he was "an idle, shiftless boy of twenty-one," and his "callow fancy" was kindled by Georgiana. Georgiana then eloped with him, over the objections of her family, and the two moved to a homestead in Nebraska. The story only hints at the couple's marital dynamics; while there are suggestions that Howard still cares for Georgiana, she does not seem to be a priority for him, as it takes fifteen years for him to buy her a parlor organ and his

letter to Clark announcing her visit is mailed at the last moment. He also seems to have been a stern taskmaster, demanding long workdays from Clark and sometimes speaking harshly to him.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CIVILIZATION VS. THE FRONTIER

"A Wagner Matinée" explores the complex role of the pioneer in the American imagination, particularly through the character of Georgiana Carpenter. A former teacher at the Boston Conservatory, upon marrying Georgiana leaves behind her highly-cultured world for the Nebraska prairie, where she fights with grace and determination to maintain her connection to music. While her nephew Clark's memories of his aunt suggest that she has succeeded in this, her visit to Boston, after decades of isolation, unravels whatever fragile balance she has found. Through Georgiana Cather argues that, while elements of frontier and "civilized" culture can maintain an uneasy coexistence for a time, they are ultimately at odds with each another.

Cather portrays the Nebraska frontier as almost unimaginably remote and foreign compared to Boston society. Clark describes Georgiana's homestead with her husband Howard as a reversion to a primitive state, their dug-out a "cave dwelling" whose inhabitants share water with the buffalo and brace for Indian attacks. The weary, plodding daily struggle of such an existence infiltrates every aspect of life; even Uncle Howard's letter to Clark, announcing Georgiana's visit to Boston to settle a legal matter, appears the day before her scheduled arrival looking "worn and rubbed."

Georgiana's jarring arrival in the city further highlights her stark difference from the environment in which she suddenly finds herself. Clark describes his reaction to her as "that feeling of awe and respect with which we behold explorers who have left their ears and fingers north of Franz-Joseph-Land, or their health somewhere along the Upper Congo." There is a whiff of exoticism, and even of heroism, about Georgiana, as a survivor of an implicitly dangerous place devoid of culture.

Indeed, for Clark, Georgiana represents a haven of civilization and beauty amid the unremitting drudgery of the frontier. Clark remembers his aunt as his instructor, encourager, and comforter against the backdrop of culturally deprived, toilsome Nebraska life. When he was young, she sat beside him at the parlor organ as Clark "[fumbled] the scales with … stiff, red fingers," or ironed until midnight as Clark read Shakespeare. They milked cows together as Georgiana recounted musical performances she had seen in her youth, and she sang Verdi to Clark when he fell ill. She was responsible for "most of the good that ever came my way in my boyhood," Clark recalls. Yet even as she encouraged him in "finer" things, Georgiana was constantly busy with the mundane manual tasks of the homestead, a pressing reality that haunted their every interaction. While Clark practiced music or studied, his aunt made mittens, ironed, or darned late into the night.

The frontier remains an overshadowing presence on Georgiana's trip to Boston, as she frets distractedly over a sickly calf and an opened kit of mackerel she left behind. Even as she and Clark discuss the changes that have taken place in the city, Georgiana is haunted by farm duties and seems fearful of venturing out. Though Boston is her hometown, "the place longed for hungrily half a lifetime," Georgiana seems not to recognize it. That Georgiana seems hopelessly out of place upon visiting Boston, reentering "civilization" for the first time in years, underscores how deeply frontier life has changed her from the cultured woman of Clark's memories.

In light of his aunt's "semi-somnambulent state," Clark begins to doubt that taking her to a Wagner matinée—intended as a display of gratitude—is a good idea after all. Georgiana stands out painfully in the concert hall, with her "queer, country clothes" and her gnarled hands "mere tentacles to hold and lift and knead with." She has been "dead" to civilization for a quarter of a century, and instead of serving art and beauty, her body has been given over to the utilitarian concerns of survival.

As the matinée goes on, however, Clark recognizes that his aunt is still the cultured woman he remembers, even as Georgiana mourns for the civilized world in which she no longer belongs. Despite her nephew's misgivings about the matinée, Georgiana shows stirrings of life when they enter the concert hall, and Clark begins to realize "how superficially [he] had judged her." Though she appears aloof and impassive at first, Georgiana is increasingly stirred by the music, silently playing the score of *The Flying Dutchman* from muscle memory. As later pieces evoke Georgiana's **tears**, Clark is moved as well, recognizing that "the soul which can suffer so excruciatingly and so interminably … withers to the outward eye only." His aunt's weathered, anachronistic appearance had deceived him; underneath, the same "civilized" soul has somehow survived the barren atmosphere of the frontier.

After the concert, however, Georgiana is overcome, weeping, "I don't want to go, Clark!" The empty stage has brought Nebraska near—"empty as a winter's cornfield"—and reminded her what lies on the other side of this respite: "the tall, unpainted house … naked as a tower; the crook-backed ash seedlings … the gaunt, molting turkeys picking up refuse." Georgiana realizes that she does not truly belong there, though it seems improbable that she can regain a place in modern

Boston, either.

