

A STUDY OF LONGING AND SACRIFICE IN WILLA CATHER'S *ON THE GULL'S ROAD*

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the themes of longing and sacrifice in Willa Cather's *On the Gull's Road*. The objective of this study is to examine how the narrator and Alexandra represent these themes in the story. New Criticism theory is applied to explore how the themes of longing and sacrifice are developed through the main characters. This study employs close reading as a method to analyze relevant passages that illustrate the emotional and relational dynamics between the narrator and Alexandra. The analysis uncovers how Cather portrays the complex feelings of desire and restraint within the story by paying careful attention to language, imagery, and narrative structure. The results show that Cather effectively conveys the narrator's longing for Alexandra through his introspective reflections and vivid descriptions of their interactions. Alexandra's character embodies sacrifice as she navigates her commitment to her husband and her growing connection with the narrator. This study concludes that Cather's portrayal of longing and sacrifice enriches the story's emotional depth, highlighting the delicate balance between personal desires and societal constraints. This insightful description of the main characters' emotional difficulties provides readers with an advancing examination of human connections and the complexity of love and obligation.

Keywords: longing; sacrifice; new criticism; characterization

INTRODUCTION

On the Gull's Road by Willa Cather cleverly combines themes of sacrifice and desire to create an emotional narrative that examines the intricacies of interpersonal connections and human emotions. The story, set on a transatlantic cruise, revolves around the narrator's intense but unmet yearning for married lady Alexandra Ebling and her accompanying feeling of duty and restraint. The relationships between the characters and the vivid images Willa Cather uses throughout the story are rich with these topics.

New Criticism theory, which stresses careful reading and textual analysis, allows for a more in-depth assessment of how these themes evolve throughout the story. Instead of focusing on outside variables like authorial purpose or historical context, New Criticism emphasizes the formal components of literature, such as language, structure, and symbolism (Tyson, 2006). Using this method, the research seeks to reveal how Cather uses her characters to represent the entwined sensations of sacrifice and desire.

A detailed examination of *On the Gull's Road* demonstrates how the narrator expresses his yearning for Alexandra via reflective introspection and Cather's poetic writing. The sea voyage's imagery highlights the fleeting and unachievable character of the narrator's wishes by acting as a metaphor for the fleeting nature of their relationship (Cather, 1908). Similarly, Alexandra's persona represents the conflict between individual desire and social obligation as she balances her responsibilities to her sick husband with her repressed affection for the narrator.

This study aims to investigate how Cather's narrative devices successfully communicate these ideas, improving our comprehension of the novella's emotional richness and depth. By concentrating on the text's essential components, this study adds to a deeper understanding of Cather's literary skill and the nuanced interaction between sacrifice and yearning in the narrative. This method sheds light on the inner lives of the individuals but also emphasizes how timeless Cather's writing is in examining everyday human situations.

This study is significant because it may provide fresh insight into how Cather depicts sacrifice and yearning in the novella. Through a thorough reading of the text using the philosophy of New Criticism, this study seeks to identify Cather's underlying processes to portray her characters' emotional nuance and complexity. Through an in-

depth examination of language, imagery, and narrative structure, this research aims to enhance comprehension of the subtle themes in *On the Gull's Road*.

This research also provides insights into how writers use literary strategies to elicit complex emotional reactions from readers, which has wider ramifications for literary studies. This study adds to our understanding of Cather's output. It advances ongoing scholarly discussions about how human emotions are portrayed in literature by clarifying the nuances of desire and sacrifice in her writing. In conclusion, this study aims to show how important Cather's examination of sacrifice and willingness in *On the Gull's Road* is to literature and how relevant it is now.

Although Willa Cather's *on the Gull's Road* has been the subject of much research, much previous research has taken a pragmatic approach, emphasizing language and conversational elements. One example is Najim's (2015) study on politeness theories in the novella's discussions. Najim's analysis sheds light on the pragmatic and social dynamics of dialogue, providing insightful information about how politeness techniques influence character interactions and the development of stories. This method, however, falls short in examining the novella's deeper emotional and thematic levels, especially in light of its nuanced depiction of sacrifice and desire.

