

Willa Cather's Use of Planetary Light Imagery to Depict Character in Selected Novels

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“The right shading for the god, the right shading for the gnome.”

Light imagery becomes for Willa Cather an effective device for revealing and enhancing the personalities, qualities, and moods of her characters. Light imagery operates in seemingly limitless ways to make her characters come to life within the novels. It is as if, like a painter, she realized the absolute necessity of light for creating the emotional dimension in her characters, for, as Ralph Evans (1984) observes, “if a picture is painted purely in its local colours without regard to light and shade and the characteristic qualities of shadow, it will tend to lie flat on the canvas without life and form” (Evans: 311). Some of Willa Cather's characters reveal only a keen sensitivity to light, but many are so frequently associated with light imagery that they seem to flare off the page with life. Willa Cather believed that characterization is what the novelist should be most concerned with. The subject of art should be humanity, and it should express the artist's wonder of man. “His business is to make men and women and breathe into them until they become living souls . . .” (*The Kingdom of Art*: 48). Light becomes, so to speak, a technique which Willa Cather used to capture the feelings of her characters and make them come alive for the reader¹.

In Willa Cather's novels, light, made manifest by certain symbols, works in association with specific characters. She uses the sun, moon, and stars to reveal basic, established qualities of the people they are associated with, often aligning them so closely with character that symbol seems to become an outgrowth of character. By simply associating external light with a character and relying on the reader's ability to attach traditional

and archetypal meaning to the light image, she succeeds in enhancing qualities of the character. David Stouck (1975) notices this technique and provides examples of her early use of planetary images with certain characters in *Alexander's Bridge*. For instance, Willa Cather describes Winifred Alexander by adjectives such as "proud," "handsome," and "composed." Whenever she appears in the novel, there is usually some mention of the evening stars, traditionally symbols of order, direction, and destiny, even coldness, as in "cold, splendid stars" (15). When Alexander thinks of the stars he also thinks of his wife: "When the grandeur and beauty of the world challenged him . . . he always answered with her name. That was his reply to the question put by the mountains and the stars; to all the spiritual aspects of life" (*AB*: 115).

After *Alexander's Bridge* the associations between character and planetary light images become even more intense and suggestive of basic qualities in a character. Chief among the planetary sources of light is the sun, and Willa Cather exploited it thoroughly in her depiction of characters. It is reasonable that those of her characters who assume heroic stature should be deeply and intrinsically aligned with the sun; Antonia Shimerda, for example, epitomizes the pioneer spirit and is a romantic heroine, actualizing the idea that "heroes are promoted to solar eminence and even identified with the sun itself" (Cirlot, 1962: 313). In *My Antonia*, Antonia becomes so frequently yet subtly linked with the sun that all distinctions appear to vanish between her and it; it is as if "one merges into the other and each is an extension of the other" (Bloom, 1962: 36).

While Jim and Antonia were studying English on a grassy bank, Antonia was comfortable only when "they were tucked down on the baked earth, in the full blaze of the sun" (38). Antonia had the habit of throwing off her sunbonnet in the garden, as if she desired to be fully in touch with the sunlight (138). She is found, not cooling herself under the shade of a tree, but amidst the elderbushes which do not grow in shade but in the "hot sandy bottoms . . . where their roots were always in moisture and their tops in the sun" (235). After being disgraced by her lover Donovan, she would "sit on them [grassy banks along the draws] and sun herself for hours" (315). When she reveals that her desire to get an education cannot be actualized, she "looked off at the red streak of dying light, over the dark prairie" (123), and Jim saw tears in her eyes. However, when many years later she reveals how contented her life has been on the farm, she

“looked down through the orchard, where the sunlight was growing more golden” (343). The golden light signifies here her ideal—the golden contentment she had achieved on the farm. What Jim says about himself during a moment of oceanic feeling can also apply to Ántonia (for she is his Ántonia; as he told her, “you are really a part of me” (321):

I [by extension, Ántonia] was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. (18)

Ántonia is not, of course, the only one of Willa Cather’s characters to be so intimately associated with the sun. In *O Pioneers!*, Carl believed that when Alexandra went out to milk the cow she looked “as if she had walked straight out of the morning itself” because she had “the milky light of the early morning all about her” (126). Carl is also able to be frank with Alexandra “with everything under the sun” (131). We find that Cather’s devotion to the sun goes back to her earliest works, and it is difficult to imagine that she would choose to develop her characters’ lives without regard to the influence of the life-giving sun. In *April Twilights*, her poems “show how strong in Willa Cather’s imagination and habitual imagery was the archetypal figure of Apollo, god of the life-giving sun, of music and beauty” (Slote 361). In a later book, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the sunlight described on the first few pages is emblematic of the character of the two priests, Latour and Vaillant, whose religious lives are the main focus of the book. “The vehemence of the sun suggested motion. The light was full of action and had a peculiar quality of climax of splendid finish” (DCFA: 4). Fathers Latour and Vaillant, like the light, are full of action and motion, because their spiritual work consists of touring the outlying villages and missions to bring the message of God to the people. The fierce sun of the Southwest, like the sun of the passage, also suggests a kind of fierce spiritualism realized in “the activism and spiritual enthusiasm which marked the endeavors of Archbishop Latour” (Turner, 1962: 209-10) throughout the novel. The priests lived a kind of splendid martyrdom in the sunny Southwest, and Bishop Latour’s rich and splendid life appropriately ended with the setting of the sun (299).

