UNIT 3 WILLA CATHER: ON THE GULL’S ROAD

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall study the core features of the short story in general and the American short story in particular in linkage with Willa Cather’s stories. To this end, besides a few initial broadsides on positioning the short story in chronological history. The unit examines several major definitions of this genre and will examine the story On the Gulls’ Road by Willa Cather with an analysis of major aspects of its contents and forms. This discussion will be helpful to you in further strengthening your understanding on American Literature in general and its short fiction in particular.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The short story, it needs to be affirmed even at the risk of mouthing a cliche, is at once old and new. It may be as old as the adventure tales of the Odyssey or the religious/moral tales of the Bible. Nearer home, it may be as old as the stories woven into the Mahabharata or those included in the Panchatantra. But as a distinct art form, i.e., as a highly organized and deftly executed short narrative, it is ‘a young art’ which emerged in the nineteenth century and which has fast come of age. The short story, therefore, is as old as the human instinct to tell and listen to a story and as new as man’s/ woman’s craft of writing it.

The ascendency and the subsequent establishment of the novel to~ards the end of the eighteenth century is quite possibly encouraged, by example, the growth of shorter fiction as an autonomous genre of English literature. More important. However, was the speedy emergence of periodicals and magazines during the first quarter of the nineteenth century whose readers made insistent demand for short and compact fiction. completed in one issue The editors of these magazines and papers, keen to boost their circulation and sales, made handsome payments to those writers who could meet their requirements. The short story thus registered its raison d-etre and smoothly stepped into a space of its own.
Short Fiction

Short Story holds great meaning as it provides us with a little world we can get a glimpse of and think about on a scale that’s much smaller than that of a novel. Through this discussion, we’ll generate an understanding about some of the techniques that short story writers use in the context of American short fiction. Willa Cather’s ‘On the Gull’s Road’ is a short story that was published in McClures in 1908. The piece centers on the life of the unknown narrator wherein there is a flashback during the time when the person met Alexandra Ebbling, a married woman in the ship. In seeking to convey the story to readers, Cather utilizes a powerful narrative that uses both symbolisms and literary devices such as metaphor to highlight themes related to love, obligations and longing. By bringing together these elements, the story is able to tap and reinforce the emotions that have been instrumental in shaping the character of the anonymous author. The story starts off with the narrator meeting someone. They each talk about the arts, and with this conversation, the narrator has a flashback. In the flashback he meets a beautiful woman, and over time they start to develop feelings for each other. But, the woman is married. They agree to go their separate ways, and over time she dies.

3.2 WILLA CATHER: LIFE AND WORKS

Willa Sibert Cather was born on December 7, 1873, in Back Creek Valley, Winchester, Virginia. When Cather was nine years old, the family moved to Nebraska. They lived in a small town of Red Cloud, and Willa began attending school for the first time in her life. Her early work was published in the town’s local newspaper. Cather was the oldest of seven children to her parents. Cather later attended the University of Nebraska. She lived and worked in Pittsburgh for ten years, supporting herself as a magazine editor and high school English teacher. Graduating from the University of Nebraska in Lincoln in 1895, Cather went east to work as a muck-racking journalist. She gained considerable attention and fame at the notorious but popular McClures and she gave herself fulltime to her fiction in 1912.

Cather’s first collection of short stories, The Troll Garden, was published in 1905 by McClure, Phillips, and Company. It contains several of Cather’s best-known stories—"A Wagner Matinee,” “The Sculptor’s Funeral,” and “Paul’s Case.”

Her many works include: April Twilights (1903); Alexander’s Bridge (1912); O Pioneers! (1913); The Song of the Lark (1915); My Ántonia (1918); Youth and the Bright Medusa (1920); One of Ours (1922; for which she won the Pulitzer Prize); A Lost Lady (1923); The Professor’s House (1925); My Mortal Enemy (1926); Death Comes to the Archbishop (1927); Shadows on the Rock (1931); Obscure Destinies (1932); and Lucy Gayheart (1935).

