

Jealousy in Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940): Nancy and Henry's Relationship

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Abstract—This study investigates the sources of jealousy in Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), focusing especially on Sapphira and Nancy's characters, who appear to present a traditional and stereotyped view of women's image in the southern American community during the 1930s and 1940s. In its purest form, Sapphira's envy stems from a desperate desire to have a genuine conventional family filled with love and stability. Sapphira hopes to get family privileges that will allow her to immerse herself more fully in the comfortable environment of family life, free of interruptions, aggravation, and threats. Aside from the themes of race and racism that drive the novel's action, the current research seeks to define and investigate the topic of jealousy and its relationship to social stability and domestic life as shown in Cather's work solely via social, cultural, and psychological lenses.

Index Terms—gender, Henry, jealousy, race, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, stability, Willa Cather

I. INTRODUCTION

Willa Cather's historical fictive narrative *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) openly tackles the theme of jealousy. This theme has struck the white protagonist by making her psychologically and physically sick of jealousy of the black yet beautiful slave girl, Nancy. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is one of the novels set in Virginia, based on a story Willa Cather heard as a youngster. Sapphira Doddridge Colbert is an aristocratic white slaveholder in her sixties suffering from some health complications and is bound to die of dropsy. This health condition leads to body swelling and heart complications. She owns other people, mainly slave girls inherited from her father's property, and manipulates her. The jealousy problem starts when she learns through her cook that her husband, Henry Colbert, is having an affair with Nancy, a slave girl. She plans to sell the lovely and innocent slave, but she is unable to do so because, by law, a woman cannot sell property without the approval of her husband. Her husband, Henry, is often misunderstood by Sapphira, but his increasing interest in Nancy puts Sapphira under great pressure and skepticism, and she starts to suspect a love affair. She tries to stop this relationship in irrational and evil ways, such as by urging Martin Colbert, Henry's Nephew, to seduce or rape Nancy and put a stop to Henry's relationship. Sapphira, however, remains frustrated and disappointed because of this annoying feeling of suspicion, which she could never stop till the end of the novel.

Sapphira's irrational jealousy is further complicated by racism and ethnic prejudice. Clere (2011) explains that "the personal affection Henry feels for Nancy toward Sapphira represents a betrayal of the hierarchy that has helped define her own sense of worth and validity. A sexual relationship with Nancy on Henry's part would represent a violation of his marriage vows to Sapphira, but Henry's recognition of Nancy's personhood threatens Sapphira's very identity, jeopardizing the assumptions of white supremacy that have defined her role as a woman in the nineteenth-century South.

The pattern of suspicion, panic, and temporary relief Sapphira enacts on the night of her breakdown mimics the responses of white southerners to both perceived and real threats from black southerners. Historically as well as literarily, when the seemingly firm de jure and de facto boundaries separating blacks and whites waver, white Southerners have responded with violence” (p. 215).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Salas (1997) has rightly stated that *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* merited diverse critical responses about race and gender questions and has been described variously as A Winter’s Tale, a gothic tale, and a clever subversion of readers’ expectations.” However, the reason for this strong response to the book is that it tackles a number of important subjects, including concerns of gender, racism, and equality. The protagonist of the story is Sapphira, who is ostracized due to her age, disease, and gender. Sapphira is both helpless and omnipotent; as a white slave owner, she controls and owns other people. Her sense of helplessness is validated—or maybe more accurately, made up for—by the authority she wields over them. The story revolves around Sapphira's attempts to take control of her body in spite of its limitations and how she transforms other people into abstract characters.

The discussion of power and authority, the hidden force of the Gothic, may lead us straight into the narrative art of the author: Cather’s use of stories within stories and mixed accounts. According to Hoover (1996), Cather used mirror texts in *Sapphira*, where the writer integrates into the story and becomes a character, symbolizing a desire for dominance. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, then, stand for women who have control over their own lives.

