

New York City's most iconic movie, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, was actually written by Greenwich Village's Willa Cather, not the limelight-driven Truman Capote who stole it

by Guest Author Reading Time: 11 mins read



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The Historical, Numinous, Magical, Hilarious, Literary Beginnings of Breakfast at Tiffany's



Why does it matter now to the NYC gal to know who the true author of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is? Because the actual author, Willa Cather, who lived in Greenwich Village, a phenomenal writer and one of the best American writers ever, knew important truths that are wild now to know for music, art, women, and culture, and even about the future of women and New York City when she wrote it, and knew how these depths of insight go much further for us now. The ingredients she knew: the roots of the female are what we need to know. And Willa saw it as the real difference in the basis of culture, like planting a wild seed and letting culture be inspired by it.



In other words, the character and movie Audrey Hepburn made in 1960 isn't over, it's opening up into truths about a revolutionary cultural shift where we're more grounded in the real. "We pick up in New York City," and the story is just getting real. And it happened right there at Washington Square Park, at the Brevoort, and walking the steps of Bank St., MacDougal, and Bleecker in the

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places where Willa lived
and dreamt up what
Audrey with her magic
would bring to the
world. Now we can look
into it and see the
phenomenal power and
beauty of women that



Willa herself was seeing into—that Bohemian spirit that then
infuses culture from New York City. And those ingredients are wild
and important! And, it's the *real* reason Audrey Hepburn made the
movie when screenwriter George Axelrod flew to the South of
France to show her what had happened with the story.

Truman Capote actually couldn't write this. And reading his
"version" of the novella one can see that it's actually really dark.
Truman only knew how to lie, to parrot Willa, and then preen for
the cameras. His "deliberate cruelty" to New York women now is
well-known (and to his "love interests"). He would do anything and
use anyone to be famous, harming even the best and brightest.
And that doesn't offer any cultural shift to anyone, even if fame is
shiny and seemingly "powerful."

That isn't Audrey or Willa and they both intended to change
culture at its base. It's that insight into the roots of a cultural shift
that Willa and Audrey knew that we're after: to see how alive the
works are that they so carefully and thoughtfully opened.

**And that makes right now the perfect moment in time to finally
see into the very real.**



Some of the Things Truman Took to Appear Like the Writer

Part of the basis of the character of Holly Golightly comes from

Willa's story "The Bohemian Girl" which was published in *McClure's Magazine* in 1912, setting up New York City for its most iconic female story ever. That's when Willa would move just a block over from MacDougal St. (Exactly 100 years later in 2012

John Mayer would release *Born and Raised* he created from there—and as we will see, the music is foundationally important to the very real.)



Willa's story was the beginning character, detail, and passion of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, as a boy from the prairies returning for "the Bohemian girl," Clara Vavrika, having grown into a man still madly in love with her, tells her, "But why do you fight for that so? What good is the power to enjoy, if you never enjoy? Your hands are cold again; what are you afraid of all the time? Ah, you're afraid of losing it; that's what's the matter with you! And you will, Clara Vavrika, you will! When I used to know you—listen; you've caught a wild bird in your hand, haven't you, and felt its heart beat so hard that you were afraid it would shatter its little body to pieces? Well, you used to be just like that, a slender, eager thing with a wild delight inside you."

Truman's novella begins with: "I am always drawn back to places where I have lived." But that's exactly what Willa wrote. Willa's writing is often about traveling back to places where she had lived and that rootedness to place is central in her conveyance of the feminine spirit. Her *My Antonia* (1918) begins with meeting paths with an old friend, Jim Burden, then not seeing each other often in NYC, and their common connection being the bohemian girl, Antonia. And that's exactly what Truman has happen.

