

Willa Cather “The Namesake”

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I. About the Author

Willa Sibert Cather (1873–1947), one of America’s most beloved authors, is best known for her novels depicting the lives of people who settled the American heartland and the Southwest: *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, *A Lost Lady*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Her life, like her writing, crisscrossed much of the United States. Born in Virginia, Cather grew up in Nebraska and graduated from the University of Nebraska. She then worked as a journalist and as a teacher in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, before moving to New York City in 1906 where she lived the rest of her life, but making long visits back to the Midwest, the Southwest, and California.

Scholars have suggested that “The Namesake” (written in 1907) has autobiographical significance: Cather’s maternal uncle, William Seibert Boak, died in the Civil War (fighting for the Confederacy), and Cather gave herself a slightly modified version of his middle name. But in the story itself, the earlier death of a (Union) Civil War hero becomes the centerpiece of a moving exploration of American national identity and of the vocation of the artist in relation to his country. Like her protagonist, Lyon Hartwell, Cather visited Paris and fell in love with it. She also greatly admired Henry James, who wrote extensively about America while living as an expatriate abroad. But unlike both Hartwell and James, Cather always made America her home.

II. Summary

The story is set in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century. Seven young American students, aspiring artists all, gather in the apartment-studio of the great sculptor Lyon Hartwell on a night when one of them, Charles Bentley, is departing for home. On display in the apartment, ready for casting, is Hartwell’s latest statue, “The Color

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Sergeant,” a work that draws the admiration—and envy—of the students. Challenged by Bentley to explain where he gets “the heat to make an idea like that carry,” Hartwell tells his young admirers the story of his own American “homecoming.”

Born in Italy to a self-exiled (and ultimately unsuccessful) American artist, Hartwell was orphaned by age fourteen. Still, he remained in Rome, studying sculpture, attempting to fulfill his father’s artistic ambitions for him, later moving to Paris to continue his artistic career. Ten years later, on the cusp of some success, he was, he says, “almost for the first time . . . confronted by a duty which was not my pleasure”: his grandfather died, leaving his father’s ailing maiden sister alone (5).

Intending to bring his aunt back to Paris, Hartwell journeyed to his father’s and grandfather’s birthplace—and to America—for the first time. Quickly realizing that it would be cruel to uproot his aunt, he remained in America two years, waiting for her illness to run its course. There he languished, feeling utterly estranged from the old family home and from the bustling industrial world encroaching upon it. One thing only drew him near: the portrait of his “boy uncle,” his father’s half-brother and his namesake. The uncle’s face reminds him of his father, but of his “father transformed and glorified; his hesitant discontent drowned in a kind of triumph” (7). Determined to learn what his boy uncle, dead at the age of sixteen, had found to make him look as he did, he tracks down the story of how he enlisted in the Civil War at age fifteen, became color sergeant of his regiment, and fell in a charge the next year, both his arms dismembered but covered by the Federal flag he had been carrying. He found no further clues about his uncle until the next Memorial Day, when his aunt, who seemed to live for this day, insisted that he retrieve the big flag from the attic and run it up the flagstaff, located in the garden beside the locust tree Uncle Lyon had planted long ago.

In the attic, Hartwell found a trunk with his “own” name on it. Later that night, he returned to the attic, opened the trunk, and found many of his uncle’s things. Among them was his uncle’s copy of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (a Latin epic poem that tells the legendary story of Aeneas, a Trojan who left the ruins of Troy and traveled to Italy, where he became the founder of Rome), inside of which his namesake had drawn the Federal flag (initialed and dated 1862, the year before his enlistment), and above which he had written the first two lines of Francis Scott Key’s poem, “The Star Spangled Banner.” “I seemed . . . at last to have known him,” he says, “in that careless, unconscious moment. . . as he was then” (10). Hartwell spends the rest of the dark and ominous night of Memorial Day sitting next to the locust tree, the flag, barely visible, continuing to flap overhead. There

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he experienced, he says, “the feeling that artists know when we, rarely, achieve truth in our work; the feeling of union with some great force, of purpose and security, of being glad that we have lived.” Sitting there until the dawn’s early light, he felt, for the first time “the pull of race and blood and kindred, and felt beating within me things that had not begun with me” (11). He concludes with an image of his rebirth as an American, rooted in the American soil.

Hartwell finishes his personal story. His young admirers sit in silence. Bentley’s cab arrives to start him on his voyage home to America.

