

THE WOODPECKER EPISODE IN WILLA CATHER'S *A LOST LADY*

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When Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* was published in 1923, many critics praised the novel very highly. James Woodress, for example, writes in *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art*: "In general the chorus of reviewers praised the novel and placed it qualitatively on the same level as *My Ántonia*" (205). The simple style of the novel seemed to be considered a good example of her *Novel Demeuble*. In fact, there is no digressive episode in *A Lost Lady*, while there are some digressions in *My Ántonia*. Even if, at first, episodes in *A Lost Lady* seemed to be digressive, they share important and indispensable parts in the whole novel. For example, the episode of the woodpecker in Part I, Chapter II is not only the evidence of the cruelty of Ivy Peters, but also an allegory of the fall of Mrs. Forrester, therefore the episode is no digression at all. This very episode foretells the fates of Mrs. Forrester and Niel Herbert. This can be seen by contrasting the woodpecker episode and their fates in the whole novel.

First of all, it will be necessary to grasp the whole idea of the woodpecker episode. When Niel Herbert and his friends were going on a picnic in the grove of Captain Forrester, Ivy Peters, an ugly, cruel lad, came to them. Ivy happened to find a woodpecker and he dropped it from the tree with his sling-shot. He caught the female woodpecker and slit the eyes of the bird and released it. The woodpecker ran away desperately striking tree-trunks. Seeing the miserable bird, Niel went up the tree to kill the bird to put it out of its misery. But he suddenly lost his balance on the way and fell from the tree. His arm was broken. He was taken to the Forrester Place and cared for by Mrs. Forrester. This episode no doubt suggests the cruel character of Ivy Peters. But here the fate of Niel Herbert in the novel seems to be symbolized by his injury, and in addition, the fate of Mrs. Forrester ruined by Ivy Peters seems to be symbolized by the eyeless woodpecker.

The miserable images of the woodpecker firmly connected with those of Mrs. Ferrester in the novel for the woodpecker symbolizes her.¹ The assumption that this bird symbolizes her is supported by some examples. First of all, we should note that the gender of the bird is stated very explicitly as "female." In this episode, when Ivy dropped the woodpecker, he thought it male and said: "'Now wait. He'll come to. You'll hear him flutter in a minute'"

(23). But he was mistaken, because it was a female bird: “‘It ain’t a he, anyhow. It’s a female. Anybody would know that,’ said Niel contemptuously, annoyed that this unpopular boy should come along and spoil their afternoon” (23). It seems that the gender of the bird is an unimportant factor in this novel as a whole, whether it is a he or a she. But if it is unimportant, why is Ivy’s statement that it is a male corrected by Niel’s statement that it is a female? It is hardly possible to think that the gender of the bird is accidentally a female. Here the gender of the bird is needed to be female, because Cather alludes to Mrs. Forrester by this woodpecker.

Another example which will prove this assumption is Mrs. Forrester’s phone call to Frank Ellinger. In the thunder-storms and torrential rains, Mrs. Forrester came to see Niel. He soon found that she was completely drunk: “Then Niel noticed that she smelled strong of spirits; it streamed above the smell of rubber and creek mud and wet cloth” (130). This scene of her drunkenness may be suggested beforehand in the woodpecker episode: “The woodpecker rose in the air with a whirling, corkscrew motion, darted to the right, struck a tree-trunk,to the left, and struck another” (24). Here the bird itself seems to move like a drunk. This word “corkscrew” connects the bird with drinking more explicitly, and therefore with Mrs. Forrester.

The miserable condition of Mrs. Forrester which made Mr. Ogden murmur “Poor lady! So misguided” (151), is also the misery which the woodpecker must endure by the loss of the eyes. In Part Two, Chapter VI, Mrs. Forrester herself had changed much and “seemed to become another woman” (152). Here she is symbolized as “a ship without ballast”: “But without him [Chaptain Forrester], she was like a ship without ballast, dsiven hither and thith-er by every wind” (152). Such a condition also suggests the condition of the eyeless bird: “Up and down, back and forward among the tangle of branchess it flew, raking its feathers, falling and recovering itself” (24). The sentence, however, which follows the similie of “a ship without ballast” seems to connect Mrs. Forrester with the bird most directly: “She seemed to have lost her faculty of discrimination” (153). Here the “faculty of discrimination” is undoubtedly another word for “eyes.” That is to say, just like the woodpecker, Mrs. Forrester lost her “eyes,” which therefore caused her at last to approach Ivy Peters.

