

# The Correlation Between Art and Death in Willa Cather's *Lucy Gayheart*: Fatality of Art or Artistic Failure

Baker Bani-Khair

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, The Hashemite University, Jordan

Ziyad Khalifah Alkhalifah

Department of English Language and Translation, College of Science and Arts in ArRass, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia

Mohammad Hilmi Al Ahmad

English Literature, Isra University, Jordan

Majed Abdul Karim

English Literature, Isra University, Jordan

Mahmoud Ali Rababah

English Language and Literature Department, Irbid University College, Al-Balqa Applied University, Jordan

**Abstract**—This study explores the representation of art in Willa Cather's *Lucy Gayheart* (1935), which is viewed as an essential aspect of the novel in terms of its vitality and dominance. The novel subtly yet persistently invokes new possibilities for general human behavior and supportive interconnectedness among women. As the female experience looms large in Cather's fiction, *Lucy Gayheart* illustrates the dangers of presenting women in a romanticized, ethereal light. However, the present paper intends to prove that Cather's attempt at romanticizing her heroine's stance leads to a war between artistic accomplishment and acquisitive spirit. Through examining Cather's *Lucy Gayheart*, this paper contends that women's perplexed possibilities are a miniature of the fragmented psyche that pervades Cather's work.

**Index Terms**—artistic accomplishments, baffled possibilities, fragmented psyche, romanticized, women

## I. INTRODUCTION

The representations of art in Willa Cather's *Lucy Gayheart* are multifarious and rich. However, the image of death dominates the whole artistic scenario throughout the novel. In this paper, we argue that there is an essential correlation between the narrative structure of art and the image of death that takes a vital part in both the plot development and the characterization level in the novel. Willa Cather's *Lucy Gayheart* focuses on the plight of a disappointed heroine who potentially finds herself in the crossfire of a deterministic fate that will be internalized through the development of her character and life. In the first place, Lucy Gayheart is a musician who is encouraged by her father, a watchmaker, to go to Chicago to study music. Such a great desire and ambition drive Lucy to embark on a long journey of artistic pursuit that never ends. To develop her character, Willa Cather relies on the possibility of her heroine's involvement in romantic relationships with two men, Harry Gordon and Clement Sebastian. Thus, the plot depends not on the linear unraveling of events but on "a conjunction of timeless moments" (Cather, p. 270). This kind of structure, mainly depending on overlapping stories, creates a dynamic reading of the narrative as dense a drama of a woman who is eventually led to having a fragmented psyche (Abumelhim et al., 2023; Issa et al., 2023; Al-Jezawi et al., 2023; Rababah et al., 2023). In Lucy's town, people assume she will marry the rich Harry Gordon. However, in Chicago, the famous opera singer, Clement Sebastian, asks for a music accompanist, as the late one is hurt. Lucy, achieving well in the audition, ends up taking the position of Sebastian's accompanist. Harry Gordon is being repudiated as he visits Chicago to see her. Lucy's disdain for Harry happens because of her growing relationship with Sebastian, who is estranged from his wife. Lucy ends up alone as Sebastian drowns in Switzerland. She returns home to live with her father and older sister. Lucy attempted, but failed, to rekindle her relationship with Harry. The closing scene of the novel ends with a catastrophic outcome that ceases her dreams and her life together, Lucy loses her life in a tragic accident, making it look like suicide.

Lucy's marvelous dreams of art endeavors and ambitions originate from that place she used to live in, and this rich experience accompanies her journey of life as a haunting, irreplaceable memory that affects her dreams and ambitions

she has been searching for from the early childhood. From another perspective, *Lucy Gayheart* can be considered an individualistic and psychological human experience because it deals with the internal structure of human feelings as it reflects her intrinsic power influences, and leads her to pursue artistic dreams. *Lucy Gayheart* is a pure psychological novel for Deepa and Rajalakshmi because it all starts from within. They say, "*Lucy Gayheart* is a psychological novel by Cather. This work focuses primarily on Cather's mind and her emotional reactions. The characters influence the circumstances of Cather's life. The internal flow of the mind generates decisive external actions that cannot state their current lives. After the death of Cather's mother, Cather thinks that life is meaningless. This meaninglessness and nothingness are demonstrated by the characters of Lucy and Harry (p. 283). Artistic dreams remain the most powerful motives behind Lucy's ambitions and endeavors in life. She continues to search for the lost part of herself despite all the psychological and social obstacles she has to endure. Such an idea as explained in the previous quote could represent Cather's interest in this theme in general. It is quite clear that Cather's works implicitly and explicitly revolve around aesthetics, art, crafts, and human skills. However, this novel mainly highlights the theme of art as connected and correlated with the image of death. Cather refers to this issue in different works and short stories, for example, "The Sculptor's Funeral" (1905), a story that begins with a funeral scene for a great artist that we do not see. Another Story that resembles such a theme is framed in her short story "Death in the Desert" (1903), where death seems to haunt artists in their long and tiring life journeys.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Generally, there have been some studies that focused on art representations in Willa Cather's novel but rarely referred to death and art together as a whole. Some of those studies were mainly concerned with the aesthetic aspects of her novels. In a study on the use and importance of light in Cather's fiction, Maria Mackas (2017) defended her thesis on Cather's "visual art's *tenebrism*" – which is defined as an artistic way of 'illuminating' a person, an object, or an idea by juxtaposing light against dark. Cather's aestheticism and love of painting are clear as Welty (1974; as cited in Duryea, 1993) suggests, in Cather's writing, "We are looking at a work of art" (*Eye of the Story* 42). However, light is a unified image of Willa Cather's stories. Asad Al-Ghalith (2005) argues that "Light imagery has become a favourite technique of Cather's to depict characters". He goes on to relate this light to the spiritual quest in many of Cather's heroines stating that, "Their eyes show this internal spiritual fire, which emanates from their souls, and any sensitive reader of an Antonia, a Thea, or a Lucy can see the spirit, the fire, surfacing in the eyes" (Al-Galith, 2005). Such an interesting aspect unites the meaning of the artistic spirit in the character's mind, and an example of this would fit Sebastian, Lucy's teacher, who finds this meaning in her flashing eyes, "When she gave him a quick shy look and the gold sparks flashed in her eyes, he read devotion there, and the fire of imagination; but no invitations, no appeal. In her companionship, there was never the shadow of a claim. On the contrary, there was a spirit which disdained advantage" (*Lucy Gayheart*, p. 81). Al-Ghalith believes that in a platonic sense, the eyes become windows to the soul. Lucy Gayheart, the protagonist, believes that her sweetheart, Harry Gordon, has this broad imaginative speculation that flashes from her eyes. In Willa Cather's characters, the human body contains the light of a burning fire that embraces art within.

James Woodress (1987) maintains that the work, *Lucy Gayheart*, was not one of Cather's favourite stories, especially the failing heroine, Lucy, who might have lost much of the sympathy from her author: "Cather also had no patience with failures, especially sentimental artistic failures". Had she written this twenty year earlier, "she would have heaped contempt on an artist manqué like Lucy," and that "Cather's impatience with her heroine while she was writing the novel is pretty well concealed (Woodress, 1987, Chapter 21).

The prevalence of death in the novel; three deaths by drowning: Sebastian, his friend, and Lucy herself, is shifting it to the Gothic. Cather meant the story to be a romance, yet Susan Rosowski (2001) discusses the novel as a "Gothic" romance. In her illuminating research, "Willa Cather's American Gothic Saphira and the Slave Girl" (1984), Susan J. Rosowski maintains that:

In her last two novels, Cather focused on the irreconcilable contradictions that had appeared in, but were not central to, her earlier plains novels. *Lucy Gayheart* has strong ties to the Dracula myth, in which a pure young heroine is drawn into the power of a dark, brooding figure who feeds upon her youth to stave off his world-weariness. (p. 222)

