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Macro-thematic analysis and deconstruction of the patriarchal structure in Willa Cather's novel 'a lost lady'

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Abstract

This paper examines the macro-thematic analysis and critical examination of patriarchal systems in Willa Cather's novel *A Lost Lady* (1923). Through an analysis of Mrs. Marian Forrester's persona, the paper examines how Cather challenges conventional gender norms and societal expectations. Through an analysis of the interaction between personal autonomy and institutional limitations, the story exposes the intricacies of identity moulded by a male-dominated society. The key sequences in the film effectively demonstrate the constraints placed on individuals of both genders, emphasising the vulnerability of male dominance and the nuanced defiance of feminine selfhood. Through her portrayal of loss and yearning, Cather underscores the emotional terrain traversed by her characters, implying that genuine agency frequently resides in the capacity to accept transformation within inflexible frameworks. The interpretation contends that *A Lost Lady* (1923) not only depicts the changing responsibilities of women in early 20th-century America but also functions as a critique of how cultural standards influence intimate relationships. In conclusion, this research highlights Cather's inventive storytelling methods and profound analysis of themes, establishing her work as a groundbreaking examination of gender relations and societal change in a swiftly evolving society.

Keywords: Domination, gender relations, identity, society, Willa Cather

Introduction

A Lost Lady, a novel released in 1923, is a renowned American theatrical production by the renowned American writer Willa Cather (1873-1947). Marian Forster, the main heroine of Willa Cather's novel *A Lost Lady* (1923), embodies the resistance against patriarchal conventions. In the story's opening, Marian is shown as dedicating her time to the role of a homemaker, responsible for assisting and nurturing her husband. Throughout the course of the narrative, Marian appears to be a character marked by inflexibility. Following the passing of her spouse, she embarks on her exploration to Argentina and establishes her residence there. Marian was a lady of exceptional competence who could approach her male colleague in her profession with meticulous precision. She challenges the established social norms and adheres to her own principles while rejecting the male standards, therefore surpassing the boundary set by the male-dominated society. The female characters in this story do not conform to the limitations imposed by male characters in their quest for self-identity and resistance against male-dominated social structures. She actively engages in competition with her male counterpart by openly articulating her opinions. She even challenges the conventional structure of a male-dominated existence and undermines the inflexible regulations of society. She is an arrogant and empowered figure, who challenges the conventional female archetype of being emotional and impulsive. In contrast to the weak sex, she demonstrates wisdom in every challenging circumstance.

Following the passing of her husband, she emerges from the role of a submissive homemaker and instead of being confined to the status of a destitute widow, she begins the process of reinventing herself. The novel *A Lost Lady* (1923) lacks peculiar plot twists, flowery descriptions, and heavily detailed details. Instead, the author employs innovative and brilliant storytelling approaches, presenting a basic and concise language that evokes a vibrant aftertaste and a profound spiritual beauty via thorough contemplation and exploration. Symbolism has been prominently featured in many works, including the formation of the

story, the shaping of characters' opposition figures, and the portrayal of mental status changes. These works not only promote but also acknowledge the significance of this topic.

Researches and Methodology

This study utilizes macro-thematic analysis to investigate the patriarchal organizational systems present in Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923). The process entails a meticulous analysis of the text, with a specific emphasis on topics related to gender roles, power relations, and cultural expectations. Through the analysis of character interactions, narrative voice, and symbolic aspects, this research investigates how patriarchy influences the formation of individual identities and relationships. In addition, the historical and cultural circumstances will be examined to place Cather's work within the wider feminist literature. The primary objective of this comprehensive method is to expose the fundamental criticisms of patriarchy and the intricate nature of women's experiences in early 20th-century America.

Discussion

Throughout history, women have been subjected to domination and mistreatment following long-standing patriarchal norms and restrictions. The male-oriented worldview has determined the structure of society, therefore perpetuating the subordinate status of women. The masculine authority exercises ultimate control and guidance over social standards, values, behaviours, and all other facets of society. Men invoke their perceived superiority to exert control over all the domains. These features are effectively facilitated to serve the aim of males. Within this particular community, authority is transmitted only from one man to another, rather than from one female to another, like a father to his son. Daughters are not assigned any specific tasks. Therefore, women are rendered powerless and their state is very distressing. Willa Cather has vocally opposed male dominance and strives to position women equitably with males. Cather has authored several novels and short tales. She has authored the novels with no intention of deriving pleasure. Her writings aim to establish women in a state of independent and autonomous living. A majority of Cather's works include female "heroes" who possess either independent agency or face the challenge of preserving their existence within society.