According to Woodress (1989), *Sapphira* is not a nostalgic retreat into the past happy life of Virginia, her childhood, or the dismissal of slave narratives; it is rather a tale of horror and a search into the roots of evil in human nature. “It is another Gothic tale, more sinister than *Lucy Gayheart*, more deeply probing into the nature of evil and the dark, irrational forces that are always threatening us” (p. 483). Supporting this view, Rosowski (1984) points out in *Willa Cather's American Gothic: Sapphira and the Slave Girl* that Cather establishes an emotional pattern of disruption by which she explores the horror of estrangement and the psychology of evil” (p. 15). Nancy, like any victim of the gothic novel, is caught in a web of transformations. She becomes the innocent victim of the changes within her body; her developing sexuality brings upon her the jealousy of her mistress and the pursuit of Martin. The familiar world has become nightmarish: her mistress, who favoured her, has become cold and distant; the guest, Martin Colbert, whom she welcomed, has turned into her would-be rapist; even her master, who used to treat her kindly, is avoiding her.

“Spotlighting Truth and Beauty: Willa Cather's Tenebraic Word Pictures” by Mackas (2017) presents an insightful theory that argues that Sapphira Colbert, a disabled woman, has mistakenly believed that her husband is infatuated with her slave Nancy, Till's daughter, due to jealousy. Because Sapphira is envious, she schemes to make Nancy appear lusty even though, in reality, she is the complete opposite—Sapphira arranges for her nephew to rape Nancy. The narrative that emerges portrays the enslaved Black people as having a purer personality and the white Sapphira as having a darker one. In this approach, Cather attempts a subliminal tenebrism by figuratively contrasting light and dark, but the outcome is neither brilliant, revelatory, or fulfilling (p. 41).

In “Time and Memory in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*: Sex, Abuse, and Art”, Wolff (1996) acknowledges Toni Morrison's criticisms of Willa Cather for appropriating the “slave narrative” to tell someone else's story and for using the “serviceable... African presence” for her own (empowered white) ends. Morrison argues that the black characters *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* in no way “own” the story, and that it is a legitimate objection because the slave narrative is a uniquely African American genre. Morrison contends that Nancy serves just as “a cypher” and “a perfect victim” to leave her own mark on the story. In this story, Cather was simply experimenting with shadow figures that had a metaphorical meaning, and it was clear that she was an expert at what she was doing. Morrison claims that Nancy's only intentions are pure love and the desire to create beauty, but inadvertently, her action incites Sapphira's envious fury and hurts the miller. Consequently, Nancy's creative tendencies are the cause of her problems, and her shyness, when combined with her true helplessness, becomes a deadly handicap.

III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Undoubtedly, a major reason for the growing sense of Sapphira's jealousy, as critics have inferred, is attributed to the disharmony that existed between both of the two female figures. Setyorini (2003) attributes such disharmony to psychological problems. Applying a psychological approach to sort out the major differences between those two protagonists, Setyorini has concluded that the psychological factor plays a great role in making the white protagonist, endowed with all aspects of physical beauty, extremely jealous of Nancy. Such a conclusion, as reached by Cather, strikes a significant notion that confirms most of what black authors and critics have reached, namely, that colour is no longer problematic for black people and that it has become a source of pride. By and large, Setyorini stresses a set of intrinsic characteristics that characterize each protagonist responsible for such conflict. While Sapphira, the slave girl, is viewed as “bad-tempered, partial, introverted, and suspicious,” Nancy is adversely seen as a “cheerful, charming, trustful, and timid girl” (p. iv).

Willa Cather represents jealousy as a major part of women's suffering, especially among different ethnic backgrounds; jealousy has causes and reasons, but how she identifies it in the novel presents a sophisticated feminist perspective. Like

most of her novels, Willa Cather uses a strong feminine voice to deal with a complicated dilemma in a social setting. According to Chintamanai (2010), Cather's writings represent a powerful feminist voice that advocates and supports women's rights. She represents women's suffering in various communities with multiple ethnic backgrounds: "Cather's maximum contribution to the feminist writings has been the magnificent boons in rendering the social charge in the women's lives. She has presented the most conscious women with real knowledge of the internal and outer worlds. They are too knowledgeable to identify problems and their solutions. They are entirely sympathetic, plain speakers, justifiably cautious, active, and creative. All her fictional women, except lost ladies, display a wider range of abilities, being all-around, all-important, all-powerful, and all-conscious. She has enriched her women with the feelings of cooperation and coordination that non-feminist males lack. Her women can smile at others' happiness and weep at their misery. She has advocated for women's rights, duties, and jobs with a view to making them as independent as men. She has imagined such a balanced world of men and women, where her women may have equal chances of jobs, social position, and other rights as men" (p. 14).