As to Mrs. Forrester’s eyes, the following expression also associates the loss of the eyes of the bird: “her eyes were hollow with fatigue” (161). The word “hollow” directly associates the “eyelessness” of the bird.

The woodpecker episode also foretells the relationship between Mrs. Forrester and Niel Herbert. In Part Two, Chapter VIII, for example, Niel tried to save her from the miserable circumstance at the dinner with the town boys: “She was not eating anything, she was using up all her vitality to electrify these heavy lads into speech. Niel felt that he must help her,

or at least try to" (162). However, Niel failed: "He soon realized that they didn't want his polite remarks; they wanted more duck, and to be let alone with it" (162). Here his attitude toward her is not that of the reverence he felt when he was a boy: "He was proud now that at the first moment he had recognized her as belonging to a different world from any he had ever known" (42), but an attitude toward her misery based on "an impulse of affection and guardianship" (84). This "impulse of affection and guardianship" toward her misery can be seen also in the woodpecker episode when he saw the miserable bird: "'There,' Niel Herbert exclaimed between his teeth, 'if I can get it now, I can kill it and put it out of misery'" (25). Niel went up the tree and tried to put the bird out of its misery, and "he suddenly lost his balance, turned a somersault in the air, and bumped down on the grass at their feet" (25-26). After all, he could not save the bird. This coincides with the fact that he could not save Mrs. Forrester out of her miserable circumstance at the dinner, and also out of her miserable decline in the latter part of the novel.

Although Niel tried to save Mrs. Forrester out of her miserable decline, he on the contrary was disappointed and disillusioned with her completely, because of his witnessing the love affairs of Mrs. Forrester, first with Frank Ellinger, and secondly with Ivy Peters. This witnessing of the two love affairs ended his reverence for her, and at the same time made him see her without illusion. His disillusionment is shown when he witnessed Mrs. Forrester and Ivy Peters in the Forrester place: "Niel went down the hill. 'For the last time,' he said, as he crossed the bridge in the evening light, 'for the last time.' And it was even so; he never went up the poplar-boarded road again. He had given her a year of his life, and she had thrown it away" (170). His awakening, however, from his illusion is shown more explicitly in the following: "If he [Niel] had not the nature of a spaniel, he told himself, he would never have gone back after the first time. It took two doses to cure him" (170). It is important to note the two words "doses" and "cure." These words can easily be associated with Niel's injury in the woodpecker episode: "He was almost there, his companions below thought him quite safe, when he suddenly lost his balance, turned a somersault in the air, and bumped down on the grass at their feet. There he lay without moving" (25-26). His injury here may be symbolic of the medicine he had to take to be "cured" of his illusion of Mrs. Forrester in the latter part of the novel. Thus the woodpecker episode foretells also the price he had to pay to be released from the illusion.

The episode, moreover, may suggest the relationship between Ivy and Niel in the latter part of the novel. For example, it should be noted that Ivy poisoned the Judge's water spaniel: "This nick name [Poison Ivy], however, was given him because it was well known that he had 'made away' with several other dogs before he had poisoned the Judge's water spaniel" (21). Here again, the word "spaniel" in this episode can be connected directly with

Niel himself, because he had the nature of a spaniel: "If he had not the nature of a spaniel, he told himself, he would never have gone back after the first time" (170). It is interesting that it was after all Ivy Peters who made Niel face "the nature of a spaniel" in himself, and also made him give it up, just as Ivy killed the Judge's water spaniel. In a sense, therefore, it can probably be said that Ivy shares a very important part in Niel's awakening of his new self in the world.