Willa Sibert Cather began publishing her written works in the Nebraska State Journal and became a regular contributor. She also worked as the managing editor of her Universities student newspaper. After her success as a writer, Cather changed her major from science to English and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in 1894.
Cather once remarked that the most important impressions one receives come before the age of fifteen, and it seems clear that she was referring particularly to her own experiences on the Nebraska prairie. She did use some Virginia memories in her work, but only sporadically, in a few early short stories, before turning to them in her last published novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. In her “Nebraska works,” it is not only Nebraska that Cather evokes, but it is, also, what Nebraska symbolizes and means, for she is not simply a regional writer. The range of her work is as broad as the range of her experience, and Nebraska represents the westward necessity of her life. Wherever in her work the pull of the landscape is felt, there is Nebraska; whether the setting is Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, or even rural Pennsylvania or frontier Quebec.

Although her setting is often the American western frontier, she masterfully locates the universal through the specific, and her literary reputation transcends the limitations of regional or gender affiliation. In her exploration of the human spirit, Cather characteristically defends artistic values in an increasingly materialistic world, and she is known for her graceful rendering of place and character.

More than her contemporaries and those figures from the generation which succeeded hers—most especially Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway—Cather’s fiction creates a personal intimacy between writer and reader which both creates a deep bond and feels authentic, special. Willa Sibert Cather published her first novel Alexander’s Bridge as a serial in McClure’s in 1912. Her first novel garnered a lot of attention and critical praise. Her next work was the famous Prairie Trilogy—*O Pioneers!*, The Song of the Lark and *My Antonia*. These three works, published in 1913, 1915 and 1918 became her most famous and critically acclaimed works.

During the next years, Cather established herself as one of the major American writers. Her novel *One of Ours* received the Pulitzer Prize in 1922. However, during the 1930s, her career experienced a slump, since critics claimed her work was too idealistic and lacked social relevance. Despite the critics’ opinions, Carter’s 1931 book *Shadows on the Rock* became the most read novel in the United States and her novel *Lucy Gayheart* was the number one bestseller in 1935.

### 3.3 Willa Cather: On the Gull’s Road

On the Gull’s Road (1908) from Willa Cather is a touching memoir of unrequited love with Alexandra Deppling on a ship from Genoa to New York City, her compelling beauty despite illness and a dandy of a husband. She gives him a mysterious box she asks that he not open until she writes, which along with his drawing of her, symbolize their love twenty years past. “Vanity sometimes saves us when nothing else will, and mine saved you.”

Plot summary

One day a painter comes to the narrator’s house on a business matter but stops when he sees the painting of Alexandra Ebbling. The painter is astonished when he sees how beautiful she is. The narrator then flashes back
to the time that he met her. He is boarding from Italy to New York when he sees Mrs. Ebbling. Captured by how beautiful she looked, he watched her and her daughter, Carin, all day. He enjoys talking to her and trying to find out what she is thinking about when she stares at the ocean all day. One day Lars Ebbling thanks the narrator for talking to his wife, then the narrator says that if Lars stayed any longer he would have punched him. Then the narrator draws Mrs. Ebbling. Slowly they talk even more about even deeper things. Then one day the weather was picking up so everyone went into the cabin except Mrs. Ebbling and the narrator and he asked her to run away with him. She explains that she gave him love and that is enough. She then gives him a box and tells him not to open it until he hears from her. About a year later He got a letter which said that Alexandra Ebbling died and with it a second later which told him that he could open the box. Inside it was a piece of her hair, a withered magnolia flower and two pink sea shells. The narrator remembers Alexandra Ebbling. Twenty years ago he met her on a boat. Slowly his love grew for her. But Alexandra Ebbling has a bad heart valve... and husband. He wants to run away with her but she says she can't. She gives him a box for him to remember her by and he never sees her again.

