

An Anglo-American Author Creates Anglo-American Villain

by
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"Here lies old four per cent
The more he grabbed, the more he lent
The more he lent, the more he craved
My God, can such a man be saved?"

The Anglo-American villains found in three novels by Willa Cather are, in varying ways three studies of "old four per cent." All three men are motivated by unchecked lust, for power, money, or women. The men are tyrannous, functioning in the autonomy that they assume is granted them through their social environments and various sources of power. Willa Cather, the Anglo-American writer who has been praised for her early positive depictions of ethnic groups in America, carefully examined many aspects of the lives and conditions of the ethnics she portrayed, including in some of her works a personification of oppression, the Anglo-American villain. In each of the three works considered here, the villain is contrasted with an ethnic heroine, a young woman whose purity and integrity are irreproachable, and who is graced with strength of character and faith in humanity. The moral, resolute woman who defies the odds against her existence, going beyond mere survival to actual success, is temporarily opposed by the spiritually weak male whose opportunities for success, granted through his sex and native American status, are corrupted. Those very opportunities, mishandled and abused, directly or indirectly lead to the villain's down-fall. The heroine, whose negative circumstances and bleak prospects would seem to indicate failure, rises from the depths and prevails. The Anglo male is dragged down from his lofty position of power by his own wilfulness and is ultimately foiled.

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), Cather tells the story of two French missionary priests in the American Southwest of the 1850's. The book concentrates on the lives of these two devout men, and there is no major female character in the novel. However,

in a section entitled, "The Lonely Road to Mora," the reader meets a young woman whose life story is the most vividly impressive in the book.

The tale of Magdalena Valdez and her irredeemingly villainous husband begins as the priests journey, burro-back, at night, through a deserted countryside in a rainstorm. The men seek shelter in a "wretched adobe house. . . poor and mean" and there meet Buck Scales, an ugly, evil looking fellow. He was tall, gaunt and ill-formed, with a snake-like neck, terminating in a small, bony head. Under his close-clipped hair this repellent head showed a number of thick ridges, as if the skull joinings were overgrown by layers of superfluous bone. With its small, rudimentary ears, this head had a positively malignant look. The man seemed not more than half human. . . ."²

Cather later emphasized his evil appearance as he challenges the visitors. "As he looked from one to the other, his head played from side to side, exactly like a snake's"³ Magdalena, his Mexican wife, cowers in a corner, "as if she were terribly frightened. . . Her hands were shaking so that she dropped things. She was not old, she might be young, but she was probably half-witted. There was nothing in her face but blankness and fear."⁴ The priests assume that her husband has been abusing her. When his back is turned, Magdalena warns the priests away by miming a slashed throat. The priests confront the outlaw and escape. Magdalena flees during the conflict, finding the priests the following day and telling horrifying tales of Buck as a robber and murderer. The woman is neither mad nor half-witted, but half-crazed with fear. The outlaw Scales is captured and finally hanged, after screaming blood-curdling threats at his wife. Magdalena is put into the custody of the famous Anglo-American convert to the Roman Catholic faith, Kit Carson. She later serves the Church as a cook in a convent, retaining her sanity and her devout nature and regaining the physical beauty she had had before she became Mrs. Buck Scales.

Buck Scales, though a minor figure, is an important one. He is the personification of savagery and lawlessness, the embodiment of the animal, chaotic nature of the Wild West. He "had drifted into Taos with a party of hunters from somewhere in Wyoming. All white men knew him for a dog and a degenerate—but to Mexican girls marriage with an American meant coming up in the world."⁵ Scales deceives the Mexican girl through his status as an "American," a high position automatically granted him in the white-oriented hierarchy of the Southwest. The girl is victimized by

her own innocence, her segregation from common knowledge shared by Anglos, and by the assumptions of her fellow ethnics. Once married, Scales manipulates through sheer physical power and the force of evil, threatening to kill Magdalena's old parents should she run away. Buck beat her and murdered each of their three offspring at birth "in ways so horrible that she could not relate it"⁶ Of course, Scales is an outlaw, living in isolation and unacceptable to the Anglo community. But until he is confronted with the combined forces of good in Magdalena and the priests, defeated by their courage and faith in justice, he remains at large, functioning as part of the American Western picture.

