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Archetypal Patterns in Shadows on the Rock

by SUSAN A. HALLGARTH

APPARENTLY CONVENTIONAL in its portrait of Cécile Auclair, *Shadows on the Rock* at first glance seems sentimental, almost unworthy of a writer who thirteen years earlier produced *My Antonia*. Because it tells the story of a young girl who grows up on the frontier to become an earth mother, *Shadows* appears to repeat the pattern of *My Antonia*. Yet the progress of their development into Demeter figures is not parallel. Where Antonia breaks from her mother to represent a new beginning, Cécile carries her mother within her to discover how a love of duty and order creates not only a "climate" for living but "life itself."¹

A close reading of *Shadows* also reveals a symbolic complexity different from *My Antonia*'s and more like that of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Different in tone and texture, *Death* and *Shadows* are actually companion novels in which Cather used traditional materials to produce a startlingly modern message, one that yields fuller understanding of her mature artistic voice.² In *The Emerging Voice*, Sharon O'Brien describes Cather's early difficulty with finding her own artistic voice amid patriarchal assumptions about art and the artist.³ Judith Fryer suggests, however, that by the time of *Death* and *Shadows* Cather had found her

1. Willa Cather, *Shadows on the Rock* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931), 198; and *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954). It is important to note that Cécile becomes linked with Demeter through her straightforward progression as Persephone in the underworld. Antonia becomes Demeter only after passing through several other representations of the "eternal female" — the tomboy, the flirt, the fallen woman — which must be discarded or assimilated before she can be seen as the symbolic Mother of the New World.

The difference between these novels reflects Cather's shift in theme and structure. Both deal with the significance of the past and the pervasive influence of the eternal female principle, but *My Antonia* is really Jim Burden's quest for the meaning of love and identity. Rendered through his consciousness as the "other," Antonia gains complexity with Jim's idealized visions of her, culminating in Demeter whose many children tumble "out of the cave into the light" (*MA*, 352). At this moment he transcends the dualism of subject-object, reaching a state similar to Keats's "negative capability," where he can empathize without judging, and gains what T. S. Eliot called the "historical sense," a recognition that the past is not dead but alive, mythically repeated and reflected in the present.

Burden's discovery of pastness in the present allows him to see Antonia as all the "images" which do not fade and herself, a "battered woman" (*MA*, 352, 353). Antonia is all aspects of the Great Goddess — maiden, mother, and crone — in one, a "succession of . . . pictures" in his memory and a woman who still fires the imagination (*MA*, 353). She is a second Eve in the orchard, making us "feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting," who is also the Corn Goddess Demeter, the "rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (353).

2. The connection in Cather's mind between *Death* and *Shadows* was so close that she continued to use "Archbishop" for "Bishop" in *Shadows*, catching the mistake only when the novel was already in page proofs. See Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 162.

3. Sharon O'Brien, *The Emerging Voice* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press), 1987.

"authentic" woman's voice.⁴ Indeed, *Shadows* is woman's view of woman's world, and as she does in *Death*, Cather challenges expectations by "re-visioning" the female meanings in traditional archetypal patterns and challenges us to reread the old myths from new vantage points.

While the surface of these novels seems to offer little beyond a chronological recording of events, reading below the surface plunges us deep into layers rich in myth and symbol, reinforcing and revealing meaning: on one level, the Catholic themes and symbolic presence of the Virgin Mary; on another, the archetypal patterns of ancient and medieval legend and myth, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the Grail Legend, in *Shadows on the Rock*, the myth of Persephone-Demeter.⁵ Through these archetypal quests—for Latour those of Christ and Parsifal in the symbolic wasteland of New Mexico, for Cécile of the Virgin Mary and Persephone-Demeter in the symbolic afterlife of Canada—Cather explores the role of the artist and the meaning of death and immortality.

