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Warriress in White: A Semiotic Analysis of America's Joan of Arc
in *The Women of the Copper Country*

Community memory in Calumet, Michigan remains contentious regarding its own history with labor, the place of women, and its past tragedies. How the small town is remembered by the country at large bothers its modern-day inhabitants, who are disgruntled by mass-media representations. Many of these citizens are at odds with the ideas present in nationally popular items such as Woody Guthrie's politically charged ballad "1913 Massacre" which tells the story of a deadly stampede which resulted in the suffocation of 73 people (mostly children) in Calumet's Italian Hall (Ross). The community is also at odds about how America remembers the 1913 strike, which was the backdrop for this disaster, and the famous (or in some minds infamous) Big Annie, the woman at the strike's center.

Mary Doria Russell's novel *The Women of the Copper Country* is a fictionalized historical account of this mining strike in the Keweenaw Peninsula. Russell, a bestselling author, tells the story of when copper miners of many ethnicities attempted to secure fair wages, reasonable working hours, and safer working conditions while striking against the most powerful mining company in the world, Calumet & Hecla. The strike began without sufficient resources and preparations, and ultimately failed to elicit recognition by the company or acquire any of the conditions set forth by the miners. Significantly in this strike, a great deal of leadership was focused in the Union's Women's Auxiliary. In particular, one woman formed the backbone of the local movement. Known by her community as Big Annie, Anna Klobuchar Clements (or Clemenc) was the heart of the 1913 strike. Memories of her bravery linger today in the form of recorded testimonies by elderly community members, immortalization in plaques and songs, and Russell's popular novel. She is remembered not as herself, not as the fully complex, flawed and

inspiring person who once lived. She is represented sometimes as a negative influence on her community, and more commonly as a shining heroine of labor and feminism. Even during her life, the media contributed to these simplified or one-dimensional portrayals of her. She was dubbed an “American Joan of Arc” by the newspapers of her day (Cochran).

In trying to understand the causes and effects of Annie’s representation in Russell’s novel, it is beneficial to view her portrayal through the lens of semiotics, the study and analysis of symbols. The Oxford Bibliography notes that semiotics:

connects the literary text to the ‘universe of signs’ and thus to the network of sign systems that interact to imbue the text with its particular, historically based meanings. Literary critics in the semiotic tradition typically extend the literary text to a larger reading of the culture in which it was created and to the more universal structures that are inherent within it. (Matthews)

Semiotics is often used in the fields of linguistics and literary analysis, though here we will focus on a cultural semiotic analysis. Cultural semiotic analysis focuses on how groups of people use signs to understand and navigate their world (Matthews). Semiotics in the tradition of Ferdinand de Saussure “is binary—based on how the signifier (form) is intrinsically connected to the signified (referent/concept)” (Matthews). In the case of the symbols present in Russell’s representation of the 1913 strike in *The Women of the Copper Country*, there are several crucial symbols which impact our understanding of the historical events described in the novel. These symbols held, and still continue to hold, significance for the community impacted by the strike, and thus they have been included within the fictional interpretation created by Russell.

Several symbols present in representations of the 1913 strike in Calumet include the white clothing worn by women in the strike, the flag carried by Annie when marching, and the

comparisons made between her and Joan of Arc. These signifiers in the strike (the white clothing, the flag, the historical personage Joan of Arc) held material properties, but also developed a deeper significance in the context of the novel. Semiotic scholars such as Petr Bogatyrev argue that “tangible things become signs when they acquire meaning beyond the bounds of their existence as a practical thing, just as speech confers meaning on the phonemes of a language” (Parmentier 6). Annie herself, while historically a full and complex person, became a symbol. Essentially, the idea of her acquired meaning beyond the reality of her personhood, becoming powerful and remaining through time, just as ideas of other historical figures have lingered and been used in various ways. Given this symbolic aspect of Annie’s representation, it is therefore crucial to view her character in Russell’s novel through the lens of semiotic analysis.

In addition, to tackle this particular subject one also needs a certain amount of background concerning feminist theories of cultural analysis. Because Annie was a woman, all depictions of her focus to varying degrees on this aspect of her identity. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how this focus on her womanhood impacts how she has been viewed. Although feminist theory is a broad field, encompassing many disciplines and including scholars and activists with various ideologies, the core of feminist theory is to “study women’s oppression in order to understand what it is, how it happened, the subtle ways it works, and how oppression, exploitation, and exclusion affect different aspects of our lives and thinking” (Bender 4). Certainly, Russell as an author is invested in exploring how Annie experienced oppression as a woman in 1913. Russell even goes to far as to model her depiction of Annie’s incarceration in the novel after the experiences of American suffragettes. Russell depicts Annie being beaten in jail, then transported to a workhouse where she begins a hunger strike. Like the suffragettes, she is force-fed and broken. She leaves the workhouse in terrible condition. There is no historical

evidence that Annie was treated in this way during her incarceration. By using the experiences of suffragettes to fill in the gaps of Annie's history, Russell draws a clear parallel between the heroic actions of Annie in the strike, and the heroic actions of the suffragettes who labored to grant women the vote. This depiction is only one example of Russell's focus on a feminist interpretation of Annie's actions and experiences, but feminist theory plays an important role in helping us understand other incidents in the novel, and indeed the historical facts of Annie's struggles.