Cather uses Clark's distance from Nebraska and from his aunt to create a sense of foreignness about Georgiana. By showing glimpses of Georgiana through the haze of a young boy's adoration, as well as the passage of many years, she creates a heroic portrait of the pioneer woman, even as she complicates the picture by introducing the older, timid, displaced aunt at the same time. Cather's story ultimately suggests that a person cannot withstand *both* the draw of civilization and the pressures of the frontier. They will either return to the former, like Clark, or be pulled apart by the tension between such disparate lives, as Georgiana seems to be at the story's conclusion.

MUSIC AND THE HUMAN SOUL

Music (and its absence) figures prominently in both Clark's and Georgiana's experiences of frontier life. Clark's boyhood memories of Aunt Georgiana always involve her love of music, and often focus on the ways she used music to comfort Clark in an environment devoid of beauty. For him, music pointed to the promise of life beyond the frontier farm. For Georgiana, however, music comes to represent a path she chose not to take, and—especially now that modern music has outstripped her own study—becomes a source of grief. Throughout the story Cather argues that music expresses the soul's longings because of its ability to transcend mundane existence.

Clark's memories of Aunt Georgiana are all intimately tied to music—specifically to music's ability to lift him beyond the deadening realities of life on the farm. Uncle Howard's letter announcing Georgiana's arrival opens "a gulf of recollection so wide and deep" that Clark feels himself once again a farm boy, fumbling with musical scales with his aunt at his side. Clark goes on to describe his "reverential affection" for the woman who not only managed the homestead, but also took time to coach him on the parlor organ when both were exhausted from a day's work. Even mundane tasks around the farm were made "glorious" when Georgiana reminisced to Clark about seeing Meyerbeer's *Huguenots* in Paris in her youth; a greater contrast to milking cows can hardly be imagined.

Clark also recalls Georgiana comforting him by singing Verdi's "Home to our mountains" while he lay ill, thinking that her singing was "fit to break the heart of a Vermont boy near dead of home-sickness already." He further remembers the particular joy, after leaving the farm, of seeing an orchestra performance for the first time: "fresh from ploughing forever and forever between green aisles of corn, where, as in a treadmill, one might walk from daybreak to dusk without perceiving a shadow of change." After such endless, plodding toil, the violinists' bow-strokes "seemed to draw the heart out of [him]."

For Georgiana, however, music represents the aspirations she has left behind. In contrast to the hope Clark found in music—a hope apparently realized by leaving the farm—music awakens desires that it is now too late for Georgiana to fulfill.

Georgiana "seldom talked to me about music," Clark remembers, and when she did, she warned him not to love it too much, "or it may be taken from you." This suggests that even when Clark was a boy, Georgiana already considered music—perhaps her greatest love—to have been lost to her. When Clark takes his aunt to see a Wagner matinée during her Boston visit, he is at first puzzled by her seeming detachment. He then sees that her mangled hands instinctively recall the score of *The Flying Dutchman*. When he sees her **tears** during the "Prize Song," Clark begins to realize that despite her stoic appearance, the music has touched longings hidden underneath Georgiana's rustic exterior.

When he questions Georgiana about her knowledge of the "Prize Song," she haltingly shares the story of a drifting cowboy she had known on the farm, a German with operatic training. This improbable figure had brought her much joy—Georgiana had even pushed him to join the choir of the country church—until he spent a drunken holiday in town and disappeared as suddenly as he had come. He represents something of Georgiana's own lost dreams; the incongruity of this figure, pressed into service as a choirboy despite rather dissolute habits, speaks to the desperation of Georgiana's longing in her isolated situation.

As the concert proceeds, Clark seems to realize the depth of his aunt's pain as her tears increase. He cannot fully comprehend it—"I never knew what she found in the shining current of [the music] … I could well believe that before the last number she had been carried out … where, from the beginning of the world, hope has lain down with hope and dream with dream and, renouncing, slept." Yet he has come to realize that Georgiana's longings involve a much deeper renunciation than his own boyhood sufferings. After the concert ends, Georgiana gives full voice to her grief, and Clark finally understands that, for her, the music has not simply evoked nostalgia or melancholy, but the imminent return to a place that has meant the death of her deepest desires.

Music is an incredibly potent force in Cather's story. For Clark, it has been a source of youthful solace that not only lifted him momentarily beyond his circumstances, but also gave him hope that he would someday leave them behind for good. For Georgiana, however, music has a far more tragic undertone. In Nebraska, she fought for every chance to savor music amidst daily survival, but in Boston, Wagner's music overpowers her with the realization that her soul's thirst can never be fully quenched. This is because music is not only a resource for her survival, but a part of herself that she has lost.

HOME AND ESTRANGEMENT

Georgiana's history is one of deepening estrangement. Despite having grown up in the city, she reappears in Boston like an anachronism and struggles to get a solid grip on her surroundings until she enters the familiar world of the concert hall. Yet during the concert Georgiana experiences a deeper estrangement still, realizing she can neither return to Nebraska the same as before. Having left one home to establish another, Georgiana has sacrificed a sense of belonging—and in trying, in a way, to go home again, is painfully reminded of her distance from once-familiar surroundings. Cather's story argues for the notion of "home" as an incredible source of grounding and comfort, and the loss of home—even when actively left behind—as a source of poignant displacement.

As a music teacher at the Boston Conservatory in the 1860s, Georgiana occupied an unusually public and elite role for a woman of her era. Her elopement with Howard Carpenter, a man who seems to have been her opposite in ambition and temperament, was already a surprising departure from expectation. Her accompanying him to the prairie to establish a homestead set her apart even more drastically from her ancestral home, her upbringing, and the path she had already set for her life.