In shifting from priest to bride, Cather logically moves from the Grail Legend, in which a male learns androgynous behavior (compassion) in order to fulfill his mission as Christlike creator and achieve transcendence in death, to a myth in which a young maiden, first separated from then reunited with her mother, becomes the symbol of death and life. Written during the time Cather's own mother was dying, *Shadows* is set in the Canadian frontier of 1697, eight years after Cécile, now twelve, was transported from France, and two years after the death of her mother, who along with Cécile's father and Count Frontenac, his patron, represents the traditions of the Old World. Here Cather joins the Virgin Mary, for her a kind of "archaic mother-goddess" (O'Brien, 35), with the myth of Persephone-Demeter, to trace the progress of Cécile's passage from childhood to young maidenhood, a process of mother-daughter separation-and-reunion through which Cécile discovers her own identity, transcends the limitations imposed by death, and symbolically represents immortality.

4. Judith Fryer, *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1986), 321.

5. Latour's association with the Grail Legend has been analyzed elsewhere (see Susan Hallgarth, "Archbishop Latour and the Virgin in the New World," unpublished paper presented at the Western Literature Association Conference, 1984, and Bernard Baum, "Willa Cather's Wasteland," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 488 [1948], 589-601). Cather's use of Catholic themes and the Virgin Mary has also been explored (see, for instance, Catherine M. McLay, "Religion in the Novels of Willa Cather," *Renaissance*, 27 [1974], 125-44, and John J. Murphy, "Willa Cather and Catholic Themes," *Western American Literature*, 17 [Spring, 1982], 53-60). In *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1986), Susan Rosowski, who noted the symbolic significance of the Virgin Mary in both *Death* and *Shadows*, considers Cécile's a kind of "saint's life emulating Mary's (184-85).

It is important to remember that Mary is a later virgin-mother already represented in the myth of Persephone-Demeter. Demeter, who gives life through grain as the Corn Goddess, had failed to give immortality to a boy child (Demophoon) through purification by fire. But Persephone, with whom she is reunited, is the virgin-mother, "the secret, hidden, ineffable goddess, related to things beyond, not even to be named except as *Thea*" (Downing, 44). After her journey through the underworld prepared her to be goddess of death and resurrection, she appears in the Eleusinian Mysteries with torch and the child Brimos/Dionysus, a divine child who, according to Eric Neumann, represents the "luminous male principle" (*The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Manheim [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963], 309-10).

The Persephone-Demeter myth allows Cather to celebrate a particular kind of symbolic union, one in which the daughter maintains the self's boundaries while fusing with her mother to become a pioneer-mother-artist. Cather's treatment of the myth naturally focuses on Persephone, whose time in the underworld and annual reunion with Demeter are both important if she is to represent the hope of seasonal regeneration and spiritual resurrection.

In order to understand Cécile's symbolic meaning for Cather, we must first understand Persephone's. In *The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine*, Christine Downing points out that many interpreters have misunderstood the full significance of Persephone's role.⁶ Because their interpretation is based on patriarchal assumptions or their acquaintance is limited to the *Homeric Hymn*, which views the underworld from the perspective of the upper world, they give little attention to Persephone and focus only on her abduction and Demeter's grief (38).

Well versed in the classics, Cather explores the myth from a different angle, one that places Cécile-Persephone at the center. Her view is more like the one Downing described several generations later. And once we make that shift in vision, then according to Downing, "the whole story is told about a figure who first and foremost is goddess of the underworld" (44), and whose acceptance of death and Hades as her consort has "integral meaning" different from Demeter's perception of them (43). In Downing's view, Persephone's separation from Demeter merely begins her journey through the afterlife, through a "realm of souls, rather than of egos, the realm where experience is perceived symbolically . . . [not as terrifying but simply as] beyond life" (45). For Persephone, the realm of Hades is the New World. It is a place for discovery and acceptance, for transformation and "deep see-ing" (my italics). And if a matured Persephone is to represent both regeneration and life after death, it is important that she "does and does not return," that she belongs both to Hades and to Demeter (48, 49).