Having established this background on theory, it is worthwhile to explore Russell's complex characterization of Annie within the novel. When the Calumet strike begins in 1913, Annie is 25 years old, married, and without children. Her most distinguishing physical characteristic is her height; she is six foot one. Russell comments wryly that she "takes up more space than any woman has a right to" (18). Perhaps because her nickname in community lore has always been "Big Annie," Russell chose to focus a great deal of attention on Annie's height. It is a key feature of her character, as it makes her different and is even seen as a weakness by her neighbors. But Russell insists that it is also a point of her character's immense strength. As Annie's father tells her when she is fifteen, "You are tall for a reason. When your head is held high, you can see farther than anyone else" (Russell 4). From a semiotic standpoint, we see Russell setting up a positive association with Annie's height, attributing her ability to organize and inspire the miners' strike to the difference in her physical stature. Her height is linked with an ability to see further out on the metaphorical horizon. Annie is thus able to gain the wisdom to pursue a strike for future generations, despite the suffering she and her community experience on the short term. A feminist perspective aids us in recognizing that Annie's height would be traditionally viewed from a negative standpoint. Annie's height threatened the men around her

and was cause for ridicule by many. The amount of space she takes up, her physical strength: neither of these were acceptable for women of the time, who were expected to serve their husbands well, raise children, maintain a home, and aspire to nothing more.

That said, Annie does aspire to motherhood and a simple home life. She wishes vainly for children, and having none she takes in young people who need care. When Russell introduces Annie, she has taken in three young Italians whose guardian in the town has died. Russell writes, “*Bella mama*, they call her” (19). As the novel progresses, Russell stresses the motherly role Annie takes on for her community. All the strikers are Annie’s children. As she leads the union on their march against the Michigan Guard, Annie thinks, “This is what my life is for. Not for my own children but for these children, for these women. For this fight” (Russell 97). Orphaned Eva Savicki certainly thinks of Annie as a motherly figure. During the same march, she shouts, “We are *all* Annie’s children! ... And she *is* taking care of us!” (Russell 96). Annie embodies the role of a community caregiver; she always has an answer for those who come to her. She provides aid and resources for all those who need it. Yet Annie cannot do so forever. Her spirit is broken just as the strike is eventually broken. Her seemingly indomitable loyalty to her community is eventually broken as well.

On the topic of loyalty, Russell is careful in how she handles Annie’s second marriage because of its impact on how readers could perceive her character. Historically, Anna Klobuchar Clements was married three times, each time to a violent drunk. She left Calumet and her husband for a reporter and fled to Chicago. Yet, eventually this marriage also fails. In the novel, Russell refuses to further weight the already tragic story with the truth about Annie’s second doomed marriage, and instead gives her a satisfying relationship with the fictional photographer Michael Sweeney. The reader sees how Annie’s first husband Joe disrespects Annie’s

contributions to her community, beats her, and terrorizes her with his suspicion. In the opening of the novel we see Annie's stubborn loyalty:

Like any good woman, she is careful about her behavior with men. Scabs are calling her the union's whore, and she does not wish to provide anything that might be used against her or the Women's Auxiliary. Even so, when Joe's drinking, it's better to stay out of his sight. (Russell 87)

Yet as time passes, Annie is beaten, physically by her husband, again by the police deputies when she is arrested, and spiritually by the tragedy of children's deaths in Italian hall and the failure of the strike. Russell shows this shift in Annie's character when she is released from the workhouse, starved and injured. The reader, invested in Annie's wellbeing, supports her when she begins making decisions for herself, decisions that contradict the strict loyalty she showed in the beginning of the strike. Annie accepts her defeat, accepts the end of her marriage. She takes Sweeney as her lover and eventually begins planning her departure from Calumet. Although historically, we know Annie escaped safely, Russell does not make this clear in the end of her novel, and we are left to wonder whether she has survived her escape from the town.