Georgiana's ensuing years on the prairie represent a losing battle to hang on to aspects of home. She endures fifteen years without an instrument, and only upon Clark's arrival can she once again exercise her teaching skill and share her love of music. The extent of this practice is limited to late-night tutelage and occasional conversations in the cowshed.

By the time she visits Boston, Georgiana's battered appearance is a "shock," making Clark think of an explorer who has sacrificed her health. She is no longer the woman she was when Clark lived with her as a boy, and the contrast with her own life in Boston many years earlier could hardly be more extreme. In agreeing to move to the frontier with Howard, she has become a stranger to the society that was once her home.

Far from being a homecoming, Georgiana's return to Boston only further estranges her from her past. The journey has itself been somewhat traumatic—she "had become **black** with soot" and suffered train sickness. Upon awakening the day after her arrival, she is "still in a semi-somnambulent state." She is so disoriented that Clark says it seems as if only "a few hours of nightmare" separated her from Red Willow County and his Newbury Street lodgings. Georgiana seems not to recognize that she is in "the place longed for hungrily half a lifetime." Indeed, she is so timid that she seems disinclined to venture out and is preoccupied by tasks forgotten back home. She seems to Clark to be caught between worlds, and all of this leads Clark to wonder whether her visit, to say nothing of bringing her to the concert, has been a mistake.

Attending the concert seems to reawaken Georgiana, however, by bringing her back to an environment in which she feels at home. As the musicians come onstage, she "looked with quickening interest over the rail at … perhaps the first wholly familiar thing that had greeted her eye since" her arrival. With the opening notes, she clutches Clark's sleeve, and he realizes that "for her this broke a silence of thirty years." For all intents and purposes, Boston is no longer home to her, but the concert hall remains a haven.

Superficially, Georgiana doesn't "belong," but she somehow transcends the scene. While her dowdy dress marks her as a relic of another era, she stands aloof from such outward trappings, admiring the crowd of concertgoers like "so many daubs of tube-paint on a palette" and unbothered by the "froth and fret that ebbs and flows" around her. Her musical knowledge stops short of Wagner's era as well, leading Clark to wonder, "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?"

Even so, the music elicits a visceral reaction, suggesting the depth of Georgiana's longing for this world left behind. Seeing his aunt's **tears**, Clark reflects that the soul "which can suffer so excruciatingly … withers to the outward eye only; like that strange moss which … if placed in water, grows green again." Though it had not been clear to him that Georgiana could enjoy such sophisticated music, he now realizes that her soul is resilient and responds to such beauty, even after many years without it.

Although the music seems to touch something timeless in Georgiana's soul, her fitness for both this world—and for Nebraska—is left in question. Georgiana's tears are ambiguous, suggesting that she grieves her estrangement from this world even as she enjoys it for the first time in many years. When Clark attempts to make light of the moment, she responds, "And you have been hearing this ever since you left me?" He realizes the music has taken his aunt somewhere he cannot follow ("I never knew how far it bore her, or past what happy islands"); that she is, in fact, a stranger to him again. Georgiana's sobs in the emptying concert hall suggest that she will be forever a stranger to both worlds. She knows there is nothing waiting for her but the "black," "unpainted" homestead, and that returning "home" is perhaps all the harder now that she has been awakened to what is beyond it.

One of the most poignant scenes in the story is Clark's memory of his aunt singing Verdi's "'Home to our mountains, O, let us return' in a way fit to break the heart of a Vermont boy near dead of home-sickness already." But Georgiana's homesickness proves to be the more intractable case, as she discovers that there is no longer a fit "home" for her anywhere. Through the figure of this formidable woman, Cather makes a case that the pioneer generation forever finds itself caught between worlds, too—sacrificing much for the sake of "progress," yet never again

able to keep pace with the world left behind.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BLACK

The color black symbolizes the absence of vitality and culture in the story, particularly in the dull, uncivilized environment of the prairie homestead. Georgiana arrives from Nebraska wearing a duster "black with soot" and a "black bonnet grey with dust" from her nightmarish train journey. This signifies the ways in which the toil of life on the homestead appears to have seeped into her very being, changing her so drastically that she is at first unrecognizable to Clark. She also appears at the concert in an unfashionable black dress, which Clark initially thinks must make her feel uncomfortable and separate from the rest of the more cultured audience. Indeed, Georgiana is struck by other women's blur of dresses—"the color of bodices past counting … red, mauve, pink, blue, lilac, purple, ecru, rose, yellow, cream, and white, all the colors that an impressionist finds in a sunlit landscape." She "regarded them as though they had been so many daubs of tube-paint on a palette," implicitly associating them both with art—a source of beauty and vitality for both Georgiana and Clark—and a life as of yet unformed; unlike Georgiana, who has chosen (and may regret) her path, these "daubs of paint" could still become anything. In contrast, each time the homestead is described, it is dark, drab, and unvarying: "the tall, naked house on the prairie, black and grim … the black pond," with no other noteworthy color attributed to the scene: "cattle-tracked bluffs … weather-curled boards … gaunt, molting turkeys." Such a lack of color instills the homestead with a distinct air of drudgery and despair, suggesting it as a place that smothers vibrancy and hope for anything more.