By closely examining *On the Gull's Road* using the New Criticism approach, this research aims to close this gap. In contrast to pragmatic studies, New Criticism focuses on the text's fundamental components, such as language, imagery, and structure, to reveal how these components interact to create themes and characterizations. Through an analysis of the narrator's inner monologue and the emotional dynamics of his connection with Alexandra Ebbing, this study attempts to offer a thorough look at how Cather deftly incorporates the themes of sacrifice and desire into the story. Filling in this void advances our comprehension of Cather's themes and raises our level of appreciation for the skillful writing that she produced.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

This research uses the notion of New Criticism as its theoretical foundation to examine Willa Cather's *on the Gull's Road*. The New Criticism strongly emphasizes closely examining the text and concentrating on its fundamental components, including language, structure, and symbolism (Tyson, 2006). By applying New Criticism to *On the Gull's Road*,

this study seeks to reveal the subtle ways Cather explores themes of sacrifice and yearning through the narrator, Alexandra Ebbeling, and the key characters. This method thoroughly analyzes how Cather portrays the emotional richness and complexity of her characters' experiences by closely examining the novella's language, imagery, and narrative devices.

Furthermore, a better comprehension of the thematic relevance of Cather's narrative decisions is made possible by the New Criticism approach. This approach makes it easier to analyze the novella's portrayal of desire and sacrifice more nuancedly since it concentrates on the text's formal features rather than outside variables like authorial purpose or historical context (Tyson, 2006). By using this theoretical framework, the research aims to identify the fundamental processes by which Cather arouses the reader's empathy and comprehension of the characters' inner lives, thereby enhancing understanding of the subtle thematic elements of *On the Gull's Road*.

METHOD

Using a qualitative research approach, this study investigates the themes of sacrifice and desire found in Willa Cather's *On the Gull's Road*. Qualitative research is suitable for this kind of literary study since it enables a thorough reading of the text and a deeper comprehension of its themes and characters (Creswell, 2013). The story is closely examined in order to identify and trace the themes of sacrifice and yearning via the narrator's and Alexandra Ebbeling's characterizations.

By focusing on the narrator's reflections and interactions with Alexandra, the researcher methodically finds places in the text where these themes are apparent. After that, the information is examined through the lens of New Criticism theory, with an emphasis on the text's fundamental components, including language, imagery, and narrative structure (Tyson, 2006). This method enables a thorough analysis of the ways in which Cather's literary devices express the nuanced emotional complexity of sacrifice and desire. Ultimately, the results are used to make judgments on how these topics are portrayed in the story, which advances our knowledge of Cather's writing and the depth of its themes.

REPRESENTATION OF LONGING AND SACRIFICE

In Willa Cather's *On the Gull's Road*, the narrator's intense and unrequited passion for Alexandra Ebbing eloquently illustrates the concept of longing. The narrator is instantly and profoundly enamored with Alexandra from the first time he sees her on board the ship. When describing Alexandra in some parts, Cather uses descriptive language to portray the narrator's inner conflict and desire, combining adoration and wistfulness. For example, the narrator's descriptions of Alexandra's appearance and manner reflect a deeper emotional and spiritual connection, conveying a desire beyond simple physical attraction (Cather, 1908).

The transatlantic journey's cramped environment intensifies the narrator's feelings of desire. The ship turns into a microcosm where the lines between one's own aspirations and social conventions are sharply felt. The transitory character of the journey represents the transient and unachievable aspect of the narrator's longing for Alexandra. This subject is further highlighted by Cather's use of nautical imagery, where the vast ocean and unending horizon symbolize the narrator's unfulfilled desire. As a result, the location is essential in emphasizing the conflict between the narrator's wishes and the reality of his circumstances (Cather, 1908).

