

Willa Cather's New American World

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Abstract

This paper tries to portray Willa Cather's extraordinary skill in presenting both the expansiveness and the narrowness of life in the New American world. Analysing the works of Willa Cather, this paper shows her rich sense of the raw pioneering life of the Midwestern Lands. Thus, this paper presents how Willa Cather's rare imagination gifted her a permanent place in American Literature.

Keywords: Willa Cather, New American World, Expansiveness, mythological, femininity, female, heroes, ambiguities.

In the field of fiction, the merits of women novelists are seldom recognised and appreciated, though their novels are as noteworthy as those of the men novelists. One such woman novelist is Willa Cather whose novels are not as widely known as those of her contemporary men novelists. She was born in 1874 near Winchester, Virginia and moved with her parents to a farm near Red cloud Nebraska. Recollecting her childhood days in Nebraska, she is found exemplifying her great love for her native land in almost all her works. She is an adept in depicting 'female heroes' in her novels like *The Song of the Lark*, *My Antonis* and *O Pioneers!*

No doubt, Willa Cather who attained the literary status to be ranked as one of the most important American writers of the first half of this century, is best known for her novels and stories depicting the early years of Nebraska. Her range is considerably broader as it includes notable work laid in the American South West, Quebec and Virginia. Her reputation is based on her extraordinary ability to "capture the sense of place" and a meticulous craftsmanship that combines a very clear prose style with effective use of myth and symbol. In any age when authors were increasingly able to exploit their talents in the market place, Willa Cather dedicated all her novels to the altar of art. She wrote twelve novels and fifty five stories which modern critics consider to exhibit consistently high quality. The only major American writer of this period with an optimistic view of the capacity of a human being to create was Willa Cather whose oeuvre constitutes a fine "humanistic statement of mind over matter". Willa served a long literary apprenticeship before she was able to free herself from journalism completely and devote her time exclusively to creative writing. She has to her credit publication of such works as 1. *April Twilights*, 2. *Alexander's Bridge*, 3. *O Pioneers!*, 4. *The Song of the Lark*, 5. *My Antonis*, 6. *One of Ours*, 7. *A Lost Lady*, 8. *My Mortal Enemy*, 9. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 10. *Shadows on the Rock* and 11. *Lucy Gay Heart*.

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Besides these, Willa Cather has to her credit three books of short stories namely, 1. *The Troll Garden*, 2. *Youth and the Bright Medusa* and 3. *The Old Beauty and Others*. Among her novels, *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia* project woman as the hero.

O Pioneers! Is the story of Alexander Bergson, a Swedish immigrant who tames the wild land in the pioneer days of Nebraska. Alexander's life is a success story told with "a loving affirmation of the beauty of the land" and the value of the "pioneer struggle". She appears as a type of a goddess. The theme is the theme of the conquest of a hard country that had dominated novels of the American settlement ever since James Fenimore Cooper's *O Pioneers!* Published in 1823. In *O Pioneers!* Willa Cather writes of land not as a geographical or geographical master but as 'the material out of which countries are made'. Alexander Bergson is delineated as a creative woman who believes that forces must be co-operated with and that mankind also can fully activate these forces. In Part I of *O Pioneers!* "The Wild land", one can see Alexandra Bergson driving with her young brother Emil and her friend Carl Linstrum from the title Nebraska town of Nanover home to the farm where her dying father has been trying for eleven years without any great success, to tame the wild land. "Alexandra, the determined and far-seeing daughter of John Bergson, does not lose heart. When he dies but continuous to strive hard with confident hopes of the future because she is not trying to get back to where she was but to go forward to where she has never been, yet knows she will one day be. She is the appropriate guardian of the wild land until it yields to the efforts of its tamers" (Daiches 25). Part-II-"Neighbouring Fields" opens sixteen years later and it presents Alexandra as the proud possessor of plenty of acres of farm land. In the final section, we are back to the pioneering theme again. The ending establishes Alexandra as a kind of corn Goddess, a Ceres who presides over the fruitful land, symbol of the success of the pioneers in taming the reluctant but immensely promising soil.

The Song of the Lark published in 1915 is the story of how the daughter of a Swedish Methodist pastor in Moonstone, Colorado, becomes a great opera singer. The chief character is a local girl of immigrant parentage with immense potentialities but very few advantages. Here the struggle involves the training of Thea Kronborg's fine voice. The novel explores how a talent may find expression even when it appears in a small unindustrialised town on the plains and how a frontier American can elevate herself as an artist in spite of her traditionless and artless environment.

My Antonia is the story of a Bohemian girl whose family has come from the old country, to settle on the open prairies of Nebraska. The Shimerdas have been first Bohemian family to come to that part of the country. They are unable to speak enough English to ask for advice or even to make their most pressing wants known. They have none of the tools or skills of farmers and they discover that the land is a sod cave. Before their first Christmas in the new land, Papa Shimarda, broken and beaten, has killed himself with a shotgun. His wife, an altogether less refined and coarser person, complains and pulls her way along until with the assistance of neighbours, her situation improves. The fourteen-year-old Antonia,

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pretty, intelligent and her father's darling has to put off any hope of schooling and becomes one of the bread-winners for her miserably poor family. Her nineteen-year-old brother is mentally deficient. Antonia has a personality rich enough to compensate for all the deficiencies in other members of her family.

Right from the beginning of the novel, Antonia, in spite of her fragmentary English and humbler circumstances, is the dominating character. She does explore the country side and learns to know and love the Nebraska plains. After her father's death she takes her place as one of the workers on the farm to which she devotes all her time and energy. When spring begins, she goes into the fields and ploughs like a man. The harvest yields money. The Shirmerdas soon have a house and with the remaining money, Antonica buys ploughshares and cattle. In the second section of the novel, Mrs. Harling brings Antonia into town as her hired girl and cook. Antonia enters into her tasks with enthusiasm. In the third section of the novel, Antonia is lost sight of completely and in the fourth section, it is found that Antonia falls in love with a rail road conductor and goes off to Denver to marry him. But he does not marry her, for reasons unknown to her, he has lost his job and goes away to Mexico leaving her pregnant. In a subdued spirit, Antonia goes back to her brother's farm and determines once again to work on the land. Just as the founders of early race, she is a rich mine of life.

Not all of Willa Cather's heroines meet with success in their lives like Antonia. *A Lost Lady* is essentially the story of the degeneration of a socially minded lady who is condemned to pass her days in a poor and rough community. "Willa Cather's main interest is less in the study of degeneration than in the exploration and presentation of those ambiguities and paradoxes of human character that make it possible for someone like Marian Forrester to be at once the epitome of aristocratic grace, kindness and understanding and a vulgarian who will do anything – deceive her husband, make advances to coarse and unprincipled young men – to get some excitement out of life" (P 59).

Lucy Gayheart published in 1935 is the story of a lively and attractive young girl in a Nebraskan town. Lucy goes to Chicago from Haverford, falls in love with a middle aged singer for whom she is acting as temporary accompanist. Because of her love for him, he declines the offer of marriage made by the wealthy charming young man of her home town. When the singer goes back to Europe for the summer, he is drowned in a boating accident on Lake Como. Lucy is crushed by his death. She returns from Chicago wretched and meets with a tragic end by drowning in a skating accident. *Sapphire and the Slave Girl* represented for Willa Cather a deeper excursion into memory than any other that she had written for her alone had she written of Virginia. The other novels of Willa Cather have male heroes.

The Professor's House published in 1925 deals with Godfrey St.Peter, a Professor in a Mid-Western American University. He is a scholarly, compassionate man who finds the tranquil and ordered life of his middle years threatened by worldly success. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* published in 1927 creates in "episodic form" the life of Jean Letour, the first

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Bishop of Mexico. The Bishop is to go to New Mexico to win for Catholicism, the Southwest of America, a country where the Faith has slumbered for centuries. There together with his old friend Father Valliant, Letour makes his home. To this pagan land, he brings the refined traditions of French culture and Christian belief. Willa Cather explores in this novel the importance of spiritual values and the nature of love.

One of Ours published in 1922 is a story of frustration rather than fulfillment and the emphasis is not on the development of an artist but on the gradual suffocation of the sensitive and maladjusted hero until he is killed in the First World War. This novel won a Pulitzer prize and brought her handsome royalties for the first time.

Honestly speaking, Willa Cather is deeply rooted in her native land. She is found linking her own deep seated feeling about the country of the pioneers with its almost mythological suggestions of growth, fertility and rural richness, with memories of particular people and events. For example, *Alexander's Bride* was the outcome of Willa Cather's meeting some interesting people in London and a warm youthful enthusiasm for Henry James". *O Pioneers!* Was like taking a ride through familiar country on a horse that knew the way on a fine morning when you felt like riding" (P 105). Comment on *Alexander's Bride*, Cather said: "Like most young writers, I thought a book should be made out of interesting material and at that time, I found the new more exciting than the familiar".

My Antonia is highly autobiographical. It is representatively American in its material, mood and unconscious uses of the past. In it, it is noted that Willa Cather's obsession has to do with the assertion of self. Like Willa Cather, Antonia too displays strong masculine traits. M.A. Abrams calls *My Antonia* "a creative autobiography" because it is more or less a fictional work of art about the development of the artist herself and it is pre-occupied with memory, time and the relations of what is passing to what is eternal" (Wasserman 231).

To conclude, the writings of Willa Cather are richly imbued with the sense of the raw pioneering life of the Midwestern prairie lands, its demands and rewards, its beauty and tragedy. With rare imagination, she portrays both the expansiveness and the narrowness of life in the New World and on its frontier, thus creating works that have a permanent place in American Literature.

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