WATER

Cather uses water to symbolize the renewal of dormant life, especially the revival of Georgiana's soul. Not incidentally, Cather frequently associates water with music, further underscoring the latter as a source of meaning for Georgiana. During the concert, for instance, the violin bows "drove obliquely downward, like the pelting streaks of rain in a summer shower," as Clark wonders whether his aunt is receptive to the power of such music after so many years removed from the cultural scene. Soon after, he first notices tears on Georgiana's cheeks and reflects on the resilience of the suffering soul, which, like moss, "can lie on a dusty shelf half a century and yet, if placed in water, grows green again." Georgiana's soul appeared to have lain almost lifeless for lack of access to music, but as soon as it is immersed in a cultured environment once again, it responds immediately with heartfelt emotion. Her weeping grows in volume and intensity throughout the concert, until it is like "a shallow vessel [that] overflows in a rainstorm"—the renewal of emotion evoked by the music is almost more than she can bear. Like her tears, the music is a "deluge of sound" that "poured on and on," relentless but also potentially dangerous in its persistence. Clark does not know what Georgiana "found in the shining current of it" or "past what happy islands" it bore her—perhaps it led her past joyful memories of her earlier career—though he believes it carried her "into the grey, nameless burying grounds of the sea" where hopes and dreams sleep, and she, too, must finally put to rest the part of herself that has been awakened by the concert. Only after the music subsides does Georgiana burst into full tears, pleading that she doesn't want to go back to the homestead. Thus, Cather's association of water and music carries Georgiana from the concert's ambiguous beginning to its cathartic end. While water symbolizes the bringing to life of Georgiana's soul, it also has an overwhelming, potentially drowning effect, shown by the fact that she is overcome with sorrow over abandoned hopes.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Collected Stories* published in 1992.

A Wagner Matinee Quotes

The name of my Aunt Georgiana opened before me a gulf of recollection so wide and deep that … 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 my aunt had known, scourged with chilblains and bashfulness, my hands cracked and sore from the corn husking.

Related Characters: Clark (speaker), Howard Carpenter, Georgiana Carpenter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes immediately after Clark receives a letter from his Uncle Howard, informing him that Aunt Georgiana will be arriving in Boston the following day to attend to legal matters. Georgiana's name sweeps Clark back to his

boyhood, which was dramatically different from his present circumstances. In this way, the quote introduces both the theme of frontier versus civilization and the theme of estrangement. The youthful Clark was shy, workworn, and exposed to the elements ("chilblains" are sores associated with exposure to the cold); by implication, the present Clark is urban, cultured, well-sheltered, and confident. Though Clark never gives an explanation as to why he lived on the homestead, he gives the impression that the circumstances were not of his choosing and were accompanied by considerable suffering. Thus, the quote anticipates the stark contrast Georgiana will present to her Boston surroundings, as well as the tension both she and Clark will face as they navigate that contrast.

> Whatever shock Mrs. Springer experienced at my aunt's appearance, she considerately concealed. As for myself, I saw my aunt's battered figure with that feeling of awe and respect with which we behold explorers who have left their ears and fingers north of Franz-Joseph-Land, or their health somewhere along the Upper Congo.

Related Characters: Clark (speaker), Georgiana Carpenter

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

After Georgiana arrives in Boston looking disoriented and covered in soot and dust, Clark's landlady immediately helps her to bed, and Clark ponders the startling impression his aunt has left. Clark's comparison of his aunt to an intrepid explorer reflects the fact that, around the time Cather wrote, European exploration of remote regions was much in the public consciousness. Franz-Joseph-Land, an uninhabited group of islands located in the Arctic Ocean, had been discovered in the late nineteenth century, and in the early years of the twentieth, explorers mounted campaigns from the islands to reach the North Pole. Central Africa's Congo Basin was famously explored by Henry Morton Stanley in the later decades of the nineteenth century as well. So while Clark's comparison of his aunt has an element of humorous exaggeration, it does show just how distant her recent experience has been from Clark's, and how great he considers her sacrifice on the frontier to be.

> 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 where her ancestors had dwelt for generations, she had kindled the callow fancy of my uncle, Howard Carpenter, then an idle, shiftless boy of twenty-one. When she returned to her duties in Boston, Howard followed her, and the upshot of this infatuation was that she eloped with him, eluding the reproaches of her family and the criticism of her friends by going with him to the Nebraska frontier.

Related Characters: Clark (speaker), Howard Carpenter, Georgiana Carpenter

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

The Boston Conservatory, founded in 1867 by a German-born violinist named Julius Eichberg, had been forward-thinking in its inclusion of women from its inception. Georgiana's affiliation with the Conservatory, therefore, shows not just her talent, but that she was on the cutting edge of musicianship and musical education in her era. This makes it all the more surprising that she would have eloped with a man who seems to have been so strikingly her opposite. Clark never supplies further details as to why Georgiana married an immature, unambitious man, but the elopement brings about the first major estrangement of her life—her alienation from friends and family, even before setting out for the frontier. The extent of her sacrifice is beginning to come into sharper focus.

> 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, gently shaking me when my drowsy head sank down over a page of irregular verbs. It was to her, at her ironing or mending, that I read my first Shakspere, and her old text-book on mythology was the first that ever came into my empty hands. She taught me my scales and exercises on the little parlour organ which her husband had bought her after fifteen years during which she had not so much as seen a musical instrument.