Scales can be seen as a stereotype, so narrowly drawn that the reader hesitates to accept him as a plausible character. But if "The Lonely Road to Mora" can be viewed as it may have been intended, as a religious fable, or a moral folk-tale, the reader need not ask more of the snake-like creature. Willa Cather greatly admired the Roman Catholic Europeans who emigrated to the United States. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is her homage to the faith that those immigrants shared. The story of Buck Scales and Magdalena seems to be a combination of the numerous Wild West stories of unremorseful cold-blooded killers and the European fairy tales of lonely travelers, lost in the woods. In her usual way, Cather reverses the sex role; Buck Scales is the "witch." Magdalena destroys this evil force through the strength of her faith in the Church and through the protective powers of the priests. Understood in this context, the tale of Buck Scales actually requires that the man be a stereotypical Wild Western bandit, even that he be an unrealistic exaggeration of The Bad Man.

An earlier novel, *My Antonia* (1918), the story of a Bohemian immigrant girl of great strength of character, living in 1880's Nebraska, is told through the voice of an Anglo narrator, Jim Burden. Jim is Cather's persona; his background and youthful experiences parallel the author's early life. The narrator is male, perhaps, to give credibility to this story, based on the life of someone Cather actually knew, in a time when women and women writers particularly were not heard or read with the same acceptance given to men. Jim "enjoys" a kind of "success" in later life, as an east-coast attorney for a large railroad company, financially comfortable, socially acceptable, and emotionally empty, shared with a barren wife who is "unimpressionable and temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm."⁷ This is the kind of success that is expected of an intelligent, educated white Anglo male. The emptiness of Jim's life

provides Cather with a contrast for Antonia's fruitful, farm and family oriented success story. Antonia's retention of her ethnic identity and the strengths she acquires in overcoming the numerous obstacles of her early life as a "newcomer" are seen as positive, admirable, enviable, from Jim's point of view. Jim is the Anglo outsider, observing and memorializing the communal harmony of his Bohemian friends. The character of Jim Burden provides another service to the book. We see the Anglo villain of this novel predominantly through the eyes of the Anglo friend. Antonia's would-be seducer is presented through the perceptions and reactions of Jim, not Antonia, another reversal of roles.

Wick Cutter is "old four per cent." Jim first describes him as ". . . the merciless Black Hawk money lender, a man of evil name through out the country."⁸ Wycliffe Cutter had come to Black Hawk, Nebraska from Iowa. He is described as one of those men who come to a frontier settlement to "escape restraint." He is a pious hypocrite who contributes to the Protestant churches "for sentiment's sake." He affects the airs of a gentleman by trying to breed horses and claims that he drinks nothing stronger than sherry. Cutter delivers pompous moral maxims to young boys, lecturing about his hard-time childhood in the insufferable manner of a self-made man. He is an "inveterate gambler, though a poor loser," a man who delights in his constant battles with his wife, and in the seduction of young immigrant hired girls. "It was a peculiar combination of old-maidishness and licentiousness that made Cutter seem so despicable."⁹ Jim has particular reasons for detesting the loan shark so strongly. The man had caused the financial ruin of Jim and Antonia's friends, two Russian immigrant farmers defeated by their debts to Cutter. In addition, Antonia's first employer, a Norwegian banker, was often occupied with attempts to rescue poor farmers from Cutter's grasping, strangling clutches. But more than this, Jim harbors a very private resentment against this debaucher.

At one point in the novel, Cutter attempts to get into bed with the new hired girl, Antonia, and finds in her place the protective friend, Jim Burden. A struggle ensues and Jim escapes through an open window, running through his hometown in a night shirt, bleeding from the face, embarrassed and angry. When Mrs. Cutter learns the sordid details of her husband's latest episode, she vows, "Mr. Cutter will pay for this, Mrs. Burden. He will pay!" Jim observes,

Certainly Cutter liked to have his wife think him a devil. In some way he depended upon the excitement he could arouse in her hysterical nature.

Perhaps he got the feeling of being a rake more from his wife's rage and amazement than from any experience of his own. His zest in debauching might wane, but never Mrs. Cutter's belief in it. The reckoning with his wife at the end of an escapade was something he counted on - like the last powerful liquer after a long dinner. The one excitement he really couldn't do without was quarreling with Mrs. Cutter.¹⁰

The Anglo villain, though he had succeeded with other young girls, fails in his attempt to seduce Antonia because she is a strong young woman and because she has supportive friends in the Anglo community. It is ironic, later, when Antonia is finally "fooled" by the charming young Larry Donovan, who seduces the farm girl with promises of marriage and abandons her with a child. Antonia may be morally strong, but she is not rigid or infallible.

The heroine rises above her unhappy situation, however, going on to marry a fellow Bohemian and to raise a large family on a Nebraska farm. The story of Cutter's demise is told in the warmth of Antonia's family kitchen, when Jim is visiting after a twenty-year absence. The shockingly violent end of Cutter's story contrasts with the successful, positive environment that surrounds Antonia. Jim is told that shortly before his return visit, Cutter's life long battle with his wife had come to an end. The old man, having lived in fear that his wife or "her people" would inherit his greedily acquired estate of one hundred thousand dollars, shot his wife as she slept, and then committed suicide. Antonia's family has difficulty understanding a man who would kill himself for spite, who so hated his wife that he would take his own life along with hers for the final satisfaction of defeating her.

