

Style and Techniques Adopted in Cather's Novels

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Willa Cather writings are very different from her contemporary, which she developed mainly through her early life and during her job as a magazine editor. Her attitude, life style and ideas on politics are different from her non-typical style, as her writings are efficient, direct and to the point. Many people compare her to Hemmingway in the simplicity of the sentences. The minimalistic style fits in the setting of her novels. If she is not doing any stream of consciousness, or describing a complicated situation, she usually describe either the desert southwest, or the great plains- the two places which do not need to be over complicated, another interesting style of Cather is the lack of emotion, especially love, in her writing.

Another style of Cather that is very important is her layout; she experimented with different styles of books. In most cases, she just wrote a typical novel. A story of a character experience, with a plot, climax and action, but in some books, she experimented with the idea of a narrative. Cather's style can be summed up by simplicity and nothing flashy, short sentences and lack of emotion characterize her writing style, but as seen by her experimentation, she was not afraid of trying something different.

Cather presents pioneer characters against a Nebraska background and places them at the centre of collective and private conflicts. Her artistic imagination turns to aspects usually left out from celebrations of the frontier experience in the rural West. Her main concerns are the personal costs concomitant with the pioneers victory, the social limitations and cultural inhibitions existent on the agricultural frontier, and the danger and damage inherent in myths about a glorious past.

The epic novel *O Pioneers!* unfolds the heroic life of a female pioneer. As the daughter of a Swedish immigrant family, Alexandra Bergson succeeds in farming the Nebraska soil and asserts

herself against her social environment. But the price that she comes to pay for her material success is emotional failure and personal loss. On the one hand there is the European heritage, and on the other the open spaces of the American West with its challenge and excitement and its responsibilities of new life. John Bergson who comes to the new world to redress the balance of the old dies in the opening section of the novel. His death symbolizes that the new world will not respond fully to those who come to it. Further Alexandra, Johns determined daughter, emphasis through her actions that a pioneer should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves. She does not go back to where she was but moves forward to where she has never been. She infact acts as the appropriate guardian of the wild land and yields. She refuses to part with any of their land instead regularly acquires the land of those who give up and return to Urban life. Her instinct serves her highly and we further see her as the prosperous owner of much wealthy farm land. The triumph of the future is beautifully portrayed in the rhythm of prose:

There are few scenes more gratifying than a spring plowing in that country, where the furrows of a single field often lie a mile in length, and the brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow; rolls away from the shear, not even dimming the brightness. The wheat—cutting sometimes goes on all night as well as all day, and in good seasons there are scarcely men and horses enough to do the harvesting. The grain is so heavy that it bends toward the blade and cuts like velvet.¹

Willa Cather explains why *O Pioneers!* interested her so tremendously:

Because it had to do with a kind of country I loved, because it was about old neighbors, once very dear, whom. I had almost forgotten in the hurry and excitement of

growing up and finding out what the world was like and trying to get on in it.²

My Antonia is an elegiac novel composed of Jim Burden's nostalgic childhood memories. He falls victim to the illusions that he has about his early experiences on the prairie and his close friendship to the Bohemian settler Antonia Shimerda. Only twenty years later, when he visits his romanticized friend, does he come to a better understanding of her real self and his own past. *A Lost Lady* is an allegorical novel about the end of the pioneer period. Set in a little western town, it focuses on Niel Herbert and his youthful admiration for a wealthy railroad builder and his beautiful wife. Disgusted at the vileness of the present, he is in danger of succumbing to his idealized picture of a nobler past. The novel is the study of Mrs. Forrester, the lost lady who gives way to her personal frustration against the decline of a community. In this novel we witness the great Western dream in reverse and the decline of the pioneering 'age in an increasingly narrow and self satisfied civilization. Such atmosphere of fading hope provides an effective background to the study of Mrs. Forrester. The wife of railroad contractor experiences change from gracious and aristocratic way of living to narrow and increasingly shabby environment. Her destiny confines her to this because of her husband's disability resulting from a fall from a horse.