Related Characters: Clark (speaker), Howard Carpenter,

Georgiana Carpenter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes in the context of Clark's reminiscences about Aunt Georgiana and her goodness to him during his years on the homestead. Cather sets up a contrast between the study of Latin, Shakespeare, and mythology and long days of demanding farm work. Georgiana clearly placed great emphasis on ensuring that Clark—his hands "empty," yet evidently filled with potential in her eyes—receive not only a rudimentary education, but a grounding in the classics and in music. Yet Georgiana was equally committed to fulfilling the demands of the homestead—she did not allow the needs of the household to suffer despite her determination to tutor Clark and maintain some connection to music. Clearly an exceptional pioneer wife, Georgiana also sacrificed greatly—after her elite musical career in Boston, fifteen years without an instrument would have been a serious privation (and a further indication that Howard has been slow to recognize his wife for who she is).

> She would sit beside me by the hour, darning and counting, while I struggled with the "Joyous Farmer." She seldom talked to me about music, and I understood why. Once when I had been doggedly beating out some easy passages from an old score of *Euryanthe* I had found among her music books, she came up 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."

Related Characters: Howard Carpenter, Georgiana Carpenter, Clark (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Clark continues to reminisce about Georgiana and her role in his upbringing. In particular, he reflects on her influence on him as a novice musician. The "Joyous Farmer" is one of a collection of pieces for beginners, composed by Robert Schumann in 1848 for his young daughters. There is humor in the fact that Clark learned to play this piece in an environment that seems to have been lacking in joy. More to the point, however, as Clark gained proficiency and began practicing more advanced pieces on his own initiative, he learned as much from Georgiana's warnings as from her musical instruction. Her emotional words—memorable because she was normally so reticent about music—reveal how much the isolation of the frontier has cost her. The fact that she brought her old music books to Nebraska is likewise a poignant indication of her fight to hang onto vestiges of home.

> I had felt some trepidation lest she might become aware of her queer, country clothes, 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 had judged her. She sat looking about her with eyes as impersonal, almost as stony, as those with which the granite Rameses in a museum watches the froth and fret that ebbs and flows about his pedestal. I have seen this same aloofness in old miners who drift into the Brown hotel at Denver … standing in the thronged corridors as solitary as though they were still in a frozen camp on the Yukon.

Related Characters: Clark (speaker), Georgiana Carpenter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

These thoughts cross Clark's mind after he and Georgiana enter the concert hall for the Wagner matinée he has planned as a special treat for his aunt. Perhaps he is slightly embarrassed himself by his aunt's outdated fashion. In any case, he quickly discovers that he needn't have worried. Despite looking jarringly out of place, Georgiana is every inch the dignified woman he remembers. By comparing her to a museum statue and a miner in a hotel, he likens her to figures similarly out of place, yet fully retaining their sense of self, despite whatever bustle occurs around them or whatever the perceptions of onlookers. Further, much like the Arctic or African explorer cited earlier, Georgiana is compared to figures who find themselves adjusting to extreme changes in their environment.

> 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 colour of bodices past counting … red, mauve, pink, blue, lilac, purple, écru, rose, yellow, cream, and white, all the colours that an impressionist 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.

Related Characters: Clark (speaker), Georgiana Carpenter

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

Before the concert begins, Georgiana is drawn to the sight of the other concertgoers' dresses. Georgiana is elsewhere described as wearing a "queer, country" dress in black, which contrasts starkly with the vivid array of the other women's clothes. The contrast between black and bright colors symbolizes the contrast between the drab, cultureless environment of the frontier and the lively world of the city. Perhaps it also suggests the contrast between Georgiana's youthful hopes and the present reality of her life, as she gazes at the dresses as though at a potential work of art—the type of sight she has been deprived of for most of her life.

> When the horns drew out the first strain of the Pilgrim's chorus, Aunt Georgiana clutched my coat sleeve. Then it was I first realized that for her this broke a silence of thirty years. 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; and I saw again the tall, naked house on the prairie … 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.

Related Characters: Clark (speaker), Georgiana Carpenter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

Here Clark observes Georgiana's reaction to the first musical performance she has heard for thirty years and also considers what the music evokes for him personally. The first piece in the concert is the overture to Wagner's 1845 opera, *Tännhauser*, set in medieval Germany and telling a story of the conflict between sacred and profane love. The dramatic conflict in the score echoes the conflict in Georgiana's own life between the frontier and her love of music, between the old life of her dreams and the reality of her life now. Clark's sense of "waste and wear" suggests that Georgiana has already lost her battle. The dramatic picture of "the flat world of the ancients" in Clark's mind has the feel of a stage direction, as if he is watching the opera's storyline play out on the prairie. "The conquests of peace" refer to the lifelong, plodding struggle to eke out an existence in that forbidding place.

> She preserved this utter immobility throughout the number from *The Flying Dutchman*, though her fingers worked mechanically upon her black dress, as if, of themselves, they were recalling the piano score they had once played. Poor hands! They had been stretched and twisted into mere tentacles to hold and lift and knead with;—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.

