

Abstract

The thesis seeks to explore the portrayal of the othered, marginalized individuals in the fictional work of Willa Cather. The primary focus of the text is the first-person narrative of *My Ántonia* (1917). Other complementary primary sources are Cather's remaining two prairie novels – *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *The Song of the Lark* (1915) – and two books of the author's later artistic creation – *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). The former two books function as a preliminary mapping of Cather's concerns developed in *My Ántonia*, the latter two texts present Cather's later reflections of otherness. The thesis focuses on Cather's incessant examination of the workings of the white, male, heteronormative discourse in the context of modern American nationhood: by her "queer" writing, she aims to unearth and subvert the coercive social mechanisms, and give voice to those who were eclipsed from the project of the rising economic empire: ethnic others (African Americans, Native Americans, European immigrants), and gendered and sexual others (women, homosexuals and lesbians). The identity of modern American society reposes on the construction of the social other and the artificial category of normality. Cather, on the other hand, examines the difference – sexual, racial, ethnic and literary. She creates romantic narratives of national conquest and in their inconspicuous twists buries the subversive testimonies of her troubled characters. The thesis is interested in those loci of subversive heterogeneity. Along with the painful predicament of the subjugated groups, the thesis is equally concerned with the situation of the privileged gatekeepers of the social order. In order to ensure their social ascend or to maintain their position on the top of the social hierarchy, they have to sacrifice their personal authenticity, suppress their knowledge of disturbing historical and social realities connected with their success and deal with the feelings of guilt. As a result, they confine themselves in an isolation of their public triumph. The backbone of the thesis constitutes the predicament of Jim Burden, the narrator of *My Ántonia*. The study examines both his role of the guardian of the social order and the purposes of the story of national triumph he is trying to tell, and the wounds he inflicts upon himself by his ambitiousness which requires him to suppress various "queer" impulses and subjugate the individuals surrounding him. The thematic analysis is complemented by the analysis of the formal complexities of Cather's writing which primarily focuses on the device of first-person narrative in *My Ántonia* that further complicates the interplay of gender, ethnicity and social power, and ensures the book a unique place in the context of Cather's work. A separate chapter is dedicated to Cather's grappling with the otherness in her later fiction - *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. The methodical approach of the thesis is an interdisciplinary one – it draws both on philosophical texts and texts of literary theory. Cather's "queer" writing was most succinctly expressed in Marilee Lindemann's *Willa Cather: Queering America* and, therefore, the thesis makes reference to her conception of the idea. The various articles concerning specific topics in Cather's fiction are complemented by broader philosophical perspectives (such as Foucault's theory of discourse and Butler's concept of gender performativity) which are applied on the discussed phenomena.

Key words: America, discourse, otherness, performativity, identity