

Yvonne A. Frey  
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## “Nothing Gold Can Stay” ( Robert Frost poem, 1923)

### Concept:

In *A Lost Lady* written in 1923, Willa Cather hearkens back nostalgically to an earlier period of American history—a time when pioneers like Captain Daniel Forrester built the railroads in the West. Viewing three American landscapes—one depicting the West before the railroads; one memorializing the beauties of Nature in autumn, in a work commissioned for a real-estate agent’s mansion; and the last landscape painted in 1925 depicting an old-fashioned mansion strangely out of place next to a railroad track-- may help to explain Cather’s concern about the changing American scene in the 1920’s.

### Guiding Question:

How do the artworks, *Looking Down Yosemite Valley*, California, 1895 by Albert Bierstadt, *Autumn Landscape—The River of Life*, 1923-1924 by Louis Comfort Tiffany, and *House by the Railroad*, 1925 by Edward Hopper, reveal changing attitudes toward nature and life in America, and help place Cather’s characters in an historical and literary context?

### Background:

*A Lost Lady* was written by Willa Cather in a time of political, economic and social transition and turmoil. 1923 was shortly after World War I and before the Great Depression. Artistic, literary, and political “isms” were ending and beginning. This novel is a novel of remembrance of a past age. Niel Herbert, in the beginning of the novel a boy of 12, recalls life in the small Western town of Sweet Water in the mid 1880’s. The Gilded Age of rich industrialists has had its effect on Sweet Water. There are defined levels of society in the small town, with the upper level composed of a doctor, a lawyer, and the retired railroad builder Daniel Forrester and his lovely wife. Cather calls it a “feudal” society in the novel. The Forrester home is honored with occasional visits from a wealthy railroad industrialist and from a wealthy business executive-- men who keep tabs on the well-being of Captain Forrester and his wife. Interesting enough, Cather, unlike Samuel Clemens, does not find fault with the men of the Gilded Age. They maintain an interest throughout Captain Forrester’s life in “doing right” by him. The threat to the Forrester family comes instead from the lower element of society, Ivy Peters, a crooked lawyer, who would normally not be received socially by the Forresters. (Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) along with his neighbor Charles Dudley Warner, coined the term “Gilded Age” as a critical comment on the extravagance, and superficiality of the wealthy. Ironically, Clemens himself had a mansion designed by Louis C. Tiffany and was friends with a Standard Oil executive who helped him out of financial difficulties.) The Forrester home was not decorated by the likes of Louis Comfort Tiffany, but the Captain and his wife could appreciate the finer things in life, often presented with fine wines and liquor when the rich visited them in their well-furnished home on the hill.

Louis Comfort Tiffany was said to embody the artistic spirit of the Gilded Age. He mastered the art of oil painting, architecture, stained glass, art glass, home decorating and interior design. His artistic philosophy was in line with that of the Aesthetic Movement which united all decorative elements in the home for an overall aesthetic effect. Tiffany was also adhered to the Art Nouveau style, in which nature is spotlighted, along with an abstraction of the natural and a sensual line. Tiffany’s *Autumn Landscape* had been designed for the massive manor house of a real-estate magnate, L.D. Towle, who died in bankruptcy shortly before his home was completed. With its Gothic framing, the window seems more appropriate to a church than to a mansion. The “Autumn” scene invites us to experience the many natural beauties of the fall before the season changes. All the elements of nature are depicted: earth in the lower ground; air in the clouds and sky; fire in the setting sun; water in the rippling stream. There are no people depicted in the landscape. This is a Garden of Eden with Nature in all its glory—nature unspoiled by Adam and Eve. In some ways the view is reminiscent of Albert Bierstadt’s *Looking Down Yosemite Valley*, before the railroads changed the Western scene. Tiffany’s work was completed in the 1920’s when the artist was in his mid 70’s, years after the Art Nouveau style had reached its peak of popularity. The window serves as a memorial not only to his patron, but to Tiffany’s own illustrious career which was now in the “autumn” years. In this window, Tiffany has demonstrated a mastery of many types of glass which his company had created, as well as a mastery of artistic technique. With light that continuously changes shining through the glass and the rippled water effects Tiffany has made in the glass, the scene of autumn remains always perfect though always changing.

Cather's *A Lost Lady*, like Tiffany's window, is assembled from many different pieces. Many bits of memory begin to shed light on the important characters, mainly the Captain and Mrs. Forrester as time moves on. Niel Herbert muses first about his boyhood in the mid-1880's Captain Daniel Forrester, whose old-fashioned home dominates the view, as one comes to Sweet Water or leaves it, was an heroic builder of the railroads. He is, however, literally of a different age from his much younger wife, Marian. When he has money to maintain his position in Sweet Water society, his wife is protected from the social elements beneath her. However, when he nobly ruins himself financially to save investors in his bank from bankruptcy, conditions change for both the Captain and his wife. As the Captain grows older and weaker in health, he retreats more and more into his garden, raising his beautiful roses and "forcing" hyacinth bulbs to grow during winter months, while his wife, no longer protected by her husband, faces harsh economic realities in less than noble ways, rejecting help from the Captain's friends and instead seeking help and advice from the unprincipled, social-climbing lawyer Ivy Peters.

