

Corruption of the Characters in Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*

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Abstract

This writing studies about corruption of the characters in the novel entitled *A Lost Lady* by Willa Cather. The mimetic approach is used to analyze this novel. So in creating art, an author is much influenced by the social condition of society in which he lives or creates, directly or indirectly. It can be learned that progression does not always make people happy but often it brings difficulties and even disaster in their lives. It is also found that the corruption in the new society happens because the characters are unable to endure their passionate nature as well as to adapt with the changing. To anticipate the changing, one must have a strong mentality among other things, by religion or a good education in order that he does not fall into such corruption as the characters in *A Lost Lady*.

Keywords: corruption, ambition, passionate, new values, old values

1. Background of The Study

Willa Sibert Cather, an American novelist, short story writer, essayist, journalist, and poet, was born on December 7, 1896 near Winchester, Virginia, in the fourth generation of an Anglo-Irish family. Her father, Charles F. Cather, and her mother, Mary Virginia Cather, and also their family moved to the town of Red Cloud, Nebraska, when she was nine years old. She grew up a tomboy, dressed as a boy, declared herself a doctor, wore suits and neckties, bobbed her hair and mingled with the children of other ranchers. It was part of her rebellion against the limitation of her sex. She was never married until she died, at the age of 73, of cerebral hemorrhage at her home in New York City.

Miss Cather was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the novel *One of Ours*, and she received the Howells Medal for fiction of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1930. In 1933, she became the first recipient of the Prix Femina Americaine. When she was seventy-one years old, in 1944, the National Institute of Arts and Letters presented her with its society's gold medal.

Alfred Kazin in his *On Native Grounds* says that "the climax in Willa Cather's career came with two short novels she published between 1923 and 1925, *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's house*" (1982:253). The statement makes the writer interested in analyzing *A Lost Lady* because the title itself explicitly shows that the novel tells about women. The other reason that Willa Cather often focused on women as protagonists is clearly seen in some of her novels, like Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!*, Thea Kronborg in *The Song of The Lark*, Antonia Shimerda in *My Antonia*, and Marian Forrester in *A Lost Lady*.

In her society in Nebraska, which consists not only of the American but also of the Englishmen, Danes, Norwegian, and Bohemian, Miss Cather gets what is called woman role and woman tasks. She learns that a woman works in the kitchen: cleaning, cooking, washing, and taking care of her children, household, and her husband. A woman, as a wife, never commands her husband, never use the word "must" to him and has to yield to him whenever they have different opinion. Further, she learns that a wife is not independent on economics and politics: she cannot make a contract, write a will, and free a slave. Even in most of the literature Miss Cather reads, she sees that women take subordinate parts or do not appear at all. On the other hand, male characters become primary actors. But later, "when she learned an important lesson from her mother's books: writing as well as reading could be a female activity" (O'Brien, 1988:40), Willa Cather learns that men as well as women have the same chance in literature, that is, women can write novels and act primary roles.

In 1908, she met Sarah Orne Jewett, a writer whom she admired and whose support strengthened her career as a writer. In the *Willa Cather : The Emerging Voice* Sharon O'Brien observes that "...Jewett gave Cather the loving support and sound literary advice the younger woman needed during a time of professional conflict and self doubt" (1988:335). Another unforgettable woman whose support also takes part in developing her career is

Isabelle Mc. Clung. Her intimacy with Isabelle Mc. Clung causes her to write, especially about women. It is understandable for Mc Clung played many roles for Cather—lover, mother, friend, patron, muse, reader; as Cather later told her friend and colleague,...., Isabelle was the one person for whom all her books had been written (O'Brien, 1988:224).