The theme of jealousy seems to be a very apparent issue in the whole novel. This theme is mainly represented by Sapphira, who consistently feels jealous of Nancy. Sapphira thinks that getting rid of Nancy would be the best solution to ease her feelings of envy and jealousy. She likes to make Nancy feel under her sovereignty and control her life in a way that she feels satisfied with herself. Possibly, Sapphira treats Nancy as a commodity and not as a decent human being. This is clearly seen when Sapphira tries to convince her husband Henry to sell Nancy to Grimwood, as we see in this quotation: "It's nothing to get flustered about, Henry. As you say, her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother were all Doddridge niggers. So it seems to me I ought to be allowed to arrange Nancy's future" (p. 782).

Sapphira also uses words that show that Nancy is no more than a commodity to her. This is obvious when she negatively talks about her, as we see in this example: "One moment, Henry, she beckoned him back. You don't really mean you will not allow me to dispose of one of my own servants? I think that the way she talks about her is completely humiliating and dehumanizing. Sapphira knows for sure that Nancy has qualities and things that she has already lost, like beauty. We can notice that when we see how Mrs. Blake describes her in this quotation, "Mrs. Blake sat watching Nancy's slender, nimble hands, so flexible that one would say there were no hard bones in them at all; they seemed compressible, like a child's" (p. 787). Even Sapphira herself likes Nancy to serve her guests and admits that Nancy is beautiful, as we notice in this quotation, "until lately, Mrs. Colbert had shown her marked favoritism; gave her pretty clothes to set off her pretty face, and liked to have her in attendance when she had guests or drove abroad" (p. 788).

Sapphira starts to realize that Nancy has become one of the things that preoccupies Henry's mind, as we see in this quotation: "It occurred to her that when they were talking about Bluebell, both she and Henry had been thinking all the while about Nancy. How much she wondered, did each wish to conceal from the other" (p. 809). This is also clear when Henry starts talking about Nancy and defending her: "But I warn you, Sapphira... Nancy is quiet and quick; she knows how I want things," but we notice that Sapphira sarcastically replies to him, attempting to ridicule and belittle Nancy, saying, "Oh, certainly, if you feel that way about it. Why take a small matter so seriously? It's of no importance to me who makes my bed," she added with just a shade of scorn (pp. 813–814).

One of the most noticeable things that Sapphira lacks is happiness, which is clear when comparing Nancy and Sapphira. We notice that Nancy is very easy to please, and some good words are more than enough to make her happy. That's the opposite of what we see in Sapphira, a woman who is hard to please. We can notice how Nancy feels happy when she only receives such expressions as "good morning", as we see in this quotation: "After a while, she fell into the habit of going early, and because she got a smile, along with his "good morning, "child" after her mother and Mrs. Blake, there was no one in the world she loved so much as the master. She had never had a harsh word from him—not many words at any time, to be sure. But his kindly greeting made her happy; that and the feeling she was of some use to him" (p. 814).

Another thing that adds more complications to Sapphira's life is her disease, which she thinks worsens her life and widens the gap with her husband, Colbert. As Clere (2011) notes, the body becomes a central issue in Sapphira's life and a source of threat and terror. Sapphira's loss of emotional control escalates from her incapacity to manage her body. Her growing mental and physical instability foreshadows the collapse of her whole business and indicates a corresponding incapacity to oversee the large number of residents on her estate. She sarcastically portrays herself as a victim in her obsessive self-pity, believing her slaves had "befoiled and hoodwinked" (p. 106) and "deceived and mocked" (p. 105). Notably, Sapphira gains no knowledge from this encounter. When she finds out that night that Nancy and her husband are not together, her doubts about their connection are not reexamined (p. 214).

