



## Sapphira and the Slave Girl

*Willa Cather , Hermione Lee (Introduction)*

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Sapphira Dodderidge, a Virginia lady of the 19th century, marries beneath her and becomes irrationally jealous of Nancy, a beautiful slave. One of Cather's later works.

### Sapphira and the Slave Girl Details

Date : Published by Virago Modern Classics (first published 1940)

ISBN : 9780860685074

Author : Willa Cather , Hermione Lee (Introduction)

Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literature, American, Novels

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## From Reader Review Sapphira and the Slave Girl for online ebook

### Carol says

Willa Cather has been a favorite since I read MY ANTONIA -the first time- as a teen. I still have some of her lesser known novels to read, such as this one. Other reviewers have done a fine job of summarizing this book so I won't. Cather brings the reader into the Virginia region where she was born, west of Winchester in the back country, in the years right before the Civil War. She draws her characters well, allowing the story to unfold as she describes Sapphira, Henry, Nancy, Rachel, Fat Lizzie, and the Colbert men. This is the gift Cather gives us. She allows the reader to live within the community, to know the people, and to confront moral issues from there.

The reader needs to remind herself that this was published in 1940. Cather isn't as explicit in her novel as contemporary writers. I read a critical review of SAPPHIRA by Toni Morrison and I understand the comments. However, reading this in the context of the time in which it was written, I appreciate the boldness of the novel. Once again Cather has allowed me to live for awhile in a different place, in a different time and my imagination still remains there due to her beautiful writing and characterizations.

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### Rachel says

I know this is classified as one of Cather's "lesser" works but I love it. The view of life from the slave, master and mistress lens is somehow a thread that weaves a mournfully beautiful tale. I started reading this at sixteen and haven't stopped.

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### Carol says

Based on an incident in Cather's own family, in which her maternal grandmother helped a slave escape in 1856, this southern plantation novel details the complicated marriage of Henry and Sapphira Colbert, who operate a mill and a small farm in Back Creek outside Winchester in the years before the American Civil War.

Henry's wife, Sapphira, believes that her housekeeper's daughter, Nancy, is having a relationship with Henry. It's Sapphira first attempts to have her sold, but Henry refuses. The mistress then invites her nephew, Martin, for a long visit, creating the circumstances in which he might rape the slave. Martin fails, but his mere presence prompts Henry, and his widowed daughter, Rachel—both of whom have long harbored antislavery notion to assist in Nancy's escape. In an epilogue that takes place 25 years later, in 1881, Nancy returns to the Shenandoah Valley, and the point of view shifts from third person to first person, suggesting that a Cather, like a storyteller, had witnessed Nancy's homecoming as a child. *Sapphira* reads as a complicated interracial story of bodily desire where the mistress recruits Martin to violate Nancy on her behalf. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) is the last novel written by Willa Cather.

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### Ann says

Willa Cather . . . one of the few novelists that I read as a child, a high-school student, a university student, and now as an elder citizen. I remember all of the books vividly. Willa Cather's novels seem to reach into human nature and tell her stories with few embellishments, just weaving a good true-to-life story. "Sapphira and the Slave Girl" was the author's last novel, written when she was in her 70's, and retold from a story told to her as a child (she was born and lived in Virginia till she was about 10).

Story of slavery in the 1850's, and may be offensive to some as it's written in the descriptive dialogue used in that time. This book brought that time totally to life for me, (having lived in the south in my earlier life, there were still vestiges of that language remaining). A lovely story, beautifully told. I thoroughly was engrossed and loved it.

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### **Sarah says**

I really enjoyed this book. It's the first piece of fiction I've finished in over a year. I thought the story was interesting, I love the way Cather writes. Her simplicity in sentences and the story she tells makes it easy to relate to.

My biggest problem with the book is the epilogue. I thought that the way it ended, with Sapphira and Henry by the fire, was all that needed to be said. What you learned in the epilogue added nothing to the story and I was very annoyed at the first person narrator who came in. As far as I could tell, you never learn their connection to the family or the former slaves. Yes they have some connection because their parents are there and whatnot, but I felt like because you spent so many pages with the family and the slaves, and saw how close they were that some connection needed to be made. I didn't need a name or anything, I just wanted there to be a justification for this narrator to be there, to be in the room. Who were they that allowed them to be at such an intimate moment in Nancy and Till's lives?