The woodpecker episode also suggests the relationship between Ivy and Mrs. Forrester. If the bird denotes her, Ivy's eyes have some importance because they are described as like those of a snake or a lizard, which is undoubtedly a natural enemy of birds, therefore of Mrs. Forrester: "His eyes were very small, and an absence of eyelashes gave his pupils the fixed, unblinking hardness of a snake's or a lizard's" (21-22). The description of his "unblinking eyes" like a snake or a lizard appears again, when he enters the Forrester Place for the first time with injured Niel and the other boys: "The little boys withdrew, only Ivy Peters remained standing in the back parlour, just outside the bedroom door, his arms folded across his chest, taking in his surroundings with bold, unblinking eyes" (27). Besides his eyes which are described as those of a snake or a lizard, his black felt hat also suggests his snake-like character and has some importance in this novel. It is a black felt hat that he threw over the woodpecker to catch it: "He threw his heavy black felt hat over it. Ivy never wore a straw hat, even in the hottest weather" (23). Later in this novel he again appears with the same kind of black felt hat: "It was a hot day in June, but he wore the black felt hat and ready-made coat of winter weight he had always affected as a boy" (103). The fact that he wears such a black felt hat even in the summer calls forth the image of a snake or a lizard in him. This snake-like image reflected in the latter part of the novel can easily be connected with the relationship between Ivy, that is, a "snake" and Mrs. Forrester, that is, the "woodpecker."

Mrs. Forrester was a target for Ivy's plan to get the Forrester Place, just like the woodpecker in the episode. In the episode he saw the bird in the grove and said: "See that woodpecker tapping; don't mind us a bit. That's nerve!" (22). His hatred for the bird, and therefore for Mrs. Forrester, is concentrated on the expression "don't mind us a bit." In the relationship between Ivy and Mrs. Forrester, such an expression seems to suggest Ivy's inferiority complex toward her social class higher than Ivy's, which may be proven in the following: "It had occurred to him that this would be a fine chance to get inside the Forrester's house and see what it was like, and this he had always wanted to do" (26). Just as he wanted to make the bird fall from the tree and succeeded in the episode, in this case his inferiority complex naturally worked in the way of pulling down Mrs. Forrester to the same level or into a more miserable circumstance.² And in fact, because of the financial decline, just as he ex-

pected, "The Forresters have come down in the world like the rest" (104). The relationship between Ivy and Mrs. Forrester is that of Ivy and the woodpecker in the episode.

In this context the reason Ivy was called "Poison Ivy" is that it is more explicit. The word "poison" suggests the fall of Mrs. Forrester: "Her blue lips, the black shadows under her eyes, made her look as if some poison were at work in her body" (131). After all, she was destined to be "poisoned," that is, ruined by Ivy in the end of this novel, which is again foretold suggestively in the woodpecker episode.

As demonstrated above, the woodpecker episode foretells the fates of Mrs. Forrester and Niel in the whole novel. The fall of Mrs. Forrester is foretold in the beginning of the novel before we come to the scenes of the decline of the Forresters in the latter part of the novel. Here the part is firmly connected with the whole, and vice versa, which may be the secret of the simple style of Willa Cather in *A Lost Lady*.

Notes

1. Mrs. Forrester is sometimes symbolized as birds and flowers. On the other hand Captain Forrester is symbolized as a mountain: "His repose was like that of a mountain" (48). In addition to that, the name "Forrester" suggests another image of mountain, "forest." As a mountain or a forest exists, birds and flowers are safe. Cf. One of the boys in the episode said: "'They are protected here, so they're not afraid,' said precise George" (22). Connected with the fate of Captain Forrester, the following sentences seem to have some significance: "They [woodpeckers] 'll spoil the old man's grove for him. That tree's full of holes already" (22), after all Mrs. Forrester sold the Forrester Place to Ivy, and did spoil "the old man's grove."

2. The inferiority complex among the town people also can be seen working: "Then Mrs. Beasley and Molly Tucker had their chance at last. They went in and out of Mrs. Forrester's kitchen as familiarly as they did out of one another's. They rummaged through the linen closet to find more sheets, pried about in the attic and cellar" (138).

Works Cited

- Cather, Willa. *A Lost Lady*. Vintage Books Edition. A Division of Random House; New York, 1972.
 Woodress, James. *Will Cather: Her Life and Art*. Western Publishing Company, Inc.: New York, 1970.