III. Thinking about the Text

The story raises many interesting questions about its main character, and especially about his identity as an American and as an artist.

A. Hartwell in Paris

1. How does Lyon Hartwell appear to his young American admirers, and why? They are identified as coming from particular parts of the United States; he is identified as being rather “from America . . . ocean to ocean” (1). What does that suggest about him?
2. Why does the usually reticent sculptor choose this occasion to tell his story?
3. What is his answer to Bentley’s claim that it is only because Hartwell is *not* an American that he can look so clearly and movingly at American subjects?

IN CONVERSATION

In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Cather’s story with Diana Schaub, coeditor of What So Proudly We Hail, and William Schambra, director of the Hudson Institute’s Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal.

Diana Schaub: The other students are drawn to Hartwell, first because he is a great sculptor; they are young men studying the same art. But they are also drawn to him because of his connection with America. Though Hartwell was born abroad, everyone describes him as simply being “from America.” Hartwell seems

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to sum up all of America in his person, from ocean to ocean. The other young American sculptors are regional in some way—they're from New Hampshire, or they're from out West. In a way, Hartwell, by not being *in* America but rather being *from* America—that distance enables him to sum up what it means to be American.

Leon Kass: While admiring the now finished magnum opus, “The Color Sergeant,” Bentley says to Hartwell, “I almost think that it’s because you are not really an American that you can manage something like this, that you have the heat to carry off an idea of this sort.” And Hartwell says, perhaps that’s the case. He uses that kind of challenge, and invitation based on their perception of him and his work, to tell them his story.

Diana Schaub: The other artists think that whoever is called home is taken out of the race in some way. So Hartwell’s story shows them that in being called home—that is the place where they can actually gain this “heat” and subject matter that will turn them into true artists.

Leon Kass: In a way, as the flag itself is an emblem, Hartwell is making a “one out of the many” of this group. That is another way in which, by representing the color sergeant before them and telling them this story on this occasion, Hartwell is doing the job that the flag does for a disparate nation such as ours.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at
www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.*

B. Hartwell’s Journey to America

1. Why is Lyon Hartwell so attracted by the portrait of his namesake?
2. What moves Hartwell so much in learning the story of his namesake’s life and death?
3. What is the significance of his discoveries inside his uncle’s marked-up copy of Virgil’s *Aeneid* (10)? What does he learn about his namesake? Is Virgil’s *Aeneid* itself of any significance in what he learns?

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IN CONVERSATION

Diana Schaub: Everyone who looks at the portrait of Hartwell's boy uncle is said to be captivated by its energy and gallantry and joy and life. It is this very handsome young man that anyone would respond to. But there is also a very specific appeal for Hartwell. His own father had been an expatriate, but a very dissatisfied one. He's described as the most unhappy of exiles. But in looking at this picture of his uncle, he sees the visage of his father, but the visage of his father now transformed and glorified, and he very much wants to understand the source of that.

Amy Kass: In a way, the portrait gives Hartwell back the father that he never knew. So the portrait is itself very attractive, but it's more than just a portrait to him. Besides the gallantry and the joy of life, the portrait leaves him with a question: Hartwell now wants to know what it is that enabled this young man to give up everything in a moment and to sacrifice himself. When he finds his uncle's copy of Virgil's *Aeneid*—in the back fly-leaf of which is his uncle's drawing of the federal flag, and above the flag his uncle has written the question asked by "The Star Spangled Banner"—it is a moment in which suddenly everything comes together for him: what it was that his uncle was living for, what it was that he was willing to die for. And that has everything to do with the Republic.

Leon Kass: That discovery in the attic comes after Hartwell has already been on a quest to find out more about his uncle. His aunt is able to tell him that his uncle planted a tree in the garden and that the boy's mother put a bench around it where she could sit after he died. Hartwell knows that his uncle is buried in the rose garden. He finds out from an old soldier how it is that his uncle actually died: He tried to enlist at age fourteen, and actually enlisted at age fifteen. In a charge against the breastworks, the boy is carrying the flag and has it shot out from his arm. He loses one arm, grabs the banner in the other, and makes it to the top of the hill, cheerfully laughing. There he has his other arm shot off and is killed, and he dies with the flag wrapped around him. Hartwell wants to find out about the Civil War, and he discovers that it was a war fought by boys. He couldn't somehow understand what this was all about. He is looking for what it could have

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been that made these boys, in the peak of their lives, with all of their vivacity and energy, give it all up.

