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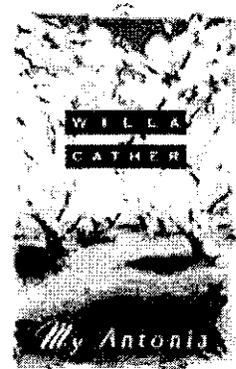
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Reading Group Guide

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My Ántonia by Willa Cather

List Price: \$9.00
Pages: 288
Format: Paperback
ISBN: 0679741879
Publisher: Vintage



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About This Book

Perhaps the most popular of Cather's novels, **My Ántonia** is at once the intimate portrait of an American heroine, an elegy for a vanished frontier, and the story of an unconsummated love affair. Jim Burden, the narrator, meets Ántonia Shimerda as a child on the Nebraska prairie. He is an orphan and a Protestant, she the daughter of ill-adapted Bohemian immigrants; her father will kill himself when he is broken by the harshness and solitude of their new home. Jim and Ántonia grow up together, and he harbors vague and contradictory romantic yearnings toward her. But they are separated in their youth and spend most of their lives apart. While Jim pursues his education and becomes a lawyer for the railroad, Ántonia goes into domestic service, survives a near-rape, is seduced and abandoned by a heartless lover, and bears a baby out of wedlock. Much of her story unfolds secondhand, as Jim gathers it from other sources. They are reunited only briefly at the novel's end, and by then both of them are married, Jim unhappily so.

What is it that makes Ántonia a genuinely heroic figure? Partly, it is her ability to emerge undiminished and unembittered from circumstances no less bleak than the ones that killed her father, to improvise happiness in the same

way she once improvised stories. In the course of the novel, *Ántonia* also becomes an embodiment of the narrator's memory, which has the power to withstand time and redeem its losses. Of course, it is not only Jim's memory that is in play: *Ántonia* represents all the strength, resilience, and unselfconscious nobility of a decisive moment in our nation's past. The virtues that Cather associates with her heroine have either become obsolete or have receded into our collective unconscious, but the sight of her is enough to reawaken our memory of them: "She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true....she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things." [p. 258]

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Discussion Questions

1. The first narrator in **My *Ántonia*** is an unnamed speaker who grew up with Jim Burden and meets him years later on a train. Jim tells his story in response to this mysterious figure, who disappears from the novel as soon as the Introduction is over. How does this first narrator's disappearance foreshadow other withdrawals within this novel, which at times resembles a series of departures? Why might Cather have chosen to frame her narrative in this fashion?
2. When Jim arrives in Nebraska, he sees "nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." [11-12] Yet at the novel's end that landscape is differentiated. It has direction and color--red grass, blue sky, dun-shaded bluffs. We are reminded of the beginning of the Book of Genesis, and of God's parting of the heavens from the earth. To what extent is **My *Ántonia*** an American Genesis? What are its agents of creation and differentiation?
3. Just as **My *Ántonia***'s setting is initially raw and featureless, its narrative at first seems haphazard: "I didn't arrange or rearrange. I simply wrote down what of herself and myself and other people's *Ántonia*'s name recalls to me. I suppose it hasn't any form." [6] Is Burden's description really accurate? Although the narrative proceeds chronologically, its structure is unconventional, as *Ántonia* is present in only three of the five sections and much of her story unfolds via exposition. What effect does Cather produce by telling her story in this fashion?
4. One of the greatest difficulties facing the Shimerdas and other immigrant families is that posed by their lack of English, which seals them off from all but the most forthcoming of their neighbors. Yet even American-born arrivals to Nebraska find themselves set apart. As the narrator notes in the Introduction, "no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry, we said." [3] What is the nature of this freemasonry? What experiences do the inhabitants of this

world share that are alien--and perhaps incommunicable--to people raised elsewhere? Does the shared experience of the novel's pioneers end up counting for more than their linguistic and ethnic differences?

5. What is it that makes Mr. Shimerda unable to adapt to his new home and ultimately drives him to suicide? Is he simply too refined--too rooted in Europe--to endure the harshness and solitude of the prairie? Before we jump to too easy a conclusion, we might consider the fact that the novel's other suicide, Wick Cutter, is a crass, upwardly mobile small-town entrepreneur. What do these two deaths suggest about the prerequisites for surviving in Cather's world?

6. From their first meeting, when Jim begins to teach *Ántonia* English, he serves as her instructor and occasional guardian. Yet he also seems in awe of *Ántonia*. What is it that makes her superior to him? What does she possess that Jim doesn't? What makes her difference so desirable?

7. At times Jim's feelings towards *Ántonia* suggest romantic infatuation, yet their relationship remains chaste. Nor does Jim ever become sexually involved with the alluring--and more available--Lena Lingard. Curiously, *Ántonia* appears to disapprove of their flirtation. And, whether he is conscious of it or not, Jim seems wedded to the idea of Tony as a sexual innocent. Following the failed assault by Wick Cutter, "I hated her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness." [186] How do you account for these characters' ambivalent and at times squeamish attitude toward sexuality? In what ways do they change when they marry and--in *Ántonia's* case--bear children?

8. Just as it is possible to read Lena Lingard as *Ántonia's* sensual twin, one can see the entire novel as consisting of doubles and repetitions. *Ántonia* has two brothers, the industrious and amoral Ambrosch and the sweet-natured, mentally incompetent Marek. Wick Cutter's suicide echoes that of Mr. Shimerda. Even minor anecdotes have a way of mirroring each other. Just as the Russians Peter and Pavel are stigmatized because they threw a bride to a pursuing wolf pack, the hired hand Otto is burdened by an act of generosity on his voyage over to America, when the woman he is escorting ends up giving birth to triplets. Where else in the novel do events and characters mirror each other? What is the effect of this symmetry and its variations?

9. In one of her essays, Willa Cather observed, "I have not much faith in women in fiction." [cited in Hermione Lee, **Willa Cather: Double Lives**. New York, Vintage, 1991, p. 12] Yet in *Ántonia* Cather has created a genuinely heroic woman. What perceived defects in earlier fictional heroines might Cather be trying to redeem in this novel? Do her female characters seem nobler, better, or more deeply felt than their male counterparts? In spite of this, why might Cather have chosen to make **My *Ántonia*'** s narrator a man?

10. For her epigraph Cather uses a quote from Virgil: *Optima dies...prima fugit*: "The best days are the first to pass." How is this idea borne out within **My *Ántonia***? In what ways can the novel's early days, with their scenes of poverty, hunger and loss, be described as the best? What does Jim, the novel's presiding consciousness, lose in the process of growing up? Does

Ántonia lose it as well? How is this notion of lost happiness connected to Jim's observation: "That is happiness: to be dissolved into something complete and great"?

11. Although **My *Ántonia*** is elegiac in its tone--and has been used in high school curricula to convey a conservative view of the American past--it is also notable for its striking realism about gender and culture. Not only does the novel have a female protagonist who prevails in spite of male betrayal and abuse (and two secondary female characters who prosper without ever marrying), it also portrays the early frontier as a multicultural quilt in which Bohemians, Swedes, Austrians, and a blind African-American retain their ethnic identities without dissolving in the American melting pot. Significantly, at the novel's end *Ántonia* has reverted to speaking Bohemian with her husband and children. How important are these themes to the novel's overall vision? Do they accurately reflect the history of the western frontier?

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Discussion questions

1. Why do you think Willa Cather chose to open the novel with the simultaneous arrival of Jim and the Shimerda family in Nebraska?
2. *Antonia's* father, Mr. Shimerda, has a profound and lasting influence upon both *Antonia* and Jim. Find the passages that illustrate this influence. In your own words, explain how and why this influence is so powerful for each of them.
3. The novel creates sharp contrasts between moments of great happiness and moments of deep sadness, grief, and loss. In your opinion, what brings greatest happiness to *Antonia* and Jim at different times in their lives?
4. In Book II, Jim moves from the country into the town of Black Hawk. Here he discovers a prevailing attitude about immigrants, "All foreigners were ignorant people who couldn't speak English." Instead of seeing the immigrant "hired girls" as inferior, Jim sees them as far superior to the other young people of Black Hawk. Why?
5. *My Antonia* gives readers the opportunity to reflect on values that cannot be easily measured, yet are essential to a life well lived. The entire novel might be seen as Jim's own journey to discover what these values are. For example, in Book III, section iv, Lena Lingard's landlord, Mr. Ordinsky, tells Jim, " ?kindness of heart . . . [is] not understood in a place like this. The noblest qualities are ridiculed." In your opinion, what contributes to Jim's understanding of "the noblest qualities"? How does *Antonia* help Jim reach this understanding?
6. "Jake and Otto served us to the last . . . Those two fellows had been faithful to us through sun and storm, and had given us things that cannot be bought in any market in the world" is how Jim describes their departure. Find other examples in the novel of things that cannot be purchased, packaged or sold?
7. In a 1915 interview, Cather commented, "No one without a good ear can write good fiction." What particular passages in *My Antonia* show Cather's "good ear" for the sound of language? Discuss how and why these passages capture the moods and themes of the novel.
8. Grandmother Burden is described as "a strong woman, of unusual endurance" in the early pages of Book I. Compare the different portraits of feminine strength and endurance in this novel. For example, compare *Antonia*, Mrs. Harling, and Grandmother Burden. What similarities and what differences do you see when you compare and contrast these three characters?
9. The novel is concerned with the pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of success. Do you think these two pursuits are one and the same in *My Antonia*? Compare the achievement of *Antonia* and the achievements of Tiny Soderball. How does Jim judge what it means to be "rich"?
10. *My Antonia* contrasts characters who stay rooted to the land and those who emigrate or travel. By the end of the novel, who seems more rooted in Nebraska, Jim or *Antonia*? Why is this ironic?
11. Where does Cather contrast Catholic and Protestant rituals? How do religious differences explain cultural misunderstandings?
12. Cather describes the plow "within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun? Even while we whispered about it, our vision disappeared; the ball dropped and dropped until the red tip went beneath the earth?[and the plow sank] back into its own littleness somewhere

on the prairie." How does this visual image of the plow become an important symbol in the novel?

13. The black pianist Blind d'Arnault is portrayed as having an instinctive gift for music. Compare this portrait of d'Arnault with the assumptions made about other ethnic groups in the novel.

14. How does the novel address the promise and price of immigration?

15. Why does Jim add "my" to the title of his manuscript?

Discussion questions were contributed by two faculty members from DePaul University's Department of English and Master of Arts in Liberal Studies Program.

Some memories are realities, and are better
than anything that can ever happen to one again.
-My Antonia



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Willa Cather

Also known as: Willa Sibert Cather, Willa Silbert Cather

Birth: December 7, 1873 in Back Creek, Virginia, United States

Death: 1947

Nationality: American

Occupation: writer

Source: *Gay & Lesbian Biography*. St. James Press, 1997.

Updated: 09/08/2005

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BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Willa Cather was famous in her lifetime as the author of *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!*, novels that celebrate and invoke the lives of the pioneer settlers of the Nebraska prairie. A prolific, successful journalist and drama critic for 20 years before writing her first novel, she also wrote movingly in *The Song of the Lark* of the challenges and choices facing the woman artist. Cather guarded her privacy with great care, burning all correspondence she could find, and stipulating in her will that any letters which escaped destruction could never be quoted in print. The direct evidence for her affective practices is thus lacking, but

Cather has nonetheless been persuasively claimed as a lesbian, on the evidence of both life and work, by many recent interpreters.

Willa Cather was born the eldest of seven children in Back Creek, Virginia, on 7 December 1873. In 1883, her father followed other members of his family to Nebraska. After 18 months of farming on the prairie, the Cathers moved to the small town of Red Cloud, then a busy stop on several intersecting railroads, where Charles Cather worked in real estate and insurance. The young Willa felt the transition from the lush, cultivated farmland of Virginia to the bleak, open prairie as an assault, describing it as "the end of everything...a kind of erasure of personality," according to a 1913 newspaper interview. Yet Cather soon found compensations in her new environment, immersing herself in the stories told by the immigrant women of the plains, a community that included recent arrivals from Sweden, Germany, Denmark and Bohemia; these kitchen tales provided the seed material for many of her later works.

The Cross-Dressing Vivisectionist

Cather was a precocious, flamboyant child. Her first ambition was to be a surgeon, a goal she pursued both by experimenting in vivisection, and by accompanying the local doctors on their rounds, even adopting the name of the doctor who delivered her, Love, as a middle name. Her manipulations of self soon became more pronounced, and more clearly cross-gendered; either in 1886 or in 1888 (accounts vary), Cather took herself to the barber's for a crew cut, and began referring to herself as "William Cather, Jr." and "William Cather, M.D." She now appropriated "Sibert" as a middle name, claiming to have been named for an uncle, William Sibert Boak, who died as a Confederate soldier. She cross-dressed for several years, acquiring notoriety for her "masculine" garments, voice, and hair style both in Red Cloud and at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, where she began five years of study in 1890.

Cather's impact on the university was intellectual as well as sartorial; a professor was so impressed by her essay on Carlyle that he sent it secretly to the *Nebraska State Journal*, where it was published in 1891 to general acclaim. Cather was soon producing reviews, columns, and drama criticism regularly. From 1893 on, she supported herself through her journalism, working first for the *Journal* and then for the *Courier*, acquiring a reputation as an outstanding--and for visiting stage companies, terrifying--drama critic.

In 1896, Cather left Lincoln for Pittsburgh, recruited to become the editor of a new women's magazine, *Home Monthly*, which it was hoped would grow to rival the immensely popular *Ladies Home Journal*. Under a series of pseudonyms, Cather wrote vast chunks of each issue. Most of her production was resolutely genteel, but it does

include a mildly subversive short story, "Tommy, the Unsentimental," which features a rather butch, capable heroine who rescues her ineffective fiance from ruin and then contrives to ensure that he marries someone else of more suitable feminine type, leaving Tommy unencumbered.

Fame as the Voice of the Prairie

After a few years as a high school teacher, Cather was recruited by the magazine tycoon S.S. McClure to edit *McClure's*. She moved to New York City, where she lived for the remainder of her life, apart from excursions to Europe, visits to her family out West, and summer retreats to New Hampshire and an island off New Brunswick. While working full-time in journalism, Cather had published a few stories in national magazines, a volume of poetry, *April Twilights* (1903), and a collection of stories, *The Troll Garden* (1905). It was only after meeting the established writer Sarah Orne Jewett in 1908, who acted as a mentor, encouraging Cather to devote herself to her writing, that Cather abandoned journalism for fiction, producing *Alexander's Bridge* in 1912. This novel, still written in the Jamesian manner of many of Cather's early stories, was politely received. With *O, Pioneers!* (1913), however, Cather achieved critical success; her depiction of the rugged inhabitants of the prairie was hailed as a authentic new American voice. Although Cather wrote many novels set elsewhere, it is as author of *My Antonia* (1918) and as nostalgic invoker of a lost realm of purity and struggle, that Cather is most remembered. Her many subsequent novels brought her fortune and status. She won the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours* (1922), but this same novel marked the beginning of Cather's bad critical press. H. L. Mencken, after applauding dismissed this World War I story as romantic slush, a dismal failure to reflect the mood of the times caught so memorably by John Dos Passos, or by e.e. cummings' *The Enormous Room*, while Hemingway damningly described her battle scenes as "catherized." Cather went on to produce, among others, *A Lost Lady*, (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), but her critical reputation, although not her popular appeal, never recovered its original glory.

While James Woodress claimed in his 1970 biography that Cather was "married to her art," more recent interpreters have emphasized the passionate nature of Cather's attachment to the women in her life. A few letters survive which strongly suggest that as an undergraduate Cather was in love with a fellow student, Louise Pound (who went on to become a distinguished academic). In Pittsburgh, Cather met Isabelle McClung, who moved her into her parents' house despite some familial opposition; Cather lived there for five years, and whatever their sexual practices (there are contradictory reports as to whether or not they shared a room), McClung would seem to have been the emotional center of Cather's life. Cather often returned to the house in Pittsburgh to write, and the two

women vacationed together for years. When McClung married unexpectedly, in 1916, Cather admitted in letters that this was a devastating loss. In New York, meanwhile, Cather moved into a Washington Square apartment with Edith Lewis, whom she met at *McClure's*. They lived together until Cather's death, and were reunited thereafter; Lewis is buried beside her near their summer retreat in New Hampshire. Lewis seems to have fulfilled the literary wife's traditional role, silently and self-effacingly enabling Cather's work.