It would be no exaggeration to say that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* suggests a unity of the Southwestern sunshine with the spirituality of Bishop Latour. As David Stouck (1975) proffers:

Although Willa Cather's landscapes are allegorical in the suggestive rather than the rigidly schematized sense, the detailed consistency with which natural objects refer us by suggestion to spiritual counterparts is remarkable. Through the stylistic device of allegory our emotional and sensuous reactions are continually disciplined and channeled into intellectual understanding of the character of saintliness, and the result is a level of appreciation which ultimately has increased impact—a sort of sensuous comprehension. (209-10)

We as readers are meant to see the brilliancy of the Southwest frontier through the acutely sensitized vision of Bishop Latour, and our ability to see by his vision allows us also to glean a deep sense of his spiritual nature as well as his appreciation of beauty—both of which were highly influenced by the brilliancy of nature. Indeed, as Randall (1960) notes, “the light of heaven had been so important that nothing was allowed to interpose itself between the land and the brilliancy of the sky” (315).

There is a blending of Latour's aesthetic regard of the village of Hidden Water with his spiritual appreciation of it, giving us the sense of his deeply-felt spirituality. The objects which are most vivid to him—“running water, clover fields . . . little adobe houses with brilliant gardens, a boy driving a flock of white goats toward the stream” (24)—suggest to him religious images. “The angoras [goats] had long silky hair of a dazzling whiteness. As they leaped through the sunlight they brought to mind the chapter in the Apocalypse, about the whiteness of them that were washed in the blood of the Lamb” (31). Bishop Latour, after spending a dreadful night in the dark, pagan, sacrificial cavern of Jacinto and the Indians, “crawled out through the stone lips, and dropped into a gleaming white world” (132). The impression we receive of the Bishop is that he has been spiritually delivered and dropped like a newborn baby back into the redeeming light of the familiar sunny world. He subsequently expressed his thanks for his deliverance by standing and observing the “tender morning breaking over” a ridge of fir trees (132). Bishop Latour's aesthetic and spiritual nature is signified by his choice of

a hill which he intended to use in building his cathedral; the hill that confronted him was the hill which “stood up high and quite alone, boldly facing the sun” (241). The earth of the hill was “very much like the gold of the sunlight that was now beating upon it” (241). Both the brilliancy of the hill and the similarity of the stones to the sun suggested to the Bishop the perfect suitability of the hill for becoming the place for religious ritual:

He stood regarding the chip of yellow rock that lay in his palm. As he had a very special way of handling objects that were sacred, he extended that manner to things which he considered beautiful. After a moment of silence he looked up at the rugged wall, gleaming gold above them. “That hill, Blanchet, is my Cathedral.” (241)

Willa Cather also pays her respects to the moon, and we find that her characters are pulled by the allure of Diana’s power, also. In her work, “the moon is generally seen as some high, illimitable beauty; the sign of yearning and desire; the radiant or mysterious illumination of darkness.”¹ In *My Moral Enemy*, the moon is the all-pervasive symbol of romantic desire. It is closely associated with Myra Henshaw and her husband Oswald. Myra, who forsook money and security to run off with her beloved Oswald, makes numerous references to the moon which comes to represent for her the stigma of her passionate decision: “See the moon coming out, Nellie—behind the tower. It awakens the guilt in me. No playing with love” (41). David Stouck furthermore noticed that “we are reminded several times in the novel of Oswald’s ‘half-moon’ eyes, which reflect perhaps the sole purpose of his existence” (123).

Willa Cather perhaps recognized the necessity of using both sun and moon imagery to bring about fuller character portrayals. It might appear that she uses the sun as the pre-eminent symbol in her characterization of pioneer and artistic protagonists, supporting Jung’s contention (summarized here by Cirlot, 1962) “that the sun is, in truth, a symbol of the source of life and of the ultimate wholeness of man” (319). However, at the same time, Cirlot contends that “there is probably some inexactitude [in Jung’s point], for totality is in fact uniquely symbolized by the ‘conjunction’ of the Sun and Moon, as king and queen, brother and sister” (319-20). The essential connection between sun and moon is suggested in *My Ántonia*, although the connection allows for the separate distinctiveness of each: Ántonia and Jim were walking in a field when

The sun dropped and lay like a great golden globe in the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose in the east, as big as a cart-wheel, pale silver and streaked with rose colour, thin as a bubble or a ghost-moon. For five, perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world. (321-22)

The sun and moon together but sitting opposite each other perhaps suggest the essential difference between Antonia and Jim. Antonia, whose life throughout the novel has been given its character by the sun, goes on to find happiness on a sunny farm as a Madonna of the Wheatfields. Jim, however, desired to go elsewhere to find his success, but ultimately his desires are frustrated by a cold marriage and personal lack of fulfillment. He returns to see Antonia and her perfect contentment on the land, and he realizes that he had been led astray from the land; he had been diminished and abstracted in comparison to Antonia, whose livelihood is concretely determined by the land itself. He was a man under the influence of the moon, seeking and striving for what became for him an unattainable goal. He could only dream of the happiness of those like sunny Antonia.