But even if that was solved, even if the narrator was revealed I still believe that the epilogue was not necessary and that the book ended more beautifully with Sapphira and Henry.

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### **Lobstergirl says**

Cather set this story near her birthplace of Winchester, Virginia. In 1856, Sapphira and Henry Colbert live on a mill farm where Henry is a miller. Sapphira brought about twenty slaves with her to the marriage; Henry owns none of them. The titular slave girl is Nancy, a pretty mulatto whom Sapphira, now past middle age and crippled by dropsy, becomes jealous of when she notices that Henry seems to have developed an affection for her. Sapphira begins to persecute Nancy in subtle ways, including inviting her lecherous nephew Martin for a long visit. Martin soon makes life miserable for Nancy. Two clandestine abolitionists live nearby the mill farm, the postmistress, and Sapphira and Henry's grown daughter Rachel. Henry himself begins to question whether slavery is right, poring over his Bible for evidence.

Lots of references to niggers and darkies (from both the slave and the white characters) may turn off some (the novel was published in 1940), but Cather treats her slave characters with deep compassion.

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### **Richard Derus says**

Rating: 4\* of five

I suspect that the passing of time has improved my ability to read what writers don't write. This book's many creaks and wobbles mattered to me as a younger reader, whereas now I'm not really that interested in cataloging failures.

As one important example of this trend in my analyses, the concept of a woman "marrying beneath her" once made me furious: If you don't want what's offered, don't say yes! Now I see a shade of grey I never thought to look for: How else is a smart woman going to stay on top? That shift in perception alone made this less a mean old bat's vicious competitive streak running roughshod over all about her and more a natural leader's recognition of a threat to her power.

Cather was old and ill when she wrote this roman à clef. She likely knew that the end was nigh and felt the strong need to get this one down on paper before she lost it into the winding-sheet, that final dreamcatcher. I love reading first and last books by dead authors. Nothing makes a career trajectory so clear as experiencing the starting gun's firing and the bullet's landing place in close temporal proximity.

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### **Kellie says**

I LOVED this for Willa Cather's ability to tell a story, her beautiful and tangible descriptions and the tremendous amount of discussion that could take place when you read about all the characters and the different aspects from which they come. Disclaimer: "slave language"

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### **Larry Piper says**

Oh, it's nice to get back to something really good after all those non-girly books I had to read over vacation. Willa Cather is a true literary gem. Why isn't she more widely read today?

Anyway, this is a sort of historical novel concerning a Virginia family just before the civil War. They live in the hills of Virginia, not too far from Winchester. Mrs. Colbert, Sapphira, grew up rich and privileged. Her servants are all slaves. Mr. Colbert is a miller, not really of the class or pretentiousness of his spouse. He has some reservations regarding slavery, and would probably turn the slaves free were they not technically his wife's "property". At some point, Sapphira turns against her personal maid, Nancy, aka "the slave girl". She thinks Nancy has something going on with her spouse. She contrives first to sell Nancy, but her spouse blocks that move, because in those days women had agency only through the good grace of their spouses. Then, she contrives to get rid of Nancy by having one of her roguish relatives come visit and have him try to "fool" Nancy, i.e. "seduce" her (well, rape, actually, but that wasn't a word used in polite company in olden times). So, how to save Nancy?

It's rather an interesting account of attitudes people had back in the day toward the humanity or not of others, and once again demonstrates that inherited wealth and privilege can so readily make one an asshole.

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### **Lydia says**

A complicated novel that harkens back to Old Virginia, Willa Cather's birthplace. This is the story of unhappily married slave owners and their unraveling domestic lives. Cather has captured strong memories of

the slavery era, with both romantic vignetting and hard glimpses at its cruder sides.

With "Sapphira," the title character, we get another portrait of a once-grand woman reduced to desperate measures by time and circumstances. It's also a fine study of encroaching disability. "The Slave Girl" portion offers a sensational quasi-slave narrative that reminds me of the novel Pamela. The depictions of slavery in general are problematic but worth critical reading and contemplating.