This ambiguity at the end of the novel aids in the creating the impression that Annie has become a martyr for her cause. In essence, Annie's story as portrayed in the novel could be said to follow the general formula of the Shakespearian tragedy. Annie begins the story an influential and important member in her community. Through the folly of beginning her community's strike too soon without the proper resources, she brings about a failure. When the Italian Hall Tragedy (or 1913 Massacre) occurs, for which Annie herself is partly responsible as the person who organized the Christmas Party, this is the final death-filled scene which breaks her spirit. The novel concludes with uncertainty as to whether Annie has died; Eva Savicki and others worry

that she has been captured and killed by strikebreakers. Russel uses both the recognizable formula of a tragic hero and the idea of martyrdom to fully drive home the emotional significance of the strike's failure, the death of Calumet community members, and the humiliating defeat of strike organizers.

Keeping in mind Annie's eventual defeat and appearance of martyrdom, we are prepared for an in-depth semiotic analysis of the most central signifier within the novel: Joan of Arc. Historically, Jeanne d'Arc, or the Maid of Orléans, is known as the peasant girl who unexpectedly played a key role in the Hundred Years War between France and England. Having received visions, which she believed were from God, Jeanne led French troops to victory at the siege of Orléans when only a teenager, and was prophesied to die after only two years of serving her country (Goy-Blanquet ix). She famously wore armor while she participated in battles. She also carried a banner and advised leaders in the army, including the French king. Unfortunately, Jeanne was later captured, handed over to the English, and burned at the stake.

Jeanne d'Arc, the historical personage, has her own complex meaning in France and in England. Yet for Americans, the figure of Joan of Arc has entirely different connotations:

few historical personages have been used for other than their 'own meaning' as much as Joan of Arc, as can be seen in the literature, art, films, and images of which she has been the subject over the centuries, serving purposes and causes quite foreign not only to France and the Middle Ages, but to herself. (Goy-Blanquet 123)

Annie Clements, repeatedly compared to Joan of Arc, has a complex legacy to live up to. In *The Women of the Copper Country*, Joan of Arc as signifier is meant to evoke a variety of associations for the reader. In the American consciousness, Joan of Arc signifies bravery, purity,

faith, and feminine power against impossible odds, yet she also signifies martyrdom and inevitable defeat.

Big Annie, who is marked as special within her community due to her height, who is young and beautiful, and who is capable of inspiring her community to action with her words and actions, certainly appeals to the American mind as similar in many ways to the symbolic Joan. Russell writes of the Calumet union community, “This fearless twenty-five-year-old woman is not just one of their own. She is their leader, their princess, their warrior. They intend to follow Big Annie down this street, around this town, to hell and back, and no one will get in their way” (97). Of course, this verbiage brings to mind the legendary Joan, who carried her banner into battle, shining in armor, inspiring the warriors who advanced behind her. And, while Joan of Arc dealt with suspicion and contempt for her rejection of traditional femininity in Medieval France, Annie too flouts traditional gender roles and takes up the flag to fight for her community even while men cry out against her, “Get off the streets! ... Go home and take care of your kids!” (Russell 96). Interestingly, even as Russell uses this symbolism to its full effect in her own representation of the events in 1913, she pays special attention to showing the way in which the media intentionally fostered Annie’s symbolic association with Joan of Arc. Russell’s fictionalized photographer Michael Sweeney explicitly tells Annie on multiple occasions that he hopes to evoke specific, sympathetic reactions amongst readers across the United States by creating a certain image of her. By dressing Annie in white to symbolize purity and by having her lead the daily parades while carrying her enormous flag, a connection to the mythologized Joan of Arc is carefully drawn. Russell is perfectly aware of what she is doing when using the symbolic legacy of this medieval personage.

Russell is also careful to take note of Annie's humanity, even while making use of this symbolism. By necessity, when a person becomes a symbol, their full humanity is lost in what they come to signify. Russell opens her novel with a reminder of Annie's full humanity. On the first page, we see a vignette from Annie's childhood, clueing the reader in to her inner life:

At twenty-five, Anna Klobuchar Clements would be known around the world as America's Joan of Arc. Ten thousand miners would march behind her in the wildcat strike against the richest, most powerful company on earth. But that day at the Houghton fair? She was just a big, gawky girl—tired to tears of being pointed at, remarked upon, ridiculed. (Russell 1)

Although Russell does make this special effort to acknowledge Annie's humanity beyond her symbolic role, the novel still functions to reduce a true historical figure to a meaning-filled myth. Many other modern representations of Annie work in the same way, even when they are positive portrayals. "America's Joan of Arc" has become, like Joan of Arc herself, subject to the use of politicians, artists, and literary minds for reasons that are somewhat or wholly divorced from her reality as a person. The image of Big Annie, a young woman carrying a flag, becomes perhaps no different from Joan of Arc carrying her French banner on the medieval battlefield.

