3. Investigation of Willa Cather’s Use of the Home in *A Lost Lady:* Idealism vs. Materialism in the Public and Private Spheres

Willa Cather’s *A Lost Lady* demonstrates Cather’s ability to hinge the private and public lives of her characters on the physical representation of the homes they inhabit, allowing her to reveal a broader range of their physical and emotional nature, and provide an fascinating insight into the public and private lives of her characters and the reflection they have on American ideals. The home of the foresters represents their powerful and influential public appearance to the outside world, while simultaneously allowing them the privacy to conceal their faults and hold mystique to the public eye. From the beginning of the novel Mr. Forrester holds a remarkable image, and creates a romantic, idealized view of the Forrester home to be built upon the hill. Throughout the novel Cather presents one facet of the home as a reflection of him. The marshes of their home particularly reflect the antiquated ways of Mr. Forrester, and the later sale of the marsh to Ivey Peters mimics the diminishing power of Mr. Forrester. This creates a simultaneously claustrophobic space physically and emotionally for Mrs. Forrester, showing another facet of her connection to their home. This exemplifies the connection of the home with Mrs. Forrester, and as she continues the fall from grace in the novel so does the house fall into shambles. Cather also provides Neil, coming from a less than ideal home, as a sort of objective view to investigate the Forrester’s situation. In the closing section of the book Cather unveils the illusion of Mrs. Forrester’s charm, as she becomes a shadow of her former self after the death of Mr. Forrester, Cather exemplifies this in the opening sequence of the book: ‘Stripped of it’s vines and denuded of its shrubbery, the house would probably have been ugly enough.’ The parallel that Cather draws between Mr. Forrester’s idealism and it’s necessity for their home in the public and private spheres draw insights into the views of Cather on the frontier and the pioneer ideals of the past.

Cather presents Mr. Forrester as representative American man, portraying him as a part of the integral ‘railroad aristocracy of that time.’ The Burlington railroad is the physical way of traversing the great west plains, but it was also a social connection to be ‘connected with the Burlington. ’ (3) It represented power and status, and is the way Mr. Forrester builds his success. In this way Cather is able to display Mr. Forrester’s connection with the land, physically and socially. She then associates him with the myth of American ideal, and in his account of his earlier life he even describes embarking across the parries as ‘an ideal life for a young man.’ This leads into the founding story of their home, founded on ‘an Indian encampment near the Sweet Water.’ (42) The founding on an Indian encampment is an especially strong association with the land, and with the time before the industrialization that Mr. Forrester doesn’t submit to. This connection with the land and the Indians that Cather builds into Mr. Forrester’s character plays a key role in setting the tension between him and Ivey Peters as Mrs. Forrester later invests money with Peters that he uses to ‘cheat Indians’ (106) out of their land. Mr. Forrester holds this nobility and idealism of America that Cather conveys as lost on future generations, and his houses association with the Indian encampment strengthens these features in his character. Also in keeping Mr. Forrester’s themes of idealism of America, he found the Indian encampment ‘on this very hill where the house now stood. He was, he said, “greatly taken with the location,” and made up his mind that one day he would have a house there.’ (42) This idea of building his house upon a hill is a common theme in American literature, as an example of perfection, and an ideal for American society. At the end of this founding story Mr. Forrester describes his philosophy of life and how ‘All our great west has been developed from such dreams; the homesteader’s and the prospector’s and the contractor’s. We dreamed the railroads across the mountains, just as I dreamed my place on the Sweet Water.’(45) Cather presents Mr. Forrester as a model for classic American culture, and uses themes of the idea home to solidify these ideals.

The home in many sources can be seen as a physical manifestation of ones public appearance. Cather uses Mr. Forrester to present these ideals in the home of public appearance. In his envisioning of the home, before it’s conception, he ‘where [he] would dig [his] well, where he would plant his orchard. [He] planned to build a house that [his] friends could come to, with a wife like Mr. Forrester to make it attractive.’ (43) This notion of building a house for the benefit of others, in order to social approval, is deeply engrained in American culture. The Forrester home is the physical representation of their public persona, and provides an insight into the relationships between characters. Mr. Forrester, in this segment, imagines his wife, Mrs. Forrester, as complimentary to his house. She is an addition to ‘make it attractive’ (43) in order to promote his public appearance. Public appearance is plays a critical role in the characters behaviour, and controls how they conduct their privacy. Cather could be using this abuse of public appearance of the house to comment on the current obsession on appearance.

