

The Image of the Place in Willa Cather's *My Antonia* and *Song of the Lark*

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Abstract—This paper explores Willa Cather's experience of place, which is prominently reflected in her novels, particularly in the two novels chosen for this study: '*My Antonia*' and '*Song of the Lark*'. The paper analyses the intricate and sophisticated aspects of these settings from various perspectives. It delves into the ontological, existential, and spatial meanings that extend beyond the physical intricacies of the places, which Willa Cather keenly portrays through profound and contemplative lenses. It is evident that her spatial use of settings, places, and locales aligns well with her stylistic descriptions, language, and vivid imagery, all of which transcend the superficial meaning and break free from the stereotypical patterns common among other writers of that literary period. The paper also discusses the spatial and urban dimensions of these settings and their influence on the emotional and intellectual development of the major female protagonists in the two works.

Index Terms—Moonstone, *My Antonia*, self-actualization, *Song of the Lark*, Willa Cather

I. INTRODUCTION

Willa Cather's deep connection to place resonates profoundly in her novels, especially those selected for this study: '*My Antonia*' (1918) and '*Song of the Lark*' (1915). It is quite evident that her skillful use of settings, places, and locales aligns seamlessly with her descriptive language and vivid portrayals. These aspects delve deeply beyond mere surface meanings, transcending the common stereotypical patterns prevalent among writers of her era. Cather draws upon her vast knowledge and rich life experiences, aiming to blend stylistic sophistication with the loftiness of thought, all the while maintaining a humble sense of spontaneity that permeates both plot and narration. Her extensive life experiences also position her as an astute judge of characters and places. Her approach to characters and style is remarkably innovative and, quite possibly, unparalleled. This is evident in her expressed empathy, emotional connection, and sense of belonging to natural landscapes. She masterfully weaves intricate portrayals of vibrant and vital settings within the context of a natural indoor and outdoor family environment. In doing so, Cather creates a vivid reflection and a contemplative representation that transcends the whimsical fantasies often associated with rural life.

Willa Cather's '*My Antonia*' and '*Song of the Lark*' stand as artistic masterpieces that ignite the imagination and prompt contemplation in the minds of readers. Furthermore, her treatment of characters and physical spaces introduces a detailed and precise approach to magnifying spatial dimensions, opening avenues for discussion and analysis. In fact, numerous scholars have explored the themes of space, its connection to the natural environment's beauty, and its impact on human relationships. Quantic (2002), for instance, emphasizes the significance of architecture and geography in Cather's works. She notes that, whereas experts in the fields of architecture and geography have concentrated on the connection between physical space and constructed surroundings, researchers in American literature and culture have directed their attention toward the influence of women in molding household settings. Their investigations illuminate the interplay between residences, the nearby natural environment, and the societal interactions that houses enable or impede. Women have the capacity to convert these residences into cherished homes by adding objects that amass meaning for the members of their families (p. 106). Such depictions of place align closely with women's aspirations for a natural and liberating life within close-knit families and communities. In the 1930s, women's roles in society were predominantly linked to family life,

allowing them to establish deep connections to their domestic spaces, farms, residences, and homes. Consequently, these spaces offered a sense of stability and affection, fostering feelings of peace and security.

