

The "space" in Willa Cather's Fictions

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Introduction

Willa Cather (1873-1947) is famous for a series of Nebraska fictions which depict the prairie landscape and the pioneers' lives in American west. Many attentions have been paid on the nature descriptions, especially for the American west prairie landscape in her fictions. However, Cheryll Glotfelty points out that: "although Cather's most famous work takes place in thinly populated western landscape, she chose to live in New York city, and in fact, set several of her works in cities" (36). The purpose of this paper is to make an analysis on "space" in Cather's fictions. I argue that the "space" plays an important role in Cather's fictions. There are three features in terms of the "space" in Cather's fictions. At first, besides the Nebraska wilderness prairie and the American Southwest landscape, the modern industrial urban landscape also appears in most of Cather's fictions. In a sense, the space in the fiction is enlarged; the scene of the fiction is often changed between the country and the city, and is not restricted to one place. Secondly, Cather intentionally depicts trains to enlarge the space form in the fictions. As a mode of modern transport, the train is an indispensable intermediary in Cather's fictions. At one hand, trains are used as the primary mode of transport between the countries and the cities; on the other hand, trains enlarge a person's world and the man's sense of space. Cather integrates the urban landscape and industrial culture into her fictions; what's more, she makes no resistance on the modern culture while depicting the landscape. With the help of the train, the space is enlarged, and becomes mobile rather than static. At some extent, the train also contains the symbolic and metaphoric, complicated and profound meaning in Cather's fictions. Finally, Cather stresses the characters' space perceptions to the surrounding environment, not only in American west prairies, but also in modern cities. In fact, Cather's life experiences on space make influence on her writing, for example, her move with her family to Nebraska at the age of nine, her New York young editor life, and the visit to Southeast American in her mid-life. Cather emphasizes much on how the characters perceive the surrounding environment by five senses in many of her fictions.

1. The Urban Space

Martha Robertson once compared Cather to another famous American painter Georgia O'Keeffe in terms of the American Southwest landscape in their artistic works. She mentioned that: "*Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) was Cather's last novel set in the American southwest, whereas O'Keeffe continued to live and work in New Mexico until her death in 1986" (81). Different from O'Keeffe, although

Cather visits the Nebraska prairie and American southwest many times, indulges in the primitive beauty of wilderness, invests strong emotion on the landscape, she does not choose to spend the rest of her life in American southwest, still go back to New York City. According to *Willa Cather—Her Life and Art*, Woodress narrated Cather's experience and hesitation during 1927 to 1932, the latter part of her life. Woodress mentioned that: "Willa Cather hated New York by this time, and her letters during the twenties complain bitterly about the increasingly ugly changes that were taking place in the city" (241). However, as a result, "She did not have the courage to leave and stayed on in New York hating it." (242), rather she chose a new apartment on the more peaceful quieter and secluded Central Park area. Thus it can be seen Cather has a mixed and complicated feeling on modern city, and shows a contradicted attitude towards the urbanism. More interestingly, because Cather writes the novels in the cities rather than in the countryside, she is inclined to describe the environment or landscape based on the memory when writing the novels. Therefore, it is not surprising that the image of villages and the image of cities are often combined and represented in one novel.

In "Willa Cather's Quarrel With Urbanism", Matthias Schubnell also points out that although Willa Cather depicts constantly the Nebraska prairie landscape and the deserts and canyons of the American Southwest in the fictions, "Cather's work also contains numerous portraits of cities, among them Chicago, Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh, London and New York" (1). The image of cities is represented frequently in Cather's several short stories, comparing to her famous long fictions, the value and significance of her short stories have not been interpreted much yet. That is one of reasons to explain why the image of cities still ignored among the Cather's critics. For instance, the country space and the urban space are arranged in the "Neighbour Rosicky" (1932), one of Cather's short stories. Cather makes a contrast of the country landscape and the urban landscape, what's more, she depicts the hero—Rosicky's sensitive mental world and emotional changes as he lives in the country and in the city:

Well, it was a nice snowstorm; a fine sight to see the snow falling so quietly and graciously over so much open country. On his cap and shoulders, on the horses' backs and manes, light, delicate, mysterious it fell; and with it a dry cool fragrance was released into the air. It meant rest for vegetation and men and beasts, for the ground itself; a season of long nights for sleep, leisurely breakfasts, peace by the fire. (Neighbour Rosicky 594)

It was on a fourth of July afternoon, and he [Rosicky] was sitting in Park Place in the sun. The lower part of New York was empty. ...It struck young Rosicky that this was the trouble with big cities; they built you in from the earth itself, cemented you away from any contact with the ground. You lived in an unnatural world, like the fish in a aquarium, who were probably much more comfortable than they ever were in the sea. (Neighbour Rosicky 599)

The first citation reflects Rosicky's old country life, and the following second citation comes from Rosicky's memory of his young urban life. Like many young man at that time, Rosicky once pursued his dream life in New York. However, after Rosicky became old, he decided to back to his hometown, where he realizes it is the place he loves so much, and the peaceful happy life there is the life he is pursuing for his whole life. Superficially, the language Cather uses is very different. Cather uses the words like "graciously" "fragrance" "delicate" to express the pleasure brought by nature, and Rosicky enjoys the buzz of nature, the spiritual experience in the natural way and makes close observations about nature and human life. On the other hand, by using the words like "empty" "stillness" "blank", Cather depicts an implacable alienated New York City. Rosicky cannot find any consolation from the city, what's more, in his view, it is the high buildings in the cities that isolated human from the earth. The process of urbanization and industrialization is also the process of human's separation from nature. In this process, the relationship between man and nature is deteriorated. For exploring and pursuing the essence of life, human like Rosicky have to come back to the countryside, the nature to achieve their self-realization and to realize their true life value. In a word, human's intimacy to the nature and human's alienation to the urban is reflected through the contrast of the country and the city.

2. The Train

Cather integrates the urban landscape and industrial culture into her fictions. Besides, she makes no resistance on the modern culture while depicting the landscape. With the help of train, the space is enlarged, and becomes mobile rather than static. At some extent, the train also contains the symbolic and metaphoric, complicated and profound meaning in Cather's fictions. When we read Cather's short fictions or long fictions, we can find that the train as one of the important transportations often appears in Cather's novels. For instance, in the beginning of the "The Bohemian Girl" (1912) "The trans-continental express swung along the windings of the Sand River Valley..." (The Bohemian Girl 89), and In "The Sculpture's Funeral"(1905) "The night express shot, red as a rocket, out of the eastward marsh lands, and wound along

the river shore under the long lines of shivering poplars that sentineled the meadows, the escaping steam hanging in gray masses against the pale sky and blotting out the Milky Way” (The Sculpture’s Funeral 497).

Facknitz observes that the train plays an important role in Cather’s life: “Cather was born four years after the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, and by the time she died the railroads were already beginning to wane, giving way to highways” (71). Facknitz then emphasizes that: “Trains, not wagons bring Cather’s migrants westward to the prairie; eastward, trains take them to education, careers, money, war, and European culture” (71). I also believe that, in a sense, the train as a metaphor or a mode of transportation, directly or indirectly influences Cather’s fiction writing. I would add that the train not only changes people’s way of life, but also changes human’s perception to the space, in addition, the train also symbolizes industrial civilisation’s intrusion to the primitive natural wilderness. Finally, the train also metaphorically connects man to past or future, which establishes and strengthens the pastoral and nostalgic atmosphere in the novels.

