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LANGUAGE AND GENDER: THE SECRET BEHIND WILLA CATHER'S USE OF A MALE NARRATOR IN MY ANTONIA

Abstract

The research seeks to show how language can unravel issues relevant to an author's identity and gender. It is an analytical study from a biographical perspective of Willa Cather's novel *My Antonia*. It aims at showing how Cather's language can help in revealing something about her identity. The study investigates the reason behind Cather's use of a male narrator, Jim Burden, in a novel written by a woman and it is about a female character Antonia. The analysis shows that the secret behind Cather's use of a male narrator is her lesbian identity and through the use of a male narrator, she hides her lesbianism. Consequently, Cather's language exposes her gender identity and proves that an author's language can help in decoding something about his/her identity especially in modern times where the distinct gender boundaries are violated.

Keywords: gender, language, lesbian identity, male narrator, My Antonia

1-Introduction

In modern society, one outstanding issue is identity formation in relation to gender. While traditional gender roles are clearly set and differentiated between men and women, the boundaries between the two genders in modern life and literature are blurred and transgressed. In modern American literature, Willa Cather's *My Antonia* is an epitome of fluctuating unconventional gender issues. Cather's novel is known not only for its subject matter, but also for its departure from the conventional gender roles and traditional female narrative style. Concerning the subject matter, Cather's literary work brought something new in American literature. *My Antonia* is about the immigrants in the United States and Cather is most well known as a regionalist writer or a local color writer. In addition, despite the fact that Cather is a female writing about women, she uses a male narrator in *My Antonia* which is a new narrative device in the sense that Cather utterly transforms the conventional form of the novel. In fact, the presence of a male narrator, Jim Burden, raises heated and ceaseless debates among critics and readers. What is peculiar and queer in the novel is not the use of a male narrator to tell the story of a female, Antonia, but the use of a male narrator in a novel written by a woman, Willa Cather. The use of a male narrator by a female writer to talk about a female protagonist is said to be the focus of much literary criticism. Many critics question the position of the male narrator, Jim Burden in women's realm. Cather deconstructs conventions by providing a new narrative technique and opposing other female writers. Moreover, the novel

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not only blurs the narrative by viewing Antonia from Jim's lens, it also displays Cather's ambivalent attitude towards gender binaries and gender roles. In other words, what is Cather's aim behind using a male narrator, Jim Burden, instead of a female narrator? Is Jim Burden a mask to disguise Cather's true identity? Is there queer texture in *My Antonia*? Does it display lesbian undercurrents? and how language can reveal the author's gender identity? The present paper is an analytical study from a biographical viewpoint to decode the secret behind Cather's use of a male narrator.

2- Theoretical Framework

Many critics comment on Cather's uncommon practice of using a male narrator and for that reason she felt obliged to defend her choice. *My Antonia* is based on a real story of Cather's friend, a bohemian immigrant, called Annie Sadilek Pavelka. Cather used a male narrator because "most of what she knew about Annie came from talks with young men... Thus Cather created as narrator Jim Burden, whose age, experience, and personal history closely parallel her own" (Woodress, 1987, p. 289). In addition, concerning the characters themselves in *My Antonia*, Jim is the narrator and not Antonia because he is more educated than she is. He is an American lawyer and well educated so he is able to use words to be literary works.

Although Cather defended her use of a male narrator, her explanation, for many critics, represents only the tip of the iceberg. Her reasons for using a male narrator are not convincing. Even Cather herself once confessed that *My Antonia* is an ambiguous and illusive novel. She states:

If one is going to do new business the patterns cannot help, though one does not deliberately go out to do that. *My Antonia*, for instance, is just the other side of the rug, the pattern that is supposed not to count in a story. In it there is no love affair, no courtship, no marriage, no broken heart, no struggle for success. I knew I'd ruin my material if I put it in the usual fictional pattern. I just used it the way I thought absolutely true. (as cited in Benfey, 1994, p. 141)

In other words, there are two sides of the rug that represents the plot; the familiar side which includes a love story and broken hearts and the unfamiliar one like *My Antonia* which lacks love affairs.

Another meaning for her metaphor is that patterns of novels suggest something concealed, something "slipped under the rug" (Benfey, 1994, p. 141). Readers and critics should act as active detectives to decode the secret and find out the subtext in the literary texts. Furthermore, in her essay "The Novel D meubl ", Cather (1922) points out to something unnamed and absent in the text:

Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there – that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to the poetry itself. (p. 6)

It is necessary to focus on the verbal mood and the emotional aura of the thing to detect Cather's most disputable phrase "the thing not named". Sarah Jewett, her friend and literary mentor, views Cather's use of a male narrator as a masquerade for something hidden and unnamed for which Sharon O'Brien (1984) claims that "the unnamed thing" is Cather's lesbian identity.

