
FACING AMERICA'S FAILED DREAM IN WILLA CATHER'S ONE OF OURS

Article Particulars

Received: 03.03.2018

Accepted: 12.03.2018

Published: 27.03.2018

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Abstract

Willia Cather is one of the prominent Western woman writers. She was born on December 7th 1873 in Winchester, Virginia where her family had farmed the land for generations. Cather's fifth novel, One of Ours (1922) was written during World War I and was inspired by the death of Cather's cousin on the Western Front in France. Claude Wheeler in the novel is an idealistic Nebraska farm boy who enlists in the army after an unhappy life on the farm and a failed marriage. He dies thinking; he is helping to save the world for democracy. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in '1922 for her novel One of Ours, and it is a courageous novel because it pursued its hero's quest for family happiness. It reached a crisis when it showed the happiness fulfilled by life and death in the army. Cather made a technical decision that put a weak character at the centre of her novel, thus precluding a strong affirmation of values in her usual mode. This seemed to force her into a rather desperate assertion that any values even a false one is better than no value at all. The two components are the clear statement of values usually in the form of an ideal which was pursued and affirmed with vigour and a strong character who was the human embodiment of that ideal. Cather created a false centre of value in the war experience of Claude. By making Claude believe in war she divides herself and compromises her own moral position. Creating war as a saving ideal for Claude was a neat device, for, it provided both the illusion of fulfilment and the death which spared the young idealist from ultimate disillusionment. Many young men who joined the armed forces tended to idealize their prospective roles in World War I but Claude did not stop there. He saw the war as a chance to start his life which he thought was over. He believed that he had at last found his route to the ideal.

Keywords: *Quest, Crisis, Affirmation, War, Fulfilment*

One of ours is the story of a boy of exceptional sensibility who underwent a slow strangulation of intellect and feelings on the Nebraska Prairie where he had been born. His induction into the army at the outbreak of the World War I provided an escape and an unexpected opportunity for the growth of his character and personality. The war touched Cather deeply. She loved France and could not bear to think of French country being torn and laid waste by the battles being waged there. It touched her in many ways. A stream of soldiers from Lincoln, Red Cloud and Pittsburgh who were her friends stopped by her New York apartment and visited her. Many of them were on their last furlongs before being sent overseas.

The first part of the novel depicts the hidden passions of the American interior plains and the second, a romantic depiction of war. Cather explored the relation of American consciousness to its old world heritage which was threatened by World War I. Claude Wheeler a farm boy was the protagonist of this novel. He was in search of something splendid through the modern wasteland and battled against materialism. True idealism seemed to be overrun and temporarily defeated by the machine made materialism. The pioneer strength in the West seemed to fade.

Claude Wheeler belonged to the second generation of pioneers. He lost most of the pioneer merits without gaining new ones. The insensitivity, greed and spiritual barrenness went with the material abundance of Claude Wheeler's world which made the fulfilment of his dream impossible but could be made by sacrificing in war.

Nat Wheeler the father of Claude Wheeler was of New England heritage. He was often off somewhere, seldom at home with his wife and sons. The mood of bitterness in Claude was felt from the beginning. The Wheeler family got up for breakfast and the narrative was immediately bristling with the hero's bitter observations on the mismanagement of the farm. Claude had planned to drive to the circus in town that day and had washed the car for that purpose, but at the table his father told him that he had to take the wagon and mules to the town with a load of cow hides. Shy and self-conscious, Claude was humiliated at the thought of going to Frankfurt with the smelling hides. He reflected angrily to himself how often the wagon had been to town that summer without the hides and that it was the carelessness of his father's hired men that resulted in the death of four steers whose skins had to be sold. Claude felt that his father gave the unpleasant task just to embarrass him. Too proud to object and expose himself further Claude submitted to his father's will. His anger changed into self-pity. Throughout the novel Claude was put off by the crudity and thoughtlessness of others.

Mr. Nat Wheeler had the stature of a pioneer figure in his physical bearings and his power over other men, but he was an unashamedly lazy man who rented his huge tracts of land, exploited the labours of others and whose jolly easy going ways disguised a cruel and authoritarian nature. When Claude was a boy of five he observed his mother asking her husband to pick the cherries from an over loaded tree. Instead of doing that the lazy and their responsible father had cut down the tree. On seeing the felled tree Claude was horrified. He began to scream. His mother had much concern for him than the tree. In her own ways he tried to pacify the son. The destruction of the tree not only outraged his mother's gentle sensibility but sent him into uncontrollable paroxysms of anger and hate. His father felt he was too timid and sentimental just like his mother. He wanted Claude to grow up as a tough boy. So often purposely, he outraged Claude's feelings to harden him, as he had hardened Claude's mother who was afraid of everything but school books and prayer meetings when he just married her.

