

Biblical Allusions to Christ's Resurrection in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*

Song (Joseph) Cho

In Book I, Jim kills a rattlesnake at a prairie dog town as Ántonia stands barefoot. After he pounds the snake's "ugly head flat," Ántonia wildly praises his bravery. This scene has been examined from a variety of perspectives by such scholars as Susan Rosowski, Blanche Gelfant, Steven Trout and Michael Gorman. Readers may also gain additional insight into the interpretation of the snake-killing incident by probing the context of the biblical allusions interwoven into the narrative. Willa Cather's familiarity with the Bible is well documented as Richard Giannone writes that "the Bible, in the King James version, schooled her in the power of words functioning as a means of survival, worshipping, and deliverance. The Bible was Cather's central text" (27). Bernice Slote notes that the author "absorbed the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*. Their presence in her writing is constant, insistent, pervasive" (35). Furthermore, Sharon Hoover highlights the fact that "the greatest number of direct references to a single book (or books) in Cather's work is from the Protestant Bible." For instance, there are echoes of the biblical story of Joseph and his brothers in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (Cho, *Echoes of the Biblical Story of Joseph* 1). Cather had also penned a review of *The Woman's Bible*, which was edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

It is worth pointing out that the snake, described as a "circus monstrosity," reminds Jim of "the ancient, eldest Evil," recalling the serpent in the Garden of Eden. According to the Book of Genesis, there were two trees in the Garden of Eden: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When the Burdens decorate a Christmas tree, Mrs. Burden remarks that it reminds her of the tree of knowledge. God gives Adam the following command: "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (2: 16-17). The serpent, however, tempts Eve to eat from the forbidden tree and both Adam and Eve disobey

God. As a result, they are banished from the garden. God punishes the serpent by saying, “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall *bruise thy head*, and thou shalt *bruise his heel*” (3:15, my emphasis).

The aforementioned verse is commonly referred to as the *Protevangelium*, or “the first gospel or good news.” *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as “The promise concerning the seed of the woman implied in the curse upon the serpent (Genesis 3:15), regarded as the earliest intimation of the gospel.” When Jim kills the snake, “a thread of green liquid oozed from *his crushed head*” (45, my emphasis). Also, it will be noticed that earlier in the novel Jim hears a story of how a “little girl who lived on the Black Hawk road was *bitten on the ankle* and had been sick all summer” (15, my emphasis). The phrases “crushed head” and “bitten on the ankle” bring to mind the words of the *Protevangelium*, namely “bruise thy head” and “bruise his heel.”

Curiously, little—if any—attention has been paid to what happens to the snake towards the end of the chapter. Jim says: “That snake hung on our corral fence for several days; some of the neighbors came to see it and agreed that it was the biggest rattler ever killed in those parts” (48). This seemingly straightforward passage is noteworthy when viewed in light of a biblical allusion made to Moses in the previous chapter when the narrator describes the prairie “like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed” (39). This sentence echoes Exodus 3: 2-3: “And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.” Moses leads the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land, to which Mr. Burden alludes when he reads Psalm 47: 4 early in the novel (Cho, *Cather’s Use of Psalms* 16). When the people complain against Moses about the wilderness conditions, God sends them venomous snakes. When they repent, God instructs Moses to make a bronze snake and hang it on a pole: “So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived” (Numbers 21: 9). In the New Testament, Christ compares his death on a cross to Moses’s lifting up of the bronze serpent in John 3: 14-15: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Interestingly, immediately after Jim describes the prairie as “the bush that burned with fire” an unexplored biblical allusion appears to be made to Christ. He says, “That hour always had the exultation of victory, of triumphant ending, *like a hero’s death—heroes who died young and gloriously. It was a sudden transfiguration, a lifting-up of day*” (39, my emphasis). The word “transfiguration” commonly refers to Christ’s appearance in radiant glory as recorded in Matthew 17: 1-3: “After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.” *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “transfiguration” as “The change in the appearance of Jesus Christ on the mountain (Matthew xvii. 2; Mark ix. 2, 3).”

In the last book of the novel, *Ántonia* and her children show Jim their fruit cave. When he sees her children run out of the fruit cave, Jim witnesses “a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight” (328). It bears mentioning that *Ántonia*’s favorite son, Leo, was born on Easter— a Christian festival celebrating the resurrection of Christ after being lifted up on a cross and placed in a tomb. To put it differently, on Easter day, new life exploded out of a dark cave. (It should be kept in mind that the author published a short story called “A Resurrection”). Against this background, it is worth recalling the Easter service that takes place in Cather’s last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. During Easter service, the congregation sings “There is a Land of Pure Delight.” The allusion to the protoevangelium earlier in the novel directs the readers’ attention to Christ’s resurrection at the end. Through her use of biblical allusions, the author invites readers to reflect on the theme of new beginnings, new life and new hope in *My Ántonia*.

=====

Works Cited

Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia*. 1918. Edited by Charles Mignon and Kari Ronning, U of Nebraska P, 1994.

=====

- Cather, Willa. *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements 1893-1896*. Ed. Bernice Slote, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966.
- Cather, Willa. *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. 1940. New York: Vintage Books, 1975.
- Cho, Song. "Willa Cather's Use of Psalms in *My Ántonia*." *Willa Cather Review*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2022, pp. 16-19.
- Cho, Song. "Echoes of the Biblical Story of Joseph and His Brothers in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*" *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews*, Mar. 2023, pp. 1-2.
- Curtin, William, editor. *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*. Nebraska UP, 1970.
- Gelfant, Blanche. "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Ántonia*." *American Literature*, vol. 43, 1971, pp. 60-82.
- Giannone, Richard. "Willa Cather and the Unfinished Drama of Deliverance." *Prairie Schooner*, vol. 52, 1978, pp. 25-46.
- Gorman, Michael. "Jim Burden and the White Man's Burden: *My Ántonia* and Empire." *Cather Studies*, vol. 6, 2006, pp. 28-57.
- Hoover, Sharon. "Introduction to a Bibliography of Willa Cather's Reading." *Willa Cather Archive*, https://cather.unl.edu/scholarship/reading_bibliography/introduction
- King James Version*. Bible Gateway, www.biblegateway.com
- "Protevangelium, n., sense 2". *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, July 2023, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1419777780>>
- Rosowski, Susan. *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986.
- "transfiguration, n., sense 2.c". *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, July 2023, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7832554292>>
- Trout, Steven. "Seeing the Rattlesnake in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2005, pp. 99-114.