The date is 1862 when Hartwell's uncle scribbles in the book. It's the year before he enlists. And here he is studying Latin and the story of the founding of Rome and doodling pictures of cannons and muskets—his mind is elsewhere. One cannot help but think that either he is repelled by the Roman example or inspired by the patriotic sentiment there. And so he wonders: how does it stand now with our Republic, which is now absolutely in peril? He cannot wait to get out there and serve her.

Amy Kass: The *Aeneid* is about the hero Aeneas who founds Rome out of the ashes of Troy; it's a sort of new life resurrected. Hartwell's boy uncle wants to find out what is happening to our Republic? What is going to save her? How does it fare with us? Are we going to live?

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

4. What happens to Hartwell on the night of Memorial Day? What does he learn about himself (10–11)?
5. What does Hartwell mean when he says that the experience of that night gave him “the same feeling that artists know when we, rarely, achieve truth in our work; the feeling of union with some great force, of purpose and security, of being glad that we have lived” (11)?
6. What does Harwell mean when he says, “I felt the pull of race and blood and kindred, and felt beating within me things that had not begun with me” (11)?
7. What does Hartwell mean when he says, “[I]t was as if the earth under my feet had grasped and rooted me, and were pouring its essence into me” (11)?
8. What is the role of the flag in his process of self-discovery?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: The scene is Memorial Day. Hartwell has just been put in contact

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with what he takes to be the guiding nerve of his namesake boy uncle's life. It's a dark and miserable night. He's got his uncle's inscribed copy of Virgil's *Aeneid* in his hand, and he sits under the flag—which he cannot see—and it is a kind of Francis Scott Key moment for him.

Hartwell says, “The experience of that night, coming so overwhelmingly to a man so dead, almost rent me in pieces. It was the same feeling that artists know when we, rarely, achieve truth in our work; the feeling of union with some great force, of purpose and security, of being glad that we have lived. For the first time I felt the pull of race and blood and kindred, and felt beating within me things that had not begun with me. It was as if the earth under my feet had grasped and rooted me, and were pouring its essence into me. I sat there until the dawn of morning, and all night long my life seemed to be pouring out of me and running into the ground.”

The end is especially strange to me. It sounds as if he's dying; he is losing his lifeblood and is turning into a plant. The image is that he's now rooted, like his namesake uncle's tree is, and he's standing in the same ground, like the flagpole beneath which he's sitting.

Amy Kass: But you need roots in order to live. A plant needs roots in order to live. He's not describing his death; he's describing his rebirth.

*For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at
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C. Hartwell's American Identity

1. How does his experience on that special Memorial Day affect Hartwell afterward—in his life and in his art?
2. In his essay on “True Americanism,” Theodore Roosevelt says that an American who chooses to live abroad never really becomes a European: “He only ceases being an American, and becomes nothing.” Is this true of Hartwell? Why or why not?

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3. Why, after his moment of self-discovery and of his link with his namesake and with America, does Lyon Hartwell return to live and work in Paris? Is it true, as some have argued, that he chooses art and fame over life and country?
4. How American really is Hartwell?

IN CONVERSATION

William Schambra: Hartwell goes back to Paris in the name of art. And yet he has taken something of America with him. At that distance, he is able, perhaps, to capture America better than if he were immersed in it. There's something about his being *from* America. He isn't an American. He's *from* America. There is a necessary distance there. Maybe he had to leave. Maybe he had to go abroad in order to preserve that distance.

Diana Schaub: He is a flag bearer; he has planted the American flag solidly on Parisian soil. Cather also seems to be very aware of the demands of art and what that required during this time period. You really couldn't carry out this kind of endeavor purely on American soil so Hartwell is still in the process of perfecting his craft and his technique. He actually says that he has wanted to do this color sergeant sculpture for fifteen years, but he hasn't been confident in his abilities to carry it off yet. So his apprenticeship in Europe has been very important for his art.

Leon Kass: He is teaching the Americans, and he does send his sculptures home to America to adorn our cemeteries and our public places. He is offering us beautified and more heroic pictures of ourselves, and he is gracing the national memory. But he says that he came late to his citizenship. It is a *partial* citizenship, however philanthropic, not to participate in one's own self-government. Cather herself, although she fell in love with Paris, did not become an expatriate, and she told her American stories and glorified the American experience without ceasing to be one among us. So I think there is at least that difficulty about Lyon Hartwell.

