

COMPLICATED DISCORD BETWEEN OF ART AND LIFE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF WILLA CATHER'S *SAPPHIRA AND THE SLAVE GIRL*

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Abstract

This paper tries to examine how art derives its energies from the life experience itself, and art in turn gives to one's life sense of purpose and design in the light of Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Art serves to enhance and enrich human life, but it requires that the artist sacrifice much in his own personal life to achieve its highest ends. Cather was aware of the deep split between the claims of art and life. While studying her work of art we observe that the values which Cather has idealized are pioneer values. She has cherished spiritual and moral strength in her characters.

Keywords: Art, Values, Discord, Creation, Life.

Willa Cather (1873-1947), novelist, short-story writer, poet, essayist, and journalist, is among the top-ranking American novelists of the first half of the twentieth-century and is commonly rated as one of the three most outstanding women writers of the era. She has a special place in American Literature as a prairie novelist who explores, in noel after novel, the unique relationship between her characters and their environment. More than most thoughtful Americans, perhaps, she was personally sensitive to devalued conduct and customs. Because she had consciously built her life upon a structure of traditions, and because she had preferred the solid virtues of an inspiring past to the mercurial shifts of practical reality, she suspiciously resisted change. From time to time; she protested against the violation of durable truths, although rarely in the clamorous voice used by many contemporary writers. Looking backward to the fixed values of a satisfying past, she reaffirmed the moral standards she cherished, thus ultimately denying they could be destroyed by temporary upheavals. In so doing she committed herself to a pattern of continuity and became part of an exclusive but nevertheless great tradition of American writing.

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Cather aspired towards the ethical and creative goals of the great tradition, consequently becoming the twentieth century successor of these four nineteenth century novelists. She has represented the tensions of American existence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Like her predecessors, she is commentator on the prevailing American condition. Sometimes urgent in fears but always ardent in her faith, she constantly held before herself the vision of realizable ideals. Out of inspired singleness of conviction grew a distinguished art. Great achievement in the fusion of two inalienable ideals set her apart from her own contemporaries and fixed her in a continuity of distinguished American writing whose practitioners are few.

Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* takes place in the Back Creek Valley, Virginia, in 1856 during the final years of slavery. Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert is an imperious old woman, semi invalid, who originally came from Loudoun country, Virginia, on the Potomac river father east. She had inexplicably married Henry Colbert, a miller, and taken her husband and twenty slaves to live in the Shenandoah Valley on property that she had inherited. Her widow daughter Rachel Blake lives in the village with her children, the story opens with a breakfast table scene between Sapphira and the miller:

‘A poor one at that, we must own’ said his wife with *an* indulgent chuckle. ‘And speaking of nigger, Major Grimwood tells me; his wife is in need of a handy girl just now. He knows my servants are well trained, he would like to have one of them.’ To this Major Grimwood answers his wife “he must know you train your servants for your own use.’ ‘There is my Nancy, now I could spare her quite well to oblige Mrs. Grimwood and she could hardly find a better place. It would be a fine opportunity for her.’ (781)

The marriage of Sapphira and Henry has been one mainly of convenience with Sapphira managing the farm and Henry running the mill. He lives at the mill but take his meals at the mill house, the mill house, despite the “air of settled comfort and stability” (801) of its parlour, has the qualities of a crypt. It is situated deep in a wooded valley, as though under the ground; around it the earth rises like the feeling of being “buried” (818). An atmosphere of death and decay hangs about it, in the cold and damp that permeate it and in the rains that seem incessant, making roads impassable and further isolating its inhabitants.

Unless fires are lighted to keep their invasion at bay, disfiguring spots appears on the walls, reminder of the disillusion that threatens constantly.

Within the mill house is entombed a vanishing society that remains in signs no longer have meaning - Linen and silver for parties not given and manners that “had little chance here” (816). It contains also Sapphira, a vestige of her formal self, now confined to the wheel chair constructed for her by the coffin maker and attended by mournful Till, old Washington and Jeff in such a house Nancy is an anomaly, Sapphira resents Nancy’s innocence as age resents youth.

Sapphira carries out her plans against Nancy by inviting her husband’s nephew Martin to come for a protracted visit. She plans to give him every opportunity to rape Nancy, for this purpose she has been brought to manor house, where Martin is “after (her) night an, day” (897). She is especially afraid when, lying in her sleeveless chemise on her straw pallet at night; she can hear the creak of his stealthy barefoot steps on the stairs and passageways of the drafty manor. She knows that if she falls asleep, the villain will slip into her bed. She has only her wit to rely upon, for the servants of the manor are under the control of their master. Although she has been able to employ ruses to escape the rake’s clutches her eventual ruin seems inevitable. As she realizes the gravity of her situation, her desperation mounts until she looks on suicide as the only way she can protect her virtue. Fortunately, however, a rescuer intervenes, who under the cover of the dark of the moon helps her escape to safety.

