

Fathers and Daughters in Willa Cather's Fiction:
A Psychoanalytic Approach

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Dedication

To
my perfect image

in
childhood,
adolescence,
and
adulthood,

to
my wonderful father.

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Abstract

Fathers and Daughters in Willa Cather's Fiction: A Psychoanalytic Approach

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This study explores the different manifestations and the significance of the father / daughter relationship in four of Willa Cather's novels, *O Pioneers!* (1913), *My Ántonia* (1918), *The Professor's House* (1925), and *Lucy Gayheart* (1935) from a psychoanalytic perspective. Though this theme is evident in most of her novels, the variant and representative portrayals of the relationship of fathers and daughters occur in the above-mentioned novels. These have the double merit of covering the most important concepts of this relationship and, at the same time, of encompassing the development of the theme through the stages of Cather's literary career.

The study analyzes the father/daughter relationship in the light of Jacques Lacan's personality theories. It explains how his article of the "Mirror Stage" and the concept of The-Law-of-Father provide a better understanding of the female protagonist's subjectivity acquisition through the father's image in her unconscious. The father figure in the above-mentioned novels functions as the daughter's "Ideal-I" which haunts her

throughout her life. Accordingly, Cather intelligently portrays the daughter's character as a reflection of her father, an extension of his self, or a foil of his failures.

Chapter One highlights the importance of the father's image in the daughter's individuation. It discusses *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* together since they overlap thematically. However, the study explains how the father in the first novel greatly motivates the daughter's achievement by his practice of The-Law-of-the-Father, whereas in the second novel the father's suicide negatively affects the daughter's choices in life.

Chapter Two tackles the impact of the different parenting behavior on two sisters in *Lucy Gayheart*. It traces the father's role in forming a certain image in his daughter's unconscious. Each daughter has a different image for the same father. Hence, the different "Ideal-I" of each daughter differs and drastically affects their subjectivity formation.

The final chapter discusses *The Professor's House* and the father figure as a representation of civilization. It illustrates the different angles from which the paternal figure influences the daughter. The chapter sheds light on the father's moral paralysis in the novels historical context and thus his dysfunctional role as a husband and a father.

The conclusion emphasizes that Cather's portrayal of this father/daughter relationship in the fabric of her novel's forms ultimately a pervasive motif in her fiction. Despite the fact that her works appeared

prior to Lacan's personality theories, his theories provide a profound understanding of the psychological nature of this relationship.

Introduction

Willa Sibert Cather (1873-1947) is one of the most influential American writers. Her fiction is unique in its powerful representation of setting and characters, and rich in its language and imagery. Although her style of writing is condensed and subtle, it is tremendously expressive.

The scholarship on Cather's works covers different aspects of her fiction. Ann M. Begley states that recent biographers and critics consider Cather "an important writer with a wide range of psychological, social, literary, and metaphysical themes" (456). Moreover, in her novels, there are certain aspects which are frequently praised and cited as important landmarks in American literature. Her distinguished fictional abilities enabled her to establish for herself a unique literary voice and to maintain a special tone. J. Lyndon Shanley contends that

the first delight beyond Miss Cather's clear prose comes partly from the apparent simplicity of her stories and the ease with which we take them in, but as we look back at them and ask why we are moved as we are, we discover how clearly and deeply we have seen into the human lives she presents to us (628).

Since the advent of her first novel, *Alexandar's Bridge* (1912), Cather devoted herself to literary writing. One way of surveying her literary legacy is to follow the chronological order of the novels' appearance, which is closely related to their themes and subject matter. Many of her early books depend heavily on her childhood memories and personal knowledge of the American Mid-West. Novels such as *O Pioneers!* (1913), *My Ántonia* (1918), and *A Lost Lady* (1923) offer a fascinating exploration of the pioneers' experience in the wild plains. In her book *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*, Joan Acocella explains that "Cather is traditionally regarded as the elegist of the pioneer period, the repository of what America thinks of as its early, true-grit triumphs" (qtd. in Scott, 127). Cather explains the reason behind her special fascination with this particular theme:

I had searched for books telling about the beauty of the country I loved, its romance, the heroism and strength and courage of its people that had been plowed into the very furrows of its soil and I did not find them. And so I wrote *O Pioneers!*

(qtd. in Janeway's review)