Willa Cather is an author critical of the myth of the frontier. Born in Virginia and transplanted to Nebraska at the age of nine, she came to know the prairie land and the pioneer people at first hand. There and then she must have felt the discrepancy between the real and the ideal. When she wrote her novels later in life, she set herself the goal to correct the pastoral images that many people had of the pioneer West. Instead of perpetuating the agrarian vision of frontiering, the writer revised it in accordance with her own perception of it. Her skilful integration of past and present, youth and age, innocence and experience brought the popular myth of the frontier to bear on such basic notions as history, memory, and identity. In her three Nebraska novels Cather criticized contemporary American mythology and strove for a more comprehensive and less distorted memory of America's pioneer age.

Willa Cather's rise to the foremost rank of twentieth century American novelists began with the

publication of *O Pioneers!* in 1913. At that time Cather was nearing her fortieth birthday and could look back on an eventful life. Born into the homogeneous wasp culture of provincial Virginia, she had grown up among the mixed population of frontier Nebraska. After some years in the narrow-minded community of urban Pittsburgh she moved on into the liberal sphere of cosmopolitan New York. Hence, her childhood in the cultivated South contrasted greatly with her youth and adolescence in the yet uncivilized west and even more so with her adult life in the cultured East. In any case, she had experienced cultural otherness within America and on her trips to Europe had thus gained an understanding of the many differences between people from places as divergent as the Old and the New World.

While still in Virginia, Cather took part in the longstanding southern tradition of oral storytelling. Always an attentive listener, she used to pick up legends, tales, gossip, and folklore whenever family and friends came together at her grandfather's big farmhouse. Following her migration to Nebraska she got into the habit of listening to the stories that her foreign born neighbors told about Europe and the past. Needless to say, the author cherished those memories from her earliest days and retained a relish for stories all her life. Shortly after, her grandmother began reading religious, historical, and fictional works to her. Once she had learnt to read, she turned into a voracious reader, devouring anything that she found interesting and could lay her hands on. As O'Brien argues that:

coming from the homogeneous Anglo Saxon culture of white settlers in the Shenandoah Valley where the sharpest divisions were those between Baptists and Presbyterians, supporters of the secession and Union sympathizers she was excited by the discovery of difference.³

In her essay *Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle* Willa Cather refers to the early population of Nebraska as 'transatlantic', saying that 'colonies of European people, Slavonic, Germanic, Scandinavian, Latin, spread across our bronze prairies like the daubs of color on a painter's palette'

Between 1902 and 1935 Willa Cather undertook seven journeys to Europe. Usually

accompanied by either Isabelle McClung or Edith Lewis, she toured extensively through England, France, and Italy. O'Brien makes a case for southern storytelling as an important influence on Willa Cather and compares it to the female activity of quilt making a consequence, she developed an everlasting love of books with a particular 'taste for romance'.⁴ Driven by a passion for writing, Willa Cather became a very productive writer of both journalism and fiction. Since her college days she worked as a journalist for some Nebraska newspapers, doing drama and opera criticism, reviewing books, and contributing her own column. Thereby did she acquire the reportorial skills that came in handy in the offices of eastern magazines.

Next to teaching in Pittsburgh high schools, she accepted the post of managing editor of America's best known muckraking magazine in New York. All the while she continued writing poetry and short stories but seemed to make no progress. Overburdened by her many responsibilities as editor, she felt that she had got stuck in her development as a fiction writer. So one day in 1912 she made a momentous decision and gave up her job to follow her true vocation. Undeniably, 'she had been a good editor as she had been a good critic and a good teacher. Now she wanted one thing only, to be a writer, and a good one'. When *O Pioneers!* was published in 1913, Willa Cather proved herself to be an excellent writer. At last, she had broken free from journalistic drudgery and had achieved artistic mastery. In the process of writing her first Nebraska novel she could rely on her profound knowledge of American nature, European culture, and classic literature. Furthermore, she brought in her sense of national history, her rich fund of regional memories, and her personal identity as a Westerner. For there can be no doubt that Cather considered herself to be 'a Nebraskan who lived most of her life away from home'. All this came to play an important role in the composition of her three Nebraska novels.