Cécile's journey is also a "deep see-ing" and maturing which transforms both Cécile and the New World in which she finds herself. At twelve, her reason for providing domestic order derives entirely from loyalty to her mother (26). During the course of the year this novel records, she grows to accept these duties as her own (197) and to recognize in Charron, her future husband, a "daring and pride . . . even more splendid" than Count Frontenac's, her father's Old World patron and ideal (268). Charron's may not be the authority of throne or law, "but he had authority, and a power which came from knowledge of the country and its people; from

6. Annis Pratt reminds us that there are dangers in interpreting earth mother-goddess figures because "archetype can vary from gynephobic to celebratory according to the critic's views on femininity" (in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1981], 138). Unfortunately, Pratt also misreads Cather by assuming, for instance, that the Corn God in *O Pioneers!* is a "green guide" leading Alexandra not to self-knowledge but to societal expectations of marriage. Pratt sees this as an instance of Cather's accepting patriarchal values (140).

knowledge, and from a kind of passion" (268). Cécile's is the same kind of authority, stemming from her mother's love of domestic order and her own compassion for those in the New World. This New World power, embodied in both Charron and Cécile, is unifying, creative, and organic.

As Hades, Charron plays an important role.⁷ In the original myth, not only does Hades abduct Persephone, he must become worthy of her. In this context, Charron's role is defined by his relation to Cécile. As his name indicates, he is the mythical ferryman and Hades, king of the underworld, who for part of each year must return Persephone to be united with Demeter. Charron's worthiness is tested by his mother and Jeanne Le Ber. Through Le Ber he learns compassion, through his mother this heroic woodsman and "romantic picture of the free Frenchman" learned to value family as "the first and final thing in the human lot" (171, 174). All of these qualities—his reverence for tradition and family, his skill in the woods and rivers of the frontier, and his experience with compassion—are essential preparation for his role as husband to the maiden Mother of the New World.

The dark forests and rude frontier settlements where Charron feels comfortable are for Cécile a kind of chaos, and the events that precipitate her epiphanies begin when she crosses with Charron to visit the family of Jean Baptiste Harnois on the Île d'Orléans. Here as elsewhere in *Shadows* names are significant. Jean Baptiste, like John the Baptist, is not the fulfillment of promise, only a precursor to it. And his home on the Île d'Orléans, where Cécile wakes to a new self, is both "paradise" (189) and hell. Cécile is frightened in the close, hot confines of the Harnois home until she finds the "harp-shaped elm" (193). There, feeling "she had escaped for ever from the Harnois and their way of living," she sleeps and wakes "happy,—though unreal, indeed, as if she were someone else" (199). In a meadow reminiscent of the one from which Persephone was abducted, the elm carries symbolic significance as an Ygdrasil or Maypole, trees of transformation and fertility, where Cécile's innocence is replaced by new awareness.⁸ She acknowledges her domestic vocation and love of Quebec and recognizes in Charron a champion with whom she would travel anywhere, even into the dark chaos of the Canadian forest which their symbolic union will later transform into civilization (195, 196, 198; also 234).

7. As Downing points out, understanding the role of Hades is central to our understanding of the myth: Hades is both abductor and "chance agent for [Persephone's] self-discovery" (43).

8. Sir James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1922), 110, 118, 124. The elm of *Shadows* may also be likened to the symbolic trees in *Death*, where Latour's role as Mary's knight is foreshadowed in the miraculous cruciform tree (18) and the blooming rose tree in his garden (200), then revealed as fulfilled in the symbolic fertility associated with the cottonwood grove and its resemblance to giant oaks covered with mistletoe clusters (222). It is perhaps significant that Cather used the elm rather than the eating of fruit to symbolize Cécile's transformation. For Persephone, eating pomegranate seeds "doomed" her to remain for at least part of each year in the underworld. Cécile is not doomed. She chooses Canada over France. Cécile is, of course, associated with fruit, with strawberries in the "harp-shaped elm" meadow and with the "glowing fruits of coloured glass" (Cécile finds them "lovelier than real fruit") in the crystal bowl Count Frontenac gives her just before his death (59, 60).