Despite the fact that Cather denied and disguised her lesbianism, her literary works unconsciously reveal her true identity. Her language can help in unravelling her blurred identity. She uses a male narrator not only in *My Antonia*, but also in other novels.

3- The Analysis of Cather's *My Antonia*

In *My Antonia*, Cather uses a male narrator, Jim Burden, to disguise her lesbian identity and to express her love to women via a male's voice to appear as a natural heterosexual love and not a lesbian one. In fact, there is juxtaposition between Jim and Cather's stories. Many critics state that Jim Burden is a reflection of Willa Cather. Reading the novel from a biographical perspective, many aspects of the novel can be found in Cather's life and Jim is a representative of her voice in the sense that Cather weaves her personal life and transforms her lesbian identity to her literary works.

Both Cather and Jim share certain affinities and similarities. They are Americans, born in Virginia then moved to Nebraska where they enjoyed their life in the prairie. Jim Burden moved to the town Black Hawk as Cather moved to Red Cloud Town. After finishing high school education, both Jim and Cather went to the university in Lincoln and after graduation, they looked for career. Not only their journey from place to place is similar, their interests are alike; for instance, they are fond of music, dancing and theatre. Cather expressed her appreciations of theatre and arts through Jim. For instance, Jim likes dancing and he went with Lena to theatre. Woodress (1987), Cather's biographer, summarizes the similarities between her life and the novel *My Antonia* by saying:

Jim's grandparents were drawn from Cather's grandparents; the entire miner family ...plays roles in the story; and Herbert Bates, one of Cather's professors at the university of Nebraska, appears as Gaston Cleric, Jim's college teacher. Minor figures and events also are rooted in actuality. The Black pianist, Blind d'Arnault, who plays in Black Hawk, was drawn from a real blind Tom, whom Cather heard in Lincoln and a blind Boone, whom she probably heard in Red Cloud. The visitor to the town today can see the home of the original Wick Cutter, a loan -shark named Bentley, who apparently was as evil and unsavory as Cather makes him. The hotel-keeping Mrs. Gardener in the novel was real Mrs. Holland, and the man who fathered Antonia's first child out of wedlock was James William Murphy. (p.38)

Cather, a female writer, arranged Jim to be a male narrator to transmit her lesbian identity and to transfer her affections to women through Jim so that her love seems natural and acceptable. "It seems safe to suggest that Jim is Cather's alter ego" (Mainiero, 2000, p. 175). She disguises her true lesbian identity through the use of a male narrator to the extent that Fetterley (1990) comments by saying:

“Often we forget that we are listening to Jim Burden... and we assume instead that we are hearing the voice of Willa Cather” (p.58) due to the common characteristics between Cather and Jim.

In *My Antonia*, there is something queer that floats to the surface, but the queerest thing is the character Jim Burden. He is such a perplexing and paradoxical character. He is not only the male persona for Cather the female writer, he is also a hybrid character of both masculine and feminine qualities. “People said there must be something queer about a boy who showed no interest in girls of his own age, but who could be lively enough when he was with Tony and Lena or the three Marys” (Cather, 1994, p. 172). In fact, the words “queer” and “gay” recur several times throughout the novel and both of them indicate a connotation with homosexuality and lesbianism. They imply behaviour and personality that are strange and odd. Although Cather denies her lesbianism, her language in her novel, *My Antonia*, manifests her secret. The queer takes place as a “process of making and unmaking, settling and unsettling that operates at times on the surfaces and at times on the deep structures of her fiction” (Lindemann, 1999, p. 4). Jim Burden is not only queer, he is also a burden as his name indicates. He is used to hide Cather’s lesbian identity.

Although Jim Burden is a male, he has many feminine and childish characteristics and his manliness raises ceaseless discussions. He has childish and impulsive nature from the beginning of the novel till the end. He is portrayed as “a romantic person” (Cather, 1994, p. 181) seeing life from female perspective and he is, unlike other men, weak, meek, passive and submissive. O’Brien (1984) ascertains: “A male character is not ‘really’ male but female...her male characters engaged in love affairs are not male at all” (p. 597). At the beginning of the novel, the anonymous narrator says: “though [Jim] is over forty now, he meets new people and new enterprises with the impulsiveness by which his boyhood friends remember him. He never seems to me to grow older” (Cather, 1994, p. 3). In his childhood, Jim has female playmates and not males that affect his personality. However, when he moves to Black Hawk, he is obliged to behave like a boy. “[He] was quite another boy, or thought [he] was. Suddenly put down among boys of [his] own age, [he] found [he] had a great deal to learn” (p.119). In addition, Antonia “thought of [him] only as a little boy” (p.103). Another episode which shows Jim’s weakness is the snake episode. Although he kills the snake, the scene is pregnant with irony because the snake makes him “sick... seasick” (p. 41). The snake is lying forming the letter “W”. “The ‘W’ is capitalized, suggesting a proper name. This ‘W’ not only is a foreshortened Willa... but enacts in advance the scene of castration/ decapitation that Jim performs” (Butler, 1993, p. 151). In other words, Jim is a castrated man who represents Cather (Willa or William) the female.