Wick Cutter is a bad man who functions within society's boundaries, passing as a respectable citizen while preying of the powerless. He "took advantage" of the young hired girls; he "took advantage" of the poor farmers, and he took advantage of the advantages that race, sex, and manipulative talents afforded him. Though he lives to an old age, it is not "ripe," but sour and rotten. He leaves life as he lived it, wealthy and powerful, with infamy and scandal following him, envied by none. Antonia, in contrast, is neither wealthy nor socially or politically powerful, but well-off, happy, loving, and beloved, envied by many, particularly her Anglo-American friend, Jim Burden.

Another Anglo-American narrator appears in the epilogue of Cather's last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). The five year old child who witnesses the reunion of Nancy, a run-away slave, with her mother after a separation of twenty-five years is

Willa Cather. The incidents in the epilogue are factual. The story of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is based on scenes that Cather saw and stories she heard in Virginia in the early 1870's, before her family moved to Nebraska. Part of the novel is like *My Antonia* in that it is based on the author's early memories. However, most of the plot takes place before the re-union, before Cather's birth, including people Cather never actually knew. This fact makes quite a difference for this particular work. Cather's depiction of blacks within the institution of slavery is not as credible as her presentation of European immigrants in other works. Here there is no evidence of ethnic unity, no view of the black family as a unit separate from the white structure, no sense of an individual proud black heritage. The slave girl Nancy is similar to Antonia and Magdalena in that she is young, pretty, innocent, and morally upright, but she does not receive the support from her own people that the other heroines do. In fact, the blacks as well as the Anglo villain, Martin Colbert, are stereotypes.

Martin is the notorious rake-hell nephew of Nancy's mistress, Sapphira, who has invited him to her home with the purpose of "ruining" Nancy. Sapphira has become suspicious of her husband's paternal affection for the girl. Unable to sell her away without her husband's signature, the slave mistress plans Nancy's disgrace, using Martin as the instrument of her cruel plans. The charming young Southern gentleman of no scruples pursues Nancy relentlessly, until she is forced to turn to Sapphira's daughter, Rachel Blake, who, with the help of fellow abolitionists and Underground Railroad conductors, sends Nancy to Canada and safety.

Martin is a young *bon-vivant* whose reputation precedes his arrival at Sapphira's home. It is well known that Martin had "fooled" one young mountain girl too many, and that the girl's indignant brothers sought vengeance, knocking out one of Martin's front teeth. Martin arrives sporting an artificial blue-tinged tooth, an emblem of which he does not appear to be particularly ashamed. He is also known as a compulsive gambler, and it seems that he seeks Sapphira's backwoods home as a refuge from the creditors he left behind in the "racing counties." Sapphira is charmed by his gentlemanly ways; her husband and daughter are repelled. Nancy, once a bright and "happy" slave, lives in fear of his attempts on her virginity.

The importance of Nancy's purity may be pointed out in a comparison of two scenes. A number of years before Martin's arrival, Rachel is engaged to Michael Blake, a young Congressman. Here is

the betrothed couple. Michael speaks:

My Sweetheart! May I have one kiss?

She puts her hands on his shoulders, holding him back and with that almost fierce devotion still shining in her eyes said pleadingly: "Please Michael, please! Not until the words have been said."

No reply could have made him happier. He caught her two hands and buried his face in them.

This was the eighteen thirties, when loose manners were very loose, and the proprieties correspondingly strict. Young bachelors who were free in their morals were very exacting that the girl they chose for a wife should be virginal in mind as well as body. The worst that could be said of an unmarried girl was that "she knew too much."¹¹

Compare that scene with the following. Nancy has just finished cleaning Martin's room, as he watches her.

As she was going toward the door with the long bolster upright in her arms, Martin caught her round the shoulders and kissed her on the mouth. She let the heavy roll of feathers slide to the floor and pushed against his chest with both hands.

"Oh, please, sir, please!"

Though candlelight was dim, he saw she was really frightened.