Cécile experiences additional shifts from innocence to growth and commitment to Canada through events connected with the death of Count Frontenac. Had he lived, she would have returned to France where the repressive order of the Old World still reigned. At the thought of returning, her sense of “peace and security” seems to vanish (228). Later, when the Count decides to stay in Canada, Cécile paradoxically responds to the immanence of his death by feeling “happy and contented” (251). With her father’s herbarium back in place, the hearth casting its usual glow, and her house restored to order, November’s brown fog cheers her as it always has because she knows her world is “not going to be destroyed” (252). By this time, it is clear that Canada is her chosen home and she recognizes her role as domestic artist in it (198). When the Count dies, Cécile feels briefly “as if a strong roof over their heads had been swept away” (259) until Charron appears to renew her sense of security and revitalize her father with his protective presence.⁹

In her passage to maturity, Cécile’s progress is also defined and enriched by her association with the Virgin Mary. Stories of saints’ lives, miracles, and scenes relating Cécile to Mary are prevalent through the first half of the novel, leading to the miracle of Jeanne Le Ber, Cécile’s “double,” after which these tales virtually disappear.¹⁰ Although many of the tales record scenes of cruelty and hardship, Cécile’s response is consistently imaginative and positive; she sees the life-giving possibility of such trials and feels the special protection of Mary for the New World (101).

She responds to the presence of Mary in the landscape with a similar innocent sense of delight. On St. Nicholas’ Eve, for instance, the sky shines for Cécile with Mary’s color, “a blue to ravish the heart, — that limpid, celestial, holy blue” (104). Cécile and Jacques, childlike versions of Mary and Christ, leave the Pommiers, an older example of mother and son, to make one last sled run in the “throbbing” evening light. At that moment nothing seems better to Cécile than “this winter, this feeling of being in one’s own place, . . . pulling Jacques up Holy Family Hill into paler and paler levels of blue air, like a diver coming up from the sea” (104). Mary’s symbolic mothering and protective presence is also apparent in Notre Dame, the cathedral at the base of the rock with its cave-like powers of regeneration (113). Throughout the novel, references to Mary and the

9. *Shadows*, 266. Charron in *Shadows* may also be connected with the Grail Legend. Just as the Grail knight replaces the dying Fisherking, Charron replaces Count Frontenac as the bringer of new life and protection. Cécile calls attention to her own life-giving role of renewal, when she responds to her father’s death wish after Frontenac dies by saying, “ ‘But you wish to live on my account. . . . I do not belong to the old time. I have got to live on into a new time; and you are all that I have in the world’ ” (261).

10. Susan Rosowski described Cather’s use of “doubles” in her analysis of Latour’s and Vaillant’s friendship (Rosowski, 166). After Le Ber’s miracle, we find reminders but few new miracles, except for Noel Chabanel (150), Captain Pondhaven’s stories of his parrot and the she-ape (216, 223), and the carp story (240). Father Hector’s salvation story, with a more human resolution than Le Ber’s miracle, has parallels both to Cécile—the pine tree and the “harp-shaped elm”—and to Le Ber’s miracle, which occurred on the same night, the night before Epiphany.

Catholic Church reinforce and expand the meaning of Cécile's mythic journey to selfhood as the Mother of the New World.

Hinted in the shadows of rock and forest, the texture of colors and landscape, and the integrated tales of violence and death, this underlayer of Christian and archetypal myth places *Shadows* closer to *Death* than *My Antonia*, which employs allusion and image to record not Antonia's but Jim Burden's search for identity. In their quests, Latour in *Death* and Cécile in *Shadows* experience symbolic deaths of the self that transform their search for identity into transcendent journeys through which they, like their archetypal counterparts, become symbols of rebirth and regeneration.