In Willa's story "Coming, Aphrodite!" (1920) is the setting by Washington Square Park, the apartment building where the girl moves in, the artist character, and the dog Truman would turn into a cat, even the rooftop he would turn into the fire escape. "Fred" and even snuggling up beside him comes from Willa's *The Song of the Lark* (1915). And "Coming, Aphrodite!" is also where Audrey's iconic opening scene comes from: "Eden got a summer all her own,—which really did a great deal toward making her an artist and whatever else she was afterward to become. She had time to look about, to watch without being watched; to select diamonds in one window and furs in another, to select shoulders and moustaches in the big hotels where she went to lunch. She had the easy freedom of obscurity and the consciousness of power. She enjoyed both. She was in no hurry." [. . .] "She was like one standing before a great show window full of beautiful and costly things, deciding which she will order. She understands that they will not all be delivered immediately, but one by one they will arrive at her door. She already knew some of the many things that were to happen to her; for instance, that the Chicago millionaire

who was going to take her abroad with his sister as chaperone, would eventually press his claim in quite another manner."

Even the title comes from "Coming, Aphrodite": "One Sunday morning Eden was crossing the Square with a spruce young man in a white flannel suit and a panama hat. They had been breakfasting at the Brevoort and he was coaxing her to let him come up to her rooms and sing for an hour." And later, "'I don't know,' Eden sat tracing patterns on the asphalt with the end of her parasol. 'Is it any fun? I got up feeling I'd like to do something different today. It's the first Sunday I've not had to sing in church. I had that engagement for breakfast at the Brevoort, but it wasn't very exciting. That chap can't talk about anything but himself.'"

And just like Paul Varjak gets a check for his writing: "Hedger had got a big advance from his advertising firm since he first lunched with Miss Bower ten days ago, and he was ready for anything."

Willa Saw the Ingredients of Holly That Went Deeper



Willa knew to create (and write from) the free spirit from the immigrants she knew who loved the land and loved life, music, laughter, and freedom no matter how harsh life got; that didn't matter, they carried it with them in their indomitable blood. They were alive with the very natural spirit which the open prairie allowed them to have and when they got to the city, the city didn't take it out of them. They could never sell themselves. And that exactly describes Greenwich Village. Willa

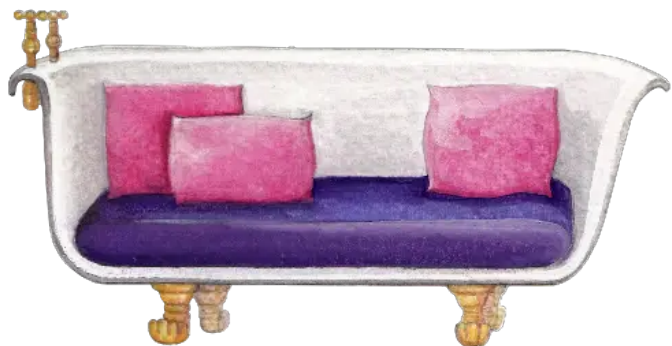
was quite known for the will to not give in to less than her own spirit and to always be the girl (or boy) who came from a very natural, grounded place. And wildly, it's the bohemian music in Willa's writing that is a signal to just that. It matches her spirit and music carries that spirit. Willa loved guitarists and singers. They were her inspiration.

This more rooted, more internally powerful beauty in Willa's creations (and her own spirit) shows how the immigrant music is so important throughout her work, and the sense of heritage and joy from the old world



that it brings that these spirits can't ever lose. In "The Bohemian Girl," Joe, an immigrant and Clara's father, plays the fiddle of all the old Bohemian songs while Clara plays on the piano. And Willa writes of her (and it's the basis of Holly): "Clara seldom came downstairs before eight o'clock, and this morning she was even later, for she had dressed with unusual care. She put on, however, only a tight-fitting black dress, which people thereabouts thought very plain. She was a tall, dark woman of thirty, with a rather sallow complexion and a touch of dull salmon red in her cheeks, where the blood seemed to burn under her brown skin. Her hair, parted evenly above her low forehead, was so black that there were distinctly blue lights in it. Her black eyebrows were delicate half-moons and her lashes were long and heavy. Her eyes slanted a little, as if she had a strain of Tartar or gypsy blood, and were sometimes full of fiery determination and sometimes dull and opaque." And of her house: "Olaf had built the house new for her before their marriage, but her interest in furnishing it had been

short-lived. It went, indeed, little beyond a bathtub and her piano. They had disagreed about almost every other article of furniture, and Clara had said she would rather have her house empty than full of things she didn't want."