In the beginning of *My Ántonia*, Jim Burden, a middle-aged legal counsel for Western railways in New York office, travels back to Nebraska town where he spent his childhood. Jim Burden and “I” are sitting in the train, and the landscape outside the train reminds them of their childhood experience:

While the train flashed through never-ending miles of ripe wheat, by country towns and bright-flowered pastures and oak groves wilting in the sun, we sat in the observation car, where the woodwork was hot to touch and red dust lay deep over everything. The dust and heat, the burning wind, reminded us of many things. (*My Ántonia* 27)

As a mode of transport, the train connects different places, shortens the distance between cities. What’s more, in the above description, Cather shows us another function of the train that is to connect man to past or future. If life is like a long journey, then recollection is like taking the train to the past, the previous landscape appearing once again. So, the train not only transport people, but also contains the symbolic, metaphoric, complicated and profound meaning in Cather’s fictions.

In *The Machine in the Garden*, Marx points out the development of machine exert huge influence and contribution to American society: “In the 1830’s the locomotive, an iron horse or fire-Titan, is becoming a kind of national obsession. It is the

embodiment of the age, an instrument of power, speed, noise, fire, iron, smoke—at once a testament to the will of man rising over natural obstacles, and, yet, confined by its iron rails to a pre-determined path, it suggests a new sort of fate” (191). According to Marx’s statement, as one of the symbol of modern industrial civilisation, the train is the embodiment of man’s triumph over nature. At some extent, the train reduces the distances between different places, bringing industrial civilisation to traditional primitive village; meanwhile, bearing man’s yearning for prosperous city and abundant money, transporting the labour forces to the cities. The description of the train crossing the wilderness itself is a metaphorical landscape, which symbolizes industrial civilisation’s intrusion to the primitive natural wilderness. In this way, the spaces in the novel is enlarged, not only the country space and urban space is connected, the landscape of civilisation and the landscape of wilderness is connected as well.

3. The Symbolic Space

When we come to a prairie, we are aware of freedom. When we live in the city, we are aware of noisy. Similar to the nonhuman animals, the human have a perceptual sense of space, and in the meantime, the human comprehends the world rationally. Cather is a very sensitive writer, she visits many places in her lives, and she observes the places, she smells and feels the surrounding space; she can capture the sentiment exquisitely. Many critics have focused on the landscape depicted in her novels, however, Cather not merely described the landscape and she likewise depicted the emotional relationship between the landscape and the human. In my opinion, when writing the novels, Cather pays much attention on how characters in the fiction perceive the landscape, the nature and the surrounding spaces. Character’s perception to the surrounding spaces frequently has symbolic meaning in Cather’s novels. For instance, in the following citation, Cather describes Jim Burden’s first sight of Nebraska prairie based on her own experience when she moved to Nebraska prairie at age of nine:

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land—slightly undulating, I knew, because often our wheels ground against the brake as we went down into a hollow and lurched up again on the other side. I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction. (My Ántonia 37)

During the 19th century, many immigrants moved to the west prairie, explored the west virgin land. The open plain of the West, which has no fence, no restriction, is a symbol of opportunity and freedom. However, Jim Burden's perception to the Nebraska prairie shows us another meaning that boundless space connoted despair rather than opportunity; it inhibited rather than encouraged action. There is no creeks, no trees, no hills or fields, but the land itself. It represents the negative meaning of man's paltriness as against the immensity and indifference of nature.

The following description excerpted from "Paul's Case", narrates Paul's perception to his birthplace and living place—Cordelia Street:

Paul never went up Cordelia Street without a shudder of loathing. His home was next to the house of the Cumberland minster. He approached it to-night with the nerveless sense of defeat, the hopeless feeling of sinking back forever into ugliness and commonness that he always had when he came home. The moment he turned into Cordelia Street he felt the waters close above his head. (Paul's Case 473)

According to this citation, Paul is not fond of Cordelia Street. The image of familiar home and street gives people happy and warm feeling, whereas, the depression and hopelessness arises spontaneously when Paul enters his living place. The atmosphere is stifling of Cordelia Street for young Paul. The reason why does Paul hate his living place is that Cordelia Street lacks room: "The young considered it crowded in an economic sense because it did not provide enough jobs, and in a psychological sense because it imposed too many social constraints on behavior" (Tuan 60). Paul's depression and the stifling air symbolize the social constraints and immutable conservative life style in Cordelia Street.

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