Moreover, Cather's novels can be viewed as robust and intense psychological experiences, making them suitable subjects for psychoanalysis (Alkhaldi et al., 2022; Essa et al., 2022; Melhim et al., 2023). Heyeck and Woodress (1979) assert that "among all of Willa Cather's novels, *The Song of the Lark*, first published in 1915, is sui [generis stands apart]. It is the only novel Cather ever wrote in what might be called a metaphor from her own essay" (p. 651). Her narratives consistently embody a sense of unconventionality, introspection, inference, and persuasion, as pointed out by Diane (2002). Diane references domestic spaces in Cather's novel '*My Antonia*,' highlighting that "they are especially apparent in *My Antonia*, a work set on the Great Plains where traditional methods of building were impractical. The materials at hand for the first dwellings were minimal and therefore limited the kind of structure the builder could create to an earth-bound sod house or a dugout, essentially a hole dug into a slope. Yet even when constructing such temporary dwellings, settlers took great care in selecting their home sites. Some looked for sites with far-reaching views, others for the protection afforded by a slight hill (Al-Jezawi et al., 2023; Al-Saidat et al., 2023). They considered the proximity of water, other settlers, and roads, which are basic amenities for the establishment of homes and a community. In *My Antonia*, the immigrant Shimerdas are ignorant of these factors. They move into a mere hole, sold to them by their opportunistic countryman" (pp. 104–105).

II. ANALYSIS

In Willa Cather's stories, the spaces she creates can be likened to dreams or fantasies where a sharp contrast between the world of reality and the realm of imagination becomes evident. This contrast reaches its zenith when we compare it to the world of the reader and draw a distinct line between the boundaries within the text itself and the boundless imaginative depictions of place that span both novels. In this way, these two novels appear to convey the concept of wish fulfillment and self-actualization, especially for the female characters who serve as the central protagonists, including Thea Kronborg.

Thea Kronborg, growing up in a small rural town, relentlessly pursues her passion to become a famous and renowned singer. Her journey unfolds across several distinct spatial settings, beginning in Moonstone, Colorado, where her artistic aspirations begin to take shape. Despite her growing ambitions, she faces numerous challenges in forming relationships with her relatives and friends. In the second part of the novel, Kronborg relocates to Chicago to continue her music lessons, later visiting an art institute where she encounters a painting titled '*The Song of the Lark*,' which gives the novel its name. This marks a turning point in her life, filled with beauty, inspiration, and tranquility. In the third chapter, Thea Kronborg embarks on yet another journey, this time to the state of New York, where she gains new artistic and musical experiences. She eventually heads to Arizona, where she encounters the breathtaking American landscapes.

Angelini et al. (2022) emphasize that "*The Song of the Lark*," the second installment in Willa Cather's Prairie Trilogy, marked a significant departure from the prairie landscape seen in "O, Pioneers!" In this work, the prairie is notably absent, and the narrative unfolds in locales such as Moonstone, Colorado, Chicago, Panther Caon, Arizona, and various European settings. When crafting "*The Song of the Lark*," Cather ventured away from her initial idea, which was a love story set in the prairies she had cherished for so long (p. 108). In almost every part of Kronborg's life, the place seems to provide a new psych geographical experience for her. Peck (1991) maintains that in Willa Cather's third novel, "*The Song of the Lark*," the narrative unfolds around the life of Thea Kronborg, an American opera singer. This story encompasses various stages of her life, including her upbringing in a small Colorado town, her musical education in Chicago, her explorations of the Cliff Dwellers ruins in Arizona, and her remarkable successes at the Metropolitan Opera. The narrative encompasses a broad expanse of time, just as it encompasses a wide range of geographical locations (p. 21). Cather subtly portrays fantasies, dreams, and idealism in a way that often leads to shock and surprise at the conclusion of each novel. She aims to establish a sense of perfection or idealism in both stories, but unfortunately, this idealism often gives rise to frustration and disappointment. However, the characters in her novels are driven by artistic aspirations they dream of fulfilling. This can be observed in artists who possess an unwavering dream they tirelessly pursue. They are dissatisfied with their surroundings and aspire to bring about a significant change in their lives by following their artistic dreams.