Related Characters: Clark (speaker), Georgiana Carpenter

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the ensuing pieces, Clark is curious to know his aunt's reactions to the music but finds her inscrutable. When he sees her playing along with the music of *The Flying Dutchman*, he is deeply moved by the sight of her marred hands. They remind him both of what might have been if Georgiana had not given up her dreams of music and how she taught and cared for Clark as a boy—ultimately helping him escape the drudgery of the farm, though she remained behind. Georgiana's ability to recall the music, even if only to mimic it, shows how deeply embedded her musical memory is. The sight of what "had once been a wedding ring" also suggests that her marriage, like her tortured

hands, has been frayed beyond recognition by the pressures of frontier life.

> Some years before there had drifted to the farm in Red Willow County a young German, a tramp cow-puncher, who had sung in the chorus at Bayreuth 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 ... 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 over 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.

Related Characters: Clark (speaker), Georgiana Carpenter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

During the concert intermission, Clark asks his aunt about her tearful reaction during the "Prize Song," and she haltingly shares the memory it had conjured. A wandering German cowboy with opera training is a truly improbable figure which effectively mirrors the strangeness of Georgiana's own situation. Bayreuth, a town in northern Bavaria, Germany, was Richard Wagner's home in his later years and the site of an opera festival he founded in order to stage his own works. As such, Georgiana and the cowboy share an elite musical background, and Georgiana's attempt to recruit the man for the church choir reflects her desperation to squeeze something of high culture out of frontier life. The fact that the cowboy is ill-suited for the role foisted upon him doesn't bode well for Georgiana, either.

> 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 number 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.

Related Characters: Clark (speaker), Georgiana Carpenter

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

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Explanation and Analysis

During the second half of the concert, which closes with Siegfried's funeral march in the Götterdämmerung (the last of Wagner's Ring cycle), Georgiana weeps almost continuously, and Clark speculates about what is going on in her mind. As this opera's final act includes a good deal of water imagery, including the overflowing of the banks of the Rhine, Cather is certainly drawing on her lifelong love of opera and likely expected her contemporary readers to be able to draw on an equivalent bank of knowledge. Here the "deluge" symbolizes music's ability to awaken Georgiana's latent love of music, but, ultimately, it also symbolizes the drowning of the hopes and dreams she has harbored all her life. The music is, contrary to Clark's initial fears, an exquisite gift to her, but its penetrating beauty also proves to be more than she can bear.

> 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 concert hall, lay the black pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs; the tall, unpainted house, with weather-curled boards, naked as a tower; the crook-backed ash seedlings where the dish-cloths hung to dry; the gaunt, moulting turkeys picking up refuse about the kitchen door.

Related Characters: Georgiana Carpenter, Clark (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

These final two paragraphs compose the climax of the story. Georgiana sits motionless as the rest of the audience leaves the concert hall, and, when prompted by Clark, expresses with jarring simplicity what has been building up throughout the concert. Clark finally understands what her emotions have been. The line "just outside the concert hall" suggests that, for Georgiana, there is effectively no in-between,

marginal space for her anymore; she must face head-on the frontier life and the losses it represents. Though she recoils at it, the frontier—a stark, barren, cultureless world all the more repellent in comparison to the overwhelming beauty she has just consumed—is the only home that realistically remains to her, and she despairs.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A WAGNER MATINEE

One morning, Clark, the narrator, receives a letter postmarked from "a little Nebraska village." The letter, which looks "worn" and "none too clean," is from his Uncle Howard, informing Clark that Howard's wife, Clark's Aunt Georgiana, must travel to Boston to attend to legal matters. He asks Clark to tend to Georgiana's needs while she is in Boston. Clark realizes that she is due in town the following day; if he had been away from home, he might have missed his aunt's arrival altogether.

The condition of Howard's letter suggests that it has weathered a long journey, hailing from a world very different from its destination. In this way, it prefigures Georgiana's own arrival from Nebraska. The suddenness of Georgiana's impending arrival also reinforces the sense of an imminent culture clash.

Georgiana's name stirs deep recollections for Clark—so deep that he feels "suddenly a stranger to all the present conditions of [his] existence." He feels as if he is once again a "gangling farmer-boy … scourged with chilblains and bashfulness," practicing scales on Georgiana's parlor organ while she makes cornhusking mittens.

Clark's dramatic sense of dislocation underscores the clash between Georgiana's context and his own, and forebodes the feeling of estrangement Georgiana herself will feel. Clark's recollections also introduce music as a significant part of his life on the farm and in his relationship with Georgiana.

The next day, at the train station, Clark has some difficulty in finding Georgiana. She is the last to alight from the train, and she doesn't seem to recognize him immediately, either. Having traveled the entire way in a day coach, she is dirty—her duster "**black** with soot" and her "black bonnet gray with dust." Clark's landlady immediately puts Georgiana to bed, and Clark doesn't see his aunt until the following day.

Clark's and Georgiana's awkward reunion underscores the contrast between frontier and city life. Georgiana's disoriented and disheveled appearance after her exhausting, stressful journey further makes her seem a stranger to Clark and to Boston.

Clark is shocked by his aunt's battered appearance. He regards her with "that feeling of awe and respect with which we behold explorers who have left their ears and fingers north of Franz-Joseph-Land, or their health somewhere along the Upper Congo."

Both Franz-Joseph-Land, an uninhabited archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, and the Upper Congo region of Central Africa were areas that were recent sites of European exploration at the time Cather wrote. Both places were regarded as utterly remote and devoid of familiar cultural touchstones. To Clark, Georgiana looks like a survivor of such dangers and privations. Though there is a note of wry exaggeration here, it emphasizes the contrast between frontier and civilization all the more.