"Now my girl, what's there to make a fuss about? That's the way we say good-night down where I live. You ask my aunt." She was already at the door. "Wait a minute." He pointed to the bolster lying on the carpet. You take that thing with you, and waken me a half hour before breakfast. Don't forget."¹²

Nancy is the daughter of a slave woman who was brought up and trained by an English housekeeper. Nancy and her mother are "house niggers." They emulate the white people whom they serve, faithfully adopting all of the mores and dictates of the white world. For Nancy to be anything less than the innocent she is would be her ruin. Martin, of course, cares for none of these niceties, either in slave girls or in mountain girls. He operates in a world that sanctions, even encourages his wild ways. In a sense, Martin is governed by the same standard as the betrothed Michael, who tests his future wife with a request for a kiss. Years after her "test," Rachel Blake, as Nancy's protector, enlists the help of her father, Martin's uncle, by saying, "You surely know that rake Mart Colbert is after Nancy day and night. He'll have her, in the end. She's a good girl, but the Colbert men have never let anything get away. He'll catch her somewhere and force her."¹³ Like Jim Burden and his family, the good Anglo friends recognize danger in one of their own and take action to help the oppressed heroine.

It is significant that Cather chose Anglo males as representatives of oppressive conditions. Cather was quite sensitive to the positive of women and ethnics in America. Her creation of Antonia

was a deliberate attempt to honor, even glorify the strength and character of the immigrant woman. Although there are positively represented Anglos in her works, and ethnics who at times seem villainous, the threat of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness comes from a white male who uses his power for corrupt ends. All of the three villains are talented in the art of deception. All of the villains, stereotypically, are ego-centric.

There is no evolution of the villain in Cather's works, for Martin Colbert is as much a stereotype as Wick Cutter. Rather, the villains are of interest because they are created by one of their own backgrounds, a white Anglo Saxon Protestant who has taken up the cause of the other side. Everything that Cather believed in, admired, supported is included in the development of her heroines; an abiding faith in Man, a special kind of courage, a warm and generous nature, moral strength. The antithesis of these qualities is established in varying ways in the three villains. In the early Godless and lawless Southwest, we find the embodiment of that wild place, the degenerate, completely conscienceless outlaw, Buck Scales. He is as repulsive and dangerous as the rattlesnake that is indigenous to that area. Wick Cutter represents the town of Black Hawk. He assumes a superior position to the country farmers whose labors provide his livelihood. Like the town of Black Hawk, without the farmers' labors and the farmers' daughters, he would not survive. Like Black Hawk, Cutter makes pretensions of Eastern ways and cultured habits, but in fact he is just a rough frontier opportunist. His treatment of Antonia and the hired girls is an extension of the attitudes of the other Anglo-American citizens of Black Hawk. Willa Cather, through the voice of Jim Burden, states,

There was a curious social situation in Black Hawk. All the young men felt the attraction of the fine, well-set-up country girls who had come to town to earn a living. . . . The country girls were considered a menace to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background. But anxious mothers need have felt no alarm. They mistook the mettle of their sons. The respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth."¹⁴

Martin Colbert, flashing that decaying, artificial blue tooth in the midst of his charming smile is the Virginia of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. He represents a doomed, decadent society, ostensibly thriving on the misery of others, but all the while moving toward its own destruction. It is fitting that the demise of such a son of the South in a society that allows no shelter for the slave Nancy, and no recourse but flight another country, would be to die in the Civil

War, a Confederate cavalry captain. His cousin Rachel Blake, years later, utters a fitting epitaph: "The Colberts made a great to-do about him after he was dead, and put up a monument. But I reckon the neighborhood was relieved."¹⁵

"My God, can such a man be saved?"

Clearly, Willa Cather was not concerned with saving these representatives of America's greed and guilt and shame. She was concerned with saving her country, though. In opposing Wick, Buck, and Martin with successful, strong, and positive women like Antonia, Magdalena, and Nancy, she offers solutions to the American problems that these Anglo villains embody.

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NOTES

¹Cass G. Barns, *The Sod House: Reminiscent Historical and Biographical Sketches Featuring Nebraska Pioneers 1887-97* (Madison, Nebraska, 1973), p. 233.

²Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* Vintage Books edition (N.Y. 1971), p. 67. (Subsequent notes will be designated by the abbreviation *Death* and the page number.)

³*Death*, p. 69.

⁴*Death*, pp. 67-68.

⁵*Death*, p. 72.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston, 1954), Introduction. (Subsequent notes will be designated by *Antonia* and the page number.)

⁸*Antonia*, p. 50.

⁹*Antonia*, p. 211.

¹⁰*Antonia*, p. 253.

¹¹Willa Cather, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. (New York, 1940), pp. 133-134. (Subsequent notes will be designated by *Sapphira*.)

¹²*Sapphira*, p. 166.

¹³*Sapphira*, p. 224.

¹⁴*Antonia*, p. 197-202.

¹⁵*Sapphira*, p. 290.