Alexandra's persona likewise embodies longing in a more subtle and nuanced way. Although the narrator's desire is visibly aimed at Alexandra, it is more ethereal and inwardly focused. She is presented as a woman torn between her repressed needs for personal satisfaction and happiness and her responsibilities as a wife and mother. Through Alexandra's exchanges with the narrator and her introspective times, Cather delicately conveys Alexandra's inner turmoil. These unseen windows into Alexandra's inner existence point to a secretive, strong yearning for a life apart from the demands of society and her marriage (Cather, 1908).

The way that Cather tells her story improves the depiction of desire even more. Because the story is told in the first person, readers are able to feel the narrator's feelings firsthand and develop a close bond with his sense of longing. Reflective in nature, the story is told years after the events, adding a depth of regret and nostalgia that highlights the long-lasting effects of unsatisfied love on the narrator's life. In addition to enhancing the theme's emotional relevance, this storytelling technique asks readers to consider how desire is a universal feeling and how it affects all of our lives (Cather, 1908).

Willa Cather deftly examines the idea of sacrifice in *On the Gull's Road*, employing Alexandra Ebbeling as a vehicle. Alexandra's life is characterized by her steadfast dedication to her family, especially her sick husband. Although Alexandra clearly has personal ambitions and feels a strong emotional bond with the narrator, she constantly puts her responsibilities as a wife and mother above her own pleasure. Her choices and actions throughout the story demonstrate her strong sense of devotion and duty and powerfully convey this sacrifice (Cather, 1908).

Cather emphasizes Alexandra's sacrifices via the use of subdued yet potent imagery. The maritime voyage's isolated and confined environment reflects Alexandra's life being confined by her marital duties. The ocean's recurrent theme, which is huge and limitless, starkly contrasts Alexandra's constrained life and draws attention to the sacrifices she has made. Her reflective and depressing moments, which are frequently placed against the backdrop of the never-ending sea, highlight her psychological struggle between her obligation and her repressed desire for autonomy and personal satisfaction (Cather, 1908).

The narrator's viewpoint sheds light on Alexandra's emotional cost of her sacrifices. His observations show that he is very saddened by her limitations and appreciates her grit and resiliency. The narrator and readers are deeply moved by Alexandra's quiet dignity and stoicism in the face of her obvious pain. Because of Cather's meticulous description of Alexandra as a person of quiet strength and altruism, which emphasizes the emotional significance of her sacrifices, Alexandra is made to seem both sad and incredibly likable (Cather, 1908).

In addition, the idea of sacrifice is best expressed by Alexandra's final choice to stick by her husband in the face of the potential of a different life with the narrator. Her decision demonstrates her unshakeable dedication to her family responsibilities, even at the expense of her own happiness. In addition to presenting the strength of Alexandra's character, Cather's depiction of her sacrifice serves as a critique of the demands that the society of the day put on women. Cather explores the intricacies of selflessness via Alexandra's tale, showing how it defines and molds people's lives—especially those of women—within the confines of early 20th-century society (Cather, 1908).

CONCLUSION

On the Gull's Road by Willa Cather is a story that profoundly connects with the human experience of unfulfilled wishes and unselfish love. The story expertly weaves together themes of sacrifice and longing. Cather examines the emotional intricacies and limitations of early 20th-century existence via the in-depth depiction of the narrator's longing for Alexandra and Alexandra's silent sacrifices for her family. This research has shed light on how Cather portrays these topics with remarkable depth and compassion via her use of evocative language, marine imagery, and subtle character development. It did this by carefully reading the text using the New Criticism theory. Readers are allowed to thoroughly connect with the characters' inner lives through the novella's intimate first-person perspective and contemplative storytelling, which further strengthen the representation of these universal themes. Cather's writing continues to examine the eternal nature of human emotions and relationships by stressing the difficult balance between societal obligation and personal desire.

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