Clark reflects on Georgiana's past. Georgiana had been a music teacher at the Boston Conservatory in the late 1860s. While visiting her ancestral village in Vermont one summer, she had attracted the attention of the "idle, shiftless" Howard Carpenter, who followed her back to Boston. Georgiana ultimately eloped with him to the Nebraska frontier, fleeing the protests of her family and friends, and they established a homestead in Red Willow County.

Georgiana's character comes into clearer focus as it is revealed that she isn't originally from Nebraska. Her prestigious background contrasts sharply with that of the unambitious Howard. It isn't clear exactly why they chose the drastic step of homesteading on the frontier, but it is clear that Georgiana's loved ones thought them a poor match, that the move was made in haste, and that the contrast between her upbringing and her marriage couldn't be greater.

Clark describes the couple's dug-out as "one of those cave dwellings whose inmates so often reverted to primitive conditions." They got water from a lagoon where buffalo drank, and their provisions were "always at the mercy of bands of roving Indians." Georgiana had not ventured more than fifty miles from the homestead in thirty years.

While Clark's perspective might be taken with a grain of salt—he is, after all, a city-dweller, years removed from the homestead—it continues to reinforce the contrast between his world and his aunt's. Georgiana's living conditions are described as primal, dangerous, and almost unfit for civilized people. What's more, her isolation has been extreme, and her estrangement from her roots absolute.

Clark further reflects that most of the good of his boyhood was due to Georgiana, whom he held in "reverential affection." After cooking three meals and caring for six children, his aunt would often iron until midnight while Clark, who rode herd for Howard, drowsily studied Latin, Shakespeare, or mythology at her side.

Clark's reasons for moving to the homestead aren't clear, but Georgiana was clearly a maternal figure to him. She not only appears to have been the ultimate pioneer wife—up all hours managing a large household—she also saw to Clark's education, suggesting that she saw special potential in him and that their bond was unique. The contrast between "riding herd" and studying Latin shows that Clark, too, understands the frontier/civilization contrast firsthand.

Georgiana also taught Clark to play the parlor organ, an instrument Howard had bought for her "after fifteen years during which she had not so much as seen a musical instrument." Clark recalls that Georgiana seldom spoke to him about music, but that once when she found him determinedly playing passages from the opera *Euryanthe*, she had placed her hands over his eyes and tremulously said, "Don't love it so well, Clark, or it may be taken from you."

After having taught at the Boston Conservatory in her youth and then gone for fifteen years without a musical instrument, a parlor organ would have been a modest consolation for Georgiana. It goes to show just how much she has sacrificed by moving to the frontier with a husband for whom her own desires were of decidedly secondary concern. Clark's memory of his aunt's emotional warning, as well as the fact the Georgiana rarely chose to speak about music, further show that after more than a decade on the frontier, Georgiana already considered music to have been taken from her.

The morning after her arrival in Boston, Georgiana still seems to be "in a semi-somnambulent state," hardly realizing she is in Boston, despite how much she has longed for the city of her youth. After the wretched train journey, it is as if there were only "a few hours of nightmare" between Red Willow County and Boston.

After her difficult journey, Georgiana seems to be in a dreamlike, marginal state that keeps her from either differentiating herself fully from Nebraska or identifying with the city she has pined for over decades. She feels estranged from the environment that was once home to her.

Clark has planned to take Georgiana to the Symphony Orchestra's Wagner program, to repay her for some of the "glorious moments" of his boyhood—such as when she told him about splendid musical performances in the cowshed while Clark was especially tired, or after Howard had spoken sharply to him.

The dramatic contrast between milking cows and attending concerts shows Georgiana's desperate efforts to hang onto aspects of her younger self. Meanwhile, Clark looks back fondly on the consolation afforded him by such moments, in a laborious environment for which he seems to have been ill-suited.

Georgiana seems so timid about venturing into the city that Clark begins to doubt whether his aunt will enjoy the concert. Even as they discuss various changes in Boston, Georgiana is distracted with concerns back on the farm: a sickly calf and an opened kit of mackerel that might spoil. She has never even heard a Wagnerian opera performed before. Clark wonders if he should "get her back to Red Willow County without waking her."

Georgiana continues to seem stuck between worlds, to the extent that Clark isn't sure the concert will be a kindness to her. She has been subject to the cares of farm life for so long that she cannot extricate herself from them sufficiently to take in what is actually around her.

As soon as they arrive at the concert hall, however, Georgiana appears to wake up to her surroundings. Clark had been concerned that Georgiana might be self-conscious about her outdated **black** dress or embarrassed at reentering a world "to which she had been dead for a quarter of a century." He realizes he had judged her superficially. She looks around with eyes as stony as those of "a granite Rameses in a museum" and as aloof as old Yukon miners in a Denver hotel.

Clark begins to realize that, though she is superficially out of place, Georgiana is still the cultured woman he remembers from his boyhood. She embodies a placid, self-possessed dignity that belies her rustic exterior, and she appears to be coming back to herself.

The matinée audience is made up mostly of women, hardly distinguishable except for the different fabrics and wide array of **colors** of their dresses— "all the colors that an impressionist finds in a sunlit landscape." Georgiana looks at them "as though they had been so many daubs of tube-paint on a palette."