Cather has been called a pessimistic realist in this novel. The book does deal with the sense of loss. There is a loss of health, of passion, of money, of position in society and even of ideals. A puzzle remains to be solved at the novel's end. Cather taunts us with the novel's very title. Is Marian a "lady"? Is the lady truly lost? In what way is she lost? Is it a story of Niel's loss of youthful innocence too, or is it more a loss of a more gracious, more pleasing way of life?

**Vocabulary:**

Gilded Age: 1865-1901—a period of great economic growth and wealthy industrialist patrons of the arts  
Art Nouveau: 1880-1914—a "new" artistic style emphasizing the beauty of nature in many decorative forms

Impressionism: 1870-80's—an artistic style depicting the effects of light in art

Realism: a style of art which attempts to depict life as it is

Aesthetic Movement: 1868-1901—a movement in which aesthetics is valued over moral or social values—anticipates

Modernism

Modernism: late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century—a style which values the "new" and uses self-conscious abstraction

**Performance Tasks/Activities:**

1. Before discussion on the novel begins, students will have read the novel, *A Lost Lady* by Willa Cather and viewed carefully three artworks from *Picturing America—Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California* by Albert Bierstadt, *Autumn Landscape—The River of Life* by Louis C. Tiffany, and *House by the Railroad* by Edward Hopper.
2. Students will be asked to write at least 5 adjectives to describe their first impressions of each of the three works of art. Class will compare the adjectives they chose for the art works. Teacher will give a brief background of the art works and the artist's place in art history.
3. Teacher will discuss in detail Louis C. Tiffany's window which dates from the same year as Cather's novel. The various types of art that Tiffany produced will be discussed, particularly his production of glass for windows. (I would bring in a disassembled jigsaw puzzle and drop the pieces on the desk to give the students the idea of how many pieces are assembled in a single work of art.. Each glass piece is created for a distinct effect.) Teacher can ask class to identify the time of day depicted in the window. Is that important to the piece? Would the window look different at different times of the day? Why? What colors are used and why? Does the glass appear to have any texture or textures? What effect on the piece does the frame around the window have? Does the frame make

you want to enter the scene or does it keep you from coming in? Why are there no animals or people pictured in the window?

4. Just as each piece of glass is fitted into the scene for a particular effect, so Willa Cather's short novel is very tightly constructed and uses many descriptions, colors, and symbols for particular effects. Students will pick a character from the novel-- Marian, Captain Forrester, Niel, Ivy --and be ready to discuss which of the 3 landscapes that character would be most comfortable to inhabit and why.
5. Students will write one detailed paragraph on one of the following topics:
- A. Why did you place your character in one of the works of art?
  - B. Do you agree that Cather is a pessimistic realist? Is Marian lost? In whose view?
  - C. Is there significance in the names Cather uses? -- Daniel Forrester, Marian, Ivy, Sweet Water--
  - D. Does Niel grow as a character? How? Why is he more concerned with Marian's morals than the Captain is? What do you make of the his final view of Marian in the last pages of the book?
  - E. How important is "time", "twilight," and "winter" in the novel? Why?
  - F. The railroad is central to Edward Hopper's painting *House by the Railroad*. Is the railroad central to Cather's novel? Explain.

Assessment:

Evaluation is based on class discussion as well as on written responses to one of the topics listed in #5.

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Good Internet Source for American Railroad History:

[www.uprr.com](http://www.uprr.com)

### **Notes on Tiffany glass making**

Before Tiffany developed new techniques, details were brushed on glass panes with enamels and then fired. Tiffany revolutionized stained glass production by creating different processes for making unique types of glass.

Plating—the addition of one or more layers of glass to obtain a greater depth of color  
Cames—the leading which hold panes of glass together. Tiffany used the leading in his design.

Cartoon—the sketched design for a stained glass window

Crown glass—glass spun on a blowpipe to create a flat “crown” of glass which is cut into panes

Confetti glass—glass formed with tiny flakes of different colors embedded in it

Jewels—molded press glass which gives texture and sparkle to the glass

Opalescent glass—milky glass which resembles an opal with variations in color and translucence

Streaky glass—glass which contains up to three colors and sheets of glass with a wide variety of

density and texture

Drapery glass—glass made by manipulating molten glass with paddles to make folds in rich

Colors

Iridescent glass—glass produced by spraying tin chloride on the glass in a reduction of oxygen

Damascene glass—glass with stripes of gold and luster in wavy patterns

Hammered glass—glass produced by rolling molten glass through textured rollers

Nothing Gold Can Stay

Robert Frost (1923)

Nature's first green is gold,

Her hardest hue to hold.

Her early leaf's a flower;

But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.

So Eden sank to grief,

So dawn goes down to day.

Nothing gold can stay.