

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COLOR GREEN IN SNAKE STORIES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND FOLKLORE

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In Willa Cather's most important novel, *My Ántonia*, the killing of a rattlesnake marks the coming of age of the young man Jimmy. Before this incident, he had been regarded as a mere boy by Ántonia, but afterwards, she perceived him with respect as a young man. In the snake-killing scene, the poison was described as "a thread of green liquid," although in actuality, rattlesnake venom is whitish yellow, not green. The idea that snake venom is green is well rooted in American folk stories about snakes. This article discusses snake lore involving the green motif, and the symbolic use of green in folklore and literature. Cather's use of green venom in the young man's initiation rite is particularly appropriate not only because it fits into the folklore vernacular of the people but also because as a symbol it carries multiple conflicting yet unified meanings.

Key Words: Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*, rattlesnake, initiation rite, green (color).

Willa Cather's most important novel, *My Ántonia*, was first published in 1918. It portrays the lives of several immigrant families in rural Nebraska. In one graphic and memorable scene of the novel, the killing of a rattlesnake marks the coming of age of the young man Jimmy. Before this incident, he had been regarded as a mere boy by Ántonia, but afterwards, she perceived him with respect as a young man. In this scene in the novel, Ántonia and Jimmy return to examine the dead snake:

Cautiously we went back to the snake; he was still groping with his tail, turning up his ugly belly in the light. A faint, fetid smell came from him, and a thread of green liquid oozed from his crushed head.

"Look, Tony, that's his poison," I said. (Cather 47)

The poison in this scene was described as "a thread of green liquid," even though actual observation and scientific evidence proves unequivocally that rattlesnake venom is whitish yellow. I myself have witnessed the milking of hundreds of rattlesnakes by scientists and snake handlers in Texas, and I can assure you that the color of the venom is not remotely close to the color of green. So why did Cather choose to describe the venom of the slain rattlesnake as green?

The idea that snake venom is green is well rooted in American folk stories about snakes. In my research of rattlesnake folklore in the southern United States, I have found numerous snake stories and lore involving the green motif, including some which can be traced back several hundred years. Let me give you a few examples which I tape-recorded in Texas in the 1980's:

1. "They claim that you cut it [the snakebite wound] just a little, right where the fangs had hit, and take a chicken, live chicken, and just split it in two, and lay it over there. Now I never did see that done, but they say it'd just turn those chickens green." --*Buddy Burnett, 72, by the parlor of his farmhouse at Hobbs, Texas, with his pet rattlesnake nearby.*
2. "I'll tell you the best thing [for rattlesnake bite], if you can get to it or got it with you and got a place on you where you can soak it like a finger, put coal oil. And that coal oil will turn just as green as the grass." -- *Tim Mize, a senior citizen, at a senior citizens center in Colorado City during lunch at a table with several other people.*
3. "My sister, younger sister, got bit by a rattlesnake. And my mother gashed it and then put it in coal oil. And the next morning, the coal oil--the pan was still sitting out in the yard where we put her foot--and it was just as green as grass where it had drawn the poison out of it."--*Myrtle Pepper, 76, retired storekeeper in Valera.*
4. "I was bit by a rattlesnake. I was herding turkeys. They got together and I

thought they was fighting at each other. When they get around a rattlesnake, they make this noise. And I was trying to scare them, and I stepped by the side of this rock. And I was trying to scare the turkeys away, and my brother was helping me. And we tried to get them away and get to the house for lunch. And after a while I felt something going down my leg and it was bleeding. And I said, "Oh, something's bit me." And I looked down and I said, "Snake." And it had bit me twice. And I didn't know it the first time, but the second time, when it pulled its fangs out, my leg started bleeding. And we ran for a while and hollered and tried to get my dad's attention. He met us in the car. We'd ran probably about an eighth of a mile. And they wrapped my leg in shoe strings and ran coal oil over it. Blisters came up on my foot. But then they ran to the chicken house and got two live chickens and cut one open and put it on there. And the chicken turned green. And then they got the car ready and took that one off and put another one on, and by the time we got to the doctor, it had turned green. And the doctor lanced my leg, and they put alcohol on it."

[Interviewer: "They cut the chicken in half?"]

"While it was still alive. And it turned green. I remember the chicken turning green." -- *Wanda Hawkins, a hairstylist, at a beauty shop in Big Spring, Texas.*

Each of the examples above contains the common element of the color green appearing after the folk cure has been applied. The color green is a motif that shows up in many snake remedies, although no scientific observation has ever confirmed such a phenomenon. People who use split chickens are warned to keep the chicken in place over the wound until the chicken turns green (Anderson 64). Even snake meat held against the wound allegedly will turn green (Anderson 65).

Another remedy is to hold a chicken gizzard against the wound. "When the gizzard turns green, all the poison has been drawn out" (Anderson 65). Walter R. Smith reported the Oklahoman belief that "a poultice of onions and kerosene would

draw out the poison from a snakebite. The poison would show as a green color in the poultice" (Smith 84). Laurence Klauber also mentioned the use of kerosene as a snakebite cure: "The venom is presumed to turn the kerosene green, thus affording a visual proof of its effectiveness" (Klauber 922). A remedy collected by one of John Anderson's students in Victoria County, Texas, calls for kerosene oil to be applied "in a jar placed upside down over the wound. You will be able to see the green venom being drawn up into the oil" (Anderson 66).

The examples above reflect the common belief that rattlesnake venom itself is green. Actually, as I mentioned before, a rattlesnake's venom is whitish-yellow; Klauber described the venoms of various species of rattlesnake as ranging from colorless to apricot yellow (Klauber 785).

The green motif also appears in snake stories unrelated to folk cures. For example, tobacco turns green in a snake story related by Levelle Jay Davidson. A rattlesnake sinks its fangs into a prospector's vest pocket, striking a plug of chewing tobacco. The snake becomes sick and dies from the tobacco; meanwhile, the prospector faints. After a friend revives him, he "cut out and threw away a bright green piece from the middle" of the tobacco before biting off another chew (Davidson 320-1).

In an article published in the Royal Society's Philosophical Transactions in 1734 in England, Sir Hans Sloane recounted his experiments with the freshly severed head of a rattlesnake. While he was poking at the mouth of the snake with a stick, a few drops of venom fell upon the sleeve of a carpenter who was standing nearby. Sloane described the scene as follows:

I advised him to pull off his Shirt, but he would not, and received no harm; and though nothing could then be seen of it upon the Shirt, yet in washing there appear'd five green Specks, which every washing appear'd plainer and plainer, and lasted so long as the Shirt did, which the Carpenter told me was about three Years after. (Sloane 328-30)

Sloane's article contained another reference to green rattlesnake venom:

I will likewise give you a Story of the violent Effects of this sort of Poison, because I depend on the Truth of it, having it from an Acquaintance of mine of good Credit, one Colonel James Taylor of Metapony, still alive. He being with others in the Woods a Surveying, just as they were standing to light their Pipes, they found a Rattle-Snake, and cut off his Head, and about three Inches of the Body. Then with a green Stick, which he had in his Hand, about a Foot and half long, the Bark being newly peel'd off, urged and provoked the Head, 'till it bit the Stick in fury several times. Upon this the Colonel observed small green Streaks to rise up along the Stick toward his Hand. He threw the Stick upon the Ground, and in a quarter of an Hour, the Stick of its own accord split into Several Pieces, and fell asunder from end to end. (Sloane 330-31)

Green venom also appears in hoop snake stories. (A hoop snake is a mythical reptile that takes its tale in its mouth, forms a hoop with its body, and rolls itself.) Otto Ernest Rayburn told of a woman whose skirt was barely touched by the stinger in the tale of a hoop snake. When she washed the dress, the poison "turned three tubs of washwater plumb green" (Randolph 132-3).

As we have seen above, the green motif is widespread in snake lore. Certainly Willa Cather in her lifetime had been exposed to the motif in storytelling among the folk. However, Willa Cather surely intended symbolic meanings in this scene. The color green, like any other color, is a vessel into which many meanings have been poured. In the *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols*, Gertrude Jobes lists green as symbolizing ignorance, innocence, and youth; but she also lists green as symbolizing initiation, knowledge, and wisdom (Jobes 687). Green has often signified rejuvenation and hope. Dead people in Egypt were frequently painted green, and palettes with green paint were left in the tombs for the dead to use, according to Donald MacKenzie. "Prolonged good health was immortality. Green paint was a life-giver, a renewer of youth," he wrote (160-1).

Cirlot wrote of the "antithetical tendencies" of the color green as a symbol: "It is the colour of vegetation (or of life, in other words) and of corpses (or of death); hence, the Egyptians painted Osiris (the god of vegetation and of the dead) green"

(Cirlot 54). In the same article, Cirlot stated: "Green is therefore the connecting-link between black--mineral life--and red--blood and animal life--as well as between animal life and discomposition and death" (51). The issues of life and death are both contained in the green of the snake venom; green represents the illness caused by the snakebite but also signals the happy result of the cure. If the chicken flesh or coal oil or tobacco had not turned green, the venom presumably would still be circulating in the victim's veins.

P.J. Heather also addressed the duality of green's meanings: "This colour seems naturally suggestive of healthy growth ... on the other hand, the destruction wrought by locusts--which are described as green worms ... suggest thoughts of damage and decay" (172). Green does often symbolize illness, as in Shakespeare's line "Too look so green and pale" (Luckiesh 118) or in the expression "green around the gills." A "green sickness" was believed to be a bilious ailment, resulting in green complexion or pallor (Neaman 81).

Although green is associated with illness, it also universally is associated with the color of springtime and hence with hope. "Just as green shoots indicate new growth and hope, green symbolizes newness, continuity of life, peace ... and healing" (Clark 125). Green also symbolizes victory (Waters 7). In the examples of snakebite cures above, these two elements, hope and victory, prevail over the corresponding images of sickness and death. The victim survives. The color green invokes a complexity of meanings; the meanings in the snakebite stories have melded into a single but multi-dimensional whole.

Cather's use of green venom in the young man's initiation rite is particularly appropriate not only because it fits into the folklore vernacular of the people but because as a symbol it carries the multiple conflicting-yet-unified meanings. The inexperienced Jimmy was a young person; the killing of the rattlesnake served as his transition into manhood. After his success in killing the snake, Jimmy at last wins the respect of *Ántonia*. Green is a symbol of youth, and Jimmy's youth is left behind along with the spilled green liquid of the snake. The boy has been victorious in his quest to become a man.

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