Sebastian could best be seen as a Gothic Byronic hero, who usually sulks by himself in loneliness, but keeps hiding his suffering from anyone else. He finds in Lucy the hope to rejuvenate and regain his lost youth and vitality. The trap is complete when Lucy attended Sebastian's recital and lost consciousness as she listened to him singing. Rosowski contends that "Cather's story resembles nothing so much as Bram Stoker's 1897 tale of dark possession and threatening sexuality, *Dracula*" (Rosowski, 2001, p. 223). Linda Chown (1993) states that, "because the structure is so exquisitely integrated throughout, one may not immediately recognize *Lucy Gayheart's* form for what it is: an aesthetic structure that completes itself only with the final section of the book (p. 119). By analyzing Cather's art of performance, Dubois (2015) tries to show that as a *mature* writer Cather, "depicts how the illusions of youth are shattered by tragedies and the final acceptance of death as an inevitable part of life" (p. 30).

### III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In almost all her narratives, Willa Cather illustrates a subtle, delicate affinity with the place. She systematically and consciously develops this concept through art. Maria Sanchez refers in "Immovable: Willa Cather's Logic of Art and Place" to the influence of place on the artistic imagination of Willa Cather as a writer and critic. She says, "Her well-known philosophies concerning the nature of great art consistently reject any stylistic trait that, to her mind, burdens it with too much of the surrounding material world" (p. 117). The writer's mentality as a profound and meticulous contemplator and observer has been revealed in her prodigious narrative style through her representation of art and aesthetics. Such thought patterns are embedded in the power of words and the vitality of depiction and projection. Willa Cather's concentration on art as a communication medium with nature has made the novel livelier and more interactive simply because the reader's imagination becomes quite indulged with the representation of nature as a piece of art.

To a great extent, the character of Lucy Gayheart, the novel's main protagonist, dramatically resembles the writer's passion and love for art and her appreciation for nature and beauty. Linda Chown (1993) notes in "Willa Cather's *Lucy Gayheart*" that Lucy has this artistic sense of nostalgia for the place she deeply loves. Hermione Lee (1990) has observed that the novel is undeniably "something more than the 'Ballad of Lucy Gayheart'" (Chown, 1993, p. 121). The book's delicate complexity emerges more clearly in examining closely the two areas that most finely constitute it: the temporal frameworks and the matter of the telling" (Chown, p. 121).

Lucy's artistic journey bloomed out of Haverford and the Platte River and extended through a developmental stage that finally led her to discover what she had been seeking since very early childhood. This is a noticeable idea when analyzing her allegiance to this place and its inhabitants. The writer's personality as an intellectual thinker who deeply reflects the sublime and magnificence of the place is clearly shown in most of her novels. Indeed, the value of place lies at the heart of Willa Cather's fiction. Cather originally placed a high value on the pioneer theme, which permeates the majority of her novels, emphasizing the significance and affinity of place for her protagonists. In this sense, Cather is never a regional writer but rather one who investigates the transformational relationship between the individual and the place. Thus, in Cather's *Lucy Gayheart*, the heroine's progress, her ambitions, and, more importantly, the actualization of her artistic dream are all perceived through this transformational relationship with the place. Such harmony between nature and art has always been a concern and a matter of discussion for many critics of Willa Cather's *Lucy Gayheart*. In "Nature and Character in the Novels of Willa Cather," John Ditsky (1974) observes that, beyond the intricate connection between nature and art, the individual's persona appears intricately linked to nature. The concept of nature and the individual converges into a shared stream of consciousness, and readers perceive this complex interconnectedness when comprehending the influential role that art assumes in the novel. Ditsky argues that "the second facet of the nature-character relationship in Cather's novels pertains to futurity in a manner akin to how the first aspect related to the past (p. 7).

Such an overlapping affinity with nature, particularly the scene of the river, is very similar to her representation of Alexander, a central protagonist in her novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), in which she represents the character of Alexander through the contemplation of his self through the river and the bridge, which symbolically represents redemption and purity. Ditsky states that "in developing nature imagery as an index of character definition, especially in terms of orientation to art, Willa Cather made only tentative steps forward in *Alexander's Bridge*, and that in the stark conception of the central character we have already noted. Alexander is described as extraordinary, a figure of such physical and intellectual strength that he epitomizes the phrase "tamer of rivers" (p. 7).

