



myth in the works of willa cather

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The critics of Willa Cather's works have always recognized the beauty of her prose and, like John Steinbeck who rated her among the four or five great modern stylists, found her outstanding quality to be her technical competence. Many of the critics stress her relation to the frontier: Maxwell Geismar calls her one of the "last of the provincials"; James E. Miller, Jr. relates her early work to Turner's concept of cultural evolution; John H. Randall III finds an expression of Populist folklore in her novels; the historian Henry Steele Commager, among many other writers, points to her as a moralist who used the frontier as a vantage point enabling her to see that deterioration of American life which, she declared, began in 1914.¹ But Willa Cather's view is at once broader and more profound than this relationship to the purely American myth might suggest. Her novels trace the progress of the American West as it repeats the progress of the human race, with the structure, language and choice of myth all appropriate to the literature of the stage of civilization she is depicting. These early novels, her strongest, are echoes of the Homeric and Scandinavian heroic ages.

The Olympian view of American life has been expressed only infrequently in twentieth-century literature. Such a view demands that the writer choose a larger-than-life hero to undergo a struggle of epic proportions and to triumph over human adversaries, natural forces and hostile gods. One writer who successfully adopts this essentially classical attitude toward native American material is Willa Cather: the best of her books describe in Virgilian phrases a hero (or more often a heroine) of great moral stature involved in Homeric episodes. In the work of an artist whose themes, structures, rhythms were notably organic, the Greek and Roman techniques were not at all extraneous. For Willa Cather tried to accomplish nothing less than a modern *Aeneid*, shaping the material of the Western frontier drama to the literary form of the novel and adapting myths, both universal and contemporary, to her epic.

Her concern with human problems “slid back into yesterday’s seven thousand years”; her protagonists are often echoes of gods and heroes of older cultures. In her books, just as important as they had been to the Romans of Virgil’s day, loom the cycle of the seasons, the vegetation myths, the hostility or beneficence of a Nature personified. The magnitude of the Western landscape adds grandeur, and the historical facts lend a sense of reality, but the stories are based on the few eternal conflicts of human existence and their attendant myths. In *O Pioneers!* she says:

Isn’t it queer: there are only two or three stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years.²

Her family’s migration to the Nebraska frontier when she was nine years old and her interest in the classics during her adolescent years explain her choice of subjects for her novels. Her own opinion was that

the years from eight to fifteen are the formative period in a writer’s life, when he unconsciously gathers basic material. He may acquire a great many interesting and vivid impressions in his mature years but his thematic material he acquires under fifteen years of age.³

During the years when her literary tastes were developing, she found a remarkable friend in the Englishman William Ducker, with whom she read Virgil, Ovid, the *Iliad*, the odes of Anacreon. Later, she studied both Greek and Latin literature at the University of Nebraska and for several years taught Latin.

As important as her study of the classics was her method of composition; it began often with an almost mystical perception. She spoke of illumination that came “in flashes that are unreasoning, often unreasonable as life itself.” When she began to write of the places and people she had known in her youth her writing became spontaneous. She compared writing *O Pioneers!* to “taking a ride through a familiar country on a horse that knew the way, on a fine morning when you felt like riding.”⁴

In her stories, as in her writing techniques, she was very conscious of the value of the unconscious. In *My Antonia*, Jim Burden, looking at a snake he has killed, decides that

he must have been there when white men first came, left on from buffalo and Indian times. As I turned him over, I began to feel proud of him, to have a kind of respect for his age and size. He seemed like the ancient, eldest Evil. Certainly his kind have left horrible unconscious memories in all warm-blooded life.⁵

Antonia Shimerda is clearly meant to call up unconscious memories too, but in her case, of heroism and strength: "She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true. . . . She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of the early races."⁶ Willa Cather saw the patterns of early civilizations being repeated on the American frontier; from this observation came one of her basic themes. Father Duchene of *The Professor's House* expresses her reverence for frontiers: "Wherever humanity has made that hardest of all starts, and lifted itself out of mere brutality, is a sacred spot."

It is at the beginning of a civilization that national myths are born. To the European mind, the American myth is readily apparent; as far back as 1849, Carlyle wrote to Emerson: "There is no *Myth* of Athene or Herakles equal to this fact." "This fact" was the American frontier. Statesmen were aware of its ability to stir the imagination; historians could see it as a controlling idea in American life. American authors, however, were, with few exceptions, unable to use the raw material of this great myth.

