

Analysis of theme in willa cather's a lost lady

Business



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Central Themes in A Lost Lady * In Willa Cather's A Lost Lady (1923), the author tells a story of a boy named Neil who's growth into manhood is molded by the Forresters; the Captain who represented the pioneer spirit of the old west in the United States, and the beautiful Marian whom he idolized to such an extent that her moral downfall initiated his loss of innocence. As he grows up, his family, friends, and his home of Sweet Water change.

Where the Forresters were once the pillars of grandeur and dignity, they fall into poverty and sickness. The Captain's passing signifies the end of a time when those who shaped the country prospered in its unsoiled splendor. Marian's affair and her surrender to Ivy Peter's signifies the change to an age when moral compromises became commonplace, and the land is raped of its natural wonder to gain money and power.

Loss, change, and growth from change shape his character, just as the relationships of those around him to the land display the changes in society and the end of the pioneer era. Of the many themes Cather presents, one of importance is the relationship the characters have with nature. Captain Forrester represents the awe and splendor of progression and advancement that does not spoil the environment. Even though he is a hardy railroad man who made his fortune laying train tracks across the country for man's use, he takes great pleasure in his home in Sweet Water. He relishes in the untouched exquisiteness of his property, refusing to drain the marsh.

He won't allow hunting on his land, and spends hours at a time caring for and gazing upon his precious roses.

The great care the Captain puts in to his roses signifies not only his bond with nature, but also his desire to possess and admire something beautiful that belongs to him. This can be compared to his relationship with Marian. He observes and adores her. He does not have a physical or emotional connection with her. He merely wants to have her as something pretty that is his alone, that he can care for and provide for.

He enjoys when people admire his wife, as if she is an object of adoration rather than affection. The first time we see Marian; she is arranging roses in a decorative bowl.

This foreshadows the connection between Marian and the roses, as if to say she the visage of natural beauty, but dangerous to get close to. Neil cuts wild roses to surprise her, a symbol of youthful love. Yet as every rose has its thorn, he catches her with Frank Ellinger, and discards them in the mud; a display of rage at her infidelity.

He feels that " It was not a moral scruple she had outraged, but an aesthetic ideal" (72). Neil's image of Marian as the perfect woman has been shattered. The thorns of her adulterous conduct have pricked his heart.

Ivy Peters is a direct contrast to the Captain. From the beginning, Ivy is rude, selfish, and vile.

He holds no respect for the Captain's land, or the creatures that dwell there. Ivy demonstrated early on his hatred for nature and the joy he gets from destruction. * " He held the woodpecker's head in a vice made of his thumb and forefinger, enclosing its pants body with his palm. Quick as a flash, as if

it were a practiced trick, with one of those tiny blades he slit both eyes that glared in the bird's stupid little head, and instantly released it" 17).

This violence, along with the rumor of him killing the neighborhood dogs, foreshadows the kind of man Ivy becomes.

Eventually, he buys the land from the Forresters to save them from poverty, but only to have them submit to his mercy. He drains the marsh that the boys use to play in. He not only uses it for profit, he enjoys seeing it gone. He has proven his dominance over the Forresters, just as he dominated the bird. * Loss, and change in response to loss dominate much of Neil's life. The story commences when Neil is a small boy and," Mrs.

Forrester was still a young woman, and Sweet Water was a town of which great things were expected" (8). When he returns from Boston as an adult, she has grown older and weary from poverty and hard work, much like Sweet Water. The town no longer prospers from the Burlington Railroad, and the social elite who made the town what it was have all gone, or become humbled by their poor circumstances. As Neil grows into an adult and leaves the innocence of childhood behind him, everything around him that he loved fades with it.

Marian most embodies Neil's loss. She begins as the epitome of grace and exquisiteness in his boyhood.

He fell in love with her persona, which forever shaped the standard to which he held all women in his life. Her affair reveals to Neil a side of her he never imagined possible: * * " In that instant between stooping to the window-sill and rising, he had lost one of the most beautiful things in his life . . . This day

saw the end of that admiration and loyalty that had been like a bloom on his existence" (71-72). * Just as she falls from the pedestal Neil has placed her on, the Forresters' status as the royalty in Sweet Water fades, and they fall victim to the scrutiny and judgment of the townsfolk.

Captain Forrester's bank fails, they lose their fortune and people like Ivy take advantage of the fact that, " The Forresters have come down in the world" (88). The Captain's health deteriorates leading to his eventual death. Marian becomes empty and aimless, and " Lost" without him. She spends her time with younger men in an attempt to regain lost youth and turns to Ivy for unscrupulous financial support.

She sheds her persona as the graceful, admirable Mrs.

Forrester, killing all that was left of who Neil wanted her to be. Neil had expected her to remain loyal to her late husband's memory, as a Lady would. By accepting Ivy Peters as her personal lawyer and giving in to his crass behavior, she has severed any ties to her old life and becomes lost in her struggle to survive. Neil's home and the woman whom he idolized have fallen victim to the changing times. * The Captain was the true embodiment of the pioneer spirit of the American west.

As a railroad man, he thrived on moving forward towards new horizons.

Although he was not Neil's father, his example instilled in Neil the kinds of principles that set him apart from his peers. He believed in and prospered from an ideal many pioneers of the time shared: " my philosophy is that what you think of and plan for day by day, in spite of yourself, so to speak—you will get. . . .

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All our great West has been developed from such dreams . . . We dreamed the railroads across the mountains . .

. " (44). He was a founder of his community, a railroad builder, and an aristocrat.

He lived a luxurious life, adorning his wife with jewels and throwing fabulous parties. He lived the American dream. But he treated those around him with respect.

At his own expense, the Captain repays the depositors after his bank collapses, despite his resulting ruin. He fights desperately to persevere a code of honor and honesty that his customers depended on, and is left with nothing but his good name. Most saw his sacrifice as weakness, including Marian. In the economic turmoil of a growing America, honor and dignity fall prey to the clever young businessmen. Cather illustrates Neil's struggles to hold on to that spirit till the end, but the loss Forresters and all they once stood for in his life drives him to find his own place in the new world far away from Sweet Water.

He leaves behind the land he treasured. He discovers the importance of holding on to his values in a world run by men like Ivy Peters.

He witnesses the end of an era with the demise of Captain Forrester. After a period of resentment, he learns to accept Marian as she really is, letting go of his need to save her from herself. He realizes that his adoration of her laid in the way that, " . .

she had always the power of suggesting things much lovelier than herself, as the perfume of a single flower may call up the whole sweetness of spring” (147). He loved all the things he wanted her to be and all the things she wasn't. Just like the Captain, he loved a woman who was never truly attainable, but belonged completely to him. He realizes that she was never really lost. Marian Forrester was a beautiful paradox; a rose whose allure drew in the best of men, but her thorns pierced their hearts and kept all at a distance.

Works Cited Cather, Willa. *A Lost Lady*. New York: Vintage Books, 1971. Print.