As mentioned earlier, the writer takes an interest in Willa Cather's novels because they talk about women. In Miss Cather's novels, women description is not completely like what knew in her daily live in Nebraska. She shows us that a woman can be an actress as The Kornbog in The Song of The Lark and a woman can manage an economic matter in her family like Alexandra Bergson in O Pioneers!. Women are not only able to work in the kitchen but also able to make a contract as Marian Forrester in A Lost Lady. Alfred Kazin also says in his On Native Grounds that "her heroines were all pioneers, pioneers on the land and pioneers of the spirit," (1942:252). Thus, it is acceptable that the National Institute of Arts and Letters presented her with its society's gold medal.

In spite of the fact that in most of her novels Willa Cather talks about women as pioneers, in A lost Lady it is seen that she does not only tell about woman as a pioneer but also tells about her corruption. It means that on one side, the heroine—Marian Forrester—is a pioneer but on the other side she is corrupt. The finding makes the writer of this thesis interested in analyzing the corruption. It is also considered that the theme of the novel itself is corruption.

In this analysis, the focus is not only on the heroine's corruption but also on the other characters'. It seems that in the novel, Miss Cather wants to show us the social condition of Nebraska society when the pioneer values that she is proud of began to disappear and is replaced by the new values. What she came to be proud of in the pioneer values are the courage, integrity, and the spirit of working hard. But the values seem to disappear from the society coinciding with the coming of the railroad. Since then, industry's leaders as well as businessmen come from cities to the prairie country. They are sometimes ruthless and dishonest in achieving their goal, that is, to gain money as much as possible. They donot care about other people's lives. They only think about their own lives, wealth, and power. The replacement, as Cather sees, brought about the corruption that she describes in A Lost Lady.

Some points that will be discussed in this thesis are the cause of the corruption, the Forresters' prosperity and downfall, the ambition of the characters to get success and money, and then the immoral and bad conduct committed by the characters.

Talking about corruption means talking about values. The pioneer values—values which is represented by Mr. Forrester and considered as "the primary values" (Kazin, 1942:251)by Willa Cather—has been declined because of the new-values brought by the townspeople. Mr. Forrester who is once deemed as a prosperous man in Sweet Water falls into deep downfall because of the new-values. On the other hand, Ivy Petres who represent the new-values becomes superior in the town because of his wealth.

People become so ambitious to gain money and success that they let any way to achieve them without caring whether it is good or not. They come to be materialists because their ambition and their conduct are no longer based on the morals. They also commit love affair and prostitution for they cannot stand their passionate nature. So materialism and the characters' inability to endure their lust lead to the corruption in the society. Analyzing any literary work, automatically, one should consider any method or approach. There are many approaches often used today but the writer would like to choose the suitable approach in order to limit the research that deals with the study.

Wilbur S. Scott says in his Five of Literary Approaches Criticism (p.123) that Art is not created in a vacuum; it was the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important, because articulate part.

So in creating art, an author is much influenced by the social condition of society in which he lives or creates, directly or indirectly. It also happens to Willa Cather. In ALostLady, for example, she was much influenced by the condition of society where she spent her girl hood. So the suitable approach for this analysis is mimetic, an approach which pays close attantion to the relationship between the work and the universe. It can be found in the American Literature :A Study and Research Guide (1976:46) that says: It views art, including literature, as an

imitation of aspects of the universe, of external and immutable ideas, of external and unchanging patterns of sound, sight, movement of form.

2. Synopsis

Niel Herbert, a boy in the Midwestern town of Sweet Water, tells the story of Marian Forrester –a young lady who brings a knowledge of gracious living to the new town, Sweet Water. Marian Forrester is a youthful wife of Captain Forrester, an old railroad builder and a contractor of the pioneer generation. Her beauty and charms set her apart from her commonplace neighbours, as Mr. Forrester's respectability and prestige do to him. The Captain devotes his life to his wife, but her passionate nature causes her to become the secret lover of his bachelor friend, Frank Ellinger. When Captain Forrester loses his fortune by assuming responsibility in the failure of the bank in Denver, he suffers from a stroke. His wife nurses him carefully, but after his death she is left in destitution. Ivy Peters, a businessman of the new generation buys up her home and properties and then becomes her lover. Niel Herbert regards her as "a lost lady" though he never ceases to admire her. Mrs. Forrester's mansion, and for Niel this symbolizes the end of the great era of the pioneers. Years afterwards, he learns that Mrs. Forrester marries a wealthy Englishman in South America. Niel Herbert still admires her gracefulness, charm and beauty until her death.