Towards the end of each story, Cather conveys a sense of triumph and self-actualization. She draws from backgrounds and places she once experienced, reflecting autobiographical elements from her own life. This exceptional literary creation mirrors some of the author's aspirations and personal sentiments. Additionally, the social environment and personal aspirations play pivotal roles in the development of these stories. It becomes evident that Willa Cather strives to establish a strong connection and similarity among her characters throughout her treatment of them. These creative and ambitious characters are often underestimated by their communities. Cather portrays them as dreamers and visionaries driven by artistic ambitions they relentlessly pursue. It's apparent that they endure numerous hardships on their journeys to achieve their artistic goals. However, this overarching theme invites contemplation about the essence of humanity and existence that Cather often explores in her narrative works.

The theme of family within the farm setting holds a prevalent and dominant role in Willa Cather's "*My Antonia*." First and foremost, the central character, Antonia, has experienced various social contexts on multiple levels: her own family as an immigrant family, with numerous and diverse facets of familial patterns, ranging from family members and parents to various actions and behaviors that shape the core elements of the family concept. Furthermore, the depiction of the

family can also be viewed as a gradual evolution and success in defining the meaning of the family concept, which, in turn, represents Antonia's personal triumph towards the novel's conclusion.

This theme becomes evident when we analyze the developmental progression of the family structure in Antonia's life, beginning in her childhood. Her early years serve as the repository of her impressions of fatherly and motherly figures, cultural influences, and the absorption of social values that refine her character and manners as she matures. These experiences collectively contribute to shaping her own family structure, reflecting Antonia's aspiration for a stable family characterized by familial harmony, peace, and success.

As Gros (2016) points out, Willa Cather's choice of setting, the vast plains of the Midwest, inherently embodies strong gender-related connotations. This region is characterized by distinct and well-defined roles for both men and women. The Midwest, along with the Far West and the Frontier, has given rise to some of America's most iconic representations of masculinity, such as the farmer, the cowboy, the cattle driver, and the plains horseman, as described by Owen Wister. These masculine icons have frequently overshadowed the recognition and attention given to the women who shared these expansive landscapes (p. 4). This desire for a stable and harmonious family life, especially within a family home filled with love and tranquility, is evident not only in Antonia but also in her entire family. Despite her strong attachment to her roots, identity, and place of birth, Antonia aspires to become an American woman who is well-versed in the ways of the world. According to Werner (2021), Antonia serves as a perfect embodiment of this concept: Unlike her father, whose sense of self is deeply rooted in his Bohemian heritage, and her mother, who embraces American traditions but still maintains a Bohemian lifestyle in the United States, Antonia wholeheartedly embraces her new life. She approaches her Bohemian identity in a way that acknowledges her birthplace, yet she eagerly assimilates herself into American life. She desires to learn English, work like an American on a prairie farm, savor American cuisine, and explore beyond. This was her new life, and she exhibits ambition in embracing the American way. Nevertheless, Antonia still holds her Bohemian heritage and the accompanying culture dear" (p. 7).

The dream of having a family and, more specifically, a family home, has been an integral part of Antonia's character, deeply rooted in her mind from an early age, and growing stronger with time. For example, her grandmother once said to her, "Sure enough, where would you sleep, dear? I don't doubt you're warm there. You will have a better house after a while, Antonia, and then you'll forget these hard times" (p. 760). It appears that Antonia's sense of complete fulfillment is intricately tied to the growth and well-being of her family, including her sons and daughters. Her pursuit of this dream is a significant part of her life journey. The concept of family represents the goal Antonia has longed for since her youth. It was an outcome shaped by her commitment to work and care for other families not related to her, as well as the self-discovery she experienced amidst the profound personal suffering she endured in "The Black Hawk," which could have compromised her dignity as a respectable woman. We can observe how her work for other households could restrain her personal freedom and stifle her own aspirations. For instance, Mrs. Harling tells Antonia, "Antonia, if you go to the Cutters to work, you cannot come back to this house again. You know who that man is. It will be the ruin of you" (p. 843).