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D. Hartwell as Artist

1. Why does Hartwell sculpt the subjects he sculpts?
2. What picture of America—and presented in what manner and spirit—does Hartwell offer in his statues?
3. Compare the sculpture (and the portrait) of “The Color Sergeant” with the story of the actual life and death of its subject, as Hartwell comes to know it. Which is more truthful? Who does a better job in conveying the truth about “The Namesake”: Hartwell or Cather?
4. What is responsible for Hartwell’s artistic success (in contrast with his father)? What is the answer to the question Bentley poses near the beginning of the story: “Where in the world does he get the heat to make an idea like that carry” (3)?
5. Compare Hartwell as artist to Virgil as poet and Cather as writer: Do they make their subjects, or do their subjects make them? What is the relationship between the artist and his subject? Does the first line of Virgil’s *Aeneid*—“Of arms and the man I sing”—shed any light on this?

E. The Title

1. What is the meaning of the title? Who or what is a “namesake”? What is implied in carrying another person’s name? In living “for the *sake* of the *name*”?
2. When Hartwell memorializes his namesake in “The Color Sergeant,” does he do honor to the name, even though he does not name him in the sculpture’s title? Assuming that sculptor Hartwell’s own name appears on the statue, is he gaining a name for himself by exploiting that of his uncle?
3. Is it perhaps Cather, rather than Hartwell, who makes clear that both “namesakes” are needed if each one is to receive the honor (the name) that he deserves?

IN CONVERSATION

Leon Kass: What does it mean to name someone for somebody else? It means that you think that the life of the person for whom you are naming your child has

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some significance for the new life coming forward. And the person who is the younger version of the namesake would somehow think that his life should be informed for the sake of the name that he was given. And then the question is: How do you do honor to your name? Because your name is not just yours alone, it is also an inheritance.

Here Hartwell makes an effort to come to terms with who he was named for, and when he feels the pull of the blood and the kinship and the race within him, it's as if his uncle's blood now lives in him in a way that it never has before. For the first time, he has earned the name, and, to some extent, the cause for which his uncle spent his brief vitality.

It raises a question for all of us: What would it mean to do honor to those who have come before us, even if we don't literally carry their exact name? Can one feel the ties of race and blood and kindred and the causes to which our ancestors gave what was theirs? Whose namesake are we? And what would it take to live up to that inheritance?

Amy Kass: One other point about naming: I know it has a religious overtone, but literally when you name a child—to name something is to call it into being. And that gives it its life. That's what Hartwell comes to realize. He comes to realize that his life, his energy, is the same as that of his namesake. And he's going to continue it.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

IV. Thinking with the Text

The plot of the story, as already noted, invites attention to several large themes, among them the nature and basis of American identity, the relation of art (and stories) to American identity, and the meaning and importance of the American flag.



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A. American Identity

1. America is said, rightly, to be a nation founded not on ties of blood and soil, but on ideas and ideals. What then is the role of ties to land and ancestors for American identity? In the past? Today?
2. Can an American living abroad be an American citizen in the full sense? Conversely, can living abroad contribute positively to someone's American identity?
3. Is living within the United States *sufficient* to make us American citizens in the full sense?
4. On what does your own identity and citizenship as an American really rest?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: Whenever you emphasize blood, race, and kindred—that doesn't sound particularly American. It could be German; it could be anything. And we pride ourselves on the fact that principles do inform us. But I think in Hartwell's case, the emotional attachment is as necessary as the principles are. This story enables Hartwell to find meaning in his own patriotism, and that patriotism is informed by the principles of the Republic. So while he emphasizes blood, race, and kindred, I think you cannot simply separate it from the fact that it's the Star-Spangled Banner that he looks to, the Federal flag that he draws, and all that that stands for.

Diana Schaub: This is the blood that has been spent or sacrificed for a cause, and the cause is the cause of Union as represented by the flag. It does seem to me that he achieves a kind of coming together of blood and the ideas.