His father could never understand Claude's idealism. In fact Claude was just the opposite of his two brothers who were brought up in similar circumstances. His older brother Bayliss was a self-made man. Too small for heavy farm work, he moved into town and opened a business there, devoting his life to buying and selling rather than producing. It was a direct step away from the virtues of rural living. He was only interested in making money. He considered everything else unimportant. His younger brother Ralph who lived with them had the spirit of his father. He was mad about automobiles, farm machinery and modern mechanical labour saving devices. Insensitive to the needs and feelings of his mother and Mahaley the old servant who were confused by machines, Ralph continually replaced the household appliances with newer, more complicated models and gadgets. The Wheelers were careful with money; they would never take a luxury seat on a train or buy expensive good looking furniture. Yet Ralph was allowed to waste countless sums of money on all the latest machines and appliances. Significantly of all the Wheelers, Claude was the only one who actually worked in the land.

Surrounded by people like his brothers, Claude began to doubt the value of his own taste and judgement. He wondered if he was wrong because he believed that there were things in life more important than making money. In fact Claude was good at judging people. He could easily see through the hypocritical nature of the preacher Weldon who exploited simple, kind hearted, religious people like his mother. Due to Brother Weldon's influence Claude was forced to go to Temple College a denominational school which he hated. The narrow piety and sterility of the religious world were further exemplified by his boarding mates Edward Chaplin and his sister Annabelle.

Claude became an unfortunate anachronism unable to contend with the materialism of the present. Everyone seemed to think that there was something wrong with Claude. His parents were inclined to blame his uncertainty, on religion. Mrs. Wheeler thought, the trouble with her son was that he had not yet found and accepted the Saviour as his Lord. His brother Bayliss was convinced that Claude was a moral rebel; that he was so uncommunicative because he was concealing radical notions. The neighbours liked Claude but in a tolerating way, laughing at him as one who was odd. Out of place in this kind of social and economic chaos, Claude was unable to adjust himself to what he considered the prevailing design of American life in which people were always buying and selling, building and pulling down. He felt the need for quietude and the revaluation of tradition that had been ignored in favour of material progress. Claude's alienation in and from his native soil was the pictograph of his physique as was his name. His eye brows and long lashes were pale corn coloured, which made his blue eye slighter than they were and he thought that it gave a look of shyness and weakness to the upper part of his face. He was exactly the sort of boy he did not want to be. He especially hated his head which was so big that he had trouble

in buying hats. His name was another source of humiliation. He felt 'Claude 'was a'Chump Name' like Elmer or Roya'hayseed' name would be fine.

Mahailey the old woman helper from Virginia and Mrs. Wheeler were the only two members of the family with whom Claude could get along. Like him they were ill at ease. Claude's closest relation was with his mother. Ever since he was a small child she had protected him against the ridicule of his father. Claude felt ignorant of himself. He was unsure and distrustful of his own feelings the means by which he might convert objects into human experience and as a result he subjected himself to the materialism he was so desperately trying to escape. He treated the land as an adversary to be overpowered. Day after day he flung himself upon the land and planted it wearing himself out in such a hurry of discomfort that he went to bed defeated every night and dreaded to wake up in the morning.

Claude's neighbours were the Erlichs a cultured German family. Julius Erlich was Claude's friend in college. The first time Claude visited them, he was immediately struck by their relaxed, gracious manners; their eagerness to discuss and analyze ideas and their appreciation of history and arts. At first Claude assumed that the widow and her six sons were rich but he learnt afterwards that on the contrary they were poor. But they knew how to live and spend the money on themselves instead of on machines to do the work. The Erlichs opened Claude's eyes - "He had never heard a family talk so much or with anything like so much jest" (0.0.0 41). One thought of the Erlich home as the musical store house, much in the same way, the Wheeler's place as a dumping ground for machinery.

