

Loss of an Aesthetic Ideal

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of nostalgia and the generational angst of the 'Lost Generation' writers in Willa Cather's novel *A Lost Lady*. Focusing on the character of Neil Herbert, the study examines the futile pursuit of preserving a dying aesthetic ideal and the challenges of adapting to a changing society. The novel portrays a transition from an old West world to an industrialized town and the looming 'Great Depression'. Through the contrasting perspectives of Neil Herbert and Mrs. Forrester, the paper investigates the worthiness of preserving the past and the subjective nature of aesthetic paradigms. It highlights Neil's disillusionment with the fading spirit of the pioneer West and his struggle to reconcile his idealized image of Mrs. Forrester with her actual reality. The paper concludes that the novel underscores the difficulties of retrieving lost values and the fragmentation of self in a world alienated from traditional heroism.

Key words: nostalgia, Willa Cather's novel *A Lost Lady*

Introduction

The novel *A Lost Lady* by Willa Cather is told by a third person narrator alongside the presence of an omniscient narrator. Therefore, as we get a peephole into Cather's world through the eyes of Neil Herbert, Willa Cather is always present in the background to highlight the difference between Neil's perspective and other characters' subjective perspective of their own. This not only creates an epistemological distance between the readers and the author but also prompts us to question the narratorial position of Neil Herbert in the novel. The following essay examines the same idea while looking at his attitude as an emblematic representation of the generational angst faced by the 'Lost Generation writers'. The focus is to explore the idea of their nostalgic attachment with the beauty of a dying aesthetic ideal and their vain attempt to hold onto it through the practice of their art. The novel shows the human condition within a society in transition through the progression of the lead female character from an old West World at countryside to a town ensnared by the forces of industrialisation, alongside the looming reality of the 'Great Depression' of early twentieth century. The point of departure then would be to analyse whether the past can really be preserved through aesthetic paradigms and even if it is so, then is the effort worth pursuing in the face of seemingly 'lost' psycho-social realities.

Auld Lang Syne

This song, originally written in the form of a poem by Robert Burns, is mostly sung at the end of any era, to remember the lost culture of the passing era and welcome the new one. In the novel, it serves as a symbol to represent the end of a culture which flourished in appreciating and preserving the beauty of 'Nature' as it was, without tempering it with mechanical tools of modernization; a culture where moral convictions were held supreme and people firmly believed in the 'American Dream' of increasing personal growth through planned efforts. Captain Forrester, in the novel preaches the same idea when he says, "a thing that is dreamed of in the way I mean, is already and accomplished fact. All our great West has been developed from such dreams" (Cather 27). However as the novel progresses, we see his economic decline, leading to deterioration in his physical health and eventually his death. This is accompanied by a change in social conditions which seem unsuitable for preserving the romantic ideals of the Old Pioneer West, when Captain Forrester could freely engage in satisfying his vocational needs without bothering much about his economic conditions. The time when he could provide his wife with jewels that would mark his own status as a lord and impart the status of 'Lady' to his wife; has been lost in past. And the present era reveres

opportunistic upstarts like Ivy Peters who enjoy destroying the gardens and marshes, once held close to his heart by Captain Forrester.

The latter half of the novel precisely focuses on this aspect of social decline that has a culturally and economically oppressive impact on the members of the older generation such as Mrs. Forrester and Judge Pommeroy. As Cather shows the struggle of her characters with their changed circumstances, she parallelises the reaction of the widowed Mrs. Forrester and the third person narrator Neil Herbert. While the latter had initially admired her lady-like character, he gradually goes on to dislike her for not holding on to this moral ideal up till her end. On the other hand, we have Mrs. Forrester who confesses, "I feel such a power to live in me" (Cather 67) and thereby goes on to defy the conventional moral values expected from a 'Lady'. She engages in an adulterous affair outside marriage, to overcome the boredom of her life with a crippled husband. And after the latter's death, chooses to appropriately change her behavior towards social upstarts like Ivy Peters, who may aid her in financial matters, even after having an inherently unscrupulous nature. Though she faces the criticism of all her neighbors, yet eventually manages to suitably adapt to her altered surroundings. Unlike her, who cannot watch "time getting visibly devoured" (ibid 59); Herbert detests the attitude of desperately "preferring life above everything else" (ibid 92). He perceives her as a 'Lost Lady' and instead believes in staying true to the conventional notions of self-fashioning.

