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Grundkurs Amerikanistik II

Essay on Willa Cather's Short Story  
"Neighbour Rosicky"

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10.11.2002

In this paper I'm concerned with the symbolism underlying Willa Cather's short story "Neighbor Rosicky" (1928).

My main focus lies in analysing the development of the relationship between Rosicky, the main character of the story, and Polly, the young wife of Rosicky's eldest son . I will argue that this development can be interpreted in terms of and related to the evolution of American consciousness in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I'll start by summarizing the most important aspects and events of the story and will then go on to link these to the broader historical picture described above.

The whole story is presented by an unidentified, semi-omniscient voice. It starts out with Rosicky an old Czech immigrant farmer from the state of Nebraska being told by a doctor about the bad state of his health, thereby in a certain sense setting the framework for the story whole story, which ends with Rosicky's death.

From the very beginning Rosicky is presented as a very strong, and positive character. The doctor for instance is sad to be forced to present such bad news to a man "[who would] hold out such a warm brown hand", and who "looked the Doctor in the eye so knowingly" (p.302, line 7-9). The most remarkable description of Rosicky, we get near the end of the story when Polly describes him as someone who seems to have "a special gift for loving people, something that was like an ear for music or an eye for color", (p. 324, line 46-47). Here again Polly attributes this largely to his

“merry” eyes and his “warm and broad” hands, just as the Doctor does in the beginning; thereby making Rosicky's character appear all the more vivid and stronger to the reader.

In the following we get to know the story of Rosicky's life through several instances of retrospection, beginning with the description of his life in London where he spends two very hard and straining years, until he finally further emigrates to New York. His life there, is described in a more positive light, but after several years of living in this city, he experiences a growing restlessness and finally manages to realize his dream of becoming a landowner in the State of Nebraska. From this point on his recollections are dominated by a deep contentment, a strong feeling of being one with nature, strongly opposed to the alienation he experienced in London and to a lesser extent in New York. Even though there are very hard years, as his wife vividly tells the whole family after a supper, the life in the country acquires a strong quality of its own: for Rosicky it seems to be the enabler of a certain quality of life which might be characterized as being truly holistic. There are several moments in the story where this union between the human being and nature is alluded to, such as when Rosicky ponders the beginning of the winter which promises rest not only to his land but to himself as well. This union very much corresponds to the realist and naturalist beliefs that a man cannot be separated from his surroundings, and that in order to understand him we have to look for the causes or the consequences of his surroundings. In that light Rosicky can really be seen as a farmer, who is literally “rooted to the soil” that supports him.

In strong contrast to that stands the attitude of Polly the young wife of

Rosicky's eldest son Rudolf. She is characterized as being an "American Girl" as opposed to Rosicky and his family who still clearly regard themselves as Czechs.

She is very skeptical about life in the country, especially about the large amount of work and the hardships it entails and she misses the social life of the city. Rosicky is very much concerned about this, since he fears that Rudolf might be forced to follow her to a life in the city, if the conditions of their life as young farmers should turn out to be too straining. He tries to help them several times, culminating in his attempt to do some very hard work on the field, where he overestimates his own strength and nearly dies from a heart attack. Only because of Polly who sees him and brings him back to their house he escapes death. This event has a very strong impact on Polly. Already mollified by what Rosicky has done for the young couple and by the way he cares for her, she suddenly seems to find herself through the impact of Rosicky's personality. Rosicky dies on the next day, but it seems as if Rosicky's hope that Rudolf and Polly might be spared the horrors and the alienation of the cities and be able to gain a similar holistic quality in their life, was much more realistic than it was in the beginning.

Polly can clearly be seen as a symbol of America in a state of growing uncertainty about its own origin, a people with no mutual history in the usual sense, faced by the danger of alienation through the industrial culture of the North, which has won against the more agricultural oriented South. Rosicky on the other hand, is presented as a character embodying the most positive qualities of America, and the whole group of people it

consists of, the immigrants. His life shows a clear progression, a progression which was fundamental to the shaping of American consciousness through the moving frontier, the feeling of an ever expanding land. This progression has obviously positive qualities in Rosicky's life, as he reaches a state of contentment which stands in stark contrast to the negative sides of this progression, the blind "pressing ahead", symbolized in Rosicky's neighbors which achieve more than he does in terms of material wealth but are seemingly unable to translate this material getting ahead into a true happiness.

Thus Polly's final encounter with Rosicky becomes something like the revelation of her country's origin and its values, the discovery of her own roots.