Paulette Scott argues that “Cather was openly attacked in the thirties for her lack of interest in economics and her conservative politics” (127). However, apart from the literary and the political arena of the twentieth century, Cather’s novels reflect an organic harmony between form and content. In a novel like *My Ántonia*, which appeared towards the end of the First World War, Cather’s fictional concerns are mainly focused on themes like nostalgia for the homeland and the pioneer’s experience. The conventional exposition and the chronological order of the events go along with the narrative’s heavy reliance on memory and remembrance of the past. Moreover, the theme of the prairies through which Cather means to record history, renders the idea of implementing modern literary techniques inappropriate. This is because Cather’s world enjoys a certain degree of peace and order. Modernism and postmodernism, on the other hand, are about chaos, relativity, and lack of harmony. Acocella views the modernity of Cather’s style from a different angle for she contends that “her austere style is part of modernist classicism, her tragic vision, part of modernist pessimism” (qtd. in Scott, 127).

Cather is narrowly and unfairly described as a regionalist writer with limited literary horizons. For although there are certain motifs and techniques that recur in her novels, Cather’s later works tread different fictional domains which reflect broader literary concerns than do the earlier ones. This dramatic shift in her literary mode, techniques, and interests can

become quite apparent in the different experiences of reading *O Pioneers!* *The Professor's House* (1925) or *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). In between these two representative profiles of Cather's literary achievements, she received in 1923 the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her novel *One of Ours* (1922).

Some critics attack Cather's fiction because it is not committed to the poetics of the twentieth century literature. Her narrative techniques seem exalted from the drastic changes that befell most literary genres in the first half of the twentieth century. The new artistic innovations came as a natural build up of major historical events as well as a massive revolution in human sciences. Doubtlessly, the two World Wars had a great influence on the then contemporary poetry and fiction in terms of themes, subject matter, and techniques. Simultaneously, Sigmund Freud's psychological theories, Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, Charles Darwin's biological theories, and Henri Bergson's theory of real time interacted homogeneously and revolutionized literary perspectives. The political, cultural, and social scene back then kindled in poets and novelists an urge to topple the conventional literary poetics and to come up with new poetics, which unmistakably mirrored their reality. They chiefly aimed at creating a reflexive art in which form reflects content. Hence, they started to experiment on new techniques such as the stream of consciousness, the use

of multiple narrators, depersonalization, and the objective correlative. Works by T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust provide a vivid depiction of technique experimentation. The outcome of their efforts created a new literary tradition and noteworthy artistic techniques that mark the twentieth century. Shanley notes that “Her stories are biographies [and that] a good half of her major works run from childhood and youth to death” (621) which makes her style and subject matter seem extremely old-fashioned and backward compared to the major literary trends of the era she belongs to. Although Cather populates these stories with “little people, whose lives are unimportant in terms of their own or twentieth century social, political, and economic problems” (Shanley, 620), Cather’s themes and characters sustain a universal status. Her personal vision of the human condition, which is the target of severe critique, elevates her fiction above the restrictions of locality and regionalism to universality and timelessness. Cather’s defense comes at the tongue of her protagonist Alexandra in *O Pioneers!* *Who says:*

Isn’t it queer: there are only two or three human 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 (89).

Cather here justifies for herself the fact that she deals with frequently tackled themes. It is the way she perceives and handles these universal themes which repeatedly manifest themselves in each age.

Acocella “finds the treatment of Cather’s work discouraging [since] a few good studies... tended to depict her either as the ‘Prairie Elegist’ or ‘the Classical/ Christian Idealist’” (qtd. in Scott, 127). For despite Cather’s overt conventional and idealistic literary inclinations, her fiction undertakes daring and profound examination of the inner self. Many critics agree that in works such as “Paul’s Case” (1905) and *The Professor’s House*, Cather’s focus shifts to the inner self of her characters. Contrary to what occurs in *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*, the struggle takes place in an inner landscape rather than the outer one in these works. Marybeth MacMahon explains that Cather uses an omniscient narrator and memory to

explore the more hidden or obscure parts of character’s psychic life, [and the] ways in which Cather explores interiority ... captures the rhythm of remembrance that was all important to her through a language peculiarly spare, unembellished,

and eloquent even in its silences and moments of withholding observation (Ibid., 363).