3. Corruption Of The Characters In A Lost Lady

What is meant by corruption here is "anything that is depraved or morally corrupted" (Morris, 1969:299). It also means anything that deviates from what is considered right and correct. In this case, the writer would like to relate corruption with characters' conduct in A Lost Lady. So the conduct that is committed by the characters in the novel is considered morally corrupt because it deviates from the right norms. The deviation happens because people become materialists because of their ambition to search money in order to be successful. It can be found in the character of the characters such as Mrs. Forrester, Ivy Peters and Frank Ellinger. Their inability to stand their passionate nature also bring about the deviation.

3.1. Mrs. Forrester's Corruption

All people in Sweet Water know Mrs. Forrester as a good lady as well as they know Mr. Forrester as a good man. Her beauty, charms and graciousness make her popular in the town and even in the other towns, such as Denver and Colorado Springs. When they hear her laugh, it is like "a soft, musical laugh which rose and descended like a suave scale" (Cather, 1972:34). She has beautiful eyes, dark and full of light, set under a low, white forehead and arching eyebrows Her skin had always the fragrant, crystalline whiteness of white lilacs (Cather, 1972:35)

It also described in the novel (Cather, 1972:12) when she greets Mr. Forrester's friends who are visiting them: Even the hardest and coldest of his friend, a certain narrow-faced Lincoln banker, become animated when he took her hand, try to meet the gay challenge in her eyes and to replay cleverly to the droll world of greeting on her lips (Cather, 1972:12).

She often invites her friends from other towns to have dinner in the house. She lets children of the town have picnic around the house and she has a nice way of serving them and it can be felt by the children. When they go for a picnic around the Forrester's house, she gives some cookies for lunch to them. When Niel Herbert falls from the cottonwood tree, she takes care of him patiently in her house and she calls a doctor to come over to the house. She often takes a relaxation with them just for talking and chatting. It makes the children think that Mrs. Forrester is a very special kind of woman that no other townswomen can compare with her. The author describes Niel's mind in the novel:

How strange that she should be here at all, a woman like her among common people! Not even in Denver had he ever seen another woman so elegant. He had never found one so attractive and distinguished as Mrs. Forrester. Compared with her, other women were heavy and dull; even the pretty ones seemed lifeless, (Cather, 1972:41).

Not only people and children who can find her goodness but also her Bohemian servant, Mary, learns it. Mrs. Forrester often lets her go to visit her mother for a week and always helps her do the cooking in the kitchen. When Mr. Forrester falls sick because of his fall with his horse in the mountains, she takes care of him carefully and patiently. As a wife of a respectable and prestigious man, she is able to guard the respectability and prestige.

She does it by performing herself as a respectable and prestigious woman and she succeeds in convincing people that she is respectable and prestigious her beauty, charms, and graciousness. Briefly, people consider her a perfect lady that they come to adore her.

Actually, Mrs. Forrester is not at all a perfect lady as the people think. She is, in fact, a corrupt woman and people do not know because she hides it. All her goodness is just a mask to cover her corruption. She looks kind to children because she feels lonely. She gets no children from her marriage and Mr. Forrester himself is too busy to stay longer with her in the house. As she is respectable lady in the town, people are reluctant to come and talk to her so she needs someone to be her friends. She gets the children as compensation for her loneliness. She shows her loyalty to her husband by taking care of him when he is sick but behind that she has love affair with Frank Ellinger, Mr. Forrester's friend from Denver. They often send love letters to each other without Mr. Forrester's knowing. At night, when Mr. Forrester has gone to bed they have a secret meeting in her room. Frank Ellinger cunningly always uses any chance to meet Mrs. Forrester. She lets Mary go to visit her mother in order that she can meet Frank freely. Once, one of the children, Adolph Blum, sees Mrs. Forrester and Frank Ellinger strolling through the cedar timber behind the hills of Sweet Water to have dinner party at the Forresters. The child sees:

When they come up to sleigh, the man spread the robes on the seat and put his hands under Mrs. Forrester's arms to lift her in. but he did not lift her; he stood for a long while holding her crushed up against his breast, her face hidden in his black overcoat (Cather, 1972:66-67).

But with Adolf Blum, her secret is safe because he does not tell it to other children or people. He does like that because he remembers her kindness to him. She treats him –the son of a tailor- in a good manner though she belongs to the rich family.

She treated him like a human being. His little chats with her, her nod and smile when she passed him on the street, were among the pleasantest things he had to remember (Cather, 1972:68).

For Niel, it is very bad deed for Ellinger to meet Mrs. Forrester when Mr. Forrester is away because he knows that it will stir up a gossip. When he wants to place a bouquet for Mrs. Forrester on the window-sill of her bedroom.

He heard from within a woman's soft laughter; impatient, indulgent, teasing, eager. Then another laugh, very different, man's. and it was fat and lazy,-ended in something like a yawn (Cather, 1972:85).

Niel gets very angry because of that he throws the bouquet into the muddy creek around the Forresters' house. Once, he sees a scandalous event in the house. One summer evening, when he wants to see Mrs. Forrester, he stops a moment by the dining-room window.

The dining-room was open into the kitchen, and there Mrs. Forrester stood at the table, making pastry. Ivy Peters come in at the kitchen door, walked up behind her, and unconcernedly put both arms around her breast. She did not move, did not look up, but went on rolling out pastry (Cather, 1972:169-170).

That is one thing that hurts him very much so that he promises: "Nothing she could ever do would in the least matter to him again" (Cather, 1972:170). One will learn how hurt and disappointed Niel feels because he finds that the goodness he sees in Mrs. Forrester is only a mask to hide her corruption. He has lost one of the most beautiful things in his life. He tells about her: "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds." (Cather, 1972:87).

Niel has given years of his life to help Mrs. Forrester keep her secret from the people. He does that for the sake of the late Mr. Forrester and moreover. He does not want people to insult her because of her secret love affair. And now, he thinks he has to give up for Mrs. Forrester herself throws the help away. He feels that his admiration and loyalty to her are just in vain. She no more hears and cares his voice; she even ignores Mr. Forrester's old friends' advice including the Judge's. She prefers to concern with the fellow like Ivy Peters rather than to care the old friends.

After Mr. Forrester's death, Mrs. Forrester lets everyone unselectively, come and go at the house. She lets Ivy Peters bring his friends to the house to have dinner or just talking and chatting. People see that day by day, he

comes to the house more than ever. Once, Niel talks to Mrs. Forrester that people are gossiping about Ivy's being at the house so often. He heard such comments even on the street. But Mrs. Forrester answers: "But I can't bother about their talk. They have always talked about me, always will" (Cather, 1972:153-154). She does not bother anymore whether people know her secret or not. She does not care when people are talking about her scandal; with Ivy Peters and therefore, people come to know that she has been corrupt. They learn that Mrs. Forrester is good only physically but morally, she is corrupt. Cather illustrates in the novel that: For years Niel and his uncle, the Dalzells and all her friends, had thought of the Captain as a drug upon his wife; a care that drained her and dimmed her and kept her from being all that she might be. But without him, she was like a ship without ballast, driven hither and thither by every wind. She flighty and perverse. She seemed to have lost her faculty of discrimination; her power of easily and graciously keeping everyone in his proper place (Cather, 1972:152-153).

