

Maternal Love in Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock* (1931)

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ABSTRACT

Maternity is the primary obsession that haunts Cecile's character in Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock* (1931). Unable to decide what to go for, Cecile finds it impossible to leave without having Jacques, a person whom she has been taking care of and compensating him with the care he really needs. His mother could not provide him with the motherly love that Jacques needs as a little child like any other children of his age. Therefore, Cecile undertakes the maternal responsibility and provides him with the attention that he lacks from his mother. The relationship between Cecile and Jacques is a mother and child relationship. We understand this theme throughout the whole novel and through multiple examples and situations we encounter when reading the novel. It is a huge responsibility that Cecile takes and shoulders as she performs this difficult role into giving the maximum maternal care to a little child.

Key words: Maternal Love, *Shadows on the Rock*, English Literature

INTRODUCTION

Maternity is the primary obsession that haunts Cecile's character. Unable to decide what to go for, Cecile finds it impossible to leave without having Jacques, a person whom she has been taking care of and compensating him with the care he really needs. His mother could not provide him with the motherly love that Jacques needs as a little child like any other children of his age. Therefore, Cecile undertakes the maternal responsibility and provides him with the attention that he lacks from his mother. The relationship between Cecile and Jacques is a mother and child relationship. We understand this theme throughout the whole novel and through multiple examples and situations we encounter when reading the novel. It is a huge responsibility that Cecile takes and shoulders as she performs this difficult role into giving the maximum maternal care to a child, as we see in this quotation, "Auclair thought it natural for a little girl to adopt a friendless child, to want something to care for after having helped to care for her mother so long," and we also see her "observing the little boy closely, he had come to feel a real affection for him." (496) This is exactly the role Cecile was doing with Jacques, as she could see her mother or taking her mother's role in caring for Jacques. Her attention and care for him was obviously maternal in many aspects. She played the role of an educator teaching him different things and enriching his experience in different ways. Just as any caring mother she assumed the role of teaching him religious faith, and also was very concerned about his psychological life and happiness in his life. Cecile also proves to be a successful

mother who sometimes can narrate stories to him. Moreover, Cecile was so much truthful to him and fulfills the promises she gives to him. In fact, this made some critics like Roswoski think of Cecile as a holy mother. Roswoski states in *The Voyage Perilous*, "Cather suggests what it means by imagery that further links Cecile to the Virgin Mary. Among her new clothes are two items described in detail: a long, very fine blue silk dress and a gold broach. The long dress of a woman, the colors of the Holy Mother-they are now Cecile's to don. In seeing them Jacques regards Cecile as previously they had regarded the blessed mother and Child: in his eyes, Cecile has become 'the loveliest of all the virgins in Kebec, a charming figure of young motherhood,-oh, very young, and radiantly happy, with stately crown, and a long, blue cloak'(65). Jacques claps his hands together as if in prayer and looks at Cecile in adoration." (187)

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

First, on the level of religion and faith, Cecile was very keen about the boy's religious faith like when she took him to the church, Cecile said, "It has been a long time since we were in here together," Cecile whispered. He nodded, and she asked, "But you come in to say your prayers, don't you, everyday?" (503). Part of her religious teaching in him, she tries to explain to him that angels come and protect people through answering his questions and supporting his observations. She always finds an answer for his questions and if she does not know she goes back to books. For example, Jacques asked

her about Jesus and angels, and she answered him that angels come and protect you (519). Some critics like Roswoski see Cecile as a holy mother who could provide Jacques with true love, affection, and spiritualism. To some extent this applies to Cecile's character because she always reminds Jacques of his religion and never forgets to strengthen his faith. Roswoski says, "In essentials Cecile's life could be that of the virgin Mother, who except in fulfilling her vocation as Mother of Christ remained in the backgrounds of events; who was preeminent in purity and obedience, sinlessness, perpetual virginity, mediatorship; and who moved through stages toward sainthood: acceptance of vocation, purification, apotheosis." (185)

Part of his teaching and educating him, Cecile was always reading for him from old books referring to religious figures and historical facts as we see in this example, "Cecile told Jacques she had found in her *Lives of the Saints* the picture of a little boy who looked very much like him. I shall always keep it for a picture of you, Jacques, look, it is little Saint Edmond. He was an English saint, and he became archbishop of Canterbury. But he died in France, at the monastery of Pontigny. Sit here beside me, I will read what it says about him." (518) This maternal affection appears very obvious in this quotation as it shows us a complete picture of harmony where a girl behaves like a mother, and the little child just listens with whole heartedness.