Such an exciting side of the writer's sense of appreciation towards nature and the beauty of nature constantly reminds the readers of Willa Cather's life and her deep sense of attachment to the land. Lisa Garvelink notes in "The Nature of the Life of the Artist in Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*" "that Willa Cather's early years were laden with beautiful memories about nature. She says: "Though Willa Cather spent most of her adult life living in New York City, she never forgot the mountains and lush environment of her early years, the wide-open prairies of her adolescent years, and the unusual rock formations of the West, all of which she portrays in her novels" (p. 270).

The image of the place around her, especially in her hometown, Haverford, Nebraska, which is located near the beautiful scenery of the Platte River, was evident from the beginning of her artistic dream. Probably the depiction of that place continues to be a more powerful influence in her personal life and her resolution to fulfil her own dreams. Moreover, the image of the river continues to accompany her artistic life and to be part of her identity as an artist or a dreamy, ambitious character. Furthermore, even though Cather feels satisfied with the achievement, the memory of the place remains an indispensable element that injects life into her goals and feeds her eagerness towards tranquillity and satisfaction despite her mixed feelings of disappointment and frustration sometimes in the novel. As one notices in this quote from the novel, *Lucy Gayheart* developed this passion for art when she was still a young girl, and the preoccupation with the place has long continued to influence her artistic dreams, whenever her townspeople see her, "They still see her as a slight figure always in motion, dancing, skating, or walking swiftly with intense direction, like a bird flying home" (Cather, *Lucy Gayheart*, p. 5).

The place, in all of its marvellous beauty and glory, was a part of her romantic life that she yearned and longed for. It is evident from the quotation that Lucy has developed an intense intimacy with Haverford and the Platte River, as it was always the place for her romantic and artistic dream that pushed her to do the best. Such wonderful places reinforced

her wishes and broadened her horizon to explore herself and the world around her. The image of the place remains as a sweet and lovely memory that she would never forget simply because it is a part of her social and psychological life.

One can also recognize how she spoke about Haverford and the Platte River and her sense of belonging to that place. The Platte River to Lucy is more like where she once lived and liked; it is more like the roots of her identity as a character filled with love, art, adeptness, and sweet memories.

The image of art also accompanies the scene of death represented by the main character, Lucy Gayheart. Throughout the novel, readers see a clear picture of the death of an ambitious artist who struggles for success and dreams. Lucy Gayheart's character represents the anti-climax that hovers around success and artistic dreams. Her character and art are associated with recurrent images that foreshadow death. The issue of death as part of the life cycle is dealt with carefully in this novel, starting at the very beginning when the narrator says, "They do not talk of her a great deal, to be sure; life goes on and we live in the present" (Cather, p. 645). The images that foreshadow her death are abundant, letting readers see that Lucy Gayheart was sure that her death was inevitable and very soon. A sense of impending death overwhelms her character and controls her unconscious mind. She even saw the way she would die before her death. Lucy knows for sure that her artistic dream and her talented creativity would lead her to death. The use of symbolism, the lofty style, and images all inform the reader about Lucy's life and her existential need to fulfil her artistic dreams. As one may notice in this quote, Lucy believes that the inner motivation is the key to success and self-actualization, "The thing to do was to make an overcoat of the cold, to feel oneself warm and awake at the heart of it, one's blood coursing unchilled in an air where roses froze instantly" (Cather, p. 39).

Part of this anxiety over pursuing her artistic dreams contributes to Lucy's persistent discomfort about her own destiny and death. She has an overwhelming fear of the future, and sometimes she thinks a lot about death. Readers can notice this when Lucy starts to feel afraid of going to sleep as she begins to see illusions of her death: "She awoke from such dreams cold and exhausted from her struggle to break that cowardly embrace (Cather, p. 733).