However, the novel also stresses on the larger issue of the worthiness of hankering after "Auld Lang Syne" (ibid 28), that is, whether Neil is correct in perceiving Mrs. Forrester as a 'lost lady' for not reacting to the bygone cultural era in a conventionally appropriate way. He has always seen Mrs. Forrester as an 'aesthetic ideal', respected her for upholding the "graceful" (ibid 25) mannerisms of a dying culture and now expects her to follow in the steps of Mr. Forrester and figuratively "immolate herself" (ibid 92), along with the end of the era that she represents for him. As he confesses on finding her adulterous affair with Frank Ellinger, "Grace, variety, the lovely voice, the sparkle of fun and fancy in those dark eyes; all this was nothing. It was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal." (ibid 47) Through such attitude, he not only denies the dynamism of her character but also comes up as an unreliable narrator. This leads us to examine his own nature which is disillusioned with the fading spirit of the pioneer West world. He is still hopeful of reclaiming the 'American ideals', which, in the beginning of their conception in 'The Declaration of Rights' had positively

envisioned the idea of a progressive future where the individual would have ample opportunities to maintain a sense of personal liberty while still holding on to a 'moral self'. However even America, which had initially remained detached from the 'Great War' for a while, could not remain unaffected by its after effects for long. This breach in realisation of the initial 'dream' of uninterrupted national development, became one of the factors behind the 'lostness' of the 'Lost Generation'. In the novel, Neil Herbert represents the same dilemma of being unable to comfortably make peace with the disappointing reality of his *present*, while trying to nostalgically immerse himself in the magnificence of the passing culture. And thereby, is himself seemingly 'lost' in the fluxes of time. Ironically however, since he takes on the role of the narrator to describe the life of Mrs. Forrester, who does not emulate the same ideals regarding the past, as his own, he views her 'progress' into an uncertain future, as a 'fall'. When he gets to know about her death from Ed Elliott, both are unable to realise that

"she has cared for herself rather than been taken care of, and she is, even from the grave, controlling their view of her, ironically binding them in their ignorance. Marian Forrester is thus lost *to* them, even though lost *by* them."
(Smith 224).

They are unable to realise her bravery in the face of struggling times when she neither has her husband, nor his financial property and is on the verge of losing the only house that is left with her. She resists the lure of nostalgically delving into the happiness of the 'past' comforts that she had enjoyed as a Lady, and handles the 'present' with a fierce will to live on. And therefore, her rejection of the traditional moral convictions, for which her neighbors criticize her, is actually a part of her disparate identity for which she had once been adored among the same people. According to Susan J. Rosowski, Neil "feels most intensely her "magic of contradictions" (ibid 79), and it is he who attempts most arduously to deny those contradictions." This leads us to see the biasedness of the narrator's perspective. Simultaneously, it also becomes necessary to look at his own human condition in these changing times; as he struggles to detach himself from his idolised image of Mrs. Forrester, whose charm as an elegant 'Lady' had infatuated him in his childhood. And now as he acknowledges her incongruous self, he finds it disheartening to dissect his imagined picture of Mrs. Forrester from her actual physical reality. As he seemingly "burned... to get the truth out of her" (ibid 53), as to how she managed to recover herself after having lost her innocence and former "exquisiteness"(ibid 50) This is also why, Willa Cather does not allow the complete recitation of 'Auld Lang Syne' in her novel, since the old times are long gone and even though

it is important not to forget “old acquaintances” but it is also impossible to bring back the spirit of “Happy days” (ibid 53) that Captain Forrester used to drink to in parties. Therefore, Neil Herbert struggles to appreciate the manner by which, unlike others, Mrs. Forrester had managed to survive in the 'lost' times.

Conclusion

The above discussion allows us to examine the central question of the worth of preserving the ideals of a *lost culture*; since the text not only shows the courageous attempt of Mrs. Forrester to adjust to her new reality and somehow carve out a new space for herself in the changed world, as she leaves her last message to Neil, “Tell him things have turned out well for me.” (ibid 100) but the text also portrays Neil Herbert as a sensitive observer who is himself mourning the loss of 'American idealism' which saw moral creed as a significant part of one's idea of self-fashioning. Here, his character comes close to that of the lost generation writers, who, after realising the end of the cherished 'Americanism' with which the optimistic national sentiments were framed, went to Paris and tried to look back nostalgically at the past and recover it, if it may, through their writings. Neil Herbert also attempts to do so by converting the human self of Mrs. Forrester into an imagined aesthetic ideal in his narration, and recounting the loss of the same amidst the changed social reality during the period of 'Great Depression'. However, at the end of the novel, he realises the vanity of his attempt and gives up on preserving the 'aesthetic ideal' through Mrs. Forrester. Many researchers have also linked him to the character of Nick Carraway of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and seen “both of them as being lost in a world where their treasured values have proved phony” (Smith 222). This leads us to observe that in Willa Cather's novel, “the traditional modes of heroism” (Powell 5) do not exist anymore, resulting in a nostalgia for the same. However, the nostalgic feeling is also not enough in itself and as the characters constantly indulge in making sense of their own place in a seemingly uncertain world around them, they, like Mrs. Forrester, either lose the moral-cultural-psychological understanding of the self that they had formerly held, or like Neil Herbert, tend to get lost in their own judgements against the survival strategies of the people around them. The world around them alienates them from their former beliefs and fragments their self to the extent that the attempt of any retrieval of the lost values, even through art or otherwise seems a vain and lost attempt in itself.

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