This image brings us to another piece of Annie's symbolic significance, which is worthwhile to apply to further semiotic analysis. That is Annie's association with the American flag. Most of the historical photos available of Anna Klobuchar Clements include her holding an enormous flag, and Russell maintains this image within the novel. At each union march, Annie carries her flag, which is so big in fact that few others would be able to carry it at all. So, what specifically does the flag signify to the reader? At its most basic level, the American flag represents the American nation and the ideologies that underpin readers' ideas of that nation. The

American ideals, laid out in the Constitution, center around the rights of the people and famously “the pursuit of happiness,” a pursuit which the union men are actively engaged in by fighting Calumet & Hecla.

Additionally, the image of a woman carrying the flag is also tied to a more complex notion of the American nation as a haven for immigrants. Russell makes a telling parallel when she describes Annie at a march: “Ten feet away, she lowers the butt of the twelve-foot flagstaff on the cobbled paving and balances it with one raised hand, like Lady Liberty with a torch” (95). Lady Liberty is linked inextricably in the American mind to the New York harbors and to the lines of “The New Colossus” engraved at her foot, “*Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand / A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame / Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name / Mother of Exiles*” (Lazarus). In short, Lady Liberty is an image which champions the spirit of the hopeful American immigrant. Because so many of the miners Annie led in Calumet were immigrants and they constituted a multinational union, the association signified by Russell’s words is particularly powerful.

Finally, we must engage Annie’s most famous line, her assertion that the flag should protect her from harm. In Russell’s novel, we see Annie utter this famous line when faced with the bayonets of the Michigan Guard. She calls, “Well, then, go ahead...Use your weapons on me! But you’ll have to go through this flag first. If this flag won’t protect me, I’ll die with it—right here, right now!” In other sources, we see Annie quoted saying variations of this sentiment such as “Run your bayonets and sabers through this flag and kill me, but I won’t move. If this flag will not protect me then I will die with it” (*Historic Women*) and “I won’t stay at home. My work is here...Go ahead now...shoot me. I am willing to die behind the flag” (*Exhibits Coppertown*). It seems unlikely that we will ever know her words verbatim, so fully has her myth

overshadowed the reality of her. Yet it is in Annie's famous assertion of trust in the ideals represented by the American flag where we see the true power she invested in that heavy length of silk. Like the martyrs of old, she was willing to test the ideals of freedom of expression and the right to pursuit of happiness, which were supposed to be promised by that flag.

Annie and the flag combine to form a potent compound of symbolism within the novel. Her presence in the historical record reflects the fact that her symbolic potency exists outside of Russell's fiction as well. Records of Annie continued to exist in the storytelling tradition of her community even in 1946 when folklorist Richard Dorson ventured into Michigan's Upper Peninsula to record oral traditions. These records of Big Annie were presented in a decidedly negative, even misogynistic light. In some, Annie was unnecessarily sexualized, as when a raconteur said of a fight between Big Annie and another woman, "They pulled out chunks of hair, scratched each other till the blood ran, fought like dirty, filthy animals. And they had damn little clothes on when they hit the ditch" (Dorson 215), or when another mentioned, "Big Annie was a great big derelict of a woman. Every morning there'd be a union parade and she'd walk in front slapping her rear and saying, 'This the one-man machine'" (Dorson 215). Another storyteller simply commented on her lack of feminine behavior: "She led a parade of bulbish women like herself, and stopped men from going to work. They'd parade down Waterworks Street, and women would turn the water engine on her to get her back where she belonged" (Dorson 215). Annie remained in the living memory of Calumet, Michigan even until the 2010's when she was mentioned by name as "Big Annie" by an interviewee in the 2013 documentary *1913 Massacre*. As far as written historical records, Annie received a positive representation in a 2013 exhibit held in the Coppertown USA Mining Museum located in Calumet. Beyond Calumet, she is honored by others who find her symbolically inspiring. The Michigan Women's

Hall of Fame, for example, commissioned a portrait of her. It now hangs in the Michigan Women's Historical Center and Hall of Fame in Lansing (*Michigan Women Forward*).

Russell's popular novel fits into these diverse representations of Big Annie in that Russell continues a tradition of presenting Annie as a symbolic figure, divorced somewhat from her complex historical personhood. Russell uses (but does not abuse) the memory of Annie to create a story of the 1913 strike which encourages union activity and feminine empowerment. These values do, in fact, fit with the ideals that Big Annie once fought for, and Russell displays an admirable awareness of her own symbolic usage within her fictionalized retelling. Perhaps in future years, in future representations, Annie's image will retain the meaning she has acquired within this novel. Or perhaps, like Joan of Arc with whom she is so frequently compared, her memory will become like a symbol for hire, used in cases where there are little to none of her own values present.

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