Georgiana's eyes are drawn to the other concertgoers' dresses as if she is seeing fine art. In contrast to her own drab apparel, associated with the drudgery of the farm, the women's dresses quench some of Georgiana's thirst for the livelier, more varied world she has left behind.

Georgiana's interest is further quickened by the appearance of the musicians onstage. Clark thinks he can understand what his aunt is feeling, for he remembers how his own soul was refreshed after years of "ploughing forever and forever between green aisles of corn," where one might never "[perceive] a shadow of change" in a whole day's work. He reminisces about "the clean profiles of the musicians … the beloved shapes of the instruments … the patches of yellow light … the restless, wind-tossed forest of fiddle necks and bows" the first time he attended a symphony concert.

Clark's understanding of his aunt advances a little more, as her growing interest reminds him of his own reaction the first time he attended a concert after years of monotonous farm labor. Like Georgiana's reaction to the colorful dresses, Clark was stirred by the vitality and variety of the orchestra compared to the monotonous green over the course of an endless workday.

During the first number, the Tannhäuser overture, Georgiana clutches Clark's sleeve, and he realizes that this music "broke a silence of thirty years" for her. For Clark the frenzied music evokes "an overwhelming sense of the waste and wear we are so powerless to combat." He visualizes the Nebraska farm, the house "**black** and grim as a wooden fortress," the land "the flat world of the ancients." Amidst all of it are "the conquests of peace, dearer-bought than those of war."

After thirty years without it, the opening notes of a symphony performance would have been overwhelming for Georgiana. For Clark, the music reminds him of the relentless march of time, the forbidding homestead, and the starkness of the land—all things that cost his aunt dearly.

Georgiana's reaction to the first overture is somewhat impassive, and Clark wonders what she gets from the music. Georgiana's musical education had been a sophisticated one, and Clark remembers her singing Verdi's melodies when he was a boy—especially, when he was sick, singing "Home to our mountains, O, let us return!" He recalls that she sang "in a way fit to break the heart of a Vermont boy near dead of home-sickness already."

Clark remembers Georgiana's singing of Verdi as a melancholy reminder of home. Yet, for his aunt, it expresses a deeper yearning still—a longing for a "home," an entire sense of self, from which she is already permanently estranged.

As the concert goes on, Clark wonders if Georgiana has "enough left to at all comprehend this power which had kindled the world since she had left it?" She remains stoic through the piece from *The Flying Dutchman*, but Clark notices that her fingers are working automatically, as if recalling the piano score she had once played. He is moved by the sight of her gnarled hands, "mere tentacles to hold and lift and knead with."

Given the years that have passed since Georgiana was trained, Clark isn't sure that she can connect with music as paradigm-shifting as Wagner's, but he has again misjudged her. He is moved by the contrast between the physical condition of her hands and their unrestrainable desire to create music. Her hands were meant for the latter, but have been dedicated instead to the utilitarian concerns of survival.

During the "Prize Song," Clark notices that there are **tears** on Georgiana's cheeks and that she continues to weep throughout the melody. Clark realizes that "it never really died … the soul which can suffer so excruciatingly and so interminably; it withers to the outward eye only."

Georgiana's tears symbolize the thawing effect that music has on the soul, as the music transcends the bitter realities of frontier life. Clark's questions about her responsiveness to music are laid to rest, as he marvels at the resilience of his aunt's soul underneath her changed exterior.

During the intermission, Georgiana explains that she has heard the "Prize Song" before. "Wanderingly, as though she were talking in the weak lapses of illness," she tells the story of the tramp cowboy, a German, who had drifted to the Carpenters' farm. He had sung in the chorus at Bayreuth as a boy and would sing the "Prize Song" while cleaning his boots and saddle. Georgiana had even prevailed upon him to sing in the church choir, but he disappeared after spending a drunken holiday weekend in town.

The incongruous figure of the opera-singing German cowboy represents Georgiana's desperate longing for music in her isolated context. He provided a transitory link to civilization and home which ultimately couldn't survive on the frontier, despite Georgiana's efforts to anchor him in that world by making him join the church choir.

During the second half of the concert, Georgiana **weeps** continuously, "as a shallow vessel overflows in a rain-storm." "The deluge" of Wagner's *Ring* "poured on and on," and Clark doesn't know where the music takes her. He supposes that she has been carried into some spiritual realm where "hope has lain down with hope and dream with dream and, renouncing, slept."

As the music goes on, it seems to carry Georgiana beyond mere reminiscence and melancholy. Her thoughts and feelings aren't accessible to Clark, but he discerns that she is confronting the grief of her abandoned dreams.

The concert ends. The rest of the audience files out talking and laughing, and the musicians exit the stage, leaving it "empty as a winter cornfield." Georgiana remains seated, however, and when prompted by Clark, she bursts into **tears** and pleads, "I don't want to go, Clark, I don't want to go!"

The silent, empty stage evokes a barren prairie, in contrast with the cheer of the departing crowd. It also leaves Georgiana faced with the reality of what awaits her, and she finally voices her despair to Clark.

Clark understands. For Georgiana, outside the concert hall "lay the **black** pond with the cattle-tracked bluffs," the weathered house, and an environment promising endless work and little beauty.

Clark finally understands his aunt's feelings. While the concert hall is no longer a place Georgiana fully belongs, the barrenness of Nebraska has become all the more repellent in light of the glimpse of transcendence the concert has given her. She cannot find home in either place.

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