These stories are authored not just for amusement but also with the sacred objective of societal improvement. Her works depict female protagonists who challenge society by rejecting their independent position within it. In this novel, the sole female character Marian Forrester challenges the male-imposed norms and values by refusing to conform to the traditional notion of women as docile and submissive figures who obey their husbands' desires and rules. Instead, she presents herself as a demure woman, but in reality, she is a free-spirited woman who interacts with many males to assert her presence and exemplify the qualities of a strong woman.

The protagonist Marian is portrayed as a radical feminist and Captain Daniel Forrester, the spouse of Marian Forrester, is portrayed as a compassionate and affectionate minor character in the story. However, thereafter, the readers come to learn that the captain actually possesses a controlling disposition. Marian's spouse, who is twenty-five years her senior, is affluent. His action is commendable, but

it is a breach of the marital agreement, namely the one that is predicated between a prosperous elderly man and an attractive young lady. Despite her acceptance of his decision as a compliment, he opts to have her bear the financial burden of his aristocracy. She is utterly deceived or victimized by the exclusive pursuit of male self-interest. In her unwillingness to accept the position of victim, Marian Forrester, who has been deceived and victimized, achieves a bittersweet victory. Her enchanting laughter is the prevailing theme of the tale. Initially, Marian Forrester appears to be a lady who is heavily influenced by drugs. She exerts control over both the early and later parts of the narrative. From the first, her unrestrained demeanour towards her husband's acquaintances is evident. Despite the presence of domestic workers at her residence, she nevertheless feels obligated to extend a warm welcome to every male visitor, regardless of their approach to her home.

In a society where men hold the majority, women are expected to adhere completely to the masculine standard of behaviour. However, Marian is shown as a woman who challenges and resists these laws and regulations. She extends a warm welcome to all male guests in her home. In the first portion of the narrative, Marian defies the guys' reticence in asking questions due to her looks. Instead, she initiates the conversation by saying:

Good morning, boys. Off for a picnic? You have a lovely day. How long has school been out? Don't miss it. Run along, and be sure you don't leave the gate into the pasture open. Mr. Forrester hates to have the cattle get in on his blue grass. (Cather 5)

Marian possesses an unwavering will that is not ephemeral, but rather resolute; she has the power to evoke a certain degree of humiliation in her spouse. In response to his attempts to discuss his future aspirations, she sarcastically informs him, "And now tell us your philosophy of life, -- this is where it comes in, and if some of us have heard it, we can hear it again. Go on!" (32). Observing the irony in Marian's last statement, it is evident that she is dissatisfied with her husband's approach to defining a dream. She cynically advises him to reframe his dream as a "philosophy," which leads to the captain being publicly humiliated, yet he remains silent about his wife. She assumes a dominant stance while delivering this phrase, effectively engaging even her spouse in a defensive stance. Subsequently, when he discloses his strategy to the onlookers, she openly ridicules and interrupts his speech; her attitude towards her husband's aspirations is evident.

However, Marian in the novel is determined to challenge all the social expectations placed on women by men. When her husband requests that she spend the entire day at home, she vehemently rejects his request by expressing her desire to view the river alone and her strong dislike for being confined to the house. On the contrary, she compels Mr. Forrester to venture forth and explore the town. Her inconsistent conduct suggests that she embodies masculine traits, while her husband conforms to feminine norms, as he obediently follows her instructions.

Initially, she explicitly states her lack of recollection of the letters and then retorts to Frank by asserting that he sends far fewer letters. Nevertheless, she is under no obligation to respond to any of them. She appears astute enough to redirect Frank's desire into a meandering nature. Initially, he was trying to cause her physical injury, but on another occasion, she sways his mind by suggesting that he take a

ride instead. She also advises him to drive at a leisurely pace. The final line implies that she is not afraid of her husband's presence and that it is inconsequential if she arrives home late.

The behaviour of Marian demonstrates her departure from the traditional role of a female figure, characterized by submissiveness and servitude. Instead, she appears to confidently defy these norms and values. For instance, whenever her husband takes a nap, she ensures that she leaves the house with her lively and energetic demeanour. On one occasion, when her husband was asleep, she enquired of Niel:

Come, Mr. Forrester is asleep. Let's run down the hill, there's no one to stop us. I'll slip on my rubber boots. No objections! Not a word! I can't stand this house a moment longer. You see there is nothing for me to do. I get no exercise. I don't skate; we didn't in California. I shall dance till I'm eighty. It's good for me I need it. (47)

This implies that when her spouse is napping, she is seeking respite from the monotony of the household. Despite the traditional expectation of wives being confined to their homes and responsible for daily tasks, Marian deviates from this norm. She embraces the idea of freely exploring her home, even if she takes time for her husband's nap. However, she is concerned about the possibility of her husband being awake when she is outside. However, she is a daring risk-taker and does not possess any reservations regarding the potential outcomes of such actions. With the second line of this sentence indicating "no objections," it is evident that she is indifferent to any catastrophe. Her lack of tolerance for the home itself indicates her dissatisfaction with living with her spouse.