On the level of education, the maternal aspect appears to be very obvious in her concern about Jacques's education, and the way he should learn things. She knows that Jacques is not a clever person, and this has made her a little more conscious about his character and education. In addition to her concern about his education, she was also concerned about his psychological life and the way he receives education and about whether education at school could make him happier more than ever. This is exactly the feeling of a caring mother when worrying about the educational life of her son, and how that affects his psychological state of mind. This is the maternal intimacy that expresses the profound feelings of responsibility and commitment towards making this child a successful person in life. We clearly notice this thing when we read this quotation that shows us how much Cecile was concerned about the educational and the psychological life of Jacques exactly as a loving caring woman who consistently cares about all the aspects of life of her son. This example shows us that Cecile is very much worried about Jacques's school life as we understand from this quotation: "Compose yourself, my child we can do something. Suppose I were to send him to the Brothers' school in Montreal, and prepare him for the seminary?" she shook her head despondently. "He could never learn Latin. He is not a clever child; but he is good. I don't think he would be happy in a school". "Schools are not meant to make boys happy, Cecile, but to teach them to do without happiness." (611)

In addition to that, Cecile was deeply concerned about his happiness and success in life, and therefore she keeps praying for him like any other dedicated mother. She was very much concerned about the very little things in

Jacques's life as part of her upbringing of him; for example, she was very much worried about his appearance and cleanliness, because she knows for sure that Jacques needs all that care as a little child who has no father and no mother.

I shall pray for him," Cecile declared fervently, "but if only there were someone in this world, here in Quebec-Oh, Monseigneur l'Ancien," she turned to him pleadingly, "everyone says you are a father to your people, and no one needs a father so much as poor Jacques! If you would bid Houssart keep an eye on him, and when he sees the little boy dirty and neglected, to bring him here, where everything is good and clean, and washes his face! It would help him only to sit here with you-he is like that. Madame Pommier would look after him for me, but she cannot get about, and Jacques will not go to her, I am afraid. He is shy. When he is very dirty and ragged, he hides away." (610)

It's true that Jacques's mother alienates herself from her son, leaving her son as an orphan who suffers from poverty and deprivation, but Cecile was aware of his needs. Little things for Jacques seem big because he has been deprived and are more than enough to make him happy. Only Cecile could provide him with this attention he has lost and could support him with the needs and things he lacks. We could notice in this quotation how just buying a shoes for Jacques by Cecile could give happiness more than ever:

It was the afternoon of All Saints' Day, and Jacques had come up the hill through a driving sleet storm to put on his new shoes for the first time. When he had carefully laced them, he stood up in them and, looking from one to the other of his friends, smiled a glad, surprised, soft smile. He was certainly not a handsome child, but he had one beauty,-his baby teeth. When his pale lips parted, his teeth showed like two rows of pearls, really; even, regular, all the size, lustrous like those pearls that have just a faint shimmer of lilac. The hard crusts, which were his fare for the most part, kept them polished like veritable jewels. Cecile only hoped that when his second teeth came in, they would not be narrow and pointed, of the squirrel kind, like his mother's. (517)

This quotation also shows us that Cecile could manage to take care of every single aspect; she could even notice his baby teeth and hope that Jacques is not going to be like his mother who totally neglects him who shows no maternal emotions for him. Cecile was sure that Jacques is different from his mother, and he lacks that care that his mother should provide him with. Probably, Cecile tries to show us the big difference between Jacques and his mother through the image of teeth that may signify something important to Cecile.