A closer analysis of the characters is relevant at this point of time. The first character is the Narrator/Male Lover. He is the one who loved Mrs. Alexandra Ebbling. They both dearly loved each other, even though they did not know each other for a long time. Overall, they decide to go their separate ways. The narrator is a classic example of the lovesick young man. Just 25 years of age when he is aboard the ship and meets Mrs. Ebbling, he is immediately drawn to her and cannot get her off his mind: "I could not help thinking how disappointed I would be if rain should keep Mrs. Ebbling in her cabin tomorrow." That admission comes after the pair's very first encounter.

One could describe the narrator as naive, his lack of worldly experience making it seem possible to overcome the roadblocks in his way (Ebbling's husband, daughter and illness) in pursuit of what he wants: a relationship with Ebbling. He practically pouts when she turns him down: "And yet you will do nothing, I groaned. You will dare nothing. You will give me nothing."

Mrs. Ebbling is the star of the story. She is described as having a "splendid, vigorous body," with red-gold hair "drenched with sunlight." The narrator pores over her high cheekbones, gentle chin and "the singular loveliness of the mouth." The narrator is smitten with her, even though she is married and has a child. Despite that, she appears to spend a good portion of her time aboard the Germania alone, looking at the water and enjoying the sunshine, and is content to do so. That maturity might be attributed to her failing health: "She had a bad heart valve, he added, and was in a serious way," or it could be her worldliness in having traveled a good portion of her life. Her uncle was a skipper on a coasting vessel, and with him she had made many trips along the Norwegian coast. But she was always reading and and thinking about the blue seas of the South."
We also see her maturity bloom when refuting the narrator’s advances. He is clearly consumed by her, even suggesting that the two run off together. Yet, she rebuffs him multiple times: “She had been held too long and too closely in my thoughts, and she begged me to release her for a little while.”

Although her husband, an engineer aboard the ship, seems to treat her well, she appears lonely and defeated. It seems unlikely that she has not noticed her husband’s advances toward other women, yet she tells the narrator she is grateful to him.

By her own admissions, we discover that Mrs. Ebbling is vain, the trait that stops her from pursuing a relationship with the narrator: “I had much to give you, if you had come earlier. As it was, I was ashamed. Vanity sometimes saves us when nothing else will, and mine saved you.”

Mr Lars Ebbling, Alexandra’s husband who is Norwegian too has some influence on the set of events of the story. Carin, the Ebblings’s daughter also appears in the story and you may watch out about her presence. The Doctor, ‘an Italian naval officer, and the commodore of a Long Island yacht club.’ Other characters which call for attention are Dame Ericson, a woman who used to live in Alexandra’s village and Niels Nannestad, Alexandra’s father.

3.4 MAJOR THEMES AND ASPECTS OF STUDY

Out of all the themes in the narratives, the theme of love needs to be probed between the characters. Arguably, as the narrator allows readers to understand his past, it demonstrates the encounter where he felt a love that should not happen. It shows his journey with Alexandra Ebbling that cannot come into place due to his marriage with Lars Ebbling. Despite having the same feelings with one another, the narrator feels heartbroken that Alexandra declined his request to elope due to her degrading health condition and the fact that she is married (Roberts 1).

Altogether, the story presents a reminiscent time when the narrator was young and felt he had experienced true love like no other. By using flashbacks, Cather is able to emphasize on these emotions and examine how complications impeded true love.