Both New Mexico and Canada are places for miracles. In Santa Fe, Latour discovered the lesson of empathy through the Virgin Mary, whose blue, rose, and gold permeate the landscape and whose immanence is everywhere signified by icons and the stories of miracles. Once he comprehends the regenerative power of the female principle, he brings fruition, fusing old with new world traditions, and as the pioneer-artist, builds his cathedral, blending earth and sky in a sanctuary more permanent than the towering but barren rock of Acoma. His quest ends by coming full circle to another "beginning of momentous things" (6) when he achieves his final synthesis in death, a symbolic fusing of human and divine.

Because she is female and young, has fewer ties with the Old and more examples of living faith in the New World, Cécile's quest is different from Latour's. Yet Cécile's frontier also contains towers that are paradoxically both sanctuary and barren rock, womb and tomb. Jeanne Le Ber's tower is at once "earthly paradise" (136) and tomb (134). And the rock of Quebec, which may gleam like an "altar with many candles, or like a holy city in an old legend" (169), is also a barren crag where "for some reason human beings built themselves nests . . . and held fast" (225-26). Here, the role of the man of action whose mission is to reach out into chaos to restore order is relegated, as it was in *Death*, to minor characters like Bishop Laval, Father Hector, and Charron. The major role in *Death*, with Latour as the still, passive artist and creator of order, is shared in *Shadows* by Jeanne Le Ber and Cécile. In this world of afterlife, Le Ber experiences a living death; Cécile lives to give new life. For Canada is a country of exiles, cut off from homeland and past, where sailors and swallows leave in autumn and return with spring. Its meaning depends on one's image of it and of the humans who hold "fast." For the Quebec of *Shadows*, like Latour's Santa Fe, is both a center of existence in the New World and a state of mind.

In *Shadows*, it is Cécile's mind that matters most, for she is the one who, like Persephone, creates a New World order that perpetually blooms. In autumn, when Mary's colors are fused with underworld fogs of brown, amethyst, and orange, Cécile feels she is "walking in a dream

. . . cut off from everything and living in a world of twilight and miracles" (61–62). She is happiest at such times. In the dead of winter, in her mind even the ice-choked river and "never-ending, merciless forest" seem part of the "layers and layers of shelter" surrounding and protecting the "one flickering, shadowy room [her salon] at the core" (157). And on All Souls' Day she is cheered by the "shades of the early martyrs and great missionaries," by the miracles and dreams that come "out of the fog" and take "on the splendour of legend" (95). While sorrow hangs "over the rock of Kebec on this day of the dead" (96), Cécile paradoxically feels the rock come to life (95). Always the center of her reality, Quebec is a joyful place because, like the nuns who have also come to civilize Canada, she maintains her "accustomed place in the world of the mind (which for each of us is the only world)" and creates a "well-ordered universe" about her (96).

Moreover, Cécile willingly makes the sacrifice of Persephone, as difficult for Father Hector and Count de Frontenac as it was for Latour — the "giving of oneself altogether and finally" to the New World by choosing to remain even in death (149). As Father Hector realizes, Cécile is not frightened by the "irrevocable" because "from the beginning women understand devotion" (150). Yet neither Latour nor Cécile are martyrs. Theirs is a more positive transplanting. Cather makes the distinction clear through Jeanne Le Ber. Both Cécile and Le Ber are symbolic "lamps," but Cécile's (Auclair) is the reassuring warmth of candle and hearth (101, 103; 158); Le Ber's is the "red spark of the sanctuary lamp" (131). Like Mother Catherine, Le Ber burns "her life out in vigils" and has as her successor a woman who is "hardy, sagacious, practical . . . the woman for Canada" (42). Purified by the fire of her devotion, Le Ber is sacrificed through it. Her martyrdom yields her position as Charron's potential bride to Cécile.

Once we recognize how myth and symbol inform these novels, we can see how *Death* and *Shadows* bear connection, but the differences between these two novels are equally important for understanding Cather's vision of the artist as androgynous and her concept of the role of the artist in the world. Latour is the passive, contemplative man who learns the feminine lesson of empathy, paired with Vaillant as the man of action. Cécile is more active, her "rapture" based in sensation and feeling for those around her (Fryer, 335), paired with Le Ber whose spiritual ecstasy is passive, silent, and solitary.