Thoreau understood it: "I felt that this was the heroic age, though we know it not. . . ." Walt Whitman gathered together the ideals and symbols of the New World, celebrating loudly the American Dream. But it was Willa Cather who most clearly interpreted the opening of the frontier as a momentary heroic age. Her insights have lost none of their validity; one English critic has recently suggested: "In the present agonised American quest for identity and direction, perhaps her novels could refresh the national myth which, at European distance, still seems magnificent and truthful in them."⁷

Adopting a title from Whitman, Willa Cather began her novels of the frontier. *O Pioneers!* is an examination of the relationship to the unsettled land of various types of people and various ethnic groups. But the land itself is pre-eminent; it is personified to such a degree that, like Hardy's heath, it seems a protagonist of the book. Only women strong in body and spirit, with deep respect for the power and beauty of the untamed land, can understand it "and own it—for a little while." The relationship between Alexandra and the earth is an intensely personal one:

For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before.⁸

The religious connotations of the more lyrical descriptions of the land prepare us for the emergence of Alexandra as its goddess. Her appearance suggests Demeter or Persephone in the works of classical

writers and artists; the thick braids circling her head and the fringe of reddish-yellow curls form the crown of corn which characterizes the corn goddess.⁹ She is the only truly heroic figure in *O Pioneers!*, the intermediary between nature and people who do not understand it—Oscar, for example, who wants to plant at the same time each year, regardless of weather conditions. In her role as goddess of the crops, Alexandra lends a religious significance to the events and to some of the characters in the book.¹⁰ The fusion of her will with the will of nature helps to unify the novel. Much of the strength of the book depends upon the skill with which nature and humanity are woven into an organic whole. There is the conventional symbolic use of weather and the seasons; in an almost primitive way, life's meanings are interpreted in terms of the cycle of the seasons and the fertility of the earth. Such connections between nature and human events make *O Pioneers!* the living thing that Willa Cather thought a novel should be.

Written in 1918, *My Antonia* is, like *O Pioneers!*, descriptive of life on the prairie thirty years before. It is Antonia's relation to the land which makes her life meaningful. Like Alexandra she has many of the attributes of an earth goddess. She, like the land, can be fruitful even when man has misused her, and her fecundity has some nexus with the fertility of the earth. The richness of Antonia's life is felt in the descriptions of the flourishing vegetation and animal life, as well as her twelve children. Since the vegetation cycle is so important here (it has been called the organizing principle of the book),¹¹ it is impossible not to connect the children with the divisions of the year. There is significance, too, in the favorite's birth at Easter—that festival celebrating the resurrection of the crops for the pagan, the renewal of life for the Christian. And the emergence of the children from the fruit cave is "a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight." Jim Burden says, "It was a sight any man might have come far to see." The American West as the Garden of the World figures prominently in these early novels.

Antonia is the chief mythic symbol of this book, but as in any mythology, there are ancillaries. These are the pleasure-seeking hired girls, the daughters of immigrant farmers. One of them, Lena Lingard, is reminiscent of the legendary White Goddess. She "kept a miraculous whiteness which somehow made her seem more undressed than other girls who went scantily clad." Dancing with her is "a waltz of coming home to something, of inevitable, fated return." Jim describes a recurring dream which imposes on the reader a strong image of Lena as a goddess:

I was in a harvest-field full of shocks, and I was lying against one of them. Lena Lingard came across the stubble bare-foot, in a short skirt, with a curved reaping-hook in her

hand, and she was flushed like the dawn, with a kind of luminous rosininess all about her.¹²

Now Jim perceives a connection between the hired girls and Virgil:

It came over me, as it had never done before, the relation between girls like those and the poetry of Virgil. If there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry. I understood that clearly, for the first time. This revelation seemed to me inestimably precious. I clung to it as if it might suddenly vanish.¹³

Such girls are the inspiration of poetry—its muses, if we like.

One of the first of Willa Cather's versions of the Homeric pause—a legend which seems to interrupt the narrative, yet strongly reinforces the emotion—occurs in this chapter with the story of Blind d'Arnault. Ugly, blind almost from birth, suffering a nervous affliction, he has taught himself to play the piano "as if all the agreeable sensations possible to creatures of flesh and blood were heaped upon those black and white keys. . . ." He realizes a music that is barbarous and exciting. His appearance is germane: "He looked like some glistening African god of pleasure, full of strong savage blood." The music of the black god and the dancing of the white goddesses make the "hired girls" chapter a rhapsody to man's instinctive urge toward sensual pleasure.

Edward Tylor says in his discussion of primitive civilizations that a childlike, primeval philosophy ascribing personal life to nature is one of the chief agents in mythological development. *My Antonia*, like *O Pioneers!*, abounds in such personification of nature. Winter comes down savagely to a prairie town; it seems to punish men for their enjoyment of the loveliness of summer. Traveling to Nebraska after many years, Jim remembers the conformation of the land as if it were a human face. Human life, conversely, is spoken of in vegetation images, as when it is "spread out shrunken and pinched, frozen down to the bare stalk." Other primitive ideas persist at all levels of prairie society. After Antonia's father is refused burial in both the Catholic and Norwegian churchyards, his family reverts to an old Bohemian superstition that a suicide must be buried at a crossroads. Even Jim Burden responds emotionally to the situation:

I loved the dim superstition, the propitiatory intent, that had put the grave there; and still more I loved the spirit that could not carry out the sentence—the error from the surveyed lines, the clemency of the soft earth roads along which the home-coming wagons rattled after sunset.¹⁴