Claude described them as a 'family at play' going to plays and concerts, talking like characters in a play and replaying college foot ball games. Youthful hope and ambition seemed an integral part of the Erlich's home. The Erlich's had completely inverted the values of Claude that he starts disliking his father's acquisitiveness and his mother's abnegation. When he lived at home he "had come to believe that things and people he most disliked were the ones that were to shape his destiny" (0.0.0 31).

Claude's another friend in Frankfurt was Gladys Farmer, an accomplished musician. These two young people were of the same fated disposition. They expected more of life than they ever could receive. Where they differed was in their capacity to accept frustration. Gladys made her separate peace through resignation because she believed them ultimately unattainable.

The domestic and emotional crisis of Claude's life was brought by his inability to come to terms with mechanical progress. While he was floundering in a confused manner, love entered into his life to transform him. One day when he was working with a team of mules, a truck frightened the animals and Claude was thrown against a barbed wire fence. In the convalescence which followed his injury he responded to the kindness of Enid Royce who visited him. Claude thought she was personally interested in him whereas she was merely being impersonally and dutifully charitable.

He even disregarded a veiled warning from Enid's father about her evangelism and vegetarianism. Claude believed from the appearance of Enid that she would be faithful to him. Enid herself told him that she was unsuited for marriage as her father said. In spite of that he got engaged to her. But throughout their engagement he was not altogether happy about her. "She seemed more interested in the house than in him". But Claude foolishly dreamt of a blissful domestic life with Enid in the house he had built.

On the wedding night itself Enid pushed Claude out of their train compartment with the lame excuse of indisposition. She started spending most of her time traveling around the country side attending meetings of the Anti-Saloon league leaving her husband to get his own meals and neglected him totally. Later Claude discovered that Enid deliberately avoided him to avoid sex. To her a man's embrace was distasteful. She even separated the farm rooster from the hens. Enid's father Jason Royce; though he tried to avert disaster of Claude's marriage he could not.

Claude could have fallen in love with Gladys. But she appeared to encourage Bayliss as a suitor and Claude was so outraged that he avoided her and the thought of her was a sore spot on his mind. Now he realised, his choice of life-partner was totally wrong for him. Enid left for China to look after her missionary sister who was seriously ill. Claude felt hurt and returned to his parents place. This crisis undermined his morale and self-confidence that he felt, "his life was choking him and he hadn't the courage to break with it what a hideous world to be born into! Or was it hideous only for him? Everything he touched went wrong under his hand - always had" (0.0.0 221).

Mrs. Wheeler reinforced this dismal fate by her silence and resignation. Although she never shared his sensitivities, never defended him, never supported his views, and never suggested he should pursue his worst desires. Mrs. Wheeler could foresee that Enid would change for the worst becoming more like her self-centered eccentric mother. Mrs. Wheeler seemed more culpable in failing to warn him about this. More to her discredit than the silence however, was the impassioned advocacy of the war in Europe which influenced Claude to enlist in the army, a crucial and irreversible decision that led to his ultimate death. Mrs. Wheeler prepared Claude for this fate by sharing and undermining his belief in a righteous outcome of the war. She told him that Paris will be saved despite its wickedness because its churches were full of women and children praying for their country. Claude and his mother had disagreed over the 'efficacy' of faith, and if faith rather than works was to save an "imperilled" civilization then France seemed to him doomed. Choosing action over prayer Claude enlisted in the army ironically fulfilling rather than denying the desire of his parents who support the war, each for a different reason. Claude in spite of his sympathy with the German culture represented by the Erlich's came to identify the threatened Paris with all that was valuable in the European spirit. So he joined war. At last he was able to live without complications of gender. He felt that he was released from having to prove himself manly. The desire for safety seemed to him ultimately a quest for death where as risk

produced energy and life. His perverse view was validated by his dramatic rebirth on his way to combat. The foreign landscape provided an image of his restoration. He had been reborn a board the ship 'Anchises'. "Though their pasts were neither long or varied most of them like Claude Wheeler felt a sense of relief at being rid of all they had ever been before and facing something absolutely new"(0.0.0278).