One must remember here that Mr. Forrester is twenty-five years older than Mrs. Forrester. She is still a very young woman when they get married, that is about twenty-five years old. She is not satisfied yet spending her youth. She must still have desire to spend it as other women at her age do. She cannot endure her passionate nature and she knows that Mr. Forrester cannot give her an inner satisfaction anymore. For the reason, she is not able to remain faithful to him while he is alive because she still needs someone to fulfill her passion. Then she seeks for the satisfaction to other men, namely Frank Ellinger and Ivy Peters. But unfortunately, both men leave her after they find her love. It shows that the two men are not serious about their love; they just want to taste her love and then leave her. It also tells us that both men are corrupt and indirectly, they represent the corruption of the society itself.

3.2. Corruption of The Other Characters

Frank Ellinger is known as a "wild man" (Cather, 1972:49) in his society. He, easily, comes and goes from one woman to another; he goes to the prostitutes and even to the married women just to taste their love. He leaves Mrs. Forrester to marry Constance Ogden—a daughter of Mr. Forrester's old friend- at Colorado Springs without Mrs. Forrester's knowing. Many scandalous gossips have been related to him but he does not care about that. From his appearance, one will not think that he is a "wild man" but when they know his conduct, they will learn that actually, he is a corrupt man. Niel explains that "he knew nothing bad about him but he felt something evil" (Cather, 1972:46). In spite of that, many women of the town show that they are sympathetic to Frank Ellinger; they want to have close relationship with him because he is a good-looking man and besides; he is a rich man in Denver. He lives at the Brown Palace Hotel in Denver though he still keeps his house at Colorado Springs.

He was a bachelor of forty, six feet two, with long straight legs, fine shoulders, and a figure that still permitted his white waistcoat to button without a wrinkle under his conspicuously well-cut dinner coat. His black hair, coarse and curly as the filling of the mattress, was grey about the ears, his florid face showed little purple veins about his beaked nose,-a nose like a prow of a ship, with long nostrils. His chin was deeply cleft, his thick curly lips seemed very muscular, very much under his control ... (Cather, 1972, 45-46).

Ivy Peters is also the same as Frank Ellinger. As a young man at the age of Mrs. Forrester, he also has passion to be in love with a woman. But he takes a wrong way in fulfilling his passion because he is in love with married woman, Mrs. Forrester. He does not care whether his conduct is immoral or not. The most important thing for him is to find the love of the beautiful lady. But then, after he succeeds in finding her love, he leaves her at will. He throws her away from the house and brings a new wife from Wyoming to live there. He does not care about Mrs. Forrester's life again because he has found another woman who is more beautiful and attractive. Everyone knows that Ivy can do that because he is rich; he has a lot of money so that women come to be interested in him and are willing to serve him.

The women become infatuated by Ivy Peters and Frank Ellinger—in spite of their corruption- because they want to get their money. It describes that the women themselves have been corrupt for they do not care anymore whether the men they love are good or not. The most important thing for them is how to get money. Again, it shows how the society has been corrupt.

Not different from Frank Ellinger and Ivy Peters, Mr. Orville Ogden—Mr. Forrester's old friend whose daughter is married to Frank Ellinger- is also one who is corrupt in the novel. Mr. Ogden is a man of fifty, "with a cast in

one eye, a stiff imperial, and twisted moustaches” (Cather, 1972:45). In spite of his being married, as Niel often hears from his uncle that “Mr. Ogden admired pretty women, though he had married a homely one” (Cather, 1972:152). People often pay attention to him that:

When Mrs. Forrester addressed him, or passed near him, his good eye twinkled and followed her –while the eye that looked askance remained unchanged and committed itself to nothing (Cather, 1972:45). Mr. Ogden knows that Mrs. Forrester needs a lot of money. Therefore, he tries to help her by getting a special increase of Mr. Forrester’s pension. Everyone knows that one who is falling in love will do everything in order to make his lover happy. That is what happens to Mr. Ogden.