The concept of the family dream becomes more apparent when we delve into the depth of Antonia's affection and intimacy toward her family members at the novel's conclusion. It signifies a growing sense of personal satisfaction, embodying the essence of her own life. This sentiment is vividly expressed when Antonia converses with Jim: "No. I never got downhearted. Anton's a good man, and I loved my children and always believed they would turn out well. I belong on a farm. I'm never lonely here like I used to be in town. You remember what sad spells I used to have when I didn't know what was wrong with me? I've never had them out here" (p. 921).

From the very beginning of the novel, the reader senses a story steeped in nostalgia for the place of one's birth. It encapsulates these desires and wishes, which are akin to childhood dreams residing in our unconscious memory. As Mazzeo (2015) explains,

In *My Antonia*, Cather blends a simplistic and emotionally charged sense of nostalgia with a more profound exploration of Jim's endeavor to recreate the past. While Jim's perspective leans towards restorative nostalgia, Cather's novel operates on the level of reflective nostalgia, delving into the emotional state and consequences of longing for the past. The novel harnesses the heartfelt sincerity of Jim's perception of the past and utilizes both him and his vision to contemplate broader themes such as recollection, revision, and the act of composing life narratives. The epigraph at the beginning of the novel doesn't merely reflect Cather's straightforward belief expressed through Virgil's words; instead, it serves as an introduction to the novel's exploration of the passionate conviction that the most cherished moments tend to slip away, despite contradictory evidence. Even Jim himself possesses some awareness, albeit at a subconscious level, of the less pleasant aspects of his "golden days". However, he lacks the motivation or inclination to embrace a more nuanced perspective on his past. Instead of delving into the reasons behind the pain associated with his yearning for the past, Jim focuses on reconstructing a sense of home and an origin story without fully interpreting their significance in his life (pp. 24–25). In fact, this is the ideal life that Antonia envisioned and worked towards, and she does not want her daughters to experience the hardships she endured in her own past. She seeks a family life free from the harshness she once knew, aspiring to see her family thrive and prosper. This notion is evident in her conversation with Tony and Jim: "Oh, I'm glad I went! I'd never have known anything about cooking or housekeeping if I hadn't. I learned nice ways at the Harlings, and I've been able to bring my children up so much better. Don't you think they are pretty well-behaved for country children? If it hadn't been for what Mrs. Harling taught me, I expect I'd have brought them home like wild rabbits. No, I'm glad I had

a chance to learn, but I'm thankful none of my daughters will ever have to work out. The trouble with me was, Jim, I never could believe harm would come to anybody I loved" (p. 921).

Antonia's vision of motherhood was another dream she realized. The narrator's description of her as a good mother is reliable. Remarkably, the concept of family remains at the core of her existence, profoundly shaping Antonia's character. Moonstone's presence in *The Song of the Lark* is essential, exuding vitality and pervading the novel. As Quantic (2002) elucidates, places and landscapes seamlessly align with one's life identity and personality, encompassing social, psychological, and economic dimensions. According to Quantic, when homes are situated within a particular environment, they can reveal the intricate connections between various societal classes, economic strata, and even different ethnic and religious communities. Scholars specializing in architecture make a distinction between two categories: there's formal, deliberately planned architecture, which includes houses designed with rooms serving specific single-purpose functions. On the other hand, there's vernacular architecture, consisting of unplanned residences with versatile spaces that encourage informal interactions among both family members and guests.