Sapphira, in the novel, represents the traditional side of her community that is deeply rooted in history, which always reminds her of her true and original sense of identity. Quantic (2002) explains that Sapphira's character is very committed to the domestic rituals of her place. She argues that "Sapphira's dedication to the social code and detailed domestic rituals of the more traditional sections of Virginia keep the local community at arms' length; not even the Colbert's thirty-year stay in this Virginia backwoods town removes their "immigrant" status. However, Sapphira does not seem to mind that she is an outsider. Until her physical condition requires her to use a wheelchair, she is able to go frequently to see family and to "import" family friends and relatives from her own social strata, who come to enjoy the riding and other activities given by the Colberts' country holiday (p. 110). In fact, such representations of domestic ritual and family life constitute a major part of most of Cather's novels. Quantic states, "Cather herself cherished household customs; her contemporaries characterize her as a pleasant, although particular, hostess and chef. These two early career works seem to show the

author's admiration of home landscapes, as seen by her attention to the chaotic space of unsettled regions and the building of well sculpted landscapes by the traditional skills of household ritual. Willa Cather creates situations that, in terms of clarity and selection, are equivalent to views seen beyond the wide frames of laboriously created Dutch paintings through exact writing (p. 120).

Sapphira's jealousy stems from a desperate desire to have a genuine conventional family full of love and security. She desires to get such family privileges that will allow her to become deeper immersed in the comfortable environment of family life, free of distractions, annoyances, and dangers. Quantic (2002) continues to explain that Sapphira's efforts to build a family represent a conservative family tradition, which she has highly aspired to possess since childhood. She says:

Sapphira's attempts to preserve the family's social standing as members of an exclusive leisure class clash with Henry Colbert's commitment to hard labor. One of the tensions that throws off the well-organized breakfast scenario is his inclination for work. He rarely has time for his wife and their household duties since he sleeps at his mill, where he spends a great deal of time. Henry Colbert looks after his mill, rather than enslaving people or having hired staff manage it and withdrawing to a life of a rural gentleman. His mill is lucrative as a consequence, which is unusual in the remote area with few residents. He also exhibits additional signs of his disassociation from conventional Southern society. His unwillingness to sell any of his wife's slaves demonstrates that, in 1854, his beliefs were closer to those of the local democratic movement than they were to his wife's family's customs. He does not wish to break up families or leave them in unfavorable situations. (p. 111)

Obviously, such a dream has not been fulfilled in the end, and her aspiration to control her life remains futile and unfulfilled. It is often contrasted with her husband's indifferent sense of concern for her and his family. Henry Colbert remains a cold husband who unthoughtfully wastes his family time and thus loses a chance to build strong ties with his wife. This is clearly seen in the opening chapter, "where this intricate domestic landscape is established, ends with a final irony: Sapphira, the woman so obviously in control of the domestic scene, is not in control of her physical self; a sufferer from dropsy, she is wheeled from the dining room by Washington" (Quantic, p. 111).

Despite the oppressive atmosphere where Nancy was living, she could always feel happy, and she always tries to make Henry pleased, as Henry says, "so happy she was—free from care, like the flowers and the birds" (p. 815). Henry starts to realize that Nancy is a different servant from others; "he never realized, until Bluebell took her place for two days, how much love and delicate feeling Nancy put into making his bare room as he liked it" (p. 815).