Their differences are dramatically evident in the scenes that occupy the center of each novel. The symbolically transformative scene in *Death* occurs when Latour happens upon the midnight vigil of Sada, empathetically experiences her suffering, and feels his heart pierced by "the beautiful concept of Mary" (218). Having experienced this moment of rapture, he becomes the active creator-artist. But the parallel scene at the heart of *Shadows*, which occurs when Charron, a man of action, observes the midnight vigil of Jeanne Le Ber, casts Charron into despair rather than releasing him from it. Equally transformative, the experience makes him want

“to die and forget that [he] had ever hoped for anything in this world” (183).

The reversal of meaning in these scenes is primarily a function of the myths that inform them and of the qualities of the artist these novels depict. Latour, Le Ber, and Cécile represent the living artist, but Cécile's is a particularly female, life-giving art. Latour builds a cathedral, and Le Ber lives through her legend as a saint, but Cécile is a mother whose legend is her art of living. Cécile and Jeanne Le Ber — paired images of the female as artist — allow Cather to refine the theme of immortality through art. For her in *Shadows*, as for Keats in the “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the dichotomy between art and life lies between the “Cold Pastoral,” whose unheard melodies will “tease” us throughout eternity, and the life of its subject. Le Ber's miracle and the novel recording Cécile's life are both melodious “silent forms.” But trapped in the silent solitude of her tower, like Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, Le Ber represents the artist's removal from life. Cécile's life may be ever present in the static, artistic form of the novel, but she — and for that matter, Latour — represents the ongoing artistry of life. Cécile and Le Ber, then, represent two means for symbolic transcendence over the limitations imposed by death. United with Mary, both become living expressions of her meaning, yet one creates new life as Persephone-Demeter while the other is removed from it.

The difference between them also explains why the midnight vigils have such different results for Latour and Charron. When Charron sees Jeanne Le Ber's “stone face” (181), a reminder of the stone-lipped cave that so terrified Latour early in his quest (127), he experiences the aspect of the Virgin Mary that Sada and Jeanne Le Ber both represent, Our Lady of Sorrows. Like Latour, Charron experiences a compassion that reaches to the depths of sorrow. Yet his sense of loss over Le Ber's “entombment” leads him not to joy but to his own death wish, to the letting go of what the self desires.¹¹ It is an important moment. Were Charron not to experience loss and his own death wish, his love for the past might prevent his later marriage to Cécile or his love for Cécile might be too self-interested to allow for her mythical reunion with her mother. Cécile's marriage and her ability to carry on her mother's domestic “feeling about life” (25) represent her final synthesis as daughter-mother, united in one as pioneer-artist, as Earth Mother of the New World.

Far from conventional or reflective of patriarchal values, then, *Shadows* is a delightful and powerful exploration of the role of the female

11. Reminiscent of Godfrey St. Peter's symbolic death-rebirth in *The Professor's House*, Charron's lesson with compassion is reiterated in the story of Blinker, the self-exiled torturer from Rouen who tends the bakery fires in Quebec and sleeps near the ovens. His disfigured face, like Le Ber's “stone face” and the stone gargoyles on French cathedrals, looks like those “figures of the tormented in the scenes of the Last Judgment” (162). Auclair compares him to Queen Dido as one whose own experience with misery has taught him pity (163). Charron's lesson is also repeated in his response to the death of his mother. It is significant that Jeanne Le Ber does not learn human compassion in this way; Le Ber's mother dies heartbroken over her daughter's lack of pity (133).

as artist, as well as of Cather's major themes—permanent and transitory values, active and passive principles, artistic isolation and human involvement. Here, as in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather's brilliant use of traditional legend and myth is both modern and female in its "re-visioning" of history and forces us to shift our vantage point. As the "good daughter" in both Christian and classical terms, Cécile becomes a positive symbol of female artistic power—compassionate, creative, empowering, and regenerating through an imaginative gift for ordering experience and her surroundings, a gift that Cather called elsewhere "the gift of sympathy."