Some critics, like Scott, celebrate the writing of Cather as purely feminist. Scott claims that feminism revived Cather's novels and subjected them to thorough investigation. Consequently, this brought them to the spotlight of criticism. Moreover, Scott argues that Cather's fiction "fit[s] no current literary trend- until feminism became popular" (127). Although this viewpoint seems a little bit exaggerated, it more or less reflects the fact that the feminist aspects of Cather's writing drew the most critical attention to her works. Scott explains that "Accocella rightly says that Cather is important as a feminist in writing novels which show that women could achieve success in the world and not just give themselves to men" (127). Thus, Cather's female *Bildungsroman* has attracted attention because of her rich portraits of childhood experiences traced into womanhood. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Cather's literary value stems solely from feminist perspectives, which examine Cather's female protagonists within the narratives of the female *Bildungsroman*. Patrick Shaw explains that "For Cather, the child is not only a literary symbol of innocence and exuberance. It is an artistic extension of the essential design of her narrative, an image of guiltlessness and the time when life is enjoyed" (33).

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ملخص

علاقة الأب بالابنة في روايات ويلّا كاتر

دراسة نفسية تحليلية

إعداد

لينا عبد الحافظ صالح

المشرفة

الدكتورة عايدة أزوقة

تبحث هذه الدراسة في علاقة الأب بالابنة من خلال أربع روايات للكاتبة الأمريكية ويلّا كاتر وهي أيّها الرّواد (1913)، أنتونيا (1918)، بيت الأستاذ (1925)، ولوسي جيهارت (1935)، من ناحية نفسية تحليلية. ومع أن هذا المغزى كان واضحاً في معظم روايات الكاتبة إلا أن التحليل النفسي والتصوير المتنوع لهذه العلاقة يظهر جلياً في الروايات المشار إليها. ولهذه الروايات ميزة مزدوجة من حيث تغطيتها لأهم المفاهيم في هذه العلاقة، وفي نفس الوقت، لشمولها على تطوّر المغزى في أدب الكاتبة كاتر في مراحلها المختلفة.

كما أن الدراسة تحلل علاقة الأب بابنته في ضوء نظريات جاك لاكان الشخصية وتظهر كيف أن مقالة "مرحلة المرأة" ومفهومه لقانون الأب تضيف فهماً أفضل وتصور أوضح لكيفية اكتساب الابنة لشخصيتها من خلال صورة الأب في اللاوعي لديها. إن صورة الأب في الروايات المذكورة تعمل عمل "الأنا المثالية" لابنة والتي تسكنها طيلة حياتها. وبهذا نرى كيف أن الكاتبة كاتر تصور بذكاء شخصية الابنة كانعكاس لصورة أبيها، امتداداً لذاته، أو كشخصية مضادة لإخفاقه.

يبرز الفصل الأول أهمية صورة الأب في محور شخصية الابنة. كما ويناقش هذا الفصل روايتي أيّها الرّواد و أنتونيا معاً حيث تتوافق الروايتان من حيث المغزى. بالرغم من

Willa Cather's letters published in defiance of her will. Correspondence of O Pioneers! author now 'belongs to everyone' according to editor. Published: 26 Mar 2013. Willa Cather's letters published in defiance of her will. December 2011. Winter reads. Winter reads: My Antonia by Willa Cather. Xan Brooks. A story of the hardships of a bitter winter in the American west, this is also a stirring tribute to unfreezable human spirit. Published: 8 Dec 2011. American pastoral. Ignored by male critics and obscured by feminist readings and biographies, Willa Cather's fiction hasn't always been given the recognition it deserves. Her understated stories of the stoicism, passion and violence of frontier life contain the mysteries of great writing, argues AS Byatt. Published: 9 Dec 2006. Willa Cather was a Pulitzer Prize winning American author, known for her war classic "One of Ours". This biography provides detailed information on her childhood, life, works, achievements and timeline. Quick Facts. father: Charles Fectigue Cather. mother: Mary Virginia Boak. siblings: Roscoe Cather - Douglass Cather - James Cather - John Cather - Jessica Cather - Elsie Cather My Antonia - Willa Cather. Winesburg, Ohio - Sherwood Anderson. Adventures of Tom Sawyer - Mark Twain. For a number of years I read them again and again without much caring for other fiction. It was only the other day that I read "Smoke" through once more, with no diminished sense of its truth, but with somewhat less than my first satisfaction in its art. The second novel of the series, "Fathers and Children," stirred up a storm the suddenness and violence of which it is not easy, nowadays, to understand. The figure of Bazarov, the first "Nihilist" thus baptized by an inversion of epithet which was to win extraordinary success is merely intended to reveal a mental condition which, though the fact had been insufficiently recognized, had already existed for some years.