With her aunt, "Clara played the piano, and Johanna used to sing Bohemian songs." And there's the reason she

married the wrong guy: "You see, they have it on you, Nils; that is, if you're a woman. They say you're beginning to go off. That's what makes us get married: we can't stand the laugh." And until she knows Nils is there because he loves her, she tells him that she won't go away, "'Yes—unless I go away with a man who is cleverer than they are, and who has more money.' Nils whistled. 'Dear me, you are demanding a good deal.'" And Willa's sky is inspired: "He rode home slowly along the deserted road, watching the stars come out in the clear violet sky. They flashed softly into the limpid heavens, like jewels let fall into clear water. They were a reproach, he felt, to a sordid world." This female writer knew strongly, exactly what she was doing. And that makes Audrey's graces and what she brought to the part all the more beautiful—and generous and far-reaching.

When Clara's father Joe is playing the Bohemian music on a Sunday with Nils, her father says about Clara, "You remember how her eyes used to snap when we called her the Bohemian Girl?"

before he starts to play the songs from the actual 1843 Irish opera, *The Bohemian Girl*, and Clara begins to sing along the lyrics: "I dreamt that I dwelt in ma-a-arble halls, / With vassals and serfs at my knee, ' [. . .] then to another of its songs, "For memory is the only friend / That grief can call its own." And then there is what she says about Nils that is recognizable in the movie: "Maybe Nils hasn't got enough to keep a wife,' put in Clara ironically. 'How about that Nils?' she asked him frankly, as if she wanted to know." And of their years when they were younger and wildly in love, "We did have fun, didn't we? None of the other kids ever had so much fun. We knew how to play."

Audrey Wouldn't Have Made the Movie but Screenwriter George Axelrod Needed Her Magic to Bring the Story Back to Willa



Audrey was born in 1929, two years after Willa's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was published (when Willa lived at 5 Bank St. in West Village), and the miracle of which Willa writes, the embodiment of spirit in the Garden, is exactly what Audrey is—and she adored gardens. The female that would change the course of Willa's stories was born to do exactly that. And Audrey, with her, would change the course of culture.

It is in Willa's story detail that the movie version actually comes to life through George Axelrod, obviously a Willa Cather avid reader, and through Audrey, as the story was changed back to her work in so many ways actually the driving force making the movie the delight that it is. And that's how he talked her into the part.

Audrey's fame wasn't flashy, but nonetheless radiant and more deeply influential. While Audrey remained kind to Truman despite knowing what she had to do that was right and important, there is a vast difference in the heart of the actions they both were taking.

The 1st century Roman Empire's Longinus' *On the Sublime*, offers one way of seeing the difference of Audrey's actions (and "Truman's Version"):

"In the treatise, the author asserts that 'the Sublime leads the listeners not to persuasion, but to ecstasy: for what is wonderful always goes together with a sense of dismay, and prevails over what is only convincing or delightful, since persuasion, as a rule, is within everyone's grasp: whereas, the Sublime, giving to speech an invincible power and [an invincible] strength, rises above every listener'."

Screenwriter George Axelrod was putting the fire-on-the-mountain inspiration back where it belonged, back directly to Willa, and also knowing by doing so he was re-opening up that magic—what was actually in Willa’s work that is astoundingly embodied and fortuitous and quite obviously still alive in this Moment with its same renaissance fire. The feminine spirit was the way to do that, as Willa was demonstrating, and no one had that more than Audrey with her vulnerability matching her courage, and her consciousness with internal drive to make the difference by the wonderful—internal and external—position of “power” she had been given.

What Does this Mean for Us Now?

Willa knew she was writing the iconic because it was coming from the real, and even like we can see today, that true spirit is to be conveyed in the sense of the realness of the music :

In “The Bohemian Girl” Nils says: “I don’t care. They can’t gossip. [. . .] Besides, we’ll give them something to talk about when we hit the trail. Lord, it will be a godsend to them! They haven’t had anything so interesting to chatter about since the grasshopper year. It’ll give them a new lease of life. [. . .] They’ll never forget his barn party, or us. They’ll always remember us as we’re dancing together now. We’re making a legend. Where’s my waltz, boys?’ he called as they whirled past the fiddlers.”

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