When Henry learns of Martin’s designs against Nancy he declares, “I will look after her” (884), then “Shrank from seeing her at all” (885), his daughter Rachel questions him, “Why don’t you do something to save her?” (902) shows Henry’s helplessness. When the situation becomes intolerable to Rachel and her father Henry, Rachel plans a midnight escape; Nancy is driven in a wagon of death, containing a coffin past a tavern filled with drunken miscreants - figures of social disorder and misrule - then transported by a silent ferry - man over a roaring river to the opposite shore, where she is met by a freed black preacher who speaks to her with “the voice of prophecy” (911) and welcomes her into a community of friends and telling her “Dey ain’t strangers where you are goin?, honey” (911). And this way Nancy passes out of Back Creek valley, leaving behind Rachel calling farewell to the departing chaise.

Till, Nancy's mother appears to us as a highly competent housekeeper, a figure of calm and order; only later we come to know that in early childhood she saw her mother burn to death. Jezebel first appears as a venerable matriarch, figure of wisdom and justice, and only later do we realise that she "saw her father brained and her four brothers cut down" (828) by the slave traders who captured her and brought her to America under the most brutal condition. At the time of Nancy's escape we see, Till, "shut her eyes to what was going on" (899) ineffectual or unsympathetic. Even reverend Fairhead, a man of God, is unable to hold his own against Sapphira and is banished from the mill house, albeit under the polite guise of not being invited back. The one thing Sapphira never *had counted on was* that her own daughter even though she had Yankee idea about slavery, would steal her property with the connivance of her own husband. Henry's part in the escape, however, is passive, for he is too much a southerner to aid his daughter openly. He puts money in his coat and hangs it by an open window on the night the escape is planned.

The final section of the novel takes place after Nancy's escape to Canada. Sapphira brakes with her daughter, forbids her to visit the mill house anymore. After a fine autumn; winter comes and with it the usual Diphtheria Epidemic. Sapphira's granddaughters contract the disease, and when one of them dies Rachel and her mother are reconciled. Sapphira invites Rachel and her surviving daughter to come and live at the mill house, and the story ends on a note on harmony, as Sapphira tells her husband; "we would all do better if we have our lives to live over again," (926) and we learn from the epilogue that Sapphira's health rapidly declined and she died a few months later.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl is a story about the radical protestant movement, abolitionism of the only woman-practicing aristocrat. A jealous and suspicious wife ruins her family life and the story of most unsung daughter Rachel Blake, who has never been sympathetic with her mother's slave binding mentality and autocratic temperament. Rachel helps Nancy the slave girl escape to Canada by the Underground Railroad. The money needed for the venture is supplied by the miller but, although he is firmly convinced that slavery is wrong, he does not think he has the right to interfere with his wife's personal property.

Through this novel Cather wanted to show that the social system, which promotes slavery, is unjust. Nancy is another in the long line of Cather protagonists who have to free themselves from a hostile environment. Here slavery is clearly equated with being cared for

and freedom with taking care of oneself, in this novel the author presents two contradictory views of human nature. One, having Rachel as its exponent, consists in the belief that equality is a moral requirement and that some measures of dignity *and* respect is due to every man as a human right. The other, represented by Sapphira, holds that equality consists of treating equals as equals and unequals as unequals. There is complete confusion of values between a feudal episcopalian hierarchy and a democratic puritan individualism. The two are clearly incompatible and Cather makes no efforts to show that the state of tension between the two is a tension, which exists in life itself.

The last glimpse we are given of Sapphira is through the eyes of Till, one of the servants most injured by Sapphira's autocratic ways but that last view is coloured by the feelings of loyalty and Christian forgiveness. Sapphira's head strong, indomitable nature is now seen as stoical dignity and courage in the face of death. We not only admire her at the end but feel sympathy for her. Particularly affecting is the image of Sapphira with her candles reflected in the window; their religious connotations remind us of her final penitential confession to the miller; "we would all do better if we had our lives to live over again" (926).

In ***Willa Cather Living***, Edith Lewis believe that Sapphira has very strongly the quality of permanence of survival; and that as time goes on it will take "a higher and higher place in any estimate of Willa Cather's work" (11). The story as a whole seems to him to be the brief chronicle of a time that will never again be recaptured with the same truth and crystalline vision, the same supreme art. In *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, James Woodress says in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* Cather had invented an overbearing unattractive protagonist with remarkable success. It is a triumphant "achievement at the end of a long and distinguished career" (235).