Leon Kass: I think that a more general point could be made: the principles by themselves are not enough to attach anybody. There are many people who could affirm these principles. They could live elsewhere, and they might be sympathetic to America, but to belong depends not only on embracing these principles—that's a necessary, but not a sufficient condition—but on being attached to the history of the people who have lived their lives under those principles, who have struggled and sacrificed to preserve and to perpetuate them. What he sees is that this

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attachment is his own personal legacy, not only in family ties, but in the very name that he carries. These are lives that have been spent to protect and preserve—not just the principles, but the entire way of life and the people who live under those principles.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

B. Art, Stories, and American Identity

1. What is the role of art (Hartwell's statues) and stories (Cather's "The Namesake") in creating and sustaining American identity? In making one out of many? How do art and stories speak to us in ways that other media do not?
2. Does devotion to art require some detachment and distance from one's civic identity and activity? Are artists as artists doing something important for citizenship?
3. Is America as a nation hospitable to art and a concern with the beautiful? Is our national preoccupation with what is useful—industry, economics, technology, and so forth—congenial to the appreciation of what is beautiful (and useless)?
4. What is the relation between art or literature and national memory?

IN CONVERSATION

William Schambra: Hartwell's sculptures aren't abstracts of Lady Liberty or of Indian goddesses or princesses, but rather are taken from specific episodes from American history: the pioneers, the Gold Rush, the settlers. They are sculptures that combine the specific history of this country with some sense of the larger principles behind it. The sculptures all symbolize larger symbols, but at the same time they're quite specific and quite grounded. They present the story of *this* place.

Amy Kass: The sculptures provide the robust national memory that is needed in order to perpetuate attachment to America.

William Schambra: Let's explore for a moment the relationship between art and

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stories—that is, the art that Hartwell presents us with, and the story here that Cather writes.

Diana Schaub: I think you can see that question in what we are told about the sculpture. The sculpture of the color sergeant leaves out the gory details of the actual incident. We know that the young boy had both of his arms shot off. Cather’s story, which tells us this, is somehow truer than the sculpture. The sculpture engages in a certain idealization or beautification. You can claim that it captures the inner truth of the moment in beautifying it, that it captures the young boy’s heart. But Cather’s story seems more complete because it captures all of those elements.

Amy Kass: The story enables us to know what the young boy actually experienced, which we otherwise would have no access to. So in that sense, the story certainly is fuller.

Even a flag, an emblem, or an image depends upon talking with others about it to give it meaning. The image itself is not necessarily going to speak to you in the way in which it speaks to this young man.

Diana Schaub: So literature can lead to a more mature patriotism, in contrast to Hartwell the sculptor, who almost seems to still be in the grip of a kind of boyish patriotism.

Amy Kass: He’s in the grip of heat—and that’s what the young artists admire about him.

For more discussion on this question, watch the videos online at www.whatsoproudlywehail.org.

C. The Flag¹

¹ For some relevant observations about the significance of the American flag, see this short essay about Flag Day, “What So Proudly We Hail,” by Leon Kass and Amy Kass, June 14, 2011, www.nationalreview.com/articles/269515/what-so-proudly-we-hail-leon-kass.

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1. What is a flag? What is special about the meaning of the American flag?
2. What role can or should the flag play in creating national identity?
3. How important to America are its national symbols? Are they more or less important to a nation that is founded on ideas and ideals?
4. What feelings and thoughts does the American flag arouse in you?

IN CONVERSATION

Amy Kass: The flag is an image. It's an image that speaks thousands of words for us.

Diana Schaub: It seems that a nation that is founded on ideas is probably more in need of the kind of tangible symbolism that a flag provides than a nation that is based on blood and soil.

If I think about my own attachments, I grew up in Minnesota, and I still think of myself as a Minnesotan even though I haven't lived there since I was a teenager. And yet I have no particular attachment to the Minnesota state flag. We all come from one of the states, but we're not especially attached to the flags of our states—it seems that the really rooted place doesn't need a flag. So there is a connection between the ideational nature of our Founding and the need for these symbols, and so it's interesting that this symbol, this flag, becomes the foundation for Hartwell's own rootedness.

Leon Kass: Before the Civil War, the flag, which now has become this iconic feature in American life and really is the emblem of “the land I love,” the “home of the free and the brave,” did not carry this meaning. In the story, it is specifically the federal flag—meaning that it's the Union flag, as opposed to the flag of the rebellion. So the flag also acquires the meaning of the history of the defense of the Republic for which it stands. It is not just an abstract embodiment of one out of many. The flag does these things, like many symbols, silently. You bring things to it. “The Star-Spangled Banner” adds something; the Pledge of Allegiance adds something. I'm not sure that the flag by itself is sufficient and whether stories like Cather's story don't help us even more than the flag does by itself. In other words, the story about the flag and its meaning as carried by the flag bearer. . . .

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Amy Kass: The story of the flag needs an artist to tell it.

Leon Kass: And it might need a storyteller more than it needs a sculptor.

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