Marian is depicted as a woman who does not perceive herself as a mere component of her male partner. Instead, she is a woman who possesses influence and resources that enable her to actively engage in the decision-making process made by her spouse. Her acts and words propel her ahead of her spouse when she advises Niel on the intricacies of life. Despite the bankruptcy of Marian and her husband, she nonetheless guarantees Niel her financial support in his pursuits, as she states,

Don't forget us, but don't mope. Make lots of new friends. You'll never be twenty again. Take a chorus girl out to supper—a pretty one, mind! Don't bother about your allowance. If you got into a scrape, we could manage a little cheque to help you out, couldn't we, Mr. Forrester? (61)

She is an audacious lady who boldly reveals to the male persona her own characteristics, which are unknown to them, as she subtly highlights her husband's shortcomings, but she also openly showcases Niel's expertise when she visits his home:

And how handsome he's grown! Isn't the old judge proud of you! He called up last night and began sputtering, "It's only fair to warn you Ma'am that I've very handsome boy over here." As if I hadn't known you would be! And now you're a man, and have seen the world! (66)

Through the aforementioned remarks, she appears to be challenging and transcending traditional male dominance. The natural tendency of males is to associate females with specific objects, such as roses and moons. In her book *Second Sex* published in 1949, Simone De-Beauvoir acknowledged that throughout history, women have been associated with various labels by men.

Conclusion

In this novel, Willa Cather skilfully analyses the patriarchal systems prevalent in early 20th-century America, using a sophisticated perspective to scrutinise conventional gender norms. From the perspective of Mrs. Marian Forrester, Cather examines the intricate nature of identity influenced by societal norms, investigating concepts of bereavement, autonomy, and the vulnerability of masculine power. The story is situated in a changing frontier civilization, characterized by deeply ingrained values of masculinity and authority. Mr. Forrester epitomises the quintessential patriarch, embodying both power and subjectivity. The persona in question functions as a central element for analysing the power dynamics within a predominantly male-oriented setting. Mr. Forrester's initial reputation as a respected man in the town implies the enduring power of patriarchal authority. However, as the story progresses, his downfall becomes apparent. The decline seen not only illuminates the intrinsic weaknesses associated with male hegemony but also mirrors the wider socioeconomic changes taking place during this period. Cather hypothesises that the authority of patriarchal power is dependent on external conditions, and as those conditions change, the basis of such authority also changes.

Alternatively, the character of Mrs. Forrester functions as a critical analysis of conventional gender expectations placed upon women. As the story unfolds, her intricacies gradually become apparent, despite being first shown as a devoted wife and socialite. The author carefully constructs the character of Mrs. Forrester to expose her inner conflicts, aspirations, and finally, her quest for autonomy. The conflict arising from Mrs. Forrester's desire for individual autonomy and the cultural norms placed upon her highlights her inherent duality as both a result of her surroundings and a person striving to surpass them. The interpersonal dynamics between Mrs. Forrester and her husband exemplify the limitations imposed by patriarchy. The dominance of Mr. Forrester suppresses her uniqueness, but when he refuses, she starts to establish her own sense of self. This metamorphosis emphasises the concept that female autonomy may arise from within the limitations of a patriarchal framework. Cather portrays this transformation with care, implying that although women may be influenced by their backgrounds, they also can bounce back and explore their own identities.

At the core of the story is the motif of loss, which appears in many manifestations—individual, societal, and affective. The erosion of Mr. Forrester's authority represents the wider deterioration of conventional masculine dominance in a society transforming. As Mrs. Forrester grapples with her husband's decline, she also faces her own identity crisis, making the sense of loss deeply personal for her. The author skilfully portrays this complex emotional terrain, demonstrating how the sorrow of losing a significant other may stimulate a process of self-actualisation. The exploration of this issue is essential for comprehending the development of Mrs. Forrester since the ultimate embrace of her autonomy represents a notable break from the constraints imposed by her previous circumstances.

The culmination of Cather's examination of these issues is a profound analysis of the linkages between gender and power. An analysis of the breakdown of patriarchal power in *A Lost Lady* (1923) not only criticizes the inflexible systems of Cather's day but also reflects current debates on

gender relations. The novel promotes a more sophisticated recognition of identity and agency, underscoring that genuine empowerment frequently emerges from embracing transformation and challenging established social conventions. Ultimately, Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) functions as a deep analysis of rigid patriarchal systems, exposing the intricacies of gender and identity in a swiftly changing world. Cather's portrayal of Mrs. Forrester's experience highlights the vulnerability of male dominance and the catalytic influence of female empowerment, eventually promoting a reassessment of the societal expectations that shape individuals in their respective environments.

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