In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, though we see Cather had return back to her childhood memories the novel is completely remote from her other novels. The pattern of the story is narrative. Cather remembered social convention, gesture, and verbal nuances from the Virginia she knew and heard about in her childhood, is described by her in such a rich detail that the novel resonates with "a culture's hum and buzz of implications". Details from the past weave through the book: the fichu Sapphira wears to church, the peacock feather fly brush that Sampson's Katie waves over the dining table, the shawl pin Henry Colbert uses. The narrator tells how ice cream is made in summer, and how rags are dyed, then women into

carpets; and she explains that any food carried in a gourd from the big kitchen to one of the cabins is not questioned.

In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Cather wanted to show, the social system which promotes slavery is unjust. Values are totally confused in this novel. The tension between the slavery values and the values of freedom is the tension which lies in life itself. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Rachel Blake, one of the best woman characters created by Cather is quite different from Cather's other heroine's. She is the daughter of Henry and Sapphira Colbert. She was very fortunate to get married to Michael Blake whom she was in love at the first sight. Michael "had made it up, indeed, on his first visit, but he had disclosed his intention to no one not even Rachel" (851). Immediately after the marriage the young couple went to Washington to live in a small rented house. By nature Rachel was reserved and shut to herself. When she was twelve years old she happened to overhear a conversation which had changed her thought and her feelings ever afterwards. Sapphira Colbert settles in a place where she is a stranger making her place there and at last remaking her relationship with her daughter. Rachel Blake is a sort of pioneer woman too, acting without a husband's support acting against her mother and local custom, but acting rightly to defy the abuses which slavery permitted. Till is another strong woman caught in a conflict of loyalties but equal to her fate.

The conversation quoted below is overheard by Rachel was between father and daughter. The post-mistress Mrs. Bywaters was a widow with three little boys. To whom Rachel was deeply attached. "It's kindly thought of you, father, and kindly spoken but neither have you ever owned flesh and blood, and I will not begin it. I am young and strong, and I will make shift to manage. Peace of mind is what I value most" (854). When Rachel was twelve years old she happens to hear the above conversation between the Postmistress and her father. When the father suggest to the Postmistress to buy a slave for her daily cores she tells her father Curtly, "Which coloured her thoughts and feelings ever afterward" (853). As Rachel was very much fond of the Postmistress, who was a widow with three little boys' risking her mother's annoyance. Rachel quite often used to go to the post office to collect the mail.

After marriage Rachel became expert in cookery "everything he liked, done as he liked, appeared in season on his dinner table" (787). As her husband was fond of good food,

before her husband died Rachel had known many warm hearted and expansive people and was drawn only towards them. “Like many persons of a serious temper, she loved being with people who were easily and carelessly merry” (856). She was happily married only for thirteen years unfortunately her husband her eider son Robert, who was then eleven died in New Orleans, were they both went to meet an old friend. They both died of yellow fever. She also loses one of her daughter’s in Dephteria epidemic at the end of the novel. She lives in the present and does not want to remember the past, which she had left behind. She helps Nancy to leave the estranged world of the Mill house and join human community. Rachel is a sort of pioneer woman too, acting without a husbands support, acting against her mother and local custom, but acting rightly to defy the abuses which slavery permitted.

While analyzing *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* we observe that the woman characters throughout her work gain respect of the reader, they all have something in them which fires the imagination. Even though they have gone through so much trauma and hardship throughout their life there is very little change in their physical appearance. They are the personification of life itself. Actually the whole work of Cather could be seen as an embodiment of one great thing i.e. passion. A strenuous physical life is lived throughout every novel, whether it is the struggle for survival or the keen experience of joy in simple identification with the living world around. It is a form of the passion that is seen all through Cather work, her work is written out of it. We see it in many modulations - desire often exalted as ambition; devotion; loyalty; fidelity; physical nearness and kindness and comfort when it lives at rest. There is reconciliation, and there is pity. There is an obsession here too, and so is the hunger for something impossible; all of these are forms of love. And there is marriage, though the marriages that occur along the way of the novels are milestones, hardly destinations; as required in the careful building of her plots, they are inclined to be unavailing.

Cather is quite conscious that, the past she remembered no longer existed, she was determined to find the inner spirit of a known or imagined person. She tried to see beyond materialism, beyond brutality, beyond the bitterness of what she considered to be the loss of idealism. In their loneliness Cather’s women find the sources of an enduring struggle. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is subtle, intelligent and artfully contrived but the vision which underlies them is one which questions the old urge to expression through art. In her old age

Cather strongly felt that not art but life matters the most. One thing, which persists throughout her fiction, is the dilemma of the artist caught between his commitments to art on one hand life on the other. Like her best heroines Cather was always searching for something higher. She believed that strong character is the character who knows what to retain of the past and at the same time how to adopt it to the present and the future. Cather seems to be saying, is the true pattern of American achievement. As a matter of fact Cather's women strike a fine balance between acts of living and acts of creation. They are women who retain their essential vitality while still finding enough resources to pursue their career as artists.

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