The maternal aspect that she has for him includes some other aspects like storytelling. Cecile always recounts stories for him, and that's a very clear aspect in her relationship with him. She was doing that exactly like any other mature woman dealing with her little child. We have many examples from the novel when Cecile tells stories to Jacques. As we

see in this quotation “‘You might tell me about some nice saint,’ said Jacques presently. She began to whisper the story of Saint Anthony of Padua.” (503) Another example, when Jacques said “‘I don’t think I know about the kings and the shepherds very well,’ Jacques sighed. ‘I wish you would tell me.’ While she placed the figures, Cecile began the story, and Jacques listened as if he had never listened before.” (534). However, the other part of Cecile’s character is the sense of homesickness that is frequently mentioned throughout the whole novel but that we notice when they want to leave Quebec, Cecile could not imagine herself abandoning Jacques. “‘But father how can we leave him, with no one to look after him? I shall always be thinking of him, and it will make me very unhappy.....No, Papa. My heart is not like that.’” (607) And Cecile said in another quotation, “‘And what troubles me most is the little boy, Jacques Gaux.’” (610)

The images of maternal love that Cecile always imagines are intertwined with that unconscious maternal love and intimacy towards Jacques. To her Jacques could mean a family, as we see in this quotation from the historical essay by Susan Murphy, “‘The Character of Jacques is a clear example of the religiously suggestive way Cather used family memories.’” (339).

On the level of the social and ethical life, Cecile could instill in the mind of this little boy the love of values and morals. One of the most important things that Cecile tries to instill in his mind is the love of knowledge and reading. Therefore, Cecile keeps informing Jacques about the things that he does not know, and she always explains to him some facts and truths about various issues from different sources. Like any other caring mother, Cecile’s treatment of Jacques was not loose at all. Despite this great emotional and maternal love, Cecile was a strict and disciplined girl who sometimes became rough and harsh on Jacques for the purpose of rearing him in the most convenient and disciplined way. She never let things go loose with him. Instead Cecile always tries to control his behaviors positively, to guide him and tell him what is wrong and right. And sometimes if this does not work she could use punishment, especially at home, because Cecile never hurts his emotions in front of people. Cecile is aware that Jacques is a sensitive and shy little boy; therefore, she was always by his side when it comes to him having any trouble with people. But Cecile was also aware that bringing up a childlike Jacques entails using both the carrot and stick teaching technique especially at home. Auclair noticed this clever policy and strategy that Cecile is using with Jacques.

CONCLUSION

Truth is one of the most prominent characteristics of the maternal relationship between Jacques and Cecile. Cecile always tries to be so truthful with him and just fulfill the promises, she gives to him like any truthful mother to her child, “‘Cecile remembered that she had promised to take him coasting on her sled when the first snow came. She fastened his ragged jacket and buttoned him into an old fur coat that she had long ago outgrown.’” (527)

Truth is a significant part in her maternal love for Jacques which she expressed through her truthful emotions towards him. It’s not only a friendship that goes away when someone leaves; it’s also a feeling of responsibility exactly like any woman who feels responsible for her child. Therefore, we notice that Cecile starts worrying about Jacques the moments she wants to leave, wondering how such an innocent little boy could live alone without receiving any care. As we notice in this quotation by Rosowski in her book *The Voyage Perilous*, “‘This is Cecile’s epiphany; it marks the end of her youth. Following it, secondary characters bear witness to her maturity: ‘Her father remarks, ‘You are your Mother over again’” (213), and her aunt sends her a package from France “‘filled with the fine things of a lady.’” (182)

Finally, we see that the maternal love in *Shadows on the Rock* as one of the most influential themes that is clearly seen through the relationship between Cecile and Jacques. However, this theme can be better analyzed and investigated when reading the novel many times. A superficial reading of the novel may reveal some other implications, like viewing their relationship as a childhood friendship.

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