Another scene that shows Jim’s weakness is when Cutter attempts to rape Antonia. Instead of fighting back to Cutter, Jim escapes and he turns his rage and anger to Antonia. He is not proud of himself for saving Antonia from raping, but he is angry and disgusted because he does not want to admit his weakness. Jim is also passive and submissive. When professor Gaston asks him to leave Lena in order to continue his studies in Harvard, he accepts the offer after getting the

permission of his grandparents, but he actually does not wish to go. "To [his] astonishment, grandfather replied that [he] might go if [he] wished. [He] was both glad and sorry on the day when the letter came" (Cather, 1994, p. 227). At the end of the novel, Jim remains a child even if he is a lawyer. He has such a good relation with Antonia's children that "he felt like a boy in their company" (p. 269). Thus, he represents many feminine characteristics and is effeminate.

Albeit Antonia is a female character, she also shows masculine characteristics in terms of her physical appearance and behavior. After the death of her father, she wears his attire. "She wore the boots her father had so thoughtfully taken off before he shot himself, and his old fur up" (p. 60). Antonia takes a masculine role and abandons her delicate feminine qualities. In addition, her behavior also shows masculine features. Jim Burden describes her by saying: "everything was disagreeable to me. Antonia ate so noisily now, like a man, and she yawned often at the table and kept stretching her arms over her head" (p.62). Antonia announces several times that she can work like a man and she challenges men in doing their work. In the whole story, she shows masculine characteristics. Consequently, Cather's characters, Jim and Antonia, have androgynous qualities.

Concerning the relationship between Jim and Antonia, it is not a healthy heterosexual relation. It is based on nostalgia rather than on love and desire. Their relation seems anything but a heterosexual love. It is like the relation of Cather with her female friends. Actually, readers expect, at any moment, Jim's proposal for marriage, but he never proposes to Antonia. Although Jim and Antonia are the heart of the story, their relationship declines after childhood and "at the very center of [Jim's] relationship with Antonia there is emptiness" (Brown, 1953, p. 202). In their childhood, Antonia gave a ring to Jim, but he "didn't want her ring" (Cather, 1994, p. 27). At Black Hawk, Antonia also refused Jim's kiss because she considered him as her brother. She says: "Why, Jim! You know you ain't right to kiss me like that. I'll tell your grandmother on you!" (p.177). Not only in real life their relationship is not good, it is also in dreams. Jim never dreamt about Antonia because his love is not based on desire. Rather, it is based on memories and nostalgia to the past. Jim states:

One dream I dreamed a great many times, and it was always the same. I was in the harvest-field...Lena Lingard came across the stubble...She sat down beside me ...and said, 'Now they are all gone, and I can kiss you as much as I like' I used to wish I could have this flattering dream about Antonia, but I never did. (p. 179)

Jim actually shows his fear of Lena who represents a new independent woman who defies traditional gender qualities of women by pursuing him. Most importantly, Jim never had the same erotic dream in relation to Antonia which shows his blurred gender identity. In addition, Jim stresses the importance of Antonia as "a woman" and not as a wife in his life. What he wants is that Antonia should be present in his life as a mother, sister, or a wife. What is important for him is the presence of a woman. Jim confesses to Antonia: "I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister" (p. 251). All he wishes is to have a woman in his life.

Through the use of a male narrator, Cather can express her love and passion to another woman without appearing as unnatural love. She disguises her lesbian identity through the use of a male narrator that “enables Cather to speak from her own sexual identity and express her own emotions for women” (Hermione, 1991, p. 153). Lambert (1982) also opines that “Cather’s fear is pervasive and dominates the development of *My Antonia*, so that the narrative structure itself becomes a defense against erotic expression” (p. 682). The male narrator Jim Burden is a masquerade to her lesbian identity. However, her language in *My Antonia* reveals her secret. In a society and historical era where gender boundaries are clearly set, Cather was afraid to expose her lesbianism, so she transforms her gender confusion to her literary work.