Although loss of one's past could be a sign of sickness as Claude realized when he encountered a soldier who had amnesia forgetting his wife seemed therapeutic. In the ship he considered himself 'the least married man on the boat' and this thought made him happy. Now in the country side of France temporarily removed from danger his new life blossomed and on his twenty fifth birthdays he felt he was 'beginning over again', this time in a family where he belonged. The voyage on the ship became a voyage of death. Influenza broke out and many boys had their burial at sea. But for Claude the voyage was really one of rebirth. Though there were many dying about, he continued to wake every morning with the sense of freedom and went forward as if the world were growing with it. Claude became a lieutenant in the army and travelled to France. He felt that, "something was released that had been struggling for a long while; he told himself.... but of purpose, of fateful purpose, the miracle had happened. The feeling was strong in his breast" (0.0.0 311-312)

At the beginning of the trip, there was band music on deck and concerts below. But with the spreading of influenza, those pleasures were cut off. The musicians had to become nurses before they could be cut off. The musicians had to be entertainers and attention turned to a basic issue - survival. There was a funeral accompaniment to the sea burial of a young doughboy. He was thrown into the freezing water and forgotten. The ocean's energy was a mocking cruelty to the lifeless bodies. His fellows forgot him because they had their own miseries to think about. Life during the epidemic was too hard and filled with tiring duties to permit one the full of music. It deprived man of the natural joy essential for his soul. War continued. Soon came the news of the fall of the fort of Namur, again giving warning that an unprecedented power of destruction had broken loose in the world. The wiping out of the ancient and peaceful seat of learning at Louva in, further made it clear that force was being directed towards incredible ends. Claude felt that "with these men he could do anything. He had learnt the mastery of men" (O.O.O 452)

During war, Claude gained the friendship another soldier David Gerhardt who was a brilliant violinist. David was everything Claude wished he were: unafraid, decent and intellectual. When Claude first encountered David he was instantly jealous of David's quiet poise. Gradually the two men became friendly and came to spend all their time together "He had come all this way to find out he had no quarrel with destiny nor did he envy David. He would give his own adventure for no man" (O.O.O 420)

Claude adored David not only because David was handsome and kind and worthy of Claude's affection but because David, though American was another kind of American, for whom the boundaries between between Europe and the United States were easily traversed even before the war. Shortly before they returned for the

last time to the Front, David brought Claude to visit some old French friend's the Fleury's who remembered David as the friend of theirs on Rene who was killed in the war.

The army, the war and France combined to give Claude the youth he had never had. When he had it, he was killed. Mrs. Wheeler thought, death had saved her son from horrible suffering and some horrible end. Mahaley's vision of Claude was 'transported to heaven' seemed almost a 'travesty' of Mrs. Wheeler's dismal consolation that her son had been spared an inevitable and unbearable disillusionment in America. Claude turned recollection into hope. Fortunately the hope was not submitted to a test. Claude Wheeler was shot in the heart. Just before Claude was shot, David Gerhardt like his rare 'Stradivarius' was blown to pieces.

Willa Cather had portrayed the First World War as being the last chance of heroism, anybody of Claude's generation would ever have at America. She implied in the long reverie of Claude's mother that had he come back from France, he too would have been defeated by the society which was but a large projection of his own unsympathetic family. Claude died in the battle for a vision of a better world which could never bear the test of reality. Claude's mother was happy he died at this point

Out of place in this kind of social and economic chaos, Claude was furthermore unable to adjust himself to the himself to the American life in which people were always buying and selling. Then over of the frontier allegorized the individual's withdrawal from a stupefied materialistic worldlike America and his quest for a direction of life which would relate him most meaningfully to a higher order, either of an impersonal non-religious power or of a highly personal Christian God.

Claude's mother was shocked at society's alacrity in returning to the meanness and greed that the war had merely interrupted. She knew that Claude could not have survived the psychic shock of the last desolating darkness. The novel concludes with these lines, "He died believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be..... perhaps it was as well to see that vision, and then to see no more" (O.O.O 458). It is better this way that he dies with a 'whispering hope'. *One of Ours* is a painful book which talks about the life being lost in war. It is a conscientious but not always convincing attempt to dignify the war into historical epic. It suggests that it was only in war and killing that the frigid; mother-dominated Claude can find erotic satisfaction. *One of Ours* creates a continuum between personal desire and public life that is markedly uncharacteristic of Cather fiction which usually ignored or satirized historic events shaping the world of its characters. Although social crisis woven into a novel's plot might influence a character's destiny, they usually remained peripheral. The catastrophic war that swept through the Western world is central to this plot; and it is a crucial determining event. Cather concentrated on her hero's desire, a source of unhappiness in many of her novels. But here she made Claude's desire for happiness dependent on various historical factors.

Reference

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