The use of the sun and moon for characterization is fully realized in *One of Ours*, a novel which seems to switch Willa Cather's allegiance from the Apollonian sun to the moon of Diana. In this novel, Claude determined that two classes of people populate the world--the children of the sun and the children of the moon. For Claude, the children of the sun were those whose lives were practical, realistic, but common, like the sun which comes and goes with regularity every day. The emotions, the passions, and romantic idealism were associated with the children of the moon, like himself, "and these children of the moon, with their unappeased longings and futile dreams, were a finer race than the children of the sun" (207-08). Willa Cather perhaps obtained these titles for characterization from her reading in ancient mythology, for

there was a belief current in ancient times, in countries remote from each other, that those great in authority, or of a superior order of society, were descendants of the Sun.

Among the Greeks we find an eminent family distinguished by the name of the "Heliadae," or Children of the Sun, and originally this family consisted of eight persons. The Greeks

were also familiar with the Children of the Moon. This ancient title was the ancient appellation of the Arcadians. (Olcott, 1914: 46-47)

However, the moon children are the superior breed to Willa Cather, perhaps to concur with her belief in the superiority of the emotions over mere factual, intellectual reasoning in the creative artist. Nevertheless, true to the mythic archetype of the Greeks, the children of the sun are the survivors and victors of the war in *One of Ours*, and the children of the moon die heroes or, with their ideals shattered in the war, commit suicide: "those slayers of themselves were all so like him [Claude]; they were the ones who had hoped extravagantly, --who in order to do what they did had to hope extravagantly, and to believe passionately. And they found they had hoped and believed too much" (458-59).

Cather uses a striking passage involving the sun and moon which can be considered ironic. The following passage precedes a conversation between Claude and Ernest concerning the declaration of World War I :

The sun was already low. It hung above the stubble, all milky and rosy with the heat, like the image of a sun reflected in grey water. In the east the full moon had just risen, and its thin silver surface was flushed with pink until it looked exactly like the setting sun. Except for the place each occupied in the heavens, Claude could not have told which was which. They rested upon opposite rims of the world, two bright shields, and regarded each other, --as if they, too, had met by appointment. (368)

The irony occurs in the association of a beautiful setting, which befits a love or marriage scene and contains "the same moon that has glorified all the romances of the world," (*Collected Short Stories*: 282) with two young men discussing an ugly aspect of war. To further the irony, we as readers know what the two boys do not know—the horrors of the war, its consequences, and the deadly toll it will take on their lives.

The same passage can be viewed as a representation of the concept formulated by Claude concerning children of the sun and moon. The sun we associate with Ernest, the moon with Claude—A hint to the dichotomy of their natures was given earlier in the book by Mrs. Wheeler: "she smiled as she saw their black figures moving along on the crest of

the hill against the golden sky; even at that distance the one looked so adaptable [Ernest], and the other so unyielding" (53). But the passage indicates that the planets became indistinguishable except by their positions in the sky. Likewise, even though Claude and Ernest view the war from two sides, Claude being American and Ernest a German immigrant, they share a similar concern for the wretchedness of the German war machine and of the inevitability of becoming involved in that war.

In *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, *One of Ours*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the characters receive some of their vitality, their life-like qualities, from their association with natural light images. When one thinks of Ántonia throwing off her bonnet in the hot fields or nestling into the sunny grass, or Alexandra walking to milk the cows with the morning light around her like a supernatural halo, it is impossible to agree with T. K. Whipple (1967) that "*O Pioneers!* is full of scenes which have no other end in view than verisimilitude, than local color, quaint and picturesque. Even *My Ántonia* . . . contains many idyllic genre pictures which are their own excuse for being" (Whipple: 37). In Merrill Skaggs' (1990) view, Cather "always seems more interested in capturing something (in her own writing) infinitely harder to hold than mere facts" (21). In Cather's novels planetary light is too intricately linked with character to be considered only for its quaintness and verisimilitude. She used light imagery to capture the souls and feelings of her characters in the same way John Hafen and his impressionist colleagues "cease[d] to look for mechanical effect or minute finish . . . but for soul, for feeling for the beautiful in line and color." (Gibbs, 1987: 44).

Notes

1. In *The Kingdom of Art*, Bernice Slote also discusses Cather's references to the moon in her short stories and novels. She claims that Cather frequently alluded to three main literary sources of moon symbolism in her 1893-96 writings: the moon of "yearning, desire, quest and ideal" in Keats' *Endymion*, the moon as the "human embodiment of the gods and the cyclic rise and fall of history (or human life) in Heine's *Gods in Exile*, and the cosmic moon of Flaubert's *Salamambo*. These literary antecedents combine to create compact allusions in her later works, making the moon in such novels as *Alexander's Bridge*, *A Lost Lady*, and *My Mortal Enemy* a mingling of literary allusions.

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