Politically reactionary, Cather had no truck with feminism, but she nonetheless offers a valuable model to women writers, having successfully inserted herself into a male pastoral tradition; she claimed ground first staked out by Walt Whitman, producing an elegiac account of pioneer experience that is sensitive to the lives of ordinary people, both female and male. Although she shunned publicity and would hate to be labelled a lesbian, Cather's youthful cross-dressing and her appropriation of masculine privilege and desire have provided subsequent generations with ways of imagining a lesbian past.

UPDATES

September 7, 2005: "Willa Cather," an episode of the PBS series *American Masters*, premiered September 7. The episode was written and co-produced by Christine Lesiak. **Source:** *New York Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com>>, September 7, 2005.

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Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation

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The Women of the Hall: Willa Cather

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REMEMBERING WILLA CATHER

(1984)

ALL OF MY RELATIVES ARE SOUTHERN, EITHER FROM NEW ORLEANS OR the rural regions of Alabama. At least 40 of the men, and possibly more, died during the Civil War, including my great-grandfather.

Long ago, when I was 10 or thereabouts, I became interested in these fallen soldiers because I read a large collection of their battlefield letters that our family had managed to keep. I was already interested in writing (in fact, had published small essays and stories in *Scholastic* magazine), and I decided to write an historical book based on the letters of these Confederate heroes.

Troubles interfered, and it was not until eight years later, when I was barely surviving as a very young journalist living in New York, that the subject of my Civil War kinfolk revived. Of course a great lot of research was necessary; the place I chose to do this research was the New York Society Library.

For several reasons. One being that it was winter, and this particular place, warm and clean and situated just off Park Avenue, provided a cozy haven the whole day long. Also, perhaps because of its location, the staff and clientele were a comfort in themselves: a bunch of upper-class, well-mannered literati. Some of the customers I saw frequently at the Library were more than that. Especially the blue-eyed lady.

Her eyes were the pale blue of a prairie dawn on a clear day. Also, there was something wholesome and countrified about her face, and it was not just an absence of cosmetics. She was of ordinary height and of a solid but not overly solid shape. Her clothing was composed of an unusual but somehow attractive combination of materials. She wore low-heeled shoes and thick stockings and a handsome turquoise necklace that went well with her soft tweed suits. Her hair was black and white

Source: Portraits & Observations by
Irene Capote. 2007.

and crisply, almost mannishly cut. The surprising, dominant factor was a beautiful sable coat which she almost never took off.

It was a good thing she had it on the day of the storm. When I left the library around four o'clock it looked as though the North Pole had moved to New York. Fist-sized snowballs pummeled the air.

The blue-eyed lady wearing the rich sable coat was standing at the curb. She was trying to hail a taxi. I decided to help her. But there were no taxis in view—indeed, very little traffic.

I said: "Maybe all the drivers have gone home."

"It doesn't matter. I live not too far from here." Her deep soft voice drifted toward me through the heavy snow.

So I asked: "Then may I walk you home?"

She smiled. We walked together along Madison Avenue until we reached a Longchamps restaurant. She said: "I could use a cup of tea. Could you?" I said yes. But once we were settled at a table, I ordered a double martini. She laughed and asked if I was old enough to drink.

Whereupon I told her all about myself. My age. The fact I was born in New Orleans, and that I was an aspiring writer.

Really? What writers did I admire? (Obviously she was not a New Yorker: she had a Western accent.)

"Flaubert. Turgenev. Proust. Charles Dickens. E. M. Forster. Conan Doyle. Maupassant—"

She laughed. "Well. You certainly are varied. Except. Aren't there any American writers you care for?"

"Like who?"

She didn't hesitate. "Sarah Orne Jewett. Edith Wharton—"

"Miss Jewett wrote one good book: *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. And Edith Wharton wrote one good book: *The House of Mirth*. But I like Henry James. Mark Twain. Melville. And I love Willa Cather. *My Antonia*. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Have you ever read her two marvelous novellas—*A Lost Lady* and *My Mortal Enemy*?"

"Yes." She sipped her tea, and put the cup down with a slightly nervous gesture. She seemed to be turning something over in her mind. "I ought to tell you—" She paused; then, in a rushing voice, more or less whispered: "I wrote those books."

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I was stunned. How could I have been so stupid? I had a photograph of her in my bedroom. Of course she was Willa Cather! Those flawless sky-like eyes. The bobbed hair; the square face with the firm chin. I hovered between laughter and tears. There was no living person I would rather have met; no one who could so have impressed me—not Garbo or Ghandi [*sic*] or Einstein or Churchill or Stalin. Nobody. She apparently realized that, and we were both left speechless. I swallowed my double martini in one gulp.

But soon we were on the street again. We trudged through the snow until we arrived at an expensive, old-fashioned address on Park Avenue. She said: "Well. Here is where I live"; then suddenly added: "If you're free for dinner on Thursday, I'll expect you at seven o'clock. And please bring some of your writing—I'd like to read it."

Yes, I was thrilled. I bought a new suit, and retyped three of my short stories. And, come Thursday, I was on her doorstep promptly at seven.

I was still amazed to think that Willa Cather wore sable coats and occupied a Park Avenue apartment. (I had always imagined her as living on a quiet street in Red Cloud, Nebraska.) The apartment did not have many rooms, but they were large rooms which she shared with a lifelong companion, someone her own size and age, a discreetly elegant woman named Edith Lewis.

Miss Cather and Miss Lewis were so alike one could be certain they had decorated the apartment together. There were flowers everywhere—masses of winter lilac, peonies, and lavender-colored roses. Beautifully bound books lined all walls of the living room.

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Biography of Willa Cather (1873-1947)

Willa Cather was born on December 7, 1873 in Back Creek Valley (a small farming community close to the Blue Ridge Mountains) in Virginia. She was the eldest child of Charles Cather, a deputy Sheriff, and Mary Virginia Boak Cather. The family traces its ancestors to Ireland, from which they settled in Pennsylvania in the 1750's.



Willa Cather

In 1883 the Cather family moved to join Willa's grandparents William and Caroline and her uncle George in Webster County, Nebraska. At the time her family included Willa's two brothers Roscoe and Douglass, a sister Jessica and her grandmother Rachel Boak who lived with them. A year later they moved to Red Cloud, a nearby railroad town, where her father opened a loan and insurance office. The family never became rich or influential, and Willa attributed their lack of financial success to her father, whom she claimed placed intellectual and spiritual matters over the commercial. Her mother was a vain woman, mostly concerned with fashion and trying to turn Willa into "a lady", in spite of the fact that Willa defied the norms for girls and cut her hair short and wore trousers. While living in the town Willa met Annie Sadilek, whom she later used for the Antonia character in My Antonia. Many of Willa's characters are inspired by people she met in her youth. Another notable example is Olive Fremstad, an opera singer, who inspired the character Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark*.

Willa graduated from Red Cloud High School in 1890. She soon moved to the state capitol in Lincoln in order to study for the entrance at the University of Nebraska. At this time Willa was actually interested in studying medicine. In Red Cloud she had spent time with and learned from a local doctor, and she dreamed of becoming a physician. But, when one of Willa's stories for a writing class got published, she discovered a passion for writing had been fermenting within her. In college, Willa spent time editing the school magazine and publishing articles and play reviews in the local papers. In 1892 she published her short story "Peter" in a Boston magazine, a story that later became part of her novel *My Antonia*. After graduating in 1895, she returned to Red Cloud until she was offered a position editing *Home Monthly* in Pittsburgh.

While editing the magazine, she wrote short stories to fill its pages. Between 1901 and 1906, Willa worked as a high school English teacher. During this time she wrote the stories that would be published in her first collection, called the *Troll Garden* (1905). These stories brought her to the attention of S.S. McClure, owner of one of the most widely read magazines of the day. In 1906 Cather moved to New York to join McClure's Magazine, initially as a member of the staff and ultimately as its managing editor. During this time she met Sara Orne Jewett, a woman from Maine who inspired her to later write about Nebraska. In 1912, after five years with McClure's, she left the magazine to have time for her own writing. After the publication of *Alexander's Bridge*, also in 1912, Cather visited the Southwest where she was fascinated by the Anasazi cliff dwellings.

In 1913 *O Pioneers* was published and in 1917 she wrote *My Antonia* while living in New Hampshire. By 1923 she had won the Pulitzer Prize for her *One of Ours*, and in this year her modernist book *A Lost Lady* was published. At the time her novels focused on the destruction of provincial life and the death of the pioneering tradition.

Perhaps overwhelmed by so much success, Cather suffered a period of despair reflected in the darker tones of the novels written during this period. Despite her problems, she wrote some of her greatest novels during this period, such as *The Professor's House* (1925), *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), and *Death Comes for the*

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Archbishop (1927).

From early on in her career, Cather was blessed not only with widespread popular success, but also with astonishing critical success. Each of her books was met with widespread praise and admiration. This pattern began to change in the 1930s with the advent of Marxist Criticism. Marxist critics suggested that Cather did not understand or show concern for modern social issues, and they made fun of the romanticism which infused her stories. Whether or not Cather was affected by such criticism, these years were made more difficult by the death of her mother, brothers and her good friend Isabelle McClung. Cather maintained an active writing career, publishing novels and short stories for many years until her death on April 24, 1947. At the time of her death, she ordered her letters burned. Though thousands of letters escaped destruction, Cather's will prevents their publication. Willa Cather was buried in New Hampshire; in Red Cloud, the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Foundation was created to honor her memory.

ClassicNotes on Works by Willa Cather

A Lost Lady

My Antonia

O Pioneers

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— ABOUT —

First published in 1918, *My Antonia* is a modernist novel. Modernism was a literary movement that began at the very end of the nineteenth century and continued until the end of the 1930s. It reached its peak during the 1920s, and it was characterized by a tone of experimentation. Authors innovated with narrative voice and structure, often foregoing linear plots in favor of more creative forms of narration. There was also a greater emphasis on a character's interiority - his thoughts, motivations, and unique consciousness. While *My Antonia* follows a conventional plot structure (with the exception of the frame narrative of the introduction), it is full of the rich, complex symbols and detailed character development that characterizes the modernist novel.

Modernism was a movement that encompassed both sides of the Atlantic (hence the term Anglo-American modernism). However, *My Antonia* presents a distinctly American vision of modernism. (Modernist works evoke a sense of disillusionment with modern society, a feeling of fragmentation and despair at the increasing trends towards industrialization and urbanization. At other times, they present an idealized view of pre-industrialized, still innocent society (a literary trend called primitivism). *My Antonia* follows the second path and offers a vision of the idyllic world of the American West. Although by the time of the novel's publication, the frontier had already been mostly settled, Cather idealizes the American frontier and depicts it as a perfect alternative to the modern, corrupt world that we now live in. Cather glorifies frontier values of independence, hard work, and asceticism, and she implicitly contrasts it to the competition and isolation of modern society. Because Cather praises the country in favor of the city, the novel can also be considered a pastoral novel.

While *Willa Cather* lived a very discreet life, modern biographers note that her long-time companion was a woman, in what was most likely a lesbian relationship. At the time of the novel's publication, it probably would have been scandalous for her to have written *My Antonia* in the voice of a woman. It is interesting to think about the novel in the context of Cather's biography and to consider how it might have been different had she written in a voice closer to her own.

ClassicNote on My Antonia

Biography of Willa Cather

About My Antonia

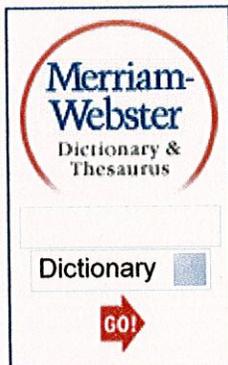
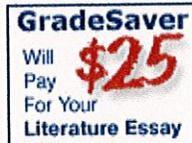
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Short Summary

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Summary and Analysis of Introduction

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Short Summary

At the age of ten, Jim Burden travels by cross-country train to live with his grandparents on the Nebraska frontier. He has just recently lost both his parer and he is accompanied by a farmhand named Jake. On the same train is a Bohemian family that barely speaks English and that is going to the same plac When Jim arrives at the station, he is greeted by Otto Fuchs, an Austrian desp cowboy.

Jim's grandparents are kindly people with simple religious beliefs and very generous natures. Jim enjoys the wide expanses of the frontier, with all its ins prairie dogs, and vegetation. At this point in the year it is still summer. Soon t Burdens go to meet their Bohemian neighbors, the Shimerdas, who were force pay too much for their farm by the only other Bohemian man in the country, P Krajiek. Jim meets Mr. Shimerda, an educated musician who is very kindly; Mr Shimerda, a shrewish woman who is complaining and demanding; the oldest s Ambrosch, who is a stubborn, stingy brute; Marek, a mentally challenged boy; Yulka, a young and pretty girl. The oldest daughter Ántonia also comes runnin to him, grabs his hand, and they go sprinting into the fields.

Ántonia and Jim instantly become friends, and they spend a lot of time togethe outdoors, with Jim teaching her English. The Shimerdas are not doing very we their new country, but they do become friends with two Russian men, Peter ar Pavel. The Burdens try to help out as much as they can. One day during the ei summer, Jim kills a huge snake and impresses Ántonia, who had been treating with condescension.

Soon, winter comes. Jim gets very sick, and Pavel dies, after unburdening his with a horrible story from his past. Mr. Shimerda becomes depressed after Pet moves away. The Burdens celebrate Christmas at home and make presents fo each other since they cannot get into town to purchase some. Mr. Shimerda cc to thank the Burdens for his family's gifts and ends up spending the day with t

In the middle of the biggest snowstorm in ten years, Mr. Shimerda shoots him after arranging himself neatly in the barn. Jake suspects that Krajiek killed Mr. Shimerda, but nothing is ever proven. The day afterwards, Jim is left in the ho by himself, and he senses Mr. Shimerda's spirit resting on his way back to his homeland. The Shimerdas insist that Mr. Shimerda be buried at the corner of t property, where eventually a crossroads will be. The funeral ceremony is very moving though somewhat disorganized.

Afterwards, the Burdens and other neighbors make a concerted effort to help t Shimerdas. Ántonia begins farming in the fields like a man and gives up going school. Jim is resentful that Ántonia no longer spends as much time with him, the Burdens and the Shimerdas get into a little feud because of Ambrosch's ba behavior. The Shimerdas do not act very grateful for the help that they receive from their friends. Eventually, however, everyone is reconciled.

After three years in the country, Jim's grandparents move to the town of Black Hawk so that Jim can go to school. Ántonia also comes into town to work for tl Harlings in their home. Other immigrant country girls also start working in the town, and they become known as the hired girls. Jim spends a lot of time with Ántonia and the Harling children, who form a happy household. Dancing becon the craze in Black Hawk, and Ántonia starts going all the time. When the Harlii ask her to stop going because she is getting a bad reputation, Ántonia quits ar starts working for Wick Cutter, a notorious philanderer. During this time Jim is antisocial and only spends time with Ántonia and the other hired girls. He stud lot in preparation for college and wants to leave Black Hawk as soon as possibl

At college in Lincoln, Jim becomes very close to his Latin instructor and mentor Gaston Cleric. They spend a lot of time talking intimately, although Jim realizes he is not an academic as Gaston is. One day Lena Lingard, one of the hired girls comes to visit him, and they start going to plays together. They spend a lot of time together, even though two other men in Lena's building are in love with her. Gaston Cleric notices that Jim is being lax in his schoolwork and asks him to follow him to Harvard. Jim agrees and says goodbye to Lena.

Two years later, before entering law school, Jim returns to Black Hawk, where he hears about Antonia. Apparently Antonia had gotten pregnant and was engaged to be married to Larry Donovan. She followed him to Denver, but he ran off soon after she arrived. She returned to her family's farm where she had her child, avoided people, and worked the land. Jim goes to visit her and tells her how much she means to him. She is a little surprised that Jim is not disappointed in her. Jim promises to return again to visit.