I felt the epilogue was too quick, wrapping up the Civil War and (view spoiler). As in *The Professor's House*, the brief sketch of early Washington DC was fascinating.

This is the last book in the Willa Cather Novel Reading Challenge 2012 and it is Cather's last novel.

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### **Lee Anne says**

This book, written in 1940, is a melodrama involving characters in the pre-Civil War South. Sapphira is the wife of a small-town miller. She suffers from dropsy (I used this book as an excuse to finally look up what exactly "dropsy" is--it's edema, the accumulation of fluid in the legs and feet) and is catered to by the slaves she brought with her when she married. She becomes envious of and begins to hate Nancy, the young mixed-race daughter of her maid Till; Nancy tends to the miller's office/bedroom. When Sapphira's rakish nephew Martin comes for a prolonged visit, he begins pursuing Nancy against her wishes. Trouble ensues.

This was a difficult novel to read in 2012. The perspective enjoyed 80 years after slavery is markedly different than the one of 150 years. It is one thing when an author has her racist protagonist refer to the slaves as "darkies" (and worse, of course); it is another when the author herself uses "darker" to describe the children at the mill farm. I found myself enjoying the soapy story and wincing at the attitudes of the characters and author. All the slaves are stereotypes: proud, hard-working women and men who wouldn't know what to do with themselves if they were freed, or lazy, scheming gossips and trouble-makers. There is real shading given to the miller, though, who had always thought of Nancy innocently until he heard of the cousin's crude attempts to seduce her; once Henry realizes Nancy is a sexual being, he can't even look at her for fear he will respond in the same way. That's a nice touch.

It's not Cather's best, but in the context of the time it was written, it's not a bad read.

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### **Rachel says**

The only of Cather's that could be considered a "page-turner." And pretty gripping, if complicated by the racism that may or may not be there. Her last finished novel.

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### **Silvery says**

Me ha encantado como escribe Willa Cather...

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## Devyn Duffy says

Sapphira and the Slave Girl is different from Willa Cather's other work, and if you're looking to start reading Cather, this isn't the one to begin with. It's set in Virginia, where Cather and her family first lived. And because the household owned slaves, there's a lot of unpleasantness in this story, including racist language and attitudes and threats of sexual assault. As always, though, Cather is able to effectively dramatize real-life events, and underneath the nastiness of slavery is a good story with complex characters. If you make it to the end, there is a special treat in the epilogue...

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## Schmacko says

There are already a lot of good reviews on GoodReads.

I will say this. Cather's ability with short, descriptive sentences and easy flow are all here; her writing is very readable.

Her thoughts on the slave culture that her older relatives in Virginia lived in is hidden. (This book is a fictionalization of a story Cather was told as a child.) Cather uses dated, derogatory language here, because that's the language they would've used in the 1850s. The Southern ethics and thoughts of the time run through the entire story; the way they treat blacks as property is abhorrent to our modern ideas.

I believe what Cather was trying to do - in a very sly way - is to really outline why and how the Southern slave owner acted - what beliefs she had and how that affected her treatment of other humans, and how that system affected black slaves' views on themselves. Cather doesn't moralize - though she does occasionally touch upon the fact that there is opposition to slave owning in the North and even in her area of Virginia. Cather chooses to tell a simple story and lets the reader come to conclusions.

Still, this book feels a little more "dated" than timeless, because even Cather's 1940 ideas seem antiquated now. It's an interesting and very readable curiosity - the last book of one of America's greatest writers. However, if you're just starting to know Cather, start with *My Antonia* or *O Pioneers*. After you read her troubling Pulitzer Prize Winner *One of Us*, if you're still curious, pick up this book.

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## Edith says

I began reading a biography of Willa Cather and only a few pages into the book the biographer began to talk about "Sapphira and the Slave Girl". I had just picked up an old copy of "Sapphira..." at the library bookshop a couple months back, so I decided to delve into it first before learning too much about the plot and having it spoiled for me. I was surprised to find a book of Cather's that was not set out west in Nebraska or thereabouts.