John Brinckerhoff Jackson, a prominent figure in architectural history, emphasizes that a landscape isn't merely a picturesque backdrop or a geographical area delineated for political purposes. Instead, it constitutes a complex "system of human-made spaces on the earth's surface." Importantly, it isn't solely a natural entity or an inherent aspect of the natural surroundings; rather, it's invariably artificial, shaped by deliberate human observation and actions, and, consequently, susceptible to modification and transformation (p. 104). Quantic further elaborates that the landscape plays a vital role in one's identity development and maturation because it refines the true essence of human relationships concerning time and place. The landscape serves as the canvas upon which we construct our own human system of spatial and temporal organization. While certain academics concentrate on the vernacular dimension, others delve into the positioning of the human body within this landscape. Philosopher Edward Casey underscores the pivotal role of the body as our foremost agent in this environment. It is through the close and personal interaction between the body and the landscape that we attain a sense of direction and orientation. These place theories provide a useful framework for analyzing Cather's two novels (p. 104). The spark and passion driving Thea's profound artistic aspirations originate from this very place and persist as an indelible memory that influences her artistic pursuits throughout her life. As pointed out by Goodman (2023), "*The Song of the Lark*" delves into the emotions and passions stirred by music in different individuals. It then narrates the challenge of encapsulating these emotions within a static narrative or archive. This novel serves as a prime illustration of the cultural and temporal instability associated with representing regions during the modernist era (p. 5). Indeed, her artistic journey blossoms from this place, evolving through various stages, ultimately leading her to discover what she has sought since childhood. This deep attachment to the place and its inhabitants is profoundly evident. Angelina and Maheswari (2022) note that while Willa Cather's affection for the prairie may not be explicitly expressed in *The Song of the Lark*, the essence of integration is vividly portrayed in her deep spiritual commitment to the frontier (p. 109).

III. CONCLUSION

The image of Moonstone was vivid from the inception of Thea's dreams, and it continues to exert a profound influence on her personal life and her determination to realize her dreams. Furthermore, the depiction of that place remains a potent presence in her artistic life, becoming an integral part of her identity as an artist and a dream-driven, ambitious individual.

Despite her contentment with her achievements, the memory of Moonstone remains an indispensable element that breathes life into her aspirations and fuels her pursuit of serenity and fulfillment. Occasionally, mixed feelings of disappointment and frustration may surface in her novels. Like Thea and Antonia, the memory of this place serves as a vital source of passion and motivation, propelling these characters to strive relentlessly for their dreams. The haunting memory of this place acts as a reminder of their past, their childhood, and their future lives.

As Quantic explains, these spaces can become ingrained in human consciousness about the world. She observes that three aspects of the domestic landscape intrigue her. First, a dwelling transforms an unmarked and undefined space into a distinct place within a larger space. Second, the dwelling exists within a context, the landscape consciously perceived and altered by human consciousness. Dwellings modify undifferentiated space, causing the viewed landscape to either constrain or expand the observer's perception of their world. This transformation results from both the individual observer's viewpoint and the design and placement of the structures themselves. Lastly, the spatial arrangement of the constructed environment, including houses and other buildings, influences the social structure of the community. Geography, in this context, encompasses more than just topography (p. 104).

Moonstone Place held a romantic allure for Thea, a place she yearned for deeply. This intimacy stemmed from its romantic backdrop and artistic ambiance. Such a profound memory propelled her to give her best and reinforced her aspirations. Moonstone retained its status as a cherished and unforgettable memory, an integral part of her life and the reservoir of her artistic motivations, even though she discovered her art elsewhere. Her words reveal this connection: "Thea looked up at him and smiled, 'Oh, I did not know anything! Not enough to ask you for my trunk when I needed it. But you see, when I set out from Moonstone with you, I had had a rich, romantic life, every hour of it'" (p. 682).

Obviously, when examining her discussions about Moonstone Place and her sense of belonging to that location, one can discern the deep roots she has regarding this place. She once remarked, "Nearly all my dreams, except those breaking down on the stage or missing trains, are about Moonstone." You tell me the old house has been pulled down, but it stands

in my mind with every stick and timber. In my sleep, I go all about it, and look in the right drawers and cupboards for everything... etc.” (p. 680). To Thea, Moonstone is more than just a place she once inhabited and admired; it is the foundation of her identity as a character characterized by profound love, passionate artistic aspirations, expertise, and a meticulous consciousness. It embodies numerous sentiments, including the sense of commencing anew, as she once expressed, “The feeling of starting out” (p. 599).

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