In the years 1913 between 1923 she succeeded not only in putting her home state on America's literary map but also had a strong influence on American mythology. One of the defining characteristics of Willa Cather's work is its self-reflexive nature; virtually every one of her novels and stories deals at some point, whether

directly or indirectly, with the importance of art and the artist. Sister Colette Toler, in an early essay on Cather's artistic motif, identifies over 32 separate artist figures in Cather's fiction, and this by taking into account only those figures that are portrayed overtly as artists. Whether in spite of this number of examples or perhaps because of it, Cather's attitudes towards her fictional artists, and what these attitudes reveal about her view of herself as artist, remain a subject of great critical contention.

The central theme of *My Antonia* is neither the struggle of the pioneer nor the conflict between generations, but the development and self discovery of the heroine. The structure of the novel as a whole tends to present Antonia as a symbolic figure and her growth, development and final adjustment is so interesting for what can be made. The story is told by Jim Burden, the childhood friend of the heroine who arrives at his grand parent's farm in Nebraska Jim and Antonia together explore the countryside and learn to know and love the Nebraska plains. Mr. Shimerda, the father of Antonia commits suicide. He had hoped to see Antonia get a good American education, but after his death Antonia takes her place as one of the workers on the farm. Jim and Antonia are drawn closer but there is a difference between the upbringing of the two-Jim goes to school while Antonia works on the farm. Antonia's resignation to circumstances is portrayed effectively in the following extract:

Antonia stood up, lifting and dropping her shoulder as if they were stiff. "I ain't got time to learn. I can work like mans now. My mother can't say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. I help make this land One good farm."⁶

The third section deals with Jim Burden at the University of Nebraska, his mild affair with Lina Lingard and his decision to continue his studies at Harvard. In the fourth sector when Jim goes home from Harvard he learns of Antonia's fate. She had fallen in love with a railroad conductor who run off to Mexico leaving her pregnant. Antonia goes back to her brothers farm subdued but determined to work once again on the land. Jim learns everything including the birth of Antonia's baby. He goes out to

see Antonia and finds her in the fields and notices a new kind of gravity in her face. She tells him that she would always be miserable in a city:

I'd die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly.⁷

The final section takes place twenty years later when Jim returns to the scenes of his childhood and visits Antonia who had married a young Bohemian. When he sees her surrounded by a large family he realizes that she has found her proper function as housewife and mother on a Nebraska farm:

She was a battered woman now, no a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. All the strong things of her heart came out in her body that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions.⁸

The story ends with a powerful emotional rhythm spurting from Jim's recapitulation of the past:

This was the road over which Antonia and I come on that night when we got off the train at Black Hawk and were bedded down in the straw, wondering children, being taken we knew not whither. I had only to close my eyes to hear the rumbling of the wagons in the dark, and to be again overcome by that obliterating strangeness. The feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand. I had the sense of coming home to my self, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is. For Antonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had

missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past.⁹

The time sense enfolds in it characters and incidents as symbols, though structurally it may be rated as imperfect in comparison to other novels. The powerful message flows that struggle does not convert in success for ever, but it obviously yields strength provided we do not give in before opposing conditions. In this respect *My Antonia* is obviously different from *O Pioneers!*

Any critic who approaches the text must deal with a number of difficult questions like if Jim is the primary protagonist, then what purpose does the title serve? If, on one other hand, this is Antonia's story, why does she disappear for long stretches of time? If Cather means for the two characters to serve as twin focal points, then still the problem of defining the nature of the relationship between them is there.

Joan Acocella in her recent study, *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*, argues that the true beneficiaries of *My Antonia's* problematic nature have been feminist critics. The novel's difficult structure allowed room in which such critics could project their own theories and adopt Cather's as a voice in service of their own cause. Since the 1970s, the bulk of articles on Cather have pointed to the discrepancy between the title and the novel's actual events as indicative of male subversion of the feminine point of view.