Another evident theme portrayed by Cather in the story corresponds to strict adherence to norms and standards. This can particularly be seen with the reactions of Alexandra Ebbling as she continues to find ways to stick with her duties to her husband Lars. Despite the supposed extra-marital affairs and lack of romantic flame between the couple, Alexandra continued to fight for the sanctity of their marriage. Equally, readers often associate Alexandra’s marriage to be arranged and do not necessarily reflect what she feels. Cather mentions this in the story by highlighting, “sometimes it is given in marriage, and sometimes it is given in love, but often it is never given at all” (151). This quote surmises how Mrs. Ebbling feels about her priorities, including marriage. Altogether, despite the temptations of eloping with the narrator and her personal feelings, Alexandra chose to stick to her obligation and duty as a wife.
The use of the water as a metaphor for budding romantic emotions of Alexandra is utilized by Cather in the story. Using this symbolism enables readers to recognize the developing feelings emerging between the main characters in the story. Woodress provides that “Cather suggests sexual passion by associating Mrs. Ebbling continually with the sea, as though she were Venus, emerging on her scallop, describing her with metaphors of sea” (201). By associating Alexandra’s feelings with the sea, it allows readers to recognize its depth and arguably its intensity when triggered. From the perspective of the narrator, he felt this emotion rise during his interaction with Alexandra in the ship.

Overall, Cather’s ‘On the Gulls Road’ remains to be reminiscent of the narrator who has experienced love but had to succumb due to complexities and circumstances. With the author’s ability to provide powerful storytelling, she is able to convey depth and meaning to readers and express strong emotions related to sadness, longing and a love that failed due to existing obligations. As the story provides a flashback of a romance that happened in the past, it enables the promotion of a nostalgic feel where the persona had to recall the one that got away and showcase that amidst the years that passed, the emotion and sense of longing continues.

Cather’s work stands as something of an emotional autobiography, tracing the course of her deepest feelings about what is most valuable in human experience. For Cather, what endured best, and what helped one endure, were the values contained in the land, and in humanity’s civilizing impulses, particularly the impulse to art. What is best in humanity responds to these things, and these things have the capacity to ennoble in return. Sometimes they seem mutually exclusive, the open landscape and civilization, and some characters never reconcile the apparent polarity. Cather says, however, that ultimately one can have both East and West. For her, the reconciliation seems to have occurred mainly in her art, where she was able to love and write about the land if not live on it. A conflict such as this can be resolved, for it involves a tension between two things of potential value. Thus, in her life and her art it was not this conflict that caused Cather to despair; rather, it was the willingness of humanity in general to allow the greedy and unscrupulous to destroy both the land and civilization. At the same time, it was the bright promise of youth, in whom desire for the land and for art could be reborn with each new generation, that caused her to rejoice. Cather is particularly appealing to readers who like wholesome, value-centered art. She is held in increasingly high regard among critics and scholars of twentieth century literature and is recognized as one of the finest stylists in American letters.

### 3.5 LET US SUM UP

On the Gulls Road is yet another beautiful story by Willa Cather. If we look at the characters, the writing, the story, all of it has created massive public appeal. Love at first sight; not just visual and physical, but mind melding, heart melding, love at first sight. But there is a catch, and it’s the catch that will give you a big sigh, and maybe even cause you to shed a tear.
Her novels on frontier life brought her to national recognition. In 1923 she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, ‘One of Ours’ (1922), set during World War I. She travelled widely and often spent summers in New Brunswick, Canada. In later life, she experienced much negative criticism for her conservative politics and became reclusive, burning some of her letters and personal papers, including her last manuscript.

It is not a surprise that she was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1943. In 1944, Cather received the gold medal for fiction from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, an award given once a decade for an author’s total accomplishments. Willa Cather will always be remembered for her art of storytelling and her thematic intensity.

3.6 EXERCISES

Study questions:

1. Do you agree with the view that the twentieth century short story primarily offers perceptions on human characters? Give reasons in support of your answer.

2. Do you agree with the view that the twentieth century short story primarily offers perceptions on human characters? Give reasons in support of your answer.

3. At the beginning of the story the narrator reflects (about Mrs. Ebbling), “Out of all that is supposed to make for happiness, she had very little.” What relationships do the things that are “supposed to make for happiness” have with actual happiness? Where does beauty fit in?

4. Throughout the story, Cather offers us images of water. How does the story use water as a metaphor for life and self-determination?

5. “On the Gulls’ Road” offers readers competing depictions of courage. Which portrayal captures the nature of courage most accurately? Why?

3.7 FURTHER READINGS


Online Resources: