

# AN ECO CRITICAL STUDY OF A *LOST LADY* BY WILLA CATHER

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## ABSTRACT

Eco criticism is the study of literature and the environment. The interdisciplinary area where literary scholars analyze texts that illustrate environmental concerns and examine the various ways of literature treats the subject of nature. Some eco critics brainstorm possible solution for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation, though not all eco critics agree on the purpose, methodology or scope of eco criticism. It takes as its subject the interconnection between nature and culture specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature as a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human. This brilliantly written short novel is economical, with every word and gesture etched in the mind to create a vivid picture of a people, place and a time. The opening image is an overview of the Foresters and their house at Sweet Water, the setting and main characters of this study. The introduction of Foresters has the feeling of a fairytale.

## INTRODUCTION

Willa Sibert Cather was a Pulitzer winning American writer who spent most of her life writing for various American journals, magazines and publishing her individual works with Henry James as one of her solid inspirations, Cather wrote about human emotions with utmost emotional sensitivity, merging it with the depiction of the platonic relationship between man and his landscape. She won international fame with her war classic 'one of ours' a novel inspired by the death of her cousin. She was born in virginia and brought up in Nebraska by her businessman father and school teacher mother. It was in Nebraska that she did her formal schooling and eventually graduated from university of Nebraska. Soon after, her essays and fictional stories started getting published in big publications like Nebraska state journal, The Mahogany Tree. The Hesperian, etc., she became the literary editor of The Hesperian and started her weekly column in Nebraska state journal for years. She becomes one of the editorial staffs of the McClure, eventually becoming the managing editor of the firm. A lot of her stories were published in McClure in the form of series of stories before they were published as books.

There is evidence already of why this might be. Mrs. Forester is twenty-five years younger than the Captain, and they have no children. Yet in this idyllic remembrance, they entertain important people, and they themselves travel and obviously have money. Niel is now twenty and on his way to his own life. He leaves the Foresters behind, and there are unanswered questions in his mind that will haunt him about Marrian Forester. The question is how she can prostitute herself with Frank: “What did she do with all her exquisiteness when she was with man like Ellinger?” (ALL 105-106). The other question is how she is able to recover herself and give the impression of “tempered steel, a blade that could fence with anyone and never break?” (ALL 106)

Niel Herbert registers the loss and change in his world, seeing it largely the way the author did at that time of her childhood when the pioneer age was ending, and the modern world was replacing it. Niel feels, growing up on the frontier, like a traveler coming upon

A hunter’s fire on the prairie, after the hunter was up and gone; the  
Coals would be trampled out, but the ground was warm, and the  
Flattened grass where he had slept and where his pony had grazed, told  
The story. (ALL 178)

He associates his ideals of this vanishing pioneer life with the period of youth, and as he grows up, the country is growing up too, and the fire of idealism has gone out, though he can see the traces.

In that instant between stooping to the window-sill and rising, he had

Lost one of the most beautiful things in his life... This day saw the end of that admiration and loyalty that had been like a bloom on his existence. Marian was to him the grace love line and loyalty of women. she created the warmth and center of the captain's home. she is after associated with jewels. she adorns the wilderness of the west with all that is best and beautiful ;It was not a moral scruple she had outraged ,but an aesthetic ideal, for she cheapens herself with vulgar lovers(ALL92)The change in the foresters is mirrored in the land ,and in the town of sweet water. The story starts when ‘Mrs. Forrester was still a young women ,and sweet water was a town of which great things were expected’.(ALL15). As Niel grows up however ;its future no longer looked bright ;ALL34.Niel ‘s father has to leave to find work ;farmers are ruined; and families move away .the Burlington officials no longer stop the captain’s place .by the time Niel returns from college ;the foresters have come down in world ;(ALL111)and they have to rent their land to interpreters the promising young men; like Niel Eliot want to be

professional in the big cities .when leaves for college ,he know there would be nothing to come back to” (ALL 177). He never comes back to Sweet Water or his youth that he leaves there.

But, as Cather reveals, Ivy Peter’s dealings with Mrs. Forester are not simply a matter of pragmatics over gentility. Ivy Peter’s actions toward the marsh are freighted with heavier meanings. According to Niel, Peters has drained the marsh

Quite as much to spite him and Mrs. Forester as to reclaim the land..

By draining the marsh Ivy had obliterated a few acres of something he

Hated, though he could not name it, and had asserted his power over the

People who had loved those unproductive meadows for their idleness and

Silver beauty”(ALL 101-02).

Draining the marsh is tantamount to rape. Ivy Peters hates the feminine. When he interrupts the boys’ he sneers that picnics are for girls. He detests a feminized Captain who will not allow guns in the marsh. Peters swaggers too vehemently that the Forresters “have come down in the world”(ALL100) and exults that they are now dependent on him. Ivy Peters is driven to ravish the feminine marsh because he is capable of doing so and because leaving the marsh and Mrs. Forester. Just as he must dominate the marsh, he must also dominate the woman.

## CONCLUSION

A Lost Lady is set in the small railroad town of Sweet Water, on the Western plains. The finest family is that of the Forresters, and Mrs. Forrester is known far and wide as being an enchanting hostess. The leaders of the railroad often stop by the house and spend an evening there while passing through Sweet Water. Niel Herbert, a young boy when the novel opens, goes to the Forrester estate in order to play in the marsh with his friends. While there, an older boy named Ivy Peters arrives. Ivy sees a woodpecker and shoots her out of a nearby tree. He then takes a blade and slits her eyes, watching as she flutters around helpless before luckily finding her hole in the tree. Feeling sympathetic, Niel starts to climb the tree in order to put the bird out of its misery. Near the top he slips and falls to the ground, breaking his arm in the process and knocking himself out.

Ivy carries him to her Forrester residence where Niel is cared for by Mrs.Forrester. He immediately become enchanted by her nice house and her sweet smell. He does not see much of her after his until one day, several years later, she invites Niel and his uncle, Judge Pommeroy, to her house for dinner. At the meal Niel meets Ellinger, whom he later learns is Mrs.Forrester’s lover, and Constance Ogden, a young girl who will marry Ellinger. Niel starts to spend a lot of

time with the Forrester family that winter, often playing cards up to three evenings a week. One day a telegram arrives informing Captain Forrester that a small bank of which he is the president has declared bankruptcy. He and Judge Pommeroy leave to take care of the problem. During their absence, Ellinger arrives and Niel accidentally spots Mrs. Forrester and Ellinger together in the house, a scene that destroys his image of her. When her husband returns, he announces that he has been financially wiped out. He soon suffers a stroke but survives, and Niel leaves to go to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Two years later Niel is returning to the town when he encounters Lvy Peters on the train. Lvy tells him that he has drained the Forrester's marsh and turned it into wheat fields. Once he arrives home, Niel visits the Forrester family. The captain has become a fat old man who sits and watches a sun-dial all day long. Mrs. Forrester is as beautiful as always, but she greets Niel as if he were still a young boy

Niel is put off by the fact that Lvy Peters is on the Forrester estate nearly every day, walking around as if he owns the place. He asks Mrs. Forrester why she allows Lvy to be so rude to her, and she tells him that he is a savvy business man who is investing money for so she can get away from the place.

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