The paradigm of opposition between Jim and Antonia relies on a number of problematic assumptions. To begin with, those critics who hold Antonia up as a heroine silenced by a domineering male author neglect the fact that she herself operates as a 'controlling' artist, and often in ways that are quite similar to those for which Jim is typically vilified. Jim is supposed to be manipulative:

he refuses to allow Antonia her own voice; he makes every attempt to revise her to fit his own preconceptions of what a woman should be. Yet, in her own way, Antonia exercises every bit as much control over narrative in the novel as Jim himself.¹¹

The study of literary influence among women writers alas frequently adopted a model of sororal or matrilineal sharing in contrast—often in an

explicitly stated contrast—to Harold Bloom's well-established theory of the 'anxiety of influence' besetting male writers. In Bloom's powerfully influential vision, that anxiety is posed as a kind of Freudian agon of sons against fathers, a struggle of self-definition through resistance and mastery.²⁰ Feminist critics have generally agreed with the Bloomian model as applied to male authors but have demurred with respect to women writers, whom we have tended to see in familial terms. The model of a separate women's tradition in literature, its inner coherence maintained by resistance to male dominance, that was posited in the 1970s by Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter, and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, as well as others, has been widely accepted.²¹ As, Betsy Erkkila points out, these ground breaking feminist critics may not have 'significantly' challenged the Bloomian model as applied to women writers and women precursors, but they did at any rate establish their resistance to the masculine literary establishment and the masculine model of rivalry.²² Their successors and elaborators have argued forcefully that a women's tradition is constituted of a supportive community whose members welcome the all-too-rare voices of foremothers calling to them across the ages. Even the literary foremothers nearer at hand, according to this prevailing vision, have served as models for emulation rather than hegemonic powers to be challenged.

An instance of such a female adoption (and adaptation) of the Bloomian model of male writers' anxiety is Katherine Anne Porter's anxious and, as artfully ambitious essay on a literary elder sister, *Reflections on Willa Cather*. Operating in the loosely narrative fashion that characterized not only Porter's non fiction but her very mode of thought the essay purports to pay retrospective tribute to one of the prominent women writers of the early and mid-twentieth century, but in fact asserts Porter's own stature in the world of letters. In the story of her essay, the protagonist is not Cather, as one would expect from the title, but Porter herself. The essay is cast in a pervasive first-person mode in which the observing or commenting 'I' becomes the active principle and its putative topic a passive reflector, a mirror reflecting Katherine Anne Porter.

Here is Porter in the review, 'The Calm, Pure Art of Willa Cather,' published in the New York Times Book Review on 25 September 1949, in observance of the posthumous collection *Willa Cather on Writing*:

I never knew her at all, or any one who did know her. Her personality did not seem to invite the overgrowth of legend or gossip. Her private life never became public property nor was her house a crossroads. I saw but one photograph of her, Steichen's showing a big, plain, smiling woman with easily crossed arms and a ragged part in her hair. She wrote with immense sympathy about Stephen Crane: There is every evidence that he was a reticent and helpful man, with no warmhearted love of giving out opinions.' She might as well have been writing about herself.²³

After Cather's appearance, the essay's focus shifts to her heritage and early life. Here again Porter tacitly emphasizes parallels to important aspects of her own life. Cather's name, as Porter liked to say she herself did, from a family reduced in circumstances but well able to inculcate an 'aspiration' toward true 'nobility.' like many 'country people ... in those times and places,' she had 'litem parents and grandparents, soundly educated and deeply read, educated, if not always at schools, always at their own firesides'. As if in testimony that this was so, Cather's sister is then quoted on the young Willa's reading of Greek and Latin with a nearby storekeeper. The two essential ideas raised in this thumbnail biographical sketch, the family's gentility and the value of home education, are stressed and amplified:

She was not the first nor the last American writer to be formed in this system of home education; at one time it was the customary education for daughters, many of them never got to school at all or expected to; but they were capable of educating their grandchildren, as this little history shows. To her last day Willa Cather was the true child of her plain living, provincial farming people. with their aristocratic ways of feeling and

thinking; poi but not poverty-stricken for a moment.²⁴

In praising these qualities in Cather, of course, Porter praises herself. The same qualities were the base's of her vision of her own heritage and character.

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