This was Willa Cather's last book and it is the only novel of hers set in Virginia. This is a book that my father would have enjoyed, given his interest in the Civil War and slave stories. "The novel is set in pre-Civil War Virginia and concerns the household of Sapphira Dodderidge, a wealthy slave-owning Southern woman, married to the miller, Henry Colbert. When we first meet them at breakfast they are arguing over the slave girl, Nancy. Jealous of what she perceives to be her husband's interest in the girl, Sapphira wants to sell her but Colbert will not agree. Nancy's mother, Till, is their housekeeper and Aunt Jezebel, her great-

grandmother, is still alive. The miller will not allow Nancy to be sold away from her family. Thwarted in her intention to sell Nancy, Sapphira seeks another way to get rid of her." (Phyllis C. Robinson, "Willa - The Life of Willa Cather) And the story is off...

Willa was born in Virginia and she once told a friend that not very much of the book was really fiction. "In fact, it was so largely made up of old family stories and neighborhood tales, she hardly knew where her own contribution began." For that reason alone, I found the book interesting. One of the scenes at the end of the book was described by Willa as the greatest experience of her life and it had haunted her for sixty years. It was short and simply written but it brought tears to my eyes. So this was a very personal story written when she was nearly seventy years old. Her biographer suggests that her health was poor and she was very tired at this time which would explain why it was not a more powerful book. She felt that the narrative drive had slowed and the plot had faltered before the climax. I can definitely see where it could have been a more powerful story, but nonetheless, I was intrigued the entire way through and was compelled to keep reading.

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## Paul Bartusiak says

Nancy, the slave girl of the title, can't be the woman depicted on this book cover. Well, perhaps this is stating the obvious because Nancy's a fictional character and the photo is clearly of a real person. More accurately, then, is that the women depicted on the cover can't be seen as a good representation of the character Nancy. That's because **Willa Cather** describes Nancy as a beautiful, young mulatto--so attractive that men, white men, are drawn to her. Her owner, Sapphira, even becomes jealous of Nancy when she believes her husband is attracted to Nancy.

And there lies the undertone and motivations in the story.

While *Sapphira* is good, it's not great, and certainly not up to the standards of **Willa Cather** at her finest (in my humble opinion). I'm a big fan of Cather and was looking forward to delving into this novel. It's an easy read, as all of Cather's novels pleasantly are, it's just that it seems rushed, incomplete. Cather has the uncanny ability of truly affecting the reader's emotions, and this novel comes close a few times, it just always seems to fall short of closing the deal.

There are some profound undertones to this story, and while the novel may seem simple on its surface, I've read some online literary criticisms that imply there's much more to it. After reading such criticisms (mainly from professors in Nebraska), I found myself thinking, "Ah, sure, I can see that now." But the applications of the posited theories seem somewhat strained...more read into the novel than Cather was truly able to infuse, or at least thoroughly flesh out.

This was Cather's last novel, and I wonder what her personal circumstances were while she wrote it. Was she of failing health, suffering financial strain...? The structure of the story was there, and pleasantly crafted, it just didn't...capture the emotional and psychological essence Cather is known for in her finest works.

## Ali says

Sapphira and the Slave girl was my classic club spin book result. I am currently on something of a Cather kick, this is the second Willa Cather novel I have read this month, and I now have four other Cather novels tbr. Willa Cather is perhaps best known for her novels which portray the Nebraskan frontier life that she knew growing up. However the first eight years of Willa Cather's life were spent in Back Creek Valley, Virginia, and it is to this community that she pays homage in her final novel. Sapphira and the Slave girl, has elements of family autobiography about it – Willa Cather herself making a somewhat surprise appearance in the epilogue of the novel, as a five year old child who witnesses the return of a runaway slave. Willa Cather's maternal grandmother had assisted in the woman's escape, just as Cather's character Rachel Blake does in the novel. The Virginian community that Willa Cather was born into – like that of the community in this novel, was not a traditionally slave owning one. Willa Cather's own family represented both sides of this bitter divide. So on to the novel itself, it is 1856 and Sapphira Colbert is one of the few Virginians who own slaves. She is an ageing woman, disabled by dropsy, her mill owner husband has little to do with the slaves and would much rather free them, but views them as Sapphira's property which she brought with her into their marriage. Sapphira presides over her property absolutely with the help of her maid Till, who has been with Sapphira's family many years. Henry, Sapphira's husband has taken to spending more and more time at the mill, often sleeping there, and young slave Nancy often goes down to the mill to clean up Henry's room. Henry comes to enjoy her gentle, quiet presence, appreciating the wild flowers Nancy places in a jar on his window sill.

“The miller, in his bed, heard her come and go. He lay still and prayed earnestly, for his daughter and for Nancy. Not a sparrow falleth to the ground without thy knowledge. He would never again hear that light footstep outside his door. She would go up out of Egypt to a better land. Maybe she would be like the morning star, this child; the last star of night...She was to go out from the dark lethargy of the cared for and irresponsible; to make her own way in this world where nobody is altogether free and the best that can happen to you is to walk your own way and be responsible to God only.”

Overhearing a conversation between two of the other women slaves in her household Sapphira begins to have concerns about the relationship between her husband and Nancy, Till's beautiful daughter. Sapphira demonstrates the power she unjustly holds over these people, and Willa Cather brilliantly depicts the awful contradictions of slave owners who actually seem to believe they care for the slaves they own, and have earned their loyalty. Sapphira of course holds sway over these human beings – their fate is completely in her hands, and yet we see Sapphira tolerating the absences and laziness of one slave, and deeply saddened over the death of the elderly Jezebel whose dreadful story of capture from Africa is told in flashback. However there is also a definite feeling of wistful nostalgia in the novel, nostalgia for a time already in the distant past for Cather herself. Cather was certainly against the practice of slavery – already abolished by the time she was born, however I think maybe, that when one has grown up hearing the stories of a time long before that of our own, there is a tendency to see it with a slight rosy glow, and it is this taint of nostalgia that leaves an impression. Sapphira's daughter, Rachel Blake, is a young widow, recently returned to Back Creek from Washington, with her two young daughters, she lives nearby. Rachel and her mother don't really see eye to eye, Rachel has been influenced by her politician husband, and the abolitionist postmistress and a sympathetic preacher she has been befriended by. When Sapphira invites her husband's nephew Martin to stay, a man known for his rakish behaviour, Rachel becomes convinced it is with the deliberate intention of ruining Nancy. It is to Rachel that Nancy runs for help, as she finds it increasingly hard to keep out of Martin Colbert's way. Rachel's decision to help Nancy will set her against her mother, but change Nancy's life forever. I am not going to go on about the fact that there is language used in this novel that we would find deeply offensive and inappropriate now – that surely is a given. The novel is set in the 1850's and was first published in 1940 – but I think Cather's intention is clear enough. She was not writing an angry treatise on slavery – her novel is a retrospective of a society and a time thankfully long over but which concerned the generation of her grandparents, and about which she was brought up hearing stories of. Cather's depiction of

the Old South, and the relationship between an old, white woman and her black slaves who are her legal property – is beautifully poignant, the sense of time and place so absolutely spot on, that the Back Creek Valley of Cather's grandparents' day envelops the reader completely. I loved this novel, it may not be perfect – but it was a definite five star read for me, and my Cather kick, continues, threatening to turn into a definite obsession.

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### **Duane says**

Cather's last novel, written just a few years before her death, was the only one set in her home state of Virginia. Her age and failing health is given as the reason that Sapphira didn't meet the level of her earlier novels. This story was based on an incident that was recounted to her by her grandmother. It occurred in 1856, shortly before the Civil War, and provides an example of what must have been endured by many of the young house slave girls.

Willa Cather was one of the best American novelist's of the 20th century. Her two novels, *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* are ranked in the top 100 novels of the 20th century on many lists, and she won the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*.

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### **Bryn says**

My rating for this one would really be more around 3.5, and not because I didn't like it. I did like it. I just didn't love it. Willa Cather writes well, but I felt like there were large parts of the story left out and that it was mostly just like any other novel similar to it.

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