From the description above, it can be seen that Mrs. Forrester is the focus of the corruption for compared with other characters. She gives more chance to create scandal. She cannot endure her passionate nature and moreover, she needs much money so it is understandable that she, then, conduct scandal with other men, namely Frank Ellinger and Ivy Peters. She is unable to remain faithful to her husband. As John H. Randall III says in The Landscape and the Looking Glass that : Marian Forrester’s union with the Captain is threatened by forces from without and within. Not only does the change in civilization threaten the moral values on which the marriage is based, but the deterioration of Mrs. Forrester’s character imperils the union ... (1979:102). Therefore, Granville Hicks in The Case Against Willa Cather says that Mrs. Forrester is “the symbol of the corruption that had overtaken the age” (1979:98)

4. Conclusion

From the description in the previous chapters, it can be learned that progression does not always make us happy but often it brings difficulties and even disaster in our lives. The coming of the railroad to Sweet Water is supposed to make the better transportation in the town so that people who want to invest money in the town, for example, by building business centers such as, hotels, banks, and shopping centers, go back and forth easily. Because of the coming of the railroad and the townspeople, the town becomes crowded. But inevitably, the coming also brings difficulties and creates disaster in the lives of people in the town.

The townspeople bring new-values to the town, values of a commerce era where people only think of how to get money and profit from the money they invest as much as possible. They become materialists because of their ambition. As a consequence, they do not care about other people’s lives; they ignore other people’s interest just for the sake of money. They are getting selfish and cowardly. Selfishness, cowardice, and spirit of getting power and money as much as possible are characteristics of the new-values holder.

Mr. Forrester is one who fails to survive in the new era because he does not adapt himself to the new-values. He keeps on holding the old-values because according to him, this is the best values in the world. He does not realize that the values no longer work in the era of commerce; the values has been declined because of the new-values. It means that the old-values, namely unselfishness, helpfulness, financial integrity, courage to face any challenge in life and spirit of working hard, have been disappeared and replaced by the new-values. It also means that the era of pioneer has been changed by the era of commerce; that is symbolized by Mr. Forrester’s downfall and death.

The new-values brought by the townspeople creates a new society in the town; a society in which deviation from the right norms is considered as a usual thing. A wife has love affair with a bachelor; a husband falls in love with other wife and a man commits prostitution; these are common in the society.

Mrs. Forrester who is considered as a respectable and a prestigious lady –a beautiful, gracious, and charming woman- is only good physically but morally, she is corrupt. She commits love affair with Frank Ellinger because she is unable to endure her passionate nature and neither is Frank Ellinger. Mrs. Forrester is willing to serve and does anything for a brutal man like Ivy Peters; she even dares sacrifice her self-esteem to find him just for the sake of money. Besides, Mrs. Forrester’s love, Ivy Peters tries hard to find her in order to own the Forresters’ mansion and properties. He throws her away from the house after he gets the properties. So it is found here that the corruption in the new society happens because the characters are unable to endure their passionate nature. Besides, they are so ambitious to get money and success that they carry out an effort without caring about whether the way is right or wrong.

Then it comes to be learned what Willa Cather means by “A Lost Lady” in the novel. It deals with the explicit as well as implicit meaning. Explicitly, the title means that the lady, Marian Forrester, is lost from her society after Mr. Forrester’s death. Being thrown away from the house by Ivy Peters, she goes to childhood home, California; people around her do not know when and where she goes. Implicitly, Marian Forrester is lost from the moral values.

From the above description, we learn that living in such a changing era as Mrs. Forrester’s and the other characters’ in the novel, one should be able to keenly find which is good and which is bad for him. To anticipate the changing, one must have a strong mentality among other things, by religion or a good education in order that he does not fall into such corruption as the characters in A Lost Lady.

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