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The Influence of the Past: Metamorphosis in Willa Cather's Heroines

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Of the Past, what do we surrender to the future? This question confronted and puzzled Willa Cather throughout her long, productive life. As an impressionable young child on the wild prairies of Nebraska, she often witnessed her hardworking European immigrant neighbors, repudiate their rich cultural past for the brash demands of a raw, callow frontier in their desperate struggle to adjust to a new country. Cather knew, loved, and feared the hold that these broad lands and their people had on her imagination, emotions, and memory. She consciously based her life within the limited structures of tradition, preferring old values and virtues to the changing standards of her day. Cather once remarked, "The world broke in two about 1920, and 1 belonged to the former half."[1] She further commented, "Our present is ruined — but we had a beautiful past."[2] Consequently, in both her life and in her fictional worlds, Cather characterized "the tensions of American existence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,"[3] betraying the present in her nostalgic search to recapture the irrecoverable.

Rooted in the past and reverencing its solidity, yet reluctantly ,sensitive to the promise of the future, Cather was torn between memory and desire. Arising out of her passion for the pioneer West, her most significant works are an imaginative restructuring of "that country ... the happiness and the curse of her life."[4] Cather tells us: "The ideas for all my novels have come from the things that happened around Red Cloud when I was a child,"[5] but for her "to heep the past so precious," it was necessary that she romanticize it and also "validate childhood... [to] let memory filter its experience through the screen of nostalgia."[6]

With deep moral intensity and with serious concern for the realization of an authentic American destiny, Willa Cather drew consistently

upon America as the source of her creative purpose although she was acutely aware of the growing dichotomy between moral values and expedient action. Loving the past, she feared the future for she believed that "a spiritual chaos threatened the central purpose of existence,"[7] yet by ignoring the disquieting realities of history for "There was so much she did not want to see and saw not,"[8] she also betrayed the very past she reverenced with such passion.

Preoccupied with intense nostalgia and skeptical about current directions of society, Cather romanticized and idealized the frontier past even while she chronicled its suffering, cruelty, and fury. She recognized and described the intense vital energy which arose from conflict between European traditions and the excitement, challenge, and new possibilities of the open spaces of America. Her characters struggle with the difficult discernment of how and what to retain of the past while, at the same time, learning to adapt to present and to future.

Paralleling Henry James, whose fictional worlds drew strength from the tensions of a European-American polarization, Willa Cather creatively exploited an equally energized geographical contrast: the American Southwest and East. Cather recognized that the greatest vitality came to the New World — to the vast prairies of the frontier — with its young, viable pioneer women. She also realized that this vitality would not last. Yet, in her novels, women remain symbolic of the vigorous Southwest and possess life and creativity. Stable and free, her women are in touch with that past, beyond the immediate past, which attracted Cather herself briefly to Europe. She perceived the resilient strength and great courage of the frontier women. She had seen them toil and drudge unstintingly so that they might preserve the land for their children, and she delighted in their fruitful relationship with nature. Admiringly she wrote of their fierce fidelity to the past and to their memories and traditions. Ironically, however, Cather's creative imagination betrayed her memory. The further Cather was removed from the actuality of her romantic past, the more vividly and idealistically did she transform memory. She increasingly denied to her own heroines the vigorous womanhood which she herself loved and desired. Cather metamorphosed richly simple, tenaciously strong pioneer women into myth and symbol to the loss of their splendid human reality.

Never totally removed from verisimilitude, Cather's heroines become symbolic to a dimension which precludes credible daily experience. Although Cather herself deplored the fact that "change and progress

were not at all related,"[9] paradoxically and apparently unknowingly, she applied this same principle in her novels. Changes which occur in her heroines are not those of personal growth or of self-realization, but rather those of a process of abstraction and detachment. Between memory, conception, and completed portrayal, Cather's women protagonists undergo an inversion. Their vital consciousness reverts to symbolic idealization. Cather mythologizes them into earth-mothers, goddesses, or negative anima figures.

Three of Cather's earlier and most familier novels give clear evidence of this process of abstraction: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song* of *The Lark* (1915), and *My Ântonia* (1918). Alexandra, Thea, and Antonia are each transformed from puissant, warm humanity into mythic personae. Devitalized, Cather's heroines are stripped of emotional, intellectual, and sexual energy. The resulting culmination of this process is the "cold...repellent"[10] Sapphira, the detached, perversely insensitive, physically morbid, monolithic protagonist of her last novel. Cather's final fiction is a "novel without a heroine."[11]

Diametrically opposed to Sapphira is Cather's portrayal of Alexandra Bergson (*O Pioneers.?.* Linked by name with the great Macedonian world conqueror, this Norwegian immigrant child, whose sole and stereotypically feminine weapons are love and nurturance, grows to conquer the New World and tames it into submission and fruitfulness with her fecund touch. Cather endowed this simple farm woman with mythic elements: through her are recalled primitive vegetation and fertility myths as well as Biblical stories of Creation and the Garden of Eden. Within the world of the novel, and symbolically within the world of the Southwest, Alexandra is literally and figuratively the creative principle and holder of power of life and fertility for the great wild land. In haunting dream sequences, the land is personified and becomes the lover whom she did not experience in the vibrancy of her youth.

Along the land of the Divide, Alexandra creates a new Eden out of the barren prairie, but this new Eden also experiences fall from innocence and witnesses adultery and murder. Ernil, Alexandra's brother, is responsible for the evil and death that wrack Alexandra's "garden," but life calls more insistently than death. In her maturity, Alexandra joins in marriage with Carl Linstrum, who comes out of the past to claim and love her. Through Cather's imagination, Alexandra, earth-mother and corn-goddess, is another Ceres who reigns over the fertile land and calls forth harvest.

Although all of Cather's early heroines transcend sterility and emptiness, alone among them, Alexandra Bergson seems destined for

final and meaningful transcendence. Cather writes: "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth."[12] As goddess, as symbol, and as woman, combining mythological depth and human richness, Alexandra conquers both life and death through oneness with the land.

In opposition to the rugged West, the East for Cather, produced overrefined, effete men. Often sexually impotent, they look to woman as the source and preserver of life. The rootless Carl Linstrum, artist and former child of the prairies, searches for stability, love, and growth by returning to Alexandra. Resembling many other male characters in Cather's fiction, he lacks depth and creativity in his relationship with the land and with nature. He needs and longs for woman to fulfull him. Although he has developed his artistic talent, he lacks the creative principle and, understandably, his art suffers.

In My *Ántonia,* as well as in *O **Pioneers!,*** Willa Cather shatters the patrilinear pattern and celebrates fruitful womanhood. She presents Ántonia Shimerda Cuzak as the woman who is "very loved by all of us."[13] Embodying all and "anything that a woman can be to a man,"[14] ~ntonia is particularly enticing to the modern psyche overweary with materialism and vicissitude in her psychologically seductive role as earth-mother. As alluring as is this character: natural, spontaneous, feeling, and joyous, Cather has done violence to the maternal figure of ~ntonia by transforming her simple and attractive humanity into universal symbol.

We are unable to share in Ántonia's consciousness, and thus are deprived of any intimate knowledge of her. We do not know Ántonia at all except through Jim Burden's eyes and thoughts. Her early life is relatively unremarkable, although shot through with privation and darkened by the suicide of her refined, Bohemian immigrant father, who is sadly defeated by the hardships and isolation of the Nebraska plains. ~ntonia grows to maturity as a farm hand and a hired girl, embracing life with enthusiastic vigor, but, when she becomes pregnant and is abandoned, Cather begins to idealize her. We see ~ntonia, backed by a stack of freshly mown, sweet-smelling hay, nursing her child: a veritable madonna of the fields. Slowly her humanity is wrought into symbol until at the end of the novel, Cather tells us that Ántonia is a "stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested ... battered but not diminished."[15] Indeed, she *is* diminished. She is remote, desexed, no longer viable. Her maternity is symbolized to the extent that she becomes a figure in the tableau. Jim sees her surrounded by the children

whom she has borne, but she is subtlely detached from them. It is no longer she, but her children and her husband with whom Jim fantasizes relationship. She has become earth-mother, "a rich mine of life. Like the founders of early races."[16] Ántonia had "that something which fires the imagination, she could stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things."[17] No longer natural, spontaneous, or sensuous, she is also no longer "mother." Cather has mythologized her and she now belongs to the world. We are all able to say possessively, "my ~ntonia."

The wrenching of Ántonia's personhood lay in Cather's urgent concern for the modem loss of solid virtue and values in a world progressively skeptical about standards and morality. She felt impelled to make Ántonia an agent of ultimate truth and to invest her with moral intensity and spiritual significance.

Basic to the novel is Cather's looking to the frontier first as a reaffirmation of traditional values, and then to its development as a corruption of those values."[18] Jim Burden, Cather's narrator and alter-ego, seeks his meaningful past in Ántonia. Emotionally and spiritually enervated by his mechanized, sterile life, Jim returns to Ántonia and to Nebraska to find and to reestablish his roots through contact with his past, and to recapture simplicity and meaning. Painfully, Jim realizes his own desperate need for transcendent values. Having experienced innocence, goodness, and clear direction in his youth, he longs to "be a little boy again, and that 2/3his 3/4 way would end there."[19] His return to the prairie, from the East, is a nostalgic and mistaken attempt to relive the past. He senses in Ántonia the key to "yesterday." After all, do not her children speak to her in the old Czech tongue? Has she not remained in fruitful relationship with the land? Has not very little in her life changed? Jim erroneously concludes that he and Ántonia "possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past."[16]