Possibly, Sapphira could notice that the relationship that her husband is having with Nancy is a love relationship. Therefore, she starts to feel jealous of her, and that explains her response when she sees them having a deep conversation together. Sapphira felt that this relationship was not a slave-master relationship; rather, it was a personal relationship that was based on true love. She also suspects that her husband and the servants have completely deceived her, as we notice in this example: "Behind the dark cedars just outside the stone wall, her husband and Nancy stood in deep conversation. The girl was in an attitude of dejection, her head hanging down, her hands clasped together, and the master, whatever he was saying, was speaking very earnestly, with affectionate solicitude. It was personal" (p. 836). Clere (2011) emphasizes that jealousy makes Sapphira's life more disappointing and frustrating because her mind is obsessed with the idea that Henry is having a love affair with Nancy. Such a suspicion was enough to make her life miserable. "The embedded narrative recounting Jezebel's abduction and transport to America, like the inset piece detailing Blind d'Arnault's childhood, wreaks havoc with the impulse to nostalgia that periodically animates both *My Antonia* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. In the latter novel, the process of embracing and then undercutting nostalgia helps form the structure of the text itself. On the night of Sapphira's breakdown, after Nancy has come running into the bedroom (proving that she was not, as Sapphira suspected, at the mill with Henry), Sapphira feels a temporary relief from tension (p. 214).

The idea of obsession with making a stable family is such a prevalent and obvious aspect of the whole novel. First of all, the major character, Sapphira, has been exposed to several social settings where she has been threatened with being deprived of her dream of being a married lady who has a stable social and marital life with her husband, Henry. In fact, the whole novel represents the theme of suffering because of the inability to control one's social space. Quantic (2002) refers to the complexities of the social space in Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Such complexities are often mixed with more sophisticated issues such as race, gender, and class or social status. She says:

There are similarities in the ways Cather uses the domestic landscape to position Sapphira and Antonia in their respective places. The house and outbuildings inhabited by Sapphira Doddridge Colbert's family and the slave girl Nancy and the homes that Antonia Shimerda Cuzak experiences define these women's relationships to the physical and social space around them. Both novels reveal complex environments in which the women attempt to control the domestic space that they inhabit. Three aspects of the domestic landscape—the relationship between setting and structures (here limited to human dwellings)—interest me. First, a dwelling creates a place in a space that has no clear or marked boundaries; that is, an unmarked, undefined space becomes a place. Second, the dwelling exists in a context—the landscape that surrounds it. I am using the term landscape to mean a scene consciously viewed (and thereby altered) by human consciousness. Dwellings alter undifferentiated space so that the viewed landscape limits or expands the observer's view of his or her world. This change arises from the individual observer's perspective and from the design and placement of the structures themselves. Finally, the

spatial arrangement of the built environment (houses and other buildings) affects the social structure of the community; geography is never simply about topography. Arranged in a particular landscape, dwellings reveal the relationships between social classes, economic hierarchies, and even ethnic and religious groups. (p. 104)

First of all, it is very clear that her other husband seems not give her the sense of family life that she is aspiring to have, and therefore, she keeps searching for a lost dream like other married women in her rural town. She has multiple and diverse images of familial wishes, beginning with her own home and ending with a variety of actions and behaviours that constitute an image of complete suspicion and scepticism towards her husband, whom she believes has love affairs with Nancy, her slave girl. The sense of jealousy grows harshly and fiercely in herself, and she cannot imagine her life as good and happy with this gruesome feeling of doubt. It is essential to mention that Sapphira's place is no longer secure for her; she constantly thinks that her privacy is always threatened by the people around her. She struggles hard to have a stable life, but she cannot find the essence of happiness in such a fragile house where she is skeptical of people around her, especially Nancy, the beautiful slave girl. Her house is devoid of family love. Such stifling feelings make her lose the very essence of psychological comfort, signaling that "house in this context means more than Sapphira's literal house or even the land and buildings of the plantation as a whole. Sapphira's house is a fragile edifice made up not only of herself and her family members but also of the people she thinks of as her slaves, whose disloyalty could bring it crashing down around her. Sapphira's house may also be equated with her body, a "life-house," uncontrollable and troubling because of its disability (Clere, 2011, p. 214).

IV. CONCLUSION

Sapphira's jealousy might be based on different incidents and situations that make her suspect a love relationship between Nancy and her husband. Still, this jealousy is only built on suspicions and illusions on Sapphira's part. However, this relationship is somewhat personal, as Sapphira noticed, but certainly not a love relationship, though it might appear so when reading the novel superficially.

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