Other superstitions surround the death of Mr. Shimerda. Jim has such vivid pictures of the man's native land that he thinks "they might have been Mr. Shimerda's memories, not yet faded out from the air in which they had haunted him." Finally, Jim holds a theory (in common with

several primitive tribes) that the released spirit will find its way back to its native land—a thought that brings much comfort to Antonia. The aura of ritual and magic serves to ennoble the memory of Mr. Shimerda even though he has shown a lack of courage and strength in his struggle in America. Myth serves another, more basic purpose in *My Antonia*. It is an important link between Europe and America, showing continuity of the thought, the emotion and the essential nature of man from generation to generation and from place to place. The idea was whispered in *O Pioneers!* during a talk between Marie and Emil about one of many forms of tree worship the world has known. The ancient Bohemian belief was that lindens purify the forest and cancel the spells of heathen times. Marie would be a willing tree worshiper:

I like trees because they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do. I feel as if this tree knows everything I ever think of when I sit here. When I come back to it, I never have to remind it of anything; I begin just where I left off.¹⁵

Life on the frontier renews many other primeval responses in men. The dawn on the prairie looks like “the light from some great fire that was burning under the edge of the world.” The same interpretation occurs to Jim in *My Antonia* as he explores his new home in the West:

I wanted to walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world, which could not be very far away. The light air about me told me that the world ended here; only the ground and sun and sky were left, and if one went a little further there would be only sun and sky, and one would float off into them. . . .¹⁶

Not only European, but Indian beliefs as well, are echoed in these early books. Identification of a man’s shadow with his soul, for example, colors events in both *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*, both passages signifying the same thing: man makes but a momentary impression on the eternal world of nature. But through the use of myth, Willa Cather also conveys the idea that man is inextricably linked to other eras, other cultures. The sensibilities of Jim Burden—protestant, Anglo-saxon, educated—respond to Indian beliefs, as they have responded to Virgilian ideas and to European superstitions. When a great circle where the Indians once rode shows a remarkably distinct pattern beneath the winter’s first snow, Jim is strongly stirred by the figure and inexplicably feels that it is a good omen. Finally, considering Jim’s (and Willa Cather’s) background, it is not surprising that nature in the light of Judeo-Christian mythology has new significance on the frontier. Jim’s description of the afternoon sun shining on the prairie is an example:

The whole prairie was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed. That hour always had the exulta-

tion of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero's death—heroes who died young and gloriously. It was a sudden transfiguration, a lifting-up of day.¹⁷

Willa Cather was eclectic in her use of myth: biblical, classical, European, Indian—the long tradition of man's thought and feeling was too sacred for her to ignore, no matter what its source. In *Shadows on the Rock* the Count ponders the mythological explanations for ordinary life:

There was something in himself and in other men that his world did not explain. Even the Indians had to make a story to account for something in their lives that did not come out of their appetites: conceptions of courage, duty, honour. The Indians had these, in their own fashion. These ideas came from some unknown source, and they were not the least part of life.¹⁸

The use of myth and mythological tradition is a significant part of Willa Cather's work. It enriches much of her writing, as it does the writing of any author who skillfully selects from "the eternal material of art," as she called it. She took her view of man from the larger patterns of his experience and gave her characters archetypal stature; the result is an art which rises from a source deep in the human soul.

footnotes

1. Harry Thornton Moore, *The Novels of John Steinbeck* (Chicago, 1939), 92-94; Maxwell Geismar, *The Last of the Provincials* (Boston, 1947); James E. Miller, Jr., "My Antonia: A Frontier Drama of Time," *American Quarterly*, X (Winter, 1958), 476-484; John H. Randall III, *The Landscape and the Looking Glass* (Boston, 1960); Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind* (New Haven and London, 1950).

2. Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (Boston, 1913), 119.

3. Quoted in E. K. Brown, *Willa Cather, A Critical Biography* (New York, 1953), 3.

4. Willa Cather, "My First Novels," *On Writing* (New York, 1949), 93.

5. Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston, 1954), 8.

6. *Ibid.*, 353.

7. Ronald Bryden, "American Sublime," *Spectator*, 206, 767 (May 26, 1961).

8. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 65.

9. Instead of carrying a poppy with petals suggestive of mountains and valleys as Sir James Frazer explains, Alexandra resembles a sunflower, whose petals are symbolic of the "shaggy ridges" of the Divide.

10. Crazy Ivar is, for example, undoubtedly the agricultural version of the "Old One" in Indian mythology who teaches the people his magical knowledge of hunting and fishing.

11. John H. Randall III, *The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value* (Boston, 1960), 147.

12. Cather, *My Antonia*, 270.

13. *Ibid.*, 225-226.

14. Cather, *My Antonia*, 119.

15. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 153.

16. Cather, *My Antonia*, 16.

17. Cather, *My Antonia*, 40.

18. Willa Cather, *Shadows on the Rock* (New York, 1931), 280.