Unlike Jim Burden, Thea Kronberg rejects her immediate past. No earthmother, no fertility goddess, Thea is resolute, ambitious, and determined to become an outstanding artist. Thea lives and struggles for the future. In *The* Song of *The Lark,* Cather depicts the heroine-artist who, internalizing and making personal her creativity, loses relationship with the bountiful land. Although Thea retains her momories, she does not find them lifeengendering. Pondering over a possible loving relationship with a powerful and wealthy young brewer, she visits the ruins of the Cliff Dwellers in the Arizona desert. Thea wanders meditatively through the Indian ruins, reflecting on her past and on her future. She realizes that "she had clung fast to whatever

was left of Moonstone in her mind. No more of that! The Cliff Dwellers had lengthened her past. She had older and higher obligations."" She abandons lover, family, and prairie for voice study in Germany, and music becomes her sole passion and life's meaning. Removed from her origins by her art, Thea loses warmth and humanity. She seems to have no needs or direction other than music, but Cather leaves her fragile. The price she set upon Thea's artistic excellence was high: the renunciation of deep human feeling and involvement.

Thea becomes unapproachable – Olympian. When her old friend and benefactor, Dr. Archie, comes to visit her, he must struggle to recognize her. She is costumed and made-up as a Wagnerian heroine. Cold, detached, she is not herself and Cather does not pretend that Thea's precious humanity is "not diminished." Once Thea decides to renounce her past, she observably hardens slowly into goddess. Although quite definitely symbolized, Thea does not possess the earth-mother seductivity of Alexandra and Ántonia. Her remote detachment and her noninvolvment in time and place with people and with her own inner life are emphatically clear. Without apparent regret, Thea lives out a chosen existence which is characterized by mobility and change. She realizes that she is uprooted but, unlike Jim Burden, she finds direction. She trades the past for the future, repudiating it and saying: "But I don't think I could go back. The past closes up behind one, somehow. One would rather have a new kind of misery. The old kind seems like death or unconsciousness. You can't force your life back into that mould again. No, one can't go back."[22]

In this novel, Cather refuses to sentimentalize the conflict which the artist feels between memory and desire, although it was a conflict which Cather knew well. Thea cannot remain in the security of the past any more than Cather could stay in Red cloud, but the aspiring singer sacrifices much in human relationship. It is in this more objective portrait that *The Song of The Lark,* although nostalgic, is truer to reality than *O Pioneers!* or *My Ántonia.*

Through her literary creativity, Willa Cather gave articulate expression to the power of the past for both imagination and memory. Recreating the pioneer experience, she developed its mythic and symbolic significance. Such transcending qualities both enhanced her heroines and detracted from their vibrant humanity. The allurement of the past prompted Cather to an anxious moral responsibility and nostalgic dependence on a tradition of conscience which, of necessity, crystallized into her fictional idealization and romanticization of women characters. Through her novels, Cather provided an imaginatively

restructured frontier past, which offered symbolic continuity in a world of rapidly shifting values, but this very fiction becomes "an implicit commentary on how ... creative power serves the mind's need to ignore and deny whatever is reprehensible in whatever one loves."[23] Ironically, Cather's nostalgic obsession with past values and memories, coupled with her didactic purpose, distorted her portrayal of the past, the land, and its pioneers.

NOTES

1. Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Wzlla Cather* (N.Y.: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1951), p. 148.
2. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Wzlla Cather: A Memoir* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), p. 121.
3. Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, *Wzlla Cather's Gzft of Sympathy* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 239.
4. Bennett, Introduction xi.
5. Bennett, p. 77.
6. Blanche H. Gelfant, "The Forgotten Reaping Hook: Sex in *My Antonia," American Literature,* vol. 43 (1971-1972), p. 79.
7. Bloom and Bloom, p. 237.
8. Sergeant, p. 46.
9. Bennett, p. 149.
10. Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather LIVING* (N.Y.: Knopf, 1953), p. 185.
11. Lewis, p. 185.
12. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1913), p. 309.
13. Willa Cather, *My Ántonza* (N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1949), p. 229. Subsequent quotations taken from this novel are from this edition.
14. *My Ántonia,* p. 208.
15. *My Ántonza,* p. 216.
16. *My Ántonia,* p. 229.
17. *My Ántonza,* p. 229.
18. Bloom and Bloom, p. 245.
19. *My Antonia,* p. 56.
20. *My Antonza,* p. 13.
21. Willa S. Cather, *The Song of The Lark* (N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1918), p. 308. The subsequent quotation taken from the novel is from this edition.
22. *The Song of The Lark,* p. 331.
23. Gelfant, p. 79.