Cather uses Mrs. Forrester as the emotional representation of the home, where at its high she is adored by all around her, but as it decays she becomes a shadow of her former self. As Mr. Forrester fills ‘the house of narcissus and Roman hyacinths’ and he physically expands the house to include ‘a little glass conservatory on the south side of the house’ the house seems to be in great shape, despite the winter. However, Neil attributes this to Mrs. Forrester, because ‘Where Mrs. Forrester was, dullness was impossible.’ (58) Mrs. Forrester throughout the novel plays as a conduit for the energy of the house. As Mr. Forrester’s health declines, so does Mrs. Forrester’s ability to keep up the illusion of attraction. The house begins to feel like a trap for her, she feels like she’s ‘been shut up too long,’ and then once Mr. Forrester is asleep says to Neil ‘Lets run down the hill. There’s no one to stop us. I’ll slip on my rubber boots. No Objections!’ (63) This longing to ‘run down the hill’ is Cather suggesting a flaw in the house upon the hill, the idea of the ideal. Through Mrs. Forrester she is portraying a critique of American myth. She continues this idea with Mrs. Forrester loosing hold of her grasp on the public appearance of the house:

“That house! Nothing is ever done unless I do it, and nothing ever moves unless I move it. That’s why I come down herein the afternoon, -to get where I can’t see the house. I can’t keep it up as it should be kept. I’m not strong enough. Oh, yes, Ben helps me; he sweeps and beats the rugs and washes the windows, but that doesn’t get a house very far.” (95)

Here Cather is using the house, in it’s declining state, is representative of the public appearance of the couple in general, and with the declining health of Mr. Forrester it is too much for Mrs. Forrester to keep up with. For Mrs. Forrester to long to be out of sight of the house suggests the sheer importance of public appearance in her eyes. For her not ‘keep it up as it should be kept’ is crucial in Cather’s point; that there is a certain set ideal to be striven towards that heavily relies on physical, emotion, and social public appearance. Cather is using this situation to show that it takes more than superficial housekeeping to keep up with the ideal that started, and the overhanging theme of Cather’s critical view of the ‘city upon a hill, American ideals, concept at all.

This passage leads to a fundamental tension in the novel between the idealistic Mr. Forrester, and the materialistic Ivey Peters, with Mrs. Forrester migrating from idealism to the materialism through the narrative. A key moment in the novel is the sale of the marsh to Ivey Peters. With the loss of the property a fundamental part of Mr. Forrester’s ideal is lost. This is exemplified in the opening of the book as ‘any one but Captain Forrester would have drained the bottom of the land and turned it into highly productive fields. But he had selected this place long ago and it looked beautiful to him.’ (5) This idea of beauty over material is central between the tension between Forrester and Peters. Mr. Forrester has the idealized preconceptions of public appearance over money, which is a central conflict between the romantic view of the American dream of pastoralism and home vs. industrialization. Once Peters tells Neil he has ‘drained the old marsh and put it into wheat’ (88) it represents this loss of beauty and public favour in Neil’s eyes. Neil here is a kind of objective, outside point of view, to cast insight into the situation, as he comes from a poorer home, of which he finds that his ‘home was not a pleasant place to go to’ (21) and so adopts the home and ideals of Mr. Forrester, however not for the better. Cather uses Neil to reflect on the conflict between Forrester and Neil who comes to understand that dream that Mr. Forrester’s home represents is just how losing the industry of Ivey Peters:

“The old west had been settled by dreamers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence... that could conquer, but could not hold. Now all the vast territory they had won would be at the mercy of men like Ivey Peters… The space, the colour, the princely carelessness of the pioneer they would destroy and cut up into profitable bits… exactly what Ivey Peters had done with when he drained the Forrester marsh.” (90)

Cather shows how the physical diminishing of the Forrester property represents the diminishment of the American ideals to the future of industry, continuing her critique of the dreaminess of the pioneers. She does this in a way that is not critical of the views that she presents in the Forrester’s, but simply the reality of American ideal.

Cather presents Mrs. Forrester’s transition from the idealism of Mr. Forrester to materialism of Peters throughout the novel inevitability of pioneer’s view of the ‘old west.’ This also is represented by the loss of privacy in the house as the narrative progresses. As Mr. Forrester represents the ideal of the home, by rendering him helpless Cather is stripping the home of is public appearance, and leaving it without privacy, but the gossips of the town find ‘nothing remarkable about the place at all!’ (118) Cather uses their loss of public and private lives to show the importance of Mr. Forrester’s ideal to the meaning of the home. ‘The Forrester place, as everyone calls it, was not at all remarkable; the people who lived there made it seem larger and finer than it was,’ because the house stands for the openness of the west, the frontier, and fault of the future strips it of that meaning.

Cather presents a solemn narrative in *A Lost Lady* to describe her attitude of the pioneer principles, and makes specific use of the home in order to display the consequences of loosing idealism to materialism. Public appearance and private lives play a critical role in this interpretation, where the American myths such as the ‘city upon a hill’ build the basis for Mr. Forrester’s philosophies. Through a thorough investigation it is clear that Cather presents the American ideals of the past as romantic, but ultimately unrealistic.

Bibliography:

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