Lucy Gayheart was completely worried about her destiny and just felt that her death was approaching. The more Lucy Gayheart develops her art, the more her sense of impending death starts to grow. Deepa and Rajalakshmi (2018) emphasize that Lucy's death causes complete disappointment to her friends, especially the ones who deeply and genuinely appreciate what art really means. On one level, her death represents a psychological shock to the ones who really loved her, and on the other, it represents a failure in communication with art as an immortal sense of beauty. They say that "Lucy's death creates a catastrophic mood for Harry. Harry spends his remaining life mourning the death of Lucy... He can realize his love for Lucy after her death. After some happy events, Harry's life takes a turn, leading the readers to come across subversive turns in Cather's life. In her dark period, Cather writes this novel with downheartedness (p. 284).

Such a tone of sadness toward the deceased artists is a recurrent theme in most of Willa Cather's novels. Lucy is similar to Thea in *The Song of the Lark*, who also represents this melancholic sense of mortal beauty that always shows sadness, and "This melancholy tone is reflected in the characters of Lucy and Harry". In *The Song of the Lark*, after the death of Ray Kennedy, Thea continues to struggle in her life and shines at the end. Lucy, with the same quality as Thea, cannot survive after the death of her heart. She is portrayed as a barren, effete lady. She cannot think over her life and rise from her present level. With her deep cheerfulness and heart, Cather writes this fiction and visualizes herself, Lucy, and Harry (Deepa & Rajalakshmi, 2018, p. 284). Lucy's sense of discomfort is evident in this quotation: "The daylight in her room grew grayer and darker" (p. 748). She starts to see death in her art, music, and even flowers, and she keeps this inside her without sharing it with anyone as we see in this quote, "She thought of music as a natural form of pleasure (p. 7).

Even though Sebastian could make her feel much more important as an artist in society, "with him, she had learned that those flashes of promise could come true, that they could be the important things in one's life" (p. 748), but she could also imagine her death in his voice and music. She loves her art, and she loves Sebastian's art; she could also see death in his songs. She knows for sure that these songs are her songs of death. This is noticeable when reading this quotation from the novel: "She loved to repeat lines from some of Sebastian's songs, trying to get exactly his way of saying the words, his accent, his phrasing. She tried to sing to them a little" (p. 733). It made her cry, but it melted the cold in her heart and brought him back to her more than anything else did.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

On an ontological level, Lucy Gayheart seems to be filled with a persistent passion and desire for art that keeps fuelling her motivation and spirit for life. Again, this artistic passion stands out as an ideal, platonic, and utopian motive at some point. Her art gives her a unique and exquisite energy for life, but it all fades away when her abrupt and fast death visits her. Death is also another domain in her aesthetic journey, which means dying with a life purpose and a dream. It also indicates a more significant theme than any ordinary death. Finally, art in Lucy Gayheart is an issue that is connected with death, but Lucy Gayheart herself thought that these obsessions could only be illusions, even though she alienates herself from the very beginning of the novel: "When she looked about this house where she had grown up, she felt so alien that she dreaded to touch anything" (p. 732). Readers will guess that this "something" is death.

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**Baker Bani-Khair** is an associate professor of English literature at Hashemite University, Jordan. He has published several articles on different aspects that mainly deal with Gothic Literature, cultural studies, and Film. His research interests are the 1960s and 1950s American films and history.



**Ziyad Khalifah Alkhalifah** is an assistant professor of English literature at the Department of English Language and Translation, College of Science and Arts in ArRass, Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. He obtained both a Master's Degree (2013) and a Ph.D. (2018) from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA. His research interests are mainly focused on 9/11 literature and Postcolonial literature.



**Mohamad Hilmi al Ahmad** is an Associate Professor of English Literature at Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Isra University, Jordan. His research interests include English literary Studies, American studies, comparative literature, world literature and critical Theory.

**Majed Yahya Abdulkarim** is an assistant professor of literature at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Isra University, Jordan. His research interests include British studies, American studies, comparative literature, and critical theory.



**Mahmoud Ali Rababah** has a PhD in Applied Linguistics. He is a senior lecturer at Al-Balqa Applied University, Irbid University College, Department of English Language and Literature. His areas of interest are socio-pragmatics, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and translation.