In addition, scrutinizing her biography, Willa Cather is a lesbian writer and she has a blurring attitude towards gender roles. As a child, she denied the limitations imposed on women and did not accept her feminine gender role. Cather looks like a man by adopting both male’s name and attire. She decided to be a doctor and signed her name “William Cather, MD” or “Willie Cather MD”. She cross dressed by wearing boyish clothes and cut her hair like a boy. “At college in Lincoln, her appearance is boyishly short hair and starched shirts rather than the customary frilly blouses-like her desire to play only male roles in college dramatic productions- continued to reflect her ‘male’ ambition” (Lambert, 1982, p. 678). Not only at college Cather dressed and acted as a man, she

continued to cut her hair short for at least her first year at the university and wore starched shirts like a man instead of feminine shirtwaists; she did put on skirts, though she wore them shorter than most women, daringly short...She also continued taking male roles in dramatic productions and singing her name William Cather. (Woodress, 1987, p. 69)

Changing her name and dress is her declaration to change her gender. Cather’s transformation and association with man’s appearance and personality represent a different personality and prediction to a lesbian personality. O’Brien (1984) asserts the following:

Her attraction to a rebellious posture thus anticipates her acceptance of an identity linked with ‘unnaturalness’ a few years later...since lesbianism was frequently associated...with ‘inversion’ a young woman who had defiantly adopted male dress and name in adolescence might well have been more aware that her attraction to other women was ‘deviant’ than one who was strongly female identified. (p. 587)

Her behavior in her early childhood and adolescence paved the way to her blurred gender identity and she transforms her behavior to her characters. Like Cather, Antonia wears men’s attire and behaves like men.

Furthermore, Cather never married, but she had strong romantic relations with many women, “After the affair with Louise [Pound] ended she found more stable, nurturing relationships, first with Isabelle McClung and then with Edith Lewis” (O’Brien, 1984, p. 590). She sent them many affectionate letters that are “central to establishing her sexual identity” (p. 580). Her lesbian identity was clearer after McClung was married to Jan Hambourg. “The great passion of

Cather's life seems to have been for Isabelle McClung...Just before she began work on *My Antonia*, she was alarmed to learn that Isabelle McClung had married" (Vaughn as cited in Cather, 1994, p. xxi). Cather suffered from emotional trauma and myriad emotions of jealousy and depression. To comfort herself, Cather turned to words and literary works that deliberately or undeliberately reflect her lesbian identity.

Cather manifests her lesbianism not only in her personal life, but in her literary life too. Cather is "a lesbian writer forced to disguise or to conceal the emotional source of her fiction, reassuring herself that the reader fills the absence in the text by intuiting the subterranean, unwritten subtext" (O'Brien, 1984, p. 577). She was unable to expose her lesbianism, so she embodies it in her language. Lambert (1982) states that "she could not, or did not, acknowledge her homosexuality and who, in her fiction, trans- formed her emotional life and experiences into acceptable, hetero- sexual forms and guises" (p. 676). Because she is a lesbian, she is "encoding a lesbian attachment whenever she was writing of heterosexual love... The heterosexual cover story is not then invariably the false one, the lesbian context the real" (O'Brien, 1984, p. 597). In fact, before her death, she asked for burning all her correspondences that were most of them with women. She wants to conceal evidences of her lesbianism. Yet, fortunately, there are remaining letters that show her gender identity that can help in interpreting her literary texts.

Willa Cather's novel *My Antonia* seems, at first glance, easy and clear, but it actually hides a myriad of meanings by reading it from different angles. It consciously or unconsciously reveals Cather's lesbian identity. "The tension between expression and suppression, revealing and concealing, produced fiction that is subtle, richly symbolic, and ambiguous, enriched by the repressed, the hidden and the covert" (O'Brien, 1984, p. 598). Although Cather uses a male narrator, Jim Burden who is Cather herself to disguise her queer identity, her lesbian identity cannot go unnoticed. Lambert (1982) opines the following: "these disguised relationships are characterized by an irrational, hopeless quality and by the fact that the male member of the couple, who is also the central consciousness of the novel, is convincingly male-is, in fact, female and lesbian" (p.682). Thus, Cather's use of a male mask, characters' portrayal and male-female relationships manifest her lesbian identity because she represents unnatural lesbian relationships rather than a heterosexual love.

4-Conclusion

Consequently, the study vindicates that Cather's *My Antonia* embodies blurred gender roles in relation to both male and female characters. Cather's characters are obscure, androgynous and they show confusion of gender identity. Through the analysis of the novel from a biographical standpoint, it is found that the secret behind her use of a male narrator in a novel that is merely about a female character and females' issues is to hide her lesbian identity. Hence, Cather's language unravels a disguised aspect of her gender identity. In other words, an author's language can greatly help in decoding something relevant to his/her identity and this is clearly demonstrated through the analytical study of Cather's *My Antonia*. Cather's language is clearly tied to her gender. So, the

relationship between language and gender is an important issue worth investigation especially in modern society and literature where the boundaries between the two genders are fluctuated. Yet, this is only one possible interpretation and Cather's use of a male narrator is open to further future research.

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