He doesn't return until twenty years have passed after hearing that Antonia had gotten married to a man named Anton Cuzak and now has about ten or eleven children. He is a little nervous about seeing how age has affected her. When he arrives on the Cuzak farm, he is greeted by many of her children. Antonia does not immediately recognize him, but is very excited when she does. She shows him around the farm, which is full of life. There are kids, trees, vegetation, and food everywhere they go, and everyone seems happy and content. Jim is happy to see Antonia looking so well and sleeps in the barn with two of the boys.

The next day he meets Cuzak, who was away on a small vacation. Jim likes Cuzak immediately and sees that Cuzak and Antonia's marriage is one of equality and mutual contentment. Cuzak tells Jim how much he loves Antonia, and the next day Jim leaves. He promises to go hunting with Antonia's sons and returns to Black Hawk for the day. There he finds the old dirt road that used to go to his grandparents' farm, and he thinks about how that road was the road of Destiny. Now he has returned full circle back to where he started.

ClassicNote on My Antonia

Biography of Willa Cather

About My Antonia

Character List

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Full Summary and Analysis



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Title: My *Antonia*: Overview
Author(s): Jean Frantz Blackall
Source: *Reference Guide to American Literature*. Ed. Jim Kamp. 3rd ed. Detroit: St. James Press, 1994.
Document Type: Critical essay

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The dual character of Willa Cather's *My Antonia* is suggested by its title, for it is at once the story of Antonia Shimerda, a Bohemian emigre to the state of Nebraska in the 1880s, and the story of the narrator character, who creates his own image of Antonia. The novel is cast as Jim Burden's reminiscent re-creation of his childhood and youth. Antonia figures both as a childhood companion and as a symbol of values that Jim retrospectively associates with the frontier experience that he has left behind. The novel changes character somewhat depending on whether one reads it as Antonia's story or as Jim Burden's, but these threads merge initially in the depiction of the pioneering life shared by easterners removed to the frontier and by Scandinavian, Russian, and Bohemian emigres.

Jim Burden, orphaned in Virginia, arrives at Black Hawk (a fictional counterpart to Red Cloud, Nebraska) by the same train that brings the Shimerda family. The superb Book I of the novel counterpoints the more stable, established homesteading lifestyle of Burden's grandparents, a patriarchal lifestyle, against the animalistic grovelling struggle for survival of the penniless Shimerdas during their first winter in a sod hut. Cather depicts the hardships of the struggle to endure the weather and to master the land. She renders characters in silhouette against vast landscapes of undulating red grass and limitless horizons, or tunneling through snow to feed livestock. Animals are both competitors and companions to human beings in their solitude. Human and animal predators operate by the same rules. Suicide, murder, and madness are the lot of those least fit to survive. The quintessential grotesque image of the cost of the struggle is that of Antonia's father's corpse, frozen to the ground in his own blood after he has shot himself, his coat and neckcloth and boots removed beforehand and carefully laid by for the survivors. Cather frequently uses a vivid episode or image such as this one to establish the mood of her story.

The dividedness between Jim's and Antonia's fortunes becomes more explicit after their early childhood because of their disparate places in the social hierarchy. Removed from the farm to Black Hawk, the Burdens enter the establishment community, respectable, conventional, and dull in Jim's esteem, but the immigrants are hired girls, waitresses, and laundresses. It is characteristic of Cather to perceive the small-minded small town as the antagonist of individual enterprise and initiative, so that in Books II-IV the impulse to escape is a central motif of the novel. Jim flees to the university at Lincoln and eventually to Harvard and law school. Lena Lingard, a Norwegian girl, denigrates the farm and the family, and becomes a successful and celibate dressmaker in Lincoln. Tiny Soderball, who had worked in the hotel, makes her fortune feeding prospectors during the Klondike gold rush, and later invites Lena to join her in San Francisco. Even Antonia has the prospect of escaping drudgery on the farm and domestic servitude in town through her romance with a railway conductor, but deceived and deserted in Denver, she returns to the farm and her taskmaster brother Ambrosch.

The land mastered, she must now overcome social opprobrium. Her success in doing so is celebrated by Jim in the concluding Book V of the novel, where he makes a nostalgic visit home and heroizes Antonia as a sort of earth mother or fertility goddess. Twenty years have passed. Married within the Bohemian community, Antonia has produced ten or eleven children and presides over a flourishing household: "She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true," Jim muses. "She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or a gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last.... It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races." The adulatory retrospective attitude displayed here is typical of Jim's voice throughout the novel. Romantic, nostalgic, and unfulfilled in life, he celebrates the vitality and fruitfulness of the pioneering era as a lost Edenic world. In both the impulse to flee Black Hawk and the nostalgic retrospect in his enduring reverence for the pioneers, Jim's career and attitudes are indicative of Cather's own. But as a male character he has been perceived as being sexually ambivalent in his attitude toward the immigrant girls, escapist and regressive in the

romanticizing of his own childhood.

Source Citation: Blackall, Jean Frantz. "My ántonia: Overview." Reference Guide to American Literature. Ed. Jim Kamp. 3rd ed. Detroit: St. James Press, 1994. Literature Resource Center. Gale. FARMINGTON COMMUNITY LIBRARY. 3 Apr. 2008 <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=LitRC&u=lom_metronetmfc>.

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Title: Modernist memory; or, the being of Americans
Author(s): Jeff Webb
Source: *Criticism*. 44.3 (Summer 2002): p227.
Document Type: Critical essay

This was the road over which *Antonia* and I came on that night when we got off the train at Black Hawk and were bedded down in the straw, wondering children being taken we knew not whither. I had only to close my eyes to hear the rambling of the wagons in the dark, and to be again overcome by that obliterating strangeness. The feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand. I had the sense of having come home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is.

Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (1918)

IT IS TEMPTING to describe what Jim Burden, the narrator of Cather's novel, experiences here as memory. But in fact it seems more like repetition: he hears the wagons and is again overcome. Up to this point *My Antonia* consists chiefly of Jim's memories, but his reunion with himself in this final paragraph depends on repeating, rather than representing in memory, his early experiences. "If we never arrived anywhere," Jim says of the wagon ride from Black Hawk, "it did not matter. Between the earth and the sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be." (1) A few days after the wagon ride, while lying in his grandmother's garden, Jim also feels perfect contentment: "I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more" (MA 20). What Jim seems to experience here--if "experience" is even the right word--is Being. "Part of something entire," "dissolved into something complete and great" (MA 20), he has no concern for the past or the future. In fact, thus complete, the moment having become like eternity, he has no past or future at all, which perhaps explains why he neglected his prayers that night in the wagon--why pray to God when you have become like God? (2)

To remember, however, is to represent other moments. Remembering is precisely the condition of not being completely in the moment. So when Jim comes home to himself at the end of the novel, he does so not by remembering the feelings of that night--how could he?--but by repeating them. In a sense he undertakes consciously and voluntarily behavior that Sigmund Freud describes as compulsive. For Freud, however, the patient who is "obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience" would be better off "remembering it as something belonging to the past." (3) Remembering is better because it involves an awareness of the difference between present and past and therefore--herein lies the cure--of the difference between the remembering self and the remembered self. Repetition is precisely the absence of this sort of difference. Jim's goal is repetition. He comes home to himself by overcoming the difference between past and present--coming home is this overcoming--which is why the novel's primary narrative mode of recounting the past, remembering, necessarily produces a problem for him. In memory, Jim can only observe past selves. As Freud's contemporary, the psychologist Eduoard Claparede, puts it, a past self can only be remembered

from the outside, in the same way that I represent other individuals to myself. My past self is thus, psychologically, distinct from my present self, but it is ... an emptied and objectivized self, which I continue to feel at a distance from my true self which lives in the present. (4)

The problem is that Jim's memories re-create through representation the very distance he wants to overcome by remembering. That is why towards the end of the novel he adopts a relation to his past that is not mediated, or not only mediated, by memory's representations. He treats his memories as objects in themselves and conceives of the ideal relation to the past as

one not of representation but of touch ("The feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand"). Although *My Antonia* is not usually regarded as a modernist novel, I will argue that Jim's attitude towards representation (his preference for, in Freud's phrase, "contemporary experience") is typical of the style of more overtly modernist works like Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930), Paul Strand's photograph, "Wall Street" (1915), Frank Stella's aluminum stripe paintings (1960), and Cather's own later novels: *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). (5) Moreover, because Cather conceptualizes the problem of memory in terms of representation in *My Antonia*, the novel demonstrates how for American modernists experiments with form--which I'll describe as efforts to bypass representation--are simultaneously efforts to realize a peculiarly American ideal of identity. The novel also demonstrates why that ideal is so often emblemized by racial bodies. If, for example, Jim must touch the past in order to live it again, Blind d'Arnault, the Negro singer who visits Black Hawk during Jim's adolescence, just lives it. As Jim imagines it, d'Arnault has no need of memory because he embodies his past by virtue of his race. *My Antonia* thus suggests that what we might call the identitarian aims of formal experimentation in American modernist texts make the emphasis on race, which is characteristic of so much of this literature, almost inevitable.

Antonia's father, Mr. Shimerda, commits suicide early in the first book of *My Antonia*, having recently emigrated with his family from Bohemia. Jim knows that "it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda," and this knowledge informs the rest of his recollection (MA 81). References to Mr. Shimerda's grave recur throughout the novel, and even in the final paragraphs of the novel, when Jim stands looking at the old road to the Burden homestead, he is in terrain ("the long red grass still grew shaggy over the draws and hillocks" [MA 273]) that resembles Mr. Shimerda's burial plot ("that unplowed patch at the crossing of the roads" where "the tall red grass had never been cut" [MA 239]). This resemblance emphasizes that Jim, who is also a modern immigrant, having left Nebraska to pursue a career in the East as a railroad executive, has not succumbed to homesickness. He has survived the dislocations of American modernity--emblemized in Mr. Shimerda's fate--by treating his memories in a way that allows him simultaneously to preserve and to escape the past. In the final book, he writes:

Antonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade--that grew stronger with time. In my memory there was a succession of such pictures, fixed there like the old woodcuts of one's first primer: Antonia kicking her bare legs against the sides of my pony when we came home in triumph with our snake; Antonia in her black shawl and fur cap, as she stood by her father's grave in the snowstorm; Antonia coming in with her work-team along the evening sky-line. (MA 260-261).

"The old woodcuts of one's first primer" do not represent a remembered past: they are "pictures" in an aesthetic and not a documentary sense. Like woodcuts, Jim's memories tend to occasion new experiences rather than recalling old ones, as in the passage I began with: "I had only to close my eyes to hear the rumbling of the wagons in the dark, and to be overcome again by that obliterating strangeness" (MA 273). Here Jim experiences directly what he had formerly remembered: he does not remember hearing the wagons, he hears them and is overcome. At this moment there is no difference between past and present, and hence no cause for homesickness.

Yet his homecoming is not only a matter of hearing the wagons again. He says, "the feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand" (MA 273). (6) Here Jim does not experience those same feelings again. Instead, the original feelings of being "erased, blotted out" on the ride to the Burden homestead are themselves erased and blotted out as he experiences them in a qualitatively different mode (MA 13). He imagines the past not as something temporally distant, to be recalled, but as something spatially proximate, to be touched. His memories still mediate his relation to the past, but not by representing the past. Rather, they mediate the past materially, much as, for example, Tom Outland's pots do in Cather's later novel, *The Professor's House* (1925). Visiting the St. Peter family for the first time, Tom gives Mrs. St. Peter an "earthen water jar" he had found on the Blue Mesa. (7) "He showed her a coating of black on the underside of the jar." He remarks: "That's not from the firing. See, I can scratch it off. It's soot, from when it was on the cook-fire last--and that was before Columbus landed, I guess. Nothing makes those people seem so real to me as their old pots, with the fire black on them" (PH 101). The pot brings past and present together: Tom scratches the soot off as if the underside had been blackened just a moment before. Indeed, the sublimity of Tom's experience on the Mesa consists in precisely this sense of the past's proximity. Similarly, at the end of *My Antonia*, Jim conceives of time as space. By touching his memories in the way he would touch an object, he remembers his past not as Claparede says he must, "from the outside," but rather in the first person in the present. This mode of remembering--if it can even be called remembering--supplies a relation to the past that is not, properly speaking, a relation at all, but an identity.

Jim views photographs of himself as if they were woodcuts. Visiting Antonia after a twenty-year absence, he participates in the family ritual of looking through photographs. "They produced a photograph taken just before I went away to college; a

tall youth in a straw hat and striped trousers trying to look easy and jaunty" (MA 260). (8) Jim looks at this photograph of himself as a stranger would--for its immediate visual content? It is true that he recognizes the scene as an event in his life, and to this degree acknowledges the chronological link with his past self. But he resolutely refuses the experiential link, replacing remembered experience (the feeling of going away to college, presented in the third person) with immediate visual experience (the look of the tall youth, experienced in the first person). Jim thus reads photographs the way he treats his memories, as objects from--rather than representations of--the past.

In objectifying his memories, Jim abandons what we might call his realism for a mode of representation more characteristic of modernism. In the "Introduction" Jim says he wants to present *Antonia* "in a direct way" (MA 5). His method of doing so--telling her story by telling his story--may appear indirect, but it actually serves his initially realist aim of accurate portraiture, since as he says, "It's through myself that I knew and felt her" (MA 5). But in the final book, as we've seen, his memories are no longer representational. Cather carefully emphasizes Jim's commitment to this modernist form of representation in the "Introduction" when she reports Jim's decision to change his title from "*Antonia*" to "*My Antonia*" (MA 6). Here "*Antonia*" literally disappears into "*My Antonia*." Critics invariably reverse this disappearance in reading the end of the novel according to the representational values operative in the beginning--thereby turning *My Antonia*, a modernist text, into *Antonia*, a realist text--and then object to Jim's abandonment of his initial focus. Deborah Lambert, for instance, argues that the novel is a "betrayal of female independence" because *Antonia* "becomes an idea and disappears under symbolic weight." (10) But the fact that *Antonia* "disappears" is entirely consistent with the title, which could be said to reflect the novel's thematization of its own mode of representation, a thematization that occurs also in the title of the final book, "*Cuzak's Boys*." "Why not '*Antonia's Children*'?" Joseph Urgo asks, adding that the title is "a kind of erasure for *Antonia*." (11) This erasure, evident in the titles of both the final book and the novel, reflects Jim's modernist strategy for avoiding Mr. Shimerda's fate.

Mr. Shimerda is buried in the southwest corner of the Shimerda property, a place destined to be a crossroads in a country where roads follow section lines. The location of the gravesite suggests not only that Mr. Shimerda will continue traveling (since suicides are unquiet spirits) but also that traveling the American road requires abandoning memories, sometimes in the most graphic way possible, by dying. Yet Jim is also convinced that Mr. Shimerda dies from homesickness, from holding on to his memories too longingly. Cather thus interprets the migratory movements made possible by the transportation networks of America's new urban industrial order as a defining feature of American citizenship and, simultaneously, a threat to the integrity of the self. To move from your home is to risk being buried in the road like Mr. Shimerda--American but not yourself. Conversely, to remember your home after moving is to risk being consumed by homesickness, also like Mr. Shimerda--yourself but not American. *My Antonia* identifies a dilemma, either horn of which appears to be fatal.

The dilemma is a familiar one in accounts of American citizenship. In his poem, "The Sleepers," for example, Walt Whitman imagines the unity of the nation to depend on the uniformity of people who are asleep. (12) "The blind sleep, and the deaf and dumb sleep," he writes. (13) "I swear they are averaged now--one is no better than the other / The night and sleep have liken'd them and restored them" (LG 431). As Philip Fisher notes, Whitman imagines the nation "through the optics of sleep" in order to "accomplish politically what Descartes had done for matter: abolish the differences of stone and leaf, mountain and house to reach the abstract fact of simple location, mass, and movement." ("SS" 71). Sleep, he says, "cancels all differences, all identities" ("SS" 71). People are equal because identical. Yet the idea of having a self that is identical to every other self seems equivalent to having no self at all, a fact registered in the very condition--sleep--through which Whitman would achieve national unity. He can imagine the country as a democratic whole only by imagining its citizens to be unconscious. (14) We might say, then, that the ideal image of American citizenship--becoming part of a uniform mass public--is paradoxically its own *reductio ad absurdum*, for it entails abandoning a unique self.

