

CRITICAL READING TEST 1

Directions: Answer the questions below based on the information in the accompanying passage.

The following passage analyzes one of Willa Cather's (1873–1947) novels.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl was the last novel of Willa Cather's illustrious literary career. Begun in the late summer of 1937 and finally completed in 1941, it is often regarded by critics as one of her (5) most personal works. Although the story takes place in 1856, well before her own birth, she drew heavily on both vivid childhood memories and tales handed down by older relatives to describe life in rural northern Virginia in the middle of the (10) 19th century. She even went on an extended journey to the area to give the story a further ring of authenticity.

Of all of Cather's many novels, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is the one most concerned with providing an overall picture of day-to-day life in a specific era. A number of the novel's characters, it would seem, are included in the story only because they are representative of the types of people to be found in 19th-century rural Virginia; (15) indeed, a few of them play no part whatsoever in the unfolding of the plot. For instance, we are introduced to a poor white woman, Mandy Ringer, who is portrayed as intelligent and content, despite the fact that she has no formal education and must toil constantly in the fields. And we (20) meet Dr. Clevenger, a country doctor who, with his patrician manners, evokes a strong image of the pre-Civil War South.

- The title, however, accurately suggests that the novel is mainly about slavery. Cather's attitude toward this institution may best be summed up as somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, she displays almost total indifference to the legal and political aspects of slavery when she misidentifies (30) certain crucial dates in its growth and development. Nor does she ever really offer a direct condemnation of slavery. Yet, on the other hand, the evil that was slavery gets through to us, albeit in typically subtle ways. Those characters, like Mrs. (35) Blake, who oppose the institution are portrayed in a sympathetic light. Furthermore, the suffering of the slaves themselves and the petty, nasty, often cruel, behavior of the slaveowners are painted in stark terms.
- (40) Although *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* was certainly not meant to be a political tract, the novel is sometimes considered to be a denunciation of bygone days. Nothing could be further from the truth. In spite of her willingness to acknowledge (45) that particular aspects of the past were far from ideal, Willa Cather was, if anything, a bit of a romantic. Especially in the final years of her life, an increasing note of anger about the emptiness of the present crept into her writings. Earlier generations, she concluded, had been the real heroes, the (50) real creators of all that was good in America.

1. The word *extended* in line 10 most nearly means
- (A) enlarged
 - (B) increased
 - (C) postponed
 - (D) stretched
 - (E) prolonged.

2. In the discussion of Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, the author refers to the book primarily as a
- (A) heroic tale of the Civil War
 - (B) sweeping epic of the old South
 - (C) story based on personal material
 - (D) political treatise on slavery
 - (E) veiled condemnation of 1930s America
3. In paragraph 2, Mandy Ringer and Dr. Clevenger are mentioned in order to emphasize which point about *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*?
- (A) A number of the characters in the novel are based on people Cather knew in her childhood.
 - (B) The novel displays Cather's mixed feelings about slavery.
 - (C) Cather took four years to complete the novel because she carefully researched her characters.
 - (D) One of Cather's purposes in writing the novel was to paint a full portrait of life in rural Virginia in the years before the Civil War.
 - (E) The characters in the novel are portrayed in a positive light since Cather was a great admirer of the old South.
4. According to the author, why is Willa Cather's attitude toward slavery "somewhat ambiguous" (line 32)?
- (A) She was ignorant of the legal and political aspects of slavery even though she was a keen observer of history.
 - (B) She did not denounce slavery directly but criticized it in more roundabout ways.
 - (C) She sympathized equally with both slaves and slave owners.
 - (D) She was an enemy of slavery but refrained from getting involved in political issues.
 - (E) She disliked the treatment of slaves yet never tried to help improve their lot in life.
5. In context, "a bit of a romantic" (lines 51-52) suggests that Willa Cather
- (A) condemned the evils of slavery
 - (B) favored the past over the present
 - (C) disliked writing about life in the 1930s
 - (D) denounced certain aspects of 19th-century life
 - (E) exaggerated the evils of earlier generations