Mr. Shimerda is Cather's emblem of this *reductio*: he has achieved citizenship perhaps, but at the cost of identity. He sleeps, emblematically, at the crossroads. The road, insofar as it seems to make people the same, levels difference. But Jim, who is Mr. Shimerda's immigrant double, leaving home and crisscrossing the country as a corporate railroad lawyer, maintains his difference and preserves his waking identity by objectifying his memories, thus finding a home in homelessness without succumbing to homesickness.

Jim's strategy is characteristic of American modernism's response to a world in which space was increasingly experienced as time. The railroad, for example, made travel time the typical measure of distance between cities. This literal transformation found its figurative emblem in the creation of standard time zones in 1883. Before then, as Allen Trachtenberg notes, cities and towns had set local time by the sun: noon "was when the sun stood directly overhead: never exactly the same moment from place to place or from week to week." (15) But a national railroad network, in requiring national coordination of time, destroyed local time. Hart Crane describes the railroad network in *The Bridge* in terms of this loss. The telegraph and the tram are "keen instruments" that "bind town to town and dream to ticking dream." (16) Ticking together on standardized time, individual dreams fuse into national identity. (17) Crane's word for the nationalist function of these keen instruments--"bind"--registers the cost of national unity by doubling as a description of its method: these networks bind together by

binding up. Crane thus reverses one aspect of Whitman's imagination of national unity, namely, that the conditions of nationality restore the self ("the night and sleep have liken'd them and restore them" [LG 431]). For him, by contrast, towns and people are constrained and limited in being connected and thereby likened. It is only by getting off the train, for instance, that the hoboes, a few lines earlier in *The Bridge*, are restored to themselves. They stand watching the converging taillights of the 20th Century Limited.

So the 20th Century--so
whizzed the Limited--roared by and left
three men, still hungry on the tracks, ploddingly
watching the tail lights wizen and converge, slipping
gimleted and neatly out of sight. (B 62)

John Stilgoe points out that although the "metropolitan corridor" was "the most traveled of American environments," it was also "the least known"--except by hoboes. (18) "Passengers in high speed luxury trams, and commuters in locals chugging along at forty miles an hour, moved too hastily to realize accurately the new environment through which they rode" (MC 15). Crucially, Crane chooses to focalize the departing train through hoboes: "three men, still hungry on the tracks." And because his syntax blurs the distinction between the train and the century, the hoboes might be said to watch the disappearance of the twentieth century--indeed, of industrial modernity itself--in watching the disappearance of the 20th Century Limited. This disappearance, in both senses, coincides exactly with the hoboes' experience of the local specificity of the "new environment" Stilgoe describes, or, as Crane says later, the world beneath "whistles, wires and steam" (B 64). The intensely local character of this world is suggested by Crane's precise rendering of the wizenning taillights. By contrast, the metropolitan corridor experienced by train passengers is thoroughly national, constituted in Crane's description by the "signboard" (B 62), the advertisements flashing past the train windows: "RADIO ROARS IN EVERY HOME WE HAVE THE NORTHPOLE / WALLSTREET AND VIRGINBIRTH WITHOUT STONES OR / WIRES OR EVEN RUNNing brooks connecting ears" (B 62). In getting off the tram and experiencing the metropolitan corridor as a local environment, the hoboes do not read the "running brook" of national ad copy; their ears are not connected. Instead, they hear actual running brooks, as they occur in local environments. They count "the river's minute by the far brook's year" (B 64); their clock is set to the local time measured before such distant "tributaries" become part of the single national flow of the mechanical river, the railroad (B 68).

Yet Crane calls even these tributaries "grimed," suggesting that the opposition between local experience (the brook) and national culture (the river) is untenable (B 68). Evidently, running brooks are themselves part of the mechanical river, hence "grimed," which is to say that the experience of the local as reproduced in an image ("the tail lights wizen and converge, slip- / ping gimleted and neatly out of sight") is not an untainted tributary but, as Crane says, a "tribute"; not the local itself but a memorialization of the local (B 68). Thus even if Crane's hoboes seem to witness the disappearance of American modernity in the disappearance of the 20th Century Limited, the image of its disappearance in fact prevents it from disappearing entirely. Crane's precise image ends up functioning like the advertising slogans designed to be repeated on the radio in every home: the image also repeats, duplicating the local. Rather than being beneath "whistles, wires and steam," the image, as image, turns out to be above, like the "signboard."

Yet Crane insists that the hoboes "know a body under the wide rain" of this national flow (B 66). This "body" is that of the "woman" in the poem's marginal gloss who is "with us in the dawn" and who is "the flesh our feet have moved upon" (B 57). She is the land itself, the locality, original and unrepeated, even in an image. But how, we might ask, do the hoboes know this locality? Crane says they have "dreamed beyond the print that bound her name," a dreaming he conveys or enacts most obviously in the very context of the descriptive image (B 66): "Tail lights wizen and converge, slip- / ping gimleted and neatly out of sight."

The line break in the middle of the word enables the poetry to stop the train in the very description of its disappearance. In one sense, of course, the line break contributes to the image: it suspends the action of slipping out of sight across the line break and preserves the slipping for sight. The line break literally makes the action of slipping take longer. But, in another sense, the broken word created to convey the slipping--"slip- / ping"--stops the train altogether in asserting the primacy of the materials in which the image is realized over what the image depicts. Instead of preserving modernity in an image, Crane works to erase modernity in simultaneously resisting the image. The line "ping gimleted neatly" does not describe a scene; it describes its own function: "ping," a broken word, gimlets the image of the departing train. Such brokenness or fragmentation enables the reader, like the hoboes, to evade modernity and know a body--in this case the body of the name, the word itself, knowable as such because it no longer describes or refers to something else. (19)

Crane's treatment of the image thus resembles Jim's objectification of his memories. The aesthetic operating in both cases seems aptly described by what the photographer Paul Strand (explaining his own art) terms the use of "abstract forms to create an emotion unrelated to the objectivity as such." (20) We see his use of such forms in his famous photograph from

1915, "Wall Street" (Fig. 1).

[FIGURE 1 OMITTED]

In this photograph, the unmoving black shapes of the windows of the Morgan Bank contrast with the "objectivity" of the moving pedestrians and seem to assert their independence of the historical moment frozen in the photograph. The shapes are static, abstract forms uninvolved in the quotidian obligations animating the pedestrians. Their independence is heightened, indeed even literalized, as much as that is possible, by the verticals of the shadows, which parallel the cropped edge of the photograph. The shapes seem to refer to that edge, to the literal shape of the photograph as an object. In doing so they detach themselves not only from the historical moment depicted within the picture but also from the picture itself. They become what Michael Fried in another context calls "shape as such." (21)

The phrase is from "Shape as Form," an essay in which Fried discusses Frank Stella's aluminum stripe paintings of 1960. These paintings, which consist of 2 1/2-inch-wide stripes that "reiterate the shape of that edge until the entire picture is filled" (see Fig. 2), make "the fact that the literal shape determines the structure of the entire painting completely perspicuous" ("SF" 79).

[FIGURE 2 OMITTED]

In each painting, Fried explains,

the stripes appear to have been generated by the framing edge, and starting there, to have taken possession of the rest of the canvas, as though the whole painting self-evidently followed from not merely the shape of the support, but its actual physical limits ("SF" 79-80).

In other words, Stella seeks to eliminate illusion. The stripe paintings, according to Fried, "represent the most unequivocal and conflictless acknowledgment of literal shape in the history of modernism" (88). This is not to say, of course, that the painting becomes wholly literal, only that such acknowledgment makes "explicit" the "dependence of depicted on literal shape" ("SF" 88). (22)

No less than Stella, Strand wants to eliminate illusion by referring to the edge of the photograph. Indeed, the representational context in his photo actually makes his emphasis on literal shape more intense than Stella's by including the dimension of time. The shadowed windows do not merely refer to the photograph itself by lining up with the vertical edge. In lining up they stand in contrast to the historical moment of the pedestrians and thus also refer to the photograph in the moment of viewing, to the continuous present in which that object exists. The shapes of the windows contribute to the pathos of the photo by emphasizing through contrast the relentless flow of time. The captured moment is irrevocably past; the pedestrians, as Strand suggests in a comment on the photo, have rushed into the maw of time. (23) If this is perhaps the emotion Strand seeks to convey through abstraction, he does so, paradoxically, by attempting to transcend even abstract shape. The shapes strive for literalness.

The pathos is that of modernity. In rushing, the pedestrians, like Crane's railroad, translate space into time. Strand uses the shapes of the windows to emphasize this modern speed and, simultaneously, to halt it. In striving to become literal, the shapes are striving to become objects, untranslated and untranslating. Strand's shapes are those of modernism--seeking objecthood in order to neutralize the modern forces of dislocation symbolized by the street, the railroad, or, to return to *My Antonia*, by the old road to the Burden homestead that Jim looks on while wandering north of Black Hawk at the end of the novel.

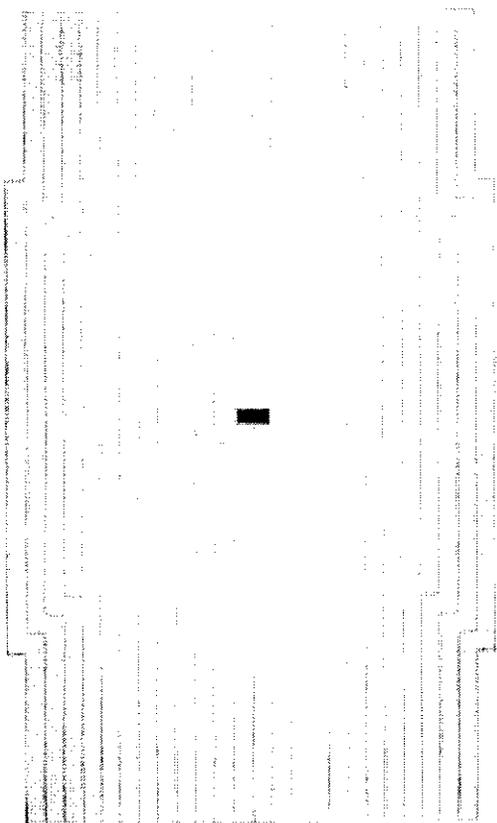


Fig. 1. Faint, illegible image, possibly a scan of a document page.

The old road is of course both the object of memory and a representation of memory itself: "On the level land the tracks had almost disappeared--were mere shadings in the grass, and a stranger would not have noticed them" (MA 273). Jim's description of the road is clearly also a description of memory.

Wherever the road had crossed the draw, it was easy to find. The rains had made wheel-ruts and washed them so deeply that the sod had never healed over them. They looked like gashes tom by a grizzly's claws, on the slopes where the farm wagons used to lurch up out of the hollows with a pull that brought curling muscles to the smooth hips of the horses. I sat down and watched the haystacks turn rosy in the slanting sunlight. (MA 273).

Characteristically Jim emphasizes the road's appearance: the wheel-ruts "looked like gashes tom by a grizzly's claws." But he also emphasizes the materiality of the language that renders the appearance. The language thickens towards the end of this passage as alliteration becomes obtrusive: g's and s's ("gashes," "grizzly's claws"), l's ("looked like," "lurch"), h's ("hollows," "hips of the horses"), s's ("muscles," "smooth hips of the horses," "sat," "haystacks," "slanting sunlight"). Here Jim's description strives to become pure sound, to the extent such a thing is possible in a narrative, just as Strand's shapes strive for literalness. (24) The literalness of sound allows the remembered past ("the farm wagons used to lurch up out of the hollows with a pull that brought curling muscles to the smooth hips of the horses") to be adjacent to the represented present ("I sat down and watched the haystacks turn rosy in the slanting sunlight") in the actual present of reading. For Jim, this road of memory is not for traveling, but for experiencing with the senses. Hence it cannot take him away from himself, and he is neither homeless nor homesick.

Soon after arriving in Nebraska as a child, Jim accompanies his grandmother to the garden, and despite its distance from the house and the danger from snakes, remains there by himself. He does not worry about snakes, even though his grandmother has just warned him twice, and at some length, about the danger. After she leaves, he positions himself "in the middle of the garden, where snakes could scarcely approach unseen," and promptly forgets all about them (MA 19). The idyllic experience of wholeness that follows--"I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more" (MA 20)--is made possible by that forgetting. As he says, "Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to

happen." Indeed, he is content "like the pumpkins" because he does not think about snakes--because he does not expect anything to happen. He is an object, a body. "That is happiness," he says. Jim's adult strategies for recapturing this happiness in the garden of childhood thus necessarily involve the body. As we have seen, he objectifies his memories so as to experience them in the present with the senses. He additionally regards the body's instinctive behaviors as the means of transforming the past into present experience, as when he and Antonia visit the dog town as children, planning to "dig into one of the holes" (MA 39).

Jim is aware that "rattlesnakes were always lurking about" (MA 39). The snakes "came to pick up an easy living among the dogs and owls, which were quite defenseless against them; took possession of their comfortable houses and ate the eggs and puppies" (MA 39, 28). In fact, Jim is so conscious of the danger that even the dried sunflowers on the way, with their "brown, rattling, burry stalks" (MA 39), remind him of snakes. In this instance, he expects something to happen, and the expectation itself distances him from his earlier, idyllic experience in the garden. Worrying about snakes in effect removes him from the garden: he is not present. Since snakes have from the very beginning threatened gardens, his expectation might be said to produce the snake that he and Antonia actually encounter. As they get ready to dig, they are surprised by the "biggest snake" (MA 40) Jim has ever seen. He kills the snake instinctively, without thinking. In killing it he clearly eradicates the need to expect something; more precisely, in the very act of killing he embodies an absence of expectation, an absence that, in a certain sense, is the killing. Jim reenters the garden of childhood self-presence, at least temporarily, by acting instinctively.

"I saw his coils tighten--now he would spring, spring his length, I remembered" (MA 40-41). Jim has never encountered a snake before. How can he remember that the snake will spring? The answer, apparently, consists in what Jim later calls the "horrible unconscious memories in all warm blooded life" (MA 42). These unconscious memories serve him well. "I remembered. I ran up and dove at his head with my spade, struck him fairly across the neck, and in a minute he was all about my feet in wavy loops (MA 41). Here the two actions of remembering and responding, discrete in the telling, seem more properly described as simultaneous: the responding is the remembering. Such memories bypass conscious thought altogether, and offer a relation to the past that promises happiness. Cather's more typical account of embodied memory takes a racial form, as in the case of Blind d'Arnault, the piano player with the "happy" face who visits Black Hawk during Jim's adolescence (MA 144).

Most of Jim's narrative of d'Arnault's visit consists in a detailed account of the musician's youth in the "Far South, on the d'Arnault plantation" (MA 145). Where does Jim get the story? Presumably from Mrs. Harling, who "had known d'Arnault for years" (MA 142). Yet the story includes elements that d'Arnault himself could not have known and therefore could not have told Mrs. Harling. When d'Arnault was a child, for instance, he would go up to the "Big House" and listen at the window when Miss Nellie d'Arnault, the mistress of the house, practiced the piano:

If Miss d'Arnault stopped practicing for a moment and went toward the window, she saw this hideous little pickaninny, dressed in an old piece of sacking, standing in the open space between the hollyhock rows, his body rocking automatically, his blind face lifted to the sun and wearing an expression of idiotic rapture. Often she was tempted to tell Martha that the child must be kept at home, but somehow the memory of his foolish, happy face deterred her. She remembered that his sense of hearing was nearly all he had,--though it did not occur to her that he might have more of it than other children. (MA 145)

D'Arnault could not have been privy to Miss d'Arnault's thoughts. Jim's license with d'Arnault's biography not only demonstrates his racism, since he borrows stereotypes directly from the minstrel tradition in imagining d'Arnault as a "hideous little pickaninny ... his body rocking automatically ... wearing an expression of idiotic rapture." It also illustrates the function of his racism. What appeals to Jim about d'Arnault's natural ability on the piano is precisely what makes it possible for Jim to invent his biography: d'Arnault has no memory. As a child, he could "finger out passages from things Miss Nellie had been practicing, passages that were already his, that lay under the bones of his pinched, conical little skull, definite as animal desires" (MA 146). D'Arnault does not remember the passages he plays so much as he feels them. If this is memory, then it is the memory of the body, not the mind: the passages are physically part of him, "definite as animal desires." Indeed, it seems doubtful that d'Arnault has a mind, given that he has "almost no head at all; nothing behind the ears but folds of neck under close-clipped wool" (MA 144). And his sense of rhythm, likewise, is "a physical sense," one that causes what Jim calls a "nervous infirmity": "When he was sitting, or standing still, he swayed back and forth incessantly, like a rocking toy. At the piano, he swayed in time to the music, and when he was not playing, his body kept up this motion, like an empty mill grinding on" (MA 147, 144).

Jim's reduction of d'Arnault's mind to his body, while grotesque, nonetheless expresses an ideal of artistic production that echoes other accounts at the time. For instance, Albert C. Barnes, in an essay from Alaine Locke's 1925 collection, *The New Negro*, ascribes the value of "Negro art" to the "the psychological complexion of the Negro as he inherited it from his primitive ancestors." (25) For Barnes this inheritance, though "psychological," is thoroughly unconscious, since "the Negro is a poet by birth" and carries his inherited poetry "with him always and everywhere; he lives it in the field, the shop, the factory" ("NA" 20). The "white man," by contrast, does not enjoy this sort of "harmony"; "his art and his life are no longer one and the same"; "many centuries of civilization have attenuated his original gifts" ("NA" 20). Hence art for him is "a thing apart"; it must be thought ("NA" 20). The white man's relation to the primitive past, "his original gifts," is conscious and representational ("NA" 20). But the Negro's relation to the past is unconscious, since he is "a poet by birth;" it is therefore strictly speaking not a relation at all, but an identity. The poetry the Negro inherits is continuously present in the poetry of unconscious "daily habits" ("NA" 20). Jim's figurative decapitation of Blind d'Arnault could thus be regarded as a literal interpretation of this ideal of racial unconsciousness. A series of recent critics have identified this ideal as a central feature of modernism, and this claim makes sense in Cather's case particularly. (26) The identity of art and life (or past and present) that Jim imagines in the racial body is precisely what modernists like Crane and Strand seek to enact formally in poetry and photography. Indeed, the identitarian aims of modernist formal experimentation make the move to race in modernist texts almost inevitable and, consequently, widespread. Cather's later novels, generally regarded as modernist, display Jim's same interest in a self-presence founded in race.

In *A Lost Lady* (1923), for instance, Captain Forrester, the great railroad builder, discusses his "philosophy" at a dinner party and concludes "with a sort of grunt. Something forbidding had come into his voice, the lonely, defiant note that is so often heard in the voices of old Indians." (27) He explains his philosophy. "What you think of and dream for day by day, in spite of yourself, so to speak--you will get. You will accomplish what you dream of most" (LL 44). This remark implies that dreaming is the mental cause of the accomplished fact. He refines, or revises, this point when his wife asks, "And why? That's the most interesting part of it" (LL 44). The Captain replies, "a thing that is dreamed of in the way I mean, is already an accomplished fact" (LL 44). It is an accomplished fact not because desire of this intensity inevitably secures its object--this reading underestimates the force of "already"--but because fact and dream are identical. Forrester's philosophy thus eliminates what seems essential about dreaming--that it happens in the mind, that it happens prior to the state of affairs that it envisions, and that it has some causal role in accomplishing that state of affairs. Dreaming in the way Forrester means is not a mental phenomenon at all. Towards the end of the novel Forrester suffers a stroke that should be understood as equivalent to Jim's decapitation of d'Arnault. It ensures the reduction of mind to body, and hence the identity of thought and action idealized in his philosophy and racialized in his foreshadowing grunt. This same modernist logic of racialized primitivism prompts Tom Outland in *The Professor's House* to imagine that he has Indian ancestors. Tom, having just returned from Washington in his failed attempt to interest the U.S. government in an archaeological expedition to the Blue Mesa ruins, learns that Roddy has sold the artifacts they recovered from Cliff City to a German antiquities collector, and reproaches Roddy: "I'm not so poor that I have to sell the pots and pans that belonged to my poor grandmothers a thousand years ago" (PH 219). His anger over the sale seems to stem partly from the recognition that his own interest in scholarly translation of the artifacts, or even his sense of the "adventure" of the discovery, resembles Roddy's commercial translation (PH 226). After Roddy leaves the mesa, for instance, Tom admits that what he had "felt for this place ... had formerly been mixed up with other motives" (PH 227). But now that those motives "were gone," he says, "I had my happiness unalloyed" (PH 227). The purity of his new relation to the mesa, and in particular to the original inhabitants of Cliff City, consists in replacing his written interpretation of them ("every night after supper I sat down at the kitchen table and wrote up an account of the day's work") with an imagined blood relation (PH 189). As his remark to Roddy indicates, Tom now thinks of the Indians as his "ancestors" (PH 219). Crucially, however, he does not begin to think of them as such until after the sale of the artifacts. It is as if Tom recognized that his relation to the Indians must bypass all forms of interpretation, translation, or representation so as not to be the equivalent of Roddy's commercial--and, formerly, his own scholarly--translation. (28) Thus not only does he lose interest in his "diary," leaving it walled up in the Eagle's Nest where he left it before going to Washington, he also must stop thinking about his "grandmothers" (PH 227,219). Significantly, the short final chapter of "Tom Outland's Story," following Roddy's departure, includes not a single reference to Tom's ancestors. Tom seems to forget about his grandmothers, an erasure equivalent to Jim's erasure of Antonia at the end of *My Antonia*.

Tom can forget because his new relation to the past bypasses representation. He is his past, at least according to his imaginary genealogy. Though his relation to the past resembles Jim's at the end of *My Antonia*, there is an important difference. Jim overcomes his loss of the child's being by objectifying his memories as an adult, but on the Mesa Tom has become like the child Jim was--a pumpkin under the sun, totally present to himself. "I wakened with the feeling that I had found everything instead of having lost everything. Up there alone, a close neighbor to the sun, I seemed to get the solar energy in some direct way" (PH 227). Tom does not objectify his memories, as Jim does in hearing the wagons again and touching his feelings; instead, like Blind d'Arnault, he embodies the past. He has eliminated the need for memories altogether, replacing a representational self-relation with one that is not a relation at all, but an identity. With Indian grandmothers, Tom lives his past.

But The Professor's House is less Tom's story than it is Godfrey St. Peter's, the Professor of the tide, who teaches history at a small college in the Midwest, and who, when Tom dies in the First World War, begins editing his Blue Mesa diary for publication. This writing task, like the Professor's more properly historical work (the eight volumes of Spanish Adventurers in North America), involves putting things in perspective.

The bother was that he must write an introduction. The diary covered only about six months of the boy's life, a summer he spent on the Blue Mesa, and in it there was almost nothing about Tom himself. To mean anything, it must be prefaced by a sketch of Outland, and some account of his later life and achievements.
(PH 150)

The Professor's House includes a "sketch of Outland" of course, but Tom narrates it. St. Peter never writes his introduction. The novel's sketch, "Tom Outland's Story," certainly fills in details of Tom's life. But what St. Peter says of Tom's "plain account" in the diary--"To mean anything, it must be prefaced"--applies equally to "Tom Outland's Story" (PH 238). If in the diary Tom uses words "sparingly" ("the adjectives were purely descriptive, relating to form and color" [PH 238]), on the mesa he rejects words altogether in order to see things "whole" and to feel "happiness" (PH 226). St. Peter's observation about Tom's stories generally--that "there were no shadows" (PH 105)--is thus true of "Tom Outland's story"; and although the Professor fails to write his introduction, that failure itself adds shadows to Tom's story and, as the subject of the final book, supplies a perspective on Tom's modernism. The reason St. Peter cannot write, after all, is that thinking about Tom sets him to thinking about "the person he was in the beginning," before "the chain of events which had happened to him" (PH 240). He is unable to become that person again. Rather than ending with Tom's feeling of having "found everything," then, the novel concludes with St. Peter's near asphyxiation and sense of having "let something go" (PH 258).

While working on the introduction to Tom's diary, St. Peter is overcome with gas after failing asleep in his study--the wind has blown the stove out and the window shut. Tom's "scientific work" during college included the discovery of a "gas" (PH 118); and it is as if this gas--or, indeed, the other "gas" he discovered, the thin atmosphere up close to the sun on Blue Mesa ("the world above the world" [PH 217])--had invaded St. Peter's study in the form of Tom's story. For the story has recalled for St. Peter the self of his own childhood: "original, unmodified," (PH 239), "primitive" (PH 241), "solitary" (PH 241). This self has "recognitions" (PH 241):

When white clouds blew over the lake like bellying sails, when the seven pine trees turned red in the declining sun, he felt satisfaction and said to himself merely: "That is right." Coming upon a curly root that thrust itself across his path, he said: "That is it." When the maple-leaves along the street began to turn yellow and waxy, and were soft to the touch,--like the skin on old faces,--he said: "That is true; it is time." (PH 241)

This self resembles Captain Forrester after his stroke. Indeed, such primitive being seems uncomfortably close to unconsciousness and death recall what Jim says of his experience in his Grandmother's garden: "perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire" (MA 20). The other side of presence is obliteration. In this respect the threat of St. Peter's "accidental extinction" (PH 258) articulates the cost of self-presence, just as his survival (when Augusta saves him from the gas) articulates the cost of life. It is the "secondary social man" (PH 240) who survives, the one created by circumstance and subject to change; and at the end of the novel St. Peter feels "the ground under his feet" and awaits the return of his family with "fortitude" (PH 258). The Professor feels he has "let something go," but for readers of the novel that something is not exactly gone: rather, the narrative of his relinquishment puts it in perspective.

Notes

(1.) Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), 13. Hereafter cited parenthetically and abbreviated as MA.

(2.) Augustine contrasts God's eternal being with human memory. See *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 254-55.

(3.) Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1961), 19.

(4.) Quoted in Ruth Leys, "Traumatic Cures: Shell Shock, Janet, and the Question of Memory," in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (London: Routledge, 1996), 113.

(5.) On Cather's modernism, see also Phyllis Rose, "Modernism: The Case of Willa Cather," *Modernism Reconsidered*, ed. Robert Kielly (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 123-45; Walter Benn Michaels (*Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1995]); and Joan Middleton (*Willa Cather's Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique*, [Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990]). Both Michaels and Middleton regard *A Lost Lady* as Cather's first modernist work.

(6.) In her later novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971 [1927]), Cather describes the dying bishop's "loss of perspective in his memories" in strikingly similar terms: "He was soon to have done with calendared time," she writes, "and it had already ceased to count for him. He sat in the middle of his own consciousness; none of his former states of mind were lost or outgrown. They were all within reach of his hand" (290). The bishop's life, Cather says, is a "great picture" in that he imagines all states of mind to be present at once (290). As Michaels observes, the bishop's transformation of "the narrativized connection of past to present self into a 'great picture,'" guarantees "continuity through time by re-imagining it as continuity in space" (81). More precisely, the bishop transcends continuity altogether. There is no continuity through time because there is no time. Like the bishop, Jim abandons temporal perspective at the end of *My Antonia*.

(7.) Willa Cather, *The Professor's House* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 101. Hereafter cited parenthetically and abbreviated as PH.

(8.) Jim's refusal to remember here seems to derive from his failure to recognize himself in an earlier photo, "a tintype of two men, uncomfortably seated, with an awkward-looking boy standing between them" (259). In the earlier photo he sees "two men, uncomfortably seated," "awkward-looking boy." When he recognizes himself--exclaiming "Jake, Otto and I!" he begins remembering. "We had it taken, I remember, when we went to Black Hawk on the first fourth of July I spent in Nebraska. I was glad to see Jake's grin again, and Otto's ferocious mustache" (259). Jim subsequently adopts this accidental failure to recognize himself as a conscious strategy.

(9.) Jim treats a private photograph, in other words, as if it were public photograph. The private photograph, John Berger notes, is "appreciated and read in a context which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it" (*Ways of Looking* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1980], 51). It "is a memento from a life being lived"; the camera is used to "contribute to a living memory" (52). In the public photograph, by contrast, this context is absent. "If the public photograph contributes to a memory," Berger says, "it is to the memory of an unknowable and total stranger (52)." Public photos are thus simultaneously historical and ahistorical: they depict a past, but a past that the viewer never experienced and therefore cannot remember. The images of the past in public photos, consequently, can be read only as images, for their surface qualities.

(10.) Deborah Lambert, "Antonia," in *Antonia*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991), ("becomes an idea"), 46 ("betrayal") 47. See also Susan Rosowski who argues that Jim's plans at the end of the novel are "curiously empty" without *Antonia*, "irrelevant to the center of life represented by the female world of *Antonia*" ("Antonia," in *Antonia*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991], 160). Linda Wagner-Martin extends this point to the entire novel: "The irony of Jim's coming to find *Antonia* and ending up with a readymade family of young boys who adore him, or another male comrade he can feel superior to, points again to the unsettling kind of characterization Cather allows in the text. *Antonia* was never anything but a male appendage--someone's daughter, someone's sister, someone's servant girl, someone's mother and wife" ("Antonia," in *Antonia*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991], 63). See also Judith Fetterly: "Tony's 'badness' is only a temporary deviation from her trajectory towards apotheosis as earth mother, in which image she is fully delivered up in Book V, fittingly titled 'Cuzak's Boys.' Defined not only as the mother of sons but as the mother of sons of her husband, so completely does 'niceness' require the elimination of self, *Antonia* admits ... 'That Leo; he's the worst of all ... and I love him the best'" ("Antonia," in *Antonia*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991], 134). Blanche Gelfant makes perhaps the most overarching observation: "*My Antonia* is a magnificent and warped testimony to the mind's image-making power, an implicit commentary on how that creative power serves the mind's need to ignore and deny whatever is reprehensible in whatever one loves" ("*The Forgotten Reaping Hook: Sex in My Antonia*," *My Antonia*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987], 95). For Gelfant, *Antonia*'s disappearance at the end is an instance of Jim's general practice of letting "memory filter its experiences through the screen of nostalgia" (95). These critics are right to focus on *Antonia*'s absence as the novel's interpretive crux. But because they all assume that the novel is operating--or should be operating--in a purely documentary mode, they miss the novel's modernist engagement with memory. Their concern with damaging stereotypes is valid, although in this case their criticism relies on inappropriately realist assumptions.

- (11.) Joseph Urgo, *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 66.
- (12.) On uniformity as a strategy for producing national unity, see Philip Fisher, "Democratic Social Space: Whitman, Melville, and the Promise of American Transparency," *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988), 60-101. Hereafter cited parenthetically and abbreviated as "SS."
- (13.) Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Bradley Sculley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1973), 425. Hereafter cited parenthetically and abbreviated as LG.
- (14.) For a discussion of the current version of such reduction in American political discourse, the unborn fetus, see Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 6.
- (15.) Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (Hill and Wang: New York, 1982), 59.
- (16.) Hart Crane, *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, ed. Brom Weber (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 64. Hereafter cited parenthetically and abbreviated as B.
- (17.) Crane says "ticking" (what clocks do) rather than "clicking" (what telegraphs do) presumably in order to identify the binding function of trains and telegraphs.
- (18.) John Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 15. Hereafter cited parenthetically and abbreviated as MC.
- (19.) It is important that Crane's hoboos "each seemed a child." Jonathan Fineberg notes that many modernist painters used children's pictures as guides in producing their mature works. Wassily Kandinsky, for example, turned to the pictures of "other children--some of whom he didn't even know. He sought the commonalities in children's art: he wanted to find a universal language, a visual vocabulary that would predate that point when culture imposes its own images on children's minds. The child has the 'natural ability to absorb the thing as such,' Kandinsky wrote in 1912" ("Modernism and the Art of Children" [The Chronicle of Higher Education, March 27, 1998], 8). The natural extension of this view--that children are able to see things as they are, because their perceptions have not yet been warped by cultural attitudes or preconceptions--comes with Picasso's invention of Cubism and Cubist collage. Picasso was "intrigued by the way that a child's imaginative play transforms a broom into a horse, or a pair of empty spools of thread into the wheels of a train. In his own work, he used this principle of appropriation, employing images in ways that overpower but do not eliminate their identity as objects" (9). Thus Picasso's interest in the child was an interest not in what the picture depicts (or what the child absorbs), but in the reality of the materials of the picture (or what the child transforms in imaginative play). "While a child disregards the reality of the broom when turning it into a fantasy horse, the cubist collage deliberately retains the reality of the object in a continuum that breaks down the boundary between the real and what is 'art.' The collage examines the role of imagination in reconfiguring our experience of real things" (9). Picasso's emphasis on the reality of the materials--evident in such works as "Baboon and Her Young" (two toy cars form the head of the baboon) and "Goat Skull and Bottle" (bicycle handlebars make the goat's horns)--could be said to transform the work of art from a representation of reality (what the picture depicts) into a presentation of reality (what the picture is). So if Picasso's appropriations of objects are equivalent to the child's imagination of what things can become, they also stand as evidence of the sorts of transformation necessary to see the thing as it really is, before it is warped by culturally imposed attitudes. The artwork itself is real. In a sense, childhood is what these artists--in trying and failing to reproduce it representationally as memory--enact nonrepresentationally.
- (20.) Quoted in Sarah Greenough, *Paul Strand: An American Vision* (Washington, D.C.: Aperture Foundation, 1990), 10.
- (21.) Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 79. Hereafter cited parenthetically and abbreviated as "SF."
- (22.) Fried does not claim that Stella's shapes are themselves literal, but he does contrast Stella's work with that of "certain younger artists" for whom "the future of the art lies in the creation of works that, more than anything else, are wholly literal--in that respect going 'beyond' painting" (88). Obviously going beyond painting cannot be the future of painting. Philip Fisher is entirely correct to point out that the only choice in painting is "the choice of mentioning or being haunted by reality," which is to say that a painting cannot become reality. See *Making and Effacing Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 195.

(23.) Strand says that he was "trying to photograph the rushing to work ... the physical movement expressed by the abstract spotting of people and shapes ... [and] no doubt the black shapes of the windows have helped this quality of a great maw into which people rush" (quoted in Naomi Rosenberg, "The Early Years," in Paul Strand: Essays on His Life and Work, ed. Maren Stange [Washington, D.C.: Aperture Foundation, 1990], 38).

(24.) One might say that Cather attempts to disconnect the signifier from the signified. I'm not suggesting that Cather was influenced by Saussure, only that Saussure formalized ideas that were already becoming manifest in modernist texts. Strikingly, Saussure explains the relational identity of the signifier--an identity independent of its material realization by comparing it with the train and the street. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 108-09. Cather's emphasis on the material properties of the language in the passage under consideration could be described as an attempt to turn language into what Saussure calls a "purely material entity," thereby erasing its vehicular properties.

(25.) Albert C. Barnes, "Negro Art and America," *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Atheneum, 1992 [1925]), 19. Hereafter cited parenthetically and abbreviated as "NA."

(26.) On race as a structural component of American modernism, see Michaels and Michael North (*The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language & Twentieth-Century Literature* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994]), and my own essays, "Literature and Lynching: Identity in Jean Toomer's *Cane*," *ELH* 67:1 (Spring 1999), 205-28; "William Carlos Williams and the New World," *Arizona Quarterly* 56:1 (Spring 2000), 65-88.

(27.) Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 45. Hereafter cited parenthetically and abbreviated as LL.

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Title: The Bohemian paradox: My Antonia and popular images of Czech immigrants
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In

1893, a letter written by Charles H. Slama of Madison, Wisconsin, appeared in *The Bohemian Voice*, a newspaper serving mostly Czech immigrant and Czech American readers across the nation. Regarding other newspapers' disparaging portrayals of Czechs (then usually called Bohemians), Slama writes, "The number of people who can really form any judgment as to the comparative merits of Bohemia and Bohemian people might be counted on one's fingers. On the other hand, the number of people who make the most confident assertions about us, and who fancy they are especially qualified to speak, is almost unascertainable" (14). Judgments and assertions about Czechs, especially Czech immigrants in the US, continued to be made by the American popular press well into the first decades of the twentieth century. By 1918, when Willa Cather added her voice to this subject with her novel *My Antonia*, specific stereotypes of Czech immigrants had developed. When placed within its historical and rhetorical context, and approached as part of this body of discourse, *My Antonia* can be seen as Cather's response to and reshaping of the popular image of Czech immigrants.

Czech immigrants appear to have had special appeal for Cather since characters identified with this group appear regularly in her fiction about the plains: along with those in *My Antonia* are the title characters of "Peter" (1892), her first published story; "The Bohemian Girl" (1912); and "Neighbor Rosicky" (1930). While *O Pioneers* (1913) focuses on the Swedish Bergsons, their Czech neighbors are given prominence, too. No doubt, Cather's interest in such characters stems from her familiarity with the actual Czech immigrants she encountered during her years in Nebraska. Annie Sadilek, for instance, is regularly named as the author's model for Antonia Shimerda. This familiarity might have spurred her to revise the images drawn by other writers and to create one that accorded with her personal understanding of this group.

Furthermore, the traits ascribed to Czech immigrants in popular discourse included a determined resistance to assimilation, and this characteristic fits well with Cather's vision of the United States as a nation rich in cultural diversity. In a 1924 interview, she says that immigrants "have come here to live in the sense that they lived in the Old World, and if they were let alone their lives might turn into the beautiful ways of their homeland." However, the agents of assimilation doggedly turn them into "stupid replicas of smug American citizens. This passion for Americanizing everything and everybody is a deadly disease with us" (Feld 71-72). The Cuzaks in *My Antonia* exhibit the "beautiful ways" that result from preserving cultural distinctiveness. Critics already have shown how Cather's novels positively portray a culturally heterogeneous nation created by the preservation of ethnic distinctiveness, a vision that opposes the homogeneous nation that would result from assimilation to the Anglo-American culture or amalgamation within the "melting pot." Ann Moseley, for instance, argues that the cultural pluralist rhetoric in *My Antonia* becomes clear when it is compared to the social theory of Horace M. Kallen, a contemporary of Cather "who maintained that each ethnic group has an inherent worth and dignity which, if retained, will strengthen and enrich American civilization" (8). (See also Harvey 35-36.) In a similar way, positioning Cather with other writers who contributed to the popular image of Czech immigrants reveals that she did not outright contradict this image so much as mold it into a favorable form. By presenting Czechs and their efforts to resist assimilation in a positive light, Cather made the idea of cultural pluralism more palatable to her original readers, many of whom would have been hostile to such a stance.

The particulars of how Cather reshapes traits commonly ascribed to Czechs might easily be missed by readers nearly a century after the first appearance of *My Antonia*. After all, the stereotypes that emerged from this group's immigration to the US are not widely known today. (1) Thus, a review of that immigration history and the social milieu surrounding it will precede a closer examination of Cather's manipulation of Czech stereotypes. Thomas Capek explains that Czechs started coming to America in the seventeenth century, when "Protestant exiles are known to have settled in New Amsterdam, the present New York, and among the English in Virginia." However, 1848 marks a dramatic increase in their immigration (viii). Since a series of revolts against autocratic governments spread from Paris throughout Europe, including one against the Hapsburg Empire, which subjugated Bohemia. Along with these political reasons, Capek notes economic incentives for

emigration, notably, "blighting droughts" and "a failure of the potato crop" happening just as "wonderful stories of the discovery of gold in California" spread across the Czech homeland (25, 28). Joseph S. Roucek explains that, after 1848, the number of Czech newcomers to the US "swelled constantly until 1870, and then again from 1890 to the World War, the greatest influx coming around 1905-1906." He cites "poor social conditions" along with "political persecution by the Empire and the subsequent antisocialist legislation" as prime motives to emigrate (231). Capek and Roucek agree that Czechs combined the classic reasons for coming to America: to enjoy greater financial opportunity and to escape political oppression.

On a wider scale, though, a significant shift in US immigration began around 1880. The English, Dutch, Germans, Scandinavians, and other groups from northern and western Europe no longer dominated immigrant statistics as they had since early colonization. These groups collectively became known as "old immigrants." Sally Allen McNall explains that characters in *My Antonia* who represent these immigrants--notably, the Harlings, Mrs. Gardener, and Mr. Jensen--are presented as "upright and cosmopolitan." Norwegian Lena Lingard even overcomes "a dubious reputation" to find the "success American-style" that Tiny Soderball also achieves. "Though many Czechs arrived in Nebraska at the same time as the western and northern Europeans," McNall says, "the national picture was different, and the Shimerdas reflect this change, arriving late, on the largest wave of Czech immigration." These more recent immigrants "bore the brunt of the economic insecurity of the period" as well as tensions surrounding World War I (24-25). Czechs became associated with the so-called "new immigrants," the Hungarians, Poles, Italians, Greeks, and other groups from eastern and southern Europe whose numbers surpassed all others in early twentieth-century immigration.

The sharp divide between old and new immigrants--and, importantly, between the widely perceived statuses of both--is clearly presented in the popular discourse of the time. In a 1910 issue of McClure's, for example, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant reveals how Czechs were subsumed among the latter newcomers:

During the last thirty years seventeen millions of foreigners have poured into our midst from central and southern Europe and Asia Minor: Italians, Hebrews, Poles, Russians, Bohemians, Rumanians, Greeks, Syrians, and many other races--most of them, except in the case of the Hebrews, passive, inarticulate, and illiterate, agriculturalists by inheritance. These people differ fundamentally from the more intelligent and efficient Northern races that preceded them hither before 1880--the English, Scotch, Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians, who, as we know, not only made their fortunes in our cities, but dared to become also the hardy and successful settlers of our distant Western plains. ("Toilers" 232; emphasis mine)

Cather was an editor at McClure's when this article was published. It is tempting to speculate about how she might have reacted to Sergeant's inclusion of Czechs with the races of supposedly passive, illiterate farmers standing in stark contrast to those bright and capable Scandinavians and other groups who tamed the plains. (2) *My Antonia* certainly contradicts this view.

A reason to refute the grouping of Czechs with new immigrants, as McNall notes, is found in the dates of their arrival. As the authors of *The Immigration Problem* (1913) explain, "The geographical location of the Bohemians and Moravians [the latter also belonging to the Czech people] in Europe would class them among the more recent immigrants, but the period of time during which they have been coming to the United States would place them among the older immigrant races" (Jenks and Lauck 301). Though Bohemia and Slovakia merged to form Czechoslovakia after World War I, a Slovakian immigrant keeps them apart in terms of immigrant experience by noting that Czechs fit better with the old immigrants than the new. In a 1920 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, John Kulamer writes, "The Bohemian or Czech portion of the Czecho-Slovaks are old settlers in this country; most of them are considered Americanized. The Slovak immigration is rather recent, and is included in that invidious term, 'foreigners'" (418). Cather suggests something similar in an article about Nebraska: "Many of our Czech immigrants were people of a very superior type. The political emigration resulting from the revolutionary disturbances of 1848 was distinctly different from the emigration resulting from economic causes, and brought to the United States brilliant young men both from Germany and Bohemia" ("*Nebraska*" 237). While sidestepping the mixed motives for emigration that Capek and Roucek describe, Cather places Czechs on an equal footing with the old immigrants, such as Germans.

Nonetheless, Czechs were listed among the undesirables when immigration restriction laws based on national origin were enacted in the early 1920s. In defense of these laws, which imposed quotas favoring old immigrant groups, Georgia Representative Carl Vinson explained to the House that the country's early colonists shared a strong commonality because they were all from, as he said, "the same branch of the Aryan race." Vinson continued, "These ancestors of the real American

people were related one to the other and possessed, to a large degree, similar tastes, traits and characteristics." The immigrants being restricted, though, were disturbingly different. "The emigrants affected by this bill," he said, "are those from Italy, Greece, Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, Armenia, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Turkey. I respectfully submit, with all the power within me, that the people from these countries do not yield their national characteristics, but retain them practically unimpaired by contact with others" (qtd. in Bennett 4849; emphasis mine). Vinson's claim that the unity of "the real American people" was threatened by inassimilable immigrants, including Czechs, reveals much about the national climate that had been gathering force for decades and in which readers first read *My Antonia*.

This climate was fortified by popular scientific rhetoric addressing the racial divisions between immigrant groups. In one pervasive theory, the races of Europe are organized according to general geography. Roughly speaking, the Mediterranean race occupied the south and included groups such as Italians and Greeks. The British, Dutch, Scandinavians, and Germans were prominent among the Nordic race in the north. Dominated by Slavic peoples, the Alpine race was wedged in between the other two races from the east, the Czech lands being near the point of this wedge. A book that played a major role in spreading this theory is Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916). Using a "cephalic index," which compared a skull's maximum width to its maximum length, Grant advanced the idea that Europeans could be placed "into three distinct subspecies of man, one northern and one southern, both dolichocephalic or characterized by a long skull[,] and a central subspecies which is brachycephalic or characterized by a round skull" (19-20). Czechs, he confirms, belong to the round-headed Alpine race (143). The theory bolstered the split between old and new immigrants, complicating it only slightly: the old immigrants were primarily comprised of Nordics while the new immigrants were dominated by Alpines and Mediterraneans.

The theory also lent itself to reinforcing the supposed superiority of old immigrants and the alleged menace of new immigrants. Grant says, "Upon the appearance on the scene of the Nordics the Alpine race temporarily lost its identity and sank to the subordinate and obscure position which it still largely occupies" (147). This imbalance makes interbreeding a serious problem, he explains. The characteristics of Nordic supremacy become suddenly impotent when mingled with other races on a genetic level: "Whether we like to admit it or not, the result of the mixture of two races, in the long run, gives us a race reverting to the more ancient, generalized and lower type" (18). The nation's open-door immigration sentiments were "sweeping the nation toward a racial abyss" due to the racial mixing that inevitably occurs in the national melting pot (263). While this theory might be deemed pseudo-scientific skullduggery today, it held remarkable sway in the early twentieth century. According to Matthew Frye Jacobson, Grant's views "not only influenced debates over immigration and restriction, but also influenced and reflected popular understanding of peoplehood and diversity" (82). Founded on evidence as seemingly objective as the shape of skulls, the theory propounded by Grant and others redoubled animosity toward those immigrants with which Czechs, despite objections, became associated.

The theory's forebodings even spread into literary discourse. A 1922 issue of *The Bookman* features an essay titled "The Alpine School of Fiction" by Gertrude Atherton. After summarizing Grant's ideas, Atherton explains how American fiction, once great because of its aristocratic and Nordic bearings, has become debased by the swell of Alpine immigrants into the nation and, via naturalism, into the nation's literature. She writes, "The Alpine influence in American letters has never been so signally demonstrated as in the large and increasing number of midwestern novels that have achieved so remarkable a notoriety during the last year and a half. [...] Every character in them all is a round-head, brachycephalic, Alpine. Not a real American could be found among them with a magnifying glass." In sum, Atherton opines, "To raise round-heads--forever doomed by nature to inferiority--to the dignity of predominance, shows not only a total lack of values and a blindness of one eye but some weakness in the author's own Americanism" (31-32). As a Czech immigrant, Antonia Shimerda no doubt would have been understood by many early twentieth-century readers as belonging to an inferior and threatening race of "round-heads."

In addition, for decades leading up to the novel's first publication, a European immigrant's specific national origins implied traits so innate, so persistent over generations, as to be rooted in that individual's racial makeup. Jacob Riis is not using the term "race" casually, then, in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) when he says of German and Bohemian immigrants, "The two races mingle no more on this side of the Atlantic than on the rugged slopes of the Bohemian mountains; the echoes of the thirty years' war ring in New York, after two centuries and a half, with as fierce a hatred as the gigantic combat bred among the vanquished Czechs" (109). Of course, equating nationality with race faded with time, and Jacobson explains, "Modern scholars are most comfortable discussing Poles, Greeks, or Italians as 'ethnic' or 'national' groups, and thus they tend to disparage and dismiss the lexicon of white races that characterized an earlier era" (68). (3)

Indeed, though the concept of a white race certainly existed when *My Antonia* appeared, some saw Czechs as something else. Recounting his life in the iron mills in a 1919 article in *The Nation*, William J. Fielding explains that he and another worker "are the only two white men in the cast-house.... The rest are Poles, Slavs, Finns, Letts, and Bohunks" (586). ("Bohunk," a slang term for Bohemian, also appears in Cather's novel [32, 229].) Curiously, Fielding not only differentiates Czechs from white people but also from Slavs, even though Czech is a Slavic language. Adding to the confusion, in a 1914

book on immigrant groups, sociology professor Edward Alsworth Ross quotes a physician colleague as saying that Slavs "are immune to certain kinds of dirt. They can stand what would kill a white man" (291). Ignoring the absurdity about dirt immunity, one can see Slavs differentiated from whites here. Ross himself, on the other hand, groups Slavs among the white population (124). Apparently, Czechs were adrift in the perplexity of competing and contradictory racial classifications.

Certain moments in *My Antonia* take on greater significance when a modern reader is aware that, when the novel was first published, the Czech or Alpine or Slavic *Antonia* had been sharply differentiated from the "true American" or Nordic or even white Jim Burden. Furthermore, subtle contrasts between Czech and Scandinavian assimilation become apparent alongside the more noticeable "success American-style" that McNall points out Lena and Tiny achieve. For instance, at one point, Jim says, "The Bohemian and Scandinavian girls could not get positions as teachers, because they had had no opportunity to learn the language" (128). Afterward, readers learn about "the first Scandinavian girl to get a position in the high school" (154), creating the impression that this group is gaining access into the dominant culture in ways that Czechs might not be. Also, some of the novel's first readers were probably very aware of Cather's examples of humankind's "perverse predisposition to mismatch," to borrow a phrase from Grant (22). These appear when Jim kisses Antonia (143), when Lena talks about how Norwegian men find "something mighty taking about the Lapp girls" (154), and when Antonia runs off with Larry Donovan (191). Cather's refutation of immigrant inferiority and native-born superiority surfaces when Jim distinguishes the hearty, vigorous immigrant girls from the listless and, presumably, native-born girls of Black Hawk. "They were almost a race apart" in terms of vitality, Jim says (127). Here, Cather flips notions of racial superiority, implying that Americans of the dominant culture should emulate immigrants rather than pressure immigrants to assimilate to their culture.

Along with this general discourse of racial categorization, specific traits were ascribed to Czech immigrants. Popular writing sometimes cast them in a flattering light--but sometimes in ominous shadows, too--creating a paradoxical image that even appears within a single piece of writing. In "The Bohemian in America" (1903), for example, Edward Steiner states, "The Bohemian is among the best of our immigrants, and yet may easily be the worst [...]" (971). This equivocal assessment is founded on a set of positive and negative traits that Steiner attributes to Czechs. The traits, frequently mirrored in other writing, indicate the era's popular stereotypes. Prominent among those in the Czechs' favor are musical proficiency and their tenacity for retaining their original language. On the negative side are their dedication to Freethinking philosophy and its religious skepticism, their volatile and potentially violent natures, and their materialism. These are the key characteristics that Cather selected from and molded to form a somewhat new image of Czech immigrants in *My Antonia*.

One way that Cather uses to deal with the negative traits ascribed to Czechs is to simply avoid them. She does this with the stigma of Freethinking, a philosophy that esteems reason and eschews conventional religious faith. A 1925 book titled *Old World Traits Transplanted* describes this as the "feature of Bohemian life in America which has attracted most attention and caused most criticism [...]" (Park and Miller 219). Some sympathetic critics acknowledge Freethinking but allege that its sway among the Czechs is countered by life in America. For instance, after ranking Czechs as "the most irreligious" of foreign-born groups, Steiner says there is "good reason to believe that this infidelity is only a desire for a more liberal type of religion, only a strong reaction and not a permanent thing, and I found signs of weakening at every point" (969-70). Riis first blames "the fierce contention through hundreds of years between Catholics and Protestants on Bohemia's soil" for the Czechs' attraction to Freethinking; however, he then assures readers that a Czech clergyman has reported that, "though the Freethinkers had started two schools in the immediate neighborhood of his church to counteract its influence, his flock had grown in a few years from a mere handful at the start to proportions far beyond his hopes [...]" Even Freethinkers were converting (113). Both Steiner and Riis imply that assimilation--or, at least, exposure to the American environment--will gradually eliminate this aspect of Czech culture, which would have been good news for pious readers.

The same story is told in fiction by Joseph Anthony, whose novel *Rekindled Fires* was published the same year as *My Antonia*. Stanley, the protagonist, grows up under the influence of a father who is a Czech immigrant and described as "a free-thinker and a hater of authority wherever and in whatever form it might crop out" (16). In boyhood, the idea of accompanying a friend to his church is "as appalling to Stanley as an invitation to a beer party could be to any evangelist" (151), and he and the friend decide to write a book titled "Atheism Affirmed" (160-63). As the story proceeds, Old World prejudices crumble among the family's younger generation: Stanley's brother marries a German and his sister marries a Catholic, both incurring their father's anger. Stanley's own partiality to Freethinking erodes, too, when he leaves his Czech community for college. Almost by accident, he attends a church service, convincing himself afterward that "there was no harm in going to chapel after all, if one refrained from listening to the service" (327). By graduation, Stanley admits to himself "that he did not have any real animosity for churches. They were the most beautiful buildings he had ever seen. The most soothing music he had ever heard was played within their walls" (340). In this way, Anthony calms any anxieties his original readers might have had regarding the Freethinking philosophy of Czechs, crediting assimilation as the cause.

Cather stays clear of such a narrative in *My Antonia*, though she briefly links Czechs with Freethinking in *O Pioneers*, published five years earlier. There, Emil Bergson asks Marie Shabata why some Czechs are buried in the Norwegian cemetery rather than the Catholic one. After she points out that they were Freethinkers, Emil says, "Lots of the Bohemian

boys at the University are" (31). In contrast, the later novel features only Czech characters who are Catholic or whose religious views are left undesignated. We learn that Mr. Shimerda is Catholic when he crosses himself and kneels before the Burden's Christmas tree, unsettling Mr. Burden just enough to make him mentally "Protestantize" the scene (57). Even the often-objectionable Ambrosch redeems himself a bit when, after Mr. Shimerda's suicide, he surprises Jim by showing himself to be "deeply, even slavishly, devout" (65; see also 86). Presumably, many early twentieth-century Americans saw being a Catholic as preferable to being a Freethinker: Catholicism was, after all, a very traditional Christian religion while Freethinking threatened fundamental assumptions about human and divine authority. (4) In *My Antonia*, Cather softens potential controversy arising from religious difference by portraying Czechs as Catholics rather than Freethinkers. Doing so, she also dodges those scenarios that suggest assimilation will weed out this negative trait.

Cather downplays--but does not outright ignore--another negative trait ascribed to Czechs, namely, a potential for violent retaliation. A 1904 issue of *Charities* was devoted to Slavic immigrants, and in an article called "Bohemian Farmers in Wisconsin," Nan Mashek reports, "The general impression that Bohemians are much like the Germans is not true. They are to begin with a very emotional people. [...] They are excitable and have an unusual capacity for entering heartily into their pleasures; but, on the other hand, they are easily depressed and have not the cool-natured endurance of the northern German" (214). Steiner illustrates how this excitability can erupt into spiteful action when he says that "when I have watched [the Czech] in political riots in Prague and Pilsen or during strikes in our own country I have found him easily inflamed, bitter and relentless in his hate, and destructive in his wild passion" (971). This imagery suggests an impulsive readiness to extract revenge that civilization has barely tamed.

The Czech potential for physical retaliation also appears in fiction. Published in 1911, Robert Haven Schaufler's short story "The Bohemian" involves Vaclav, a Czech bookkeeper pushed to the breaking point by his employer, Bulkeley. No longer tolerating Bulkeley's referring to him as "Polack" and similar slurs, Vaclav expounds upon the greatness of Czech history in Europe and America; the impressive accomplishments in Czech music, architecture, and military action; the high literacy rate among Czechs--all the while repeatedly pummeling his boss. In the end, Vaclav shows the quality of his character by volunteering to turn himself into the police for his physical assault, but Bulkeley stops him. Convinced of his errors, Bulkeley offers to shake Vaclav's hand and maintains that one admirable characteristic among Yankees is "sporting blood" ("Bohemian" 561). In a piece that is clearly designed to correct misperceptions of Czech immigrants, Schaufler only reinforces the image that Czechs are a potentially violent breed. Also, in Cather's *O Pioneers*, Frank Shabata turns violent, killing his wife, Marie, and Emil Bergson. In prison, he explains to Emil's sister, "Two, t'ree years I know dat woman don' care no more 'bout me, Alexandra Bergson. I know she after some other man. [...] An' I ain't never hurt her. I never would-a done dat, if I ain't had dat gun along. I don't know what in hell make me take dat gun." Immediately afterward, Alexandra wonders if Marie's "warm-hearted and impulsive" nature were, after all, an undesirable quality (117). In other words, Czechs are an impulsive people, which might make them especially friendly or, possibly, especially violent.

No Czech character commits an act of violence this extreme in *My Antonia*, though there are some signs of brutal retaliation. Jim recalls that, after being angered by Ambrosch disdainfully walking away from charges of mistreating a borrowed harness, "Jake caught him by the belt of his trousers and yanked him back. Ambrosch's feet had scarcely touched the ground when he lunged out with a vicious kick at Jake's stomach. [...] This was not the sort of thing country boys did when they played at fisticuffs, and Jake was furious" (83). Later, while visiting Jim's house, Antonia offers an environmental reason for the rough nature that she and Ambrosch have exhibited: "If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us" (90). Another reference to a Czech character committing physical violence appears in a quick, secondhand comment that Marek "had got violent and been sent away to an institution a good while back" (202). Marek's institutionalization reveals that his violence is attributable to his mental deficiencies. While Cather perpetuates the notion that a potentially violent impulse resides in Czech males, she shows that acting on it is dependent upon unfortunate economic or psychological conditions.

Furthermore, Cather counterbalances these reports of violence with Czech characters who seem far from being violent men. Anton Jelinek first impresses Jim as "warm and spontaneous" (68), and that view of him seems to hold throughout the novel. Cuzak actually is contrasted to the impulsive Antonia when Jim discusses their marriage: "The two seemed to be on terms of easy friendliness, touched with humour. Clearly, she was the impulse, and he the corrective" (229). Jim finds him to be "a most companionable fellow" (234). Cather would go on to refine the impulsive Czech character further in "Neighbor Rosicky." The title character "represents an ideal balance between reason and emotion," Jaroslav Peprnik says, adding that this work is "actually a sequel to *My Antonia*" (285). Cather undermines the stereotype of the potentially violent Czech by suggesting that, while some Czechs might become violent, others do not.

Another trait that drew public condemnation was materialism. Regarding the essential Czech, Steiner writes, "His greatest sin is his materialism, and he stunts every part of his finer nature to own a house and to have a bank account. Children are robbed of their youth and of the opportunity to obtain a higher education by this parental hunger after money [...]" (971). The same hunger is recorded in *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910), by Jane Addams, who says:

When Professor Masurek of Prague gave a course of lectures in the University of Chicago, he was much distressed over the materialism into which the Bohemians of Chicago had fallen. The early immigrants had been so stirred by the opportunity to own real estate, an appeal perhaps to the Slavic land hunger, and their energies had become so completely absorbed in money-making that all other interests had apparently dropped away. (234)

Seemingly, something about their character turned Czechs into gluttons in the land of plenty. (5)

As she does with violent tendencies among the Czechs, Cather reshapes the image of this group's materialism by explaining what motivates it and by providing plenty of exceptions to it. Mrs. Shimerda seems the most overtly materialistic character: unlike the rest of the family, her generosity rests on the assumption that she will receive "substantial presents" in return (29), and she comments on the Burdens' furnishings "in an envious, complaining tone." However, when Antonia explains that her mother pushed the family to emigrate to acquire "much money, much land" for her sons (58-59), we begin to see that the American Dream, not Czech predilection, accounts for her materialism. It is further explained both by the poverty she knew in Bohemia, where she was "a poor girl come in to do the work" (151), and the squalor that the Burdens find during their first visit to the Shimerdas' sod house. Mrs. Shimerda is driven more by need than by greed.

Other Czech characters who might be accused of letting materialistic aims overtake higher ideals are Peter Krajiek, who swindles the Shimerdas, and Ambrose, who wrings hard work out of Marek (85) and Antonia (202); however, these are eclipsed by the reprehensible acts of their "real American" neighbors Wick Cutter and Larry Donovan. No other Czech character seems especially driven by material gain. Anton Jelinek rents his homestead to open a saloon in Black Hawk, for instance, but the immigrant farmers who bring their lunches there imply this is a modest enterprise (139). Antonia's financial climb is symbolized in her move from a partly subterranean sod house to an apparently comfortable farmhouse "up there on the hill" (213); however, in the end, she clearly values children and country life more than money. As Antonia says, "It's no wonder their poor papa can't get rich, he has to buy so much sugar for us to preserve with" (217). In Cather's landscape, then, Czechs are as likely, or as unlikely, to be materialistic as the other groups who surround them.

Overcoming such negative allegations aimed at Czechs is very much part of Jim's experience. The first information he receives about the newly arrived Shimerdas comes from Jake, who tells him that "you were likely to get diseases from foreigners" (6). Jake later tells him, "These foreigners ain't the same," meaning the Shimerdas are unlike the dominant culture and, therefore, cannot be trusted. Jim replies with a promise to stop being friendly with them (84). In both cases, though, Jake's comments fail to have any lasting effect on Jim. By personally experiencing the ways in which the Shimerdas invalidate derogatory generalizations, Jim discovers what is admirable about these Czech immigrants, as do Cather's readers.

One such quality is a penchant for music. Writing in 1904, Alice G. Masaryk describes Czechs in Chicago as "born musicians. [...] You will find on the West Side many music schools, many violinists and pianists, amateurs, besides the professional musicians who have three unions" (209). Regarding Czech farmers in Wisconsin, Mashek says that "perhaps, their most striking characteristic is their love of music and dancing. In the country, almost every village has a band of self-taught musicians, and the country dance is a time-honored institution" (214). In Anthony's *Rekindled Fires*, Stanley plays violin in his spare time; band music opens and closes the meetings of the Sons of Bohemia, his father's lodge; and an important character named Frantisek is seldom without his accordion. As he is thrashing his boss in Schaffler's story, Vaclav exclaims that Czech musicians have achieved acclaim that Americans can only envy: "You got anybody ever wrote such music like our Smetana? Didn't you have to get Dvorak over here to write the 'New World Symphony'?" ("Bohemian" 559).

Music surfaces frequently in *My Antonia*, and Moseley points out that a central metaphor is drawn between a symphony and a nation of harmonized yet individual ethnicities. She explains that "the emphasis on cultural pluralism and on the symbolic association of music with specific cultures is most clearly presented through the piano imagery of African American Blind d'Arnault and the violin imagery associated with the Bohemians [...]" (10). However, Cather links music to characters representing many ethnic groups: Austrian Otto Fuchs sings, Russian Peter plays the harmonica, the Italian Vannis bring dance music to town, and the Norwegian Harling family has a piano as a centerpiece of their home. Along with its references to Hispanic and Native American cultures, Cather's novel becomes an "application of the metaphor of a New World Symphony [...]" Moseley contends (10). This begins to illustrate how Cather advances a pluralistic view of the nation and its ethnic makeup.

Nonetheless, Cather portrays music as having an especially emotional and even nationalist resonance with her Czech characters. For instance, the mere chirp of a cricket changes Antonia's disposition from merry to melancholy by evoking memories of Old Hata, who "sang old songs to the children in a cracked voice" back in Bohemia (27). Before committing

suicide, Mr. Shimerda reveals his despair by no longer playing his violin. "My papa sad for the old country," **Antonia** says, adding, "He never make music any more. At home he play violin all the time; for weddings and for dance. Here never. [...] He don't like this kawn-tree" (59). Here, Cather illustrates a close relationship between music and Bohemia itself: for Mr. Shimerda, to leave the homeland behind is to leave music behind. (6) Mr. Shimerda's violin is inherited by **Antonia's** son Leo, who manages to play "very well for a self-taught boy," even though the instrument is too big for him (223). Importantly, Cather shows the Czech trait of musical talent surviving among a Czech family's first American-born generation.

The persistence of national culture in **Antonia's** family is also apparent in their using the Czech language. As Susie Thomas writes, "**Antonia's** household is a Bohemian one: Jim is offered coffee and kolaches, pictures of Prague hang on the parlour walls, the children cannot even speak English until they go to school." The novel "is about the transplanting of European culture in American soil and repeatedly affirms Old World values." In fact, "Cather's ideal was an intermingling of Old and New" (96-97). This intermingling is significant since **Antonia's** household is actually bicultural. Along with serving kolaches, **Antonia** values the "nice ways" of cooking, housekeeping, and childrearing she learned from the Harlings (221), and importantly, the Cuzaks are bilingual. For instance, Anton Cuzak easily switches from Czech to English so that Jim will not be excluded (229). Also, the older children speak proficient English instead of the telegraphic dialect the Shimerdas use in the early chapters. This bilingual proficiency helps to dramatize how, in becoming American, **Antonia** has remained connected to her cultural heritage. She has a rootedness that Jim loses, and he attempts to supplant his own sense of dislocation by planning trips back to Nebraska and, indeed, by writing the manuscript he titles "**My Antonia**."

Cather's concern for the loss of cultural background also appears in a comment on Nebraska's Czech immigrants transplanting their language. Describing the town of Wilber "in the old days," she says that "there was a pleasant little theater where the boys and girls were trained to give the masterpieces of Czech drama in the Czech language. 'Americanization' has doubtless done away with all this. Our lawmakers have a rooted conviction that a boy can be a better American if he speaks only one language than if he speaks two" ("**Nebraska**" 237). Here, Cather uses sarcasm to denounce Americanization. In **My Antonia**, she makes the same point by dramatizing the value of immigrants speaking two languages.

One reason why the preservation of immigrants' traditional languages was argued to be valuable was its bearing on family unity. Emily Greene Balch, author of *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* (1910), points out that immigrant parents frequently "endeavor to have the children speak only the old language until they go to school, knowing that this is their one opportunity to acquire it, and foreseeing that after the children have entered the school, they will speak English not only outside the home but within it [...]." Balch defends this practice, explaining,

One of the great evils among the children of foreigners [...] is the disastrous gulf between the older and the younger generation. Discipline, in this new freedom which both parents and children misunderstand, is almost impossible; besides which, the children, who have to act as interpreters for their parents and do business for them, are thrown into a position of unnatural importance, and feel only contempt for old-world ways, a feeling enhanced by the too common American attitude. (414-15)

Jane E. Robbins points out that this problem is less severe in Czech families: "The children speak Bohemian more than any other New York children speak the tongue of their fathers and the ancestral tongue seems to have a tendency to bind the family together and to preserve its traditions in this new land" (196). (7) As such, Czech immigrants are shown to encourage not just a closer connection to their cultural heritage by speaking Czech but also to ensure greater family cohesion.

This is particularly important to **My Antonia** because of the contrast between **Antonia's** large, happy family and Jim's childless and presumably cheerless marriage. Cather establishes Jim's hollow marriage in the introduction when the narrator says that his wife "has her own fortune and lives her own life. For some reason, she wishes to remain Mrs. James Burden" (2). Also, when they become reacquainted as adults, **Antonia** is caught off guard when Jim admits that he has no children (216). Not only has Jim lost touch with his past on the plains; his family legacy ends with him. **Antonia's** family, on the other hand, is closely knit, and her children carry forward the knowledge of their mother's past. This is seen when they gather to review photographs: "In the group about **Antonia** I was conscious of a kind of physical harmony. [...] They contemplated the photographs with pleased recognition; looked at some admiringly, as if these characters in their mother's girlhood had been remarkable. The little children, who could not speak English, murmured comments to each other in the rich old language" (224). Cather seems to be saying that America's future lies not with old immigrant stock, such as Jim Burden. Neither does it lie with the more assimilated and materially successful immigrants such as Lena, who chooses to avoid repeating the unhappy family experiences of her youth by not marrying (186). Instead, the future belongs to families such as the Cuzaks, who head there on a bridge from the past.

Another ideal that Cather links to Czechs' preservation of their language and culture is the enhancement of life that comes from living in a culturally diverse nation. In *The Immigrant and the Community* (1917), Grace Abbott argues that those pushing for complete assimilation "have not been able to see that, if encouraged to express his own characteristics, the Slav and the Italian would give to American life the color, the gaiety, and the self-expression which Puritanism denied to it and which no reading of Russian literature or attendance on Italian opera can give to the Anglo-American" (276). This passage intimates why, upon moving to Lincoln, Jim delves into European literature, associating the laughter of the immigrant girls he left behind with the poetry of Virgil (173). In addition, Lena--so altered by the assimilation process that she twice is barely recognized by her old friends (103, 170)--becomes entranced by musical theatre alongside him. They enrich their lives through art while Antonia, who retains much of her Czech identity in the end, finds fulfillment in life itself. Like art, then, cultural variety can enrich American life.

Jim is deprived of this enrichment when pressure from his grandparents and their prudish social set induce him to stop visiting Anton Jelinek's saloon (139) and to give up the dances at the Fireman's Hall (145), both of which are populated largely by immigrants. At this point, Cather has Jim paint a picture of the dominant culture that is stifled and skittish, fleeting and superficial: "Every individual taste, every natural appetite, was bridled by caution. The people [...] tried to live like mice in their own kitchens; to make no noise, to leave no trace, to slip over the surface of things in the dark" (140). There is a sharp contrast between this and life in the crowded but close-knit Cuzak household, where a tour of a fruit cellar ends with "a veritable explosion of life" into the sunshine (218). The contrast reveals Cather's view that the preservation of immigrant culture can revitalize the nation. (8) The Czechs were purported to be accomplishing such preservation through their music and their language better than other groups, and so they became Cather's exemplars.

In the same interview in which she decries rampant Americanization, Cather discusses *My Antonia*. She dismisses the idea that it is a "story of the soil" and claims that it is, instead, more a story of the Czechs: "*Antonia* was tied to the soil. But I might have written the tale of a Czech baker in Chicago, and it would have been the same. [...] It would have been smeerier, joltier, noisier, less sugar and more sand, but still a story that had as its purpose the desire to express the quality of these people" (Feld 72). Still, Cather was very likely sensitive to reigning attitudes toward and popular portrayals of Czech immigrants. Instead of just expressing "the quality of these people," she assembled fresh images of them based on those conveyed in works by other writers as well as in her own earlier work. In this way Cather expressed a quality that she saw in Czechs and that she presumably wanted the rest of the nation to value, if not imitate.

Notes

(1.) Peprnik and Sparling have both written about images of Czechs in American literature. Peprnik says that Czechs have had too little impact on Americans for stereotypes to exist, and this is evidenced by "the fact that the only detailed look at the Czechs is found in only three American writers," namely, Cather, Marcia Davenport, and Philip Roth (283). Unfortunately, fiction is all Peprnik examines. Sparling includes works of travel literature by F.O. Matthiessen and Patricia Hampl along with John Updike's short story, "Bech in Czech." Even in this small sample, Sparling finds certain motifs that reflect American associations with the Czech people, such as their strong sense of community and literary culture (301). My own look at popular writing in the early twentieth century spans non-fiction books and magazine articles, novels, a short story, and a poem. This diverse body of writing discloses how specific characteristics were repeatedly ascribed to Czechs in this period.

(2.) In a memoir of the famous novelist, Sergeant recounts bringing the article into Cather's office at McClure's. Cather's reaction is guarded at first. After accepting the piece, though, Cather confides to Sergeant that reading about the conditions suffered by immigrants in New York made her "low in her mind. In her Nebraska country Europeans from Northern or Central Europe were surely hard-driven. [...] But they were at ease in space and time [...]" (Willa Cather 43). Seemingly, the article did remind Cather of those immigrants she had known during her earlier years on the plains.

(3.) Literary scholars examining the racial aspects of *My Antonia* often overlook the fact that Czechs were thought of as a discrete racial construct. For instance, Tellefsen sees the racial status of the Czech characters as dependent upon the contrast provided by Blind d'Arnault, an African American character. She says that "the figure of the African-American is used to construct 'other-others' (white immigrants) as Americans. Against the backdrop of the Negro d'Arnault, Tiny Soderball and the three Mary's appear that much more white [...]" (237). Any distinction between Cather's Czechs, such as the three Mary's, and her Scandinavians, who Tiny represents, is lost in their mutual movement toward acceptance as fully white. Fischer focuses on another non-white group, American Indians, and argues that Cather romanticizes Western history by ignoring the devastation white settlers brought upon native tribes of the plains. Again, Czechs are conflated with Scandinavians as Fischer salutes the author for drawing a "sensitive portrayal and vigorous defense of immigrant peoples such as the Czechs and Norwegians" in an era of xenophobia fired by World War I; however, he then intimates that Czechs under the thumb of the Hapsburg Empire inspired US support for the right of self-determination in ways that non-white groups did not. Czechs, he adds, were "the most Western and consequently least threatening of the Eastern European peoples" (41). Discourse of the time reveals that Czechs were viewed as a discreet race and that Czech immigrants were not received as calmly as Fischer's

argument implies.

(4.) Hostilities toward Catholics existed in the US throughout the nineteenth century, but they appear to have largely subsided before the twentieth. "In an increasingly secular culture," Higham explains, "enthusiastic religion was passing out of middle-class life, and with it the belief that popery lay behind the major national perils was hard to sustain. Furthermore, by the late nineteenth century many Catholics had become assimilated into 'respectable' society [...]." Nativist anxieties shifted away from Catholics and onto immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, he says (86-87). By 1918, then, Cather could make the Shimerdas Catholic without risking the loss her readers' sympathy. Rather, the challenge she faced was evoking compassion for a family associated with those immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, whom many readers saw as dangerously foreign.

(5.) This hunger seems to have been insatiable since it continued to be described in popular writing as late as 1969. That year, Chicago magazine ran a series on the city's ethnic groups and included an installment titled "The Bohemians." Goldsborough introduces the piece with scenes and statistics of the "predilection for thrift" and "general money consciousness" among the spotlighted community (46). Though it appears to have lost its negative connotations by the second half of the century, the drive of Czechs and their offspring to acquire money and land in the US has been brought repeatedly before the public eye.

(6.) A close intermingling of music and life in Bohemia is also suggested in Sandburg's poem "Jan Kubelik" (1916). Kubelik was a world-famous Czech violinist who toured the US at the start of the century. Sandburg opens with a description of a "long low note," presumably being played by Kubelik on his violin. This is followed by a line, set in parentheses, describing "[a] mother of Bohemia" sobbing over a suckling baby. Faster playing then leads to an image of "[a]ll the girls in Bohemia" laughing with their lovers (1-8). The short poem leaves open whether Kubelik's music is shaped by, represents, or simply evokes these scenes of the emotion and experience of Czech women. However, clearly Sandburg wants readers to sense the close parallels between the violinist's music and the lives of those who share his nationality.

(7.) Steiner also shines a positive light on Czechs retaining their language. He says that, despite pressures to assimilate, "the Czechish language will not soon disappear from the streets of Chicago; and language to the Bohemian, as, indeed, to all the Slavs, is history, religion, and life." Steiner adds that an immigrant from Bohemia "will remain a Bohemian longest in the agricultural districts of Minnesota and Nebraska, where he holds tenaciously to the speech of his forefathers" (968). In this way, Czech immigrants--especially those in Nebraska, about whom Cather knew and wrote--are portrayed as achieving something vital by retaining their language.

(8.) Harvey notes that Cather and her contemporary Randolph Bourne both advocated preserving immigrant cultures in order to infuse the richness of ethnic diversity into the otherwise bland, conformist lives of mainstream Americans. She adds that Jim Burden makes this point "when he contrasts the vitality of the immigrant girls to the stagnant life in Black Hawk" (35). The argument is also dramatized in Schauffler's short story "The Island of Desire." In this tale, a doctor successfully treats a patient suffering from fin de siecle malaise by prescribing a saunter through the Greek, Italian, and Bohemian neighborhoods of New York, each of which resounds with the foods, costumes, and customs of the Old World. With the same lack of subtlety found in "The Bohemian," Schauffler makes his point: immigrant cultures can cure the US of its cultural ennui.

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Full Text : COPYRIGHT 1989 Gale Research, COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning [In the following excerpt, Scholes compares the characters of Jim Burden and Ántonia Shimerda.]

The two central figures in *My Ántonia* are, in different senses, Innocents. Jim Burden, bereft of both his parents within a year, is removed from the warm and comfortable Virginia of his early days and thrust into the strange and frightening world of Nebraska. As he bumps along on the wagon ride to his new home, he feels that he has left even the spirits of his dead parents behind him:

The wagon jolted on, carrying me I know not whither. I don't think I was homesick. If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be.

Ántonia Shimerda, though also a young, innocent creature in a raw country, is not bereft of the past as Jim Burden is. Ántonia's Bohemian ancestry is a part of her and exerts a decided influence on her present and future. We are reminded of this past constantly: by the Bohemian customs and culinary practices of the Shimerdas; by the observations of Otto Fuchs on the relationship of Austrians and Bohemians in the old country; and especially by the Catholic religion of the Bohemians, which is their strongest link with the past, and which serves to bind them together and to separate them from the Protestant society of their adopted land. But, most important, Ántonia herself cherishes her connection with the past. When Jim asks if she remembers the little town of her birth, she replies,

"Jim ... if I was put down there in the middle of the night, I could find my way all over that little town; and along the river where my grandmother lived. My feet remember all the little paths through the woods, and where the big roots stick out to trip you. I ain't never forgot my own country."

But despite the importance of the past for Ántonia, she and the other hired girls are figures of heroic and vital innocence, associated with nature and the soil. Like Lena Lingard, they all "waked fresh with the world every day." They are unused to the ways of society, and Ántonia, especially, is too trusting. Lena tells Jim that Ántonia "won't hear a word against [Larry Donovan]. She's so sort of innocent." The struggle of the "hired girls" with society is one of the important themes of the novel. Jim Burden remarks that

the country girls were considered a menace to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background. But anxious mothers need have felt no alarm. They mistook the mettle of their sons. The respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth.

This struggle of the country girls with the city is a very perplexing one, in which apparent victory and apparent defeat are both apt to prove evanescent in time. Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball become successful, triumphing even in the metropolis of San Francisco, while Ántonia becomes the foolish victim of her love for a conniving railroad conductor. But Lena and Tiny succeed only in becoming more like the society from which they had been ostracized, while Ántonia, and the other country girls who stay on the land, ultimately change the structure of society itself. Jim Burden remarks,

I always knew I should live long enough to see my country girls come into their own, and I have. Today the best that a harassed Black Hawk merchant can hope for is to sell provisions and farm machinery and automobiles to the rich farms where that first crop of stalwart Bohemian and Scandinavian girls are now the mistresses.

Jim Burden, like Lena and Tiny, has made his success in the city and on the city's terms. From the narrator of the introductory chapter we learn that Jim's personal life, his marriage, has not been a success though his legal work flourishes. Jim's failure to find happiness or satisfaction in his career and in the city, constitutes for him the "fall" into self-knowledge which is characteristic of the Adamic hero. It is Jim's recognition of his own fall that makes him superior to Lena and Tiny, and enables him to live vicariously through Ántonia and her children.

Ántonia's seduction is a more clear-cut "fall" than Jim's unhappiness, and her subsequent self-knowledge is more strikingly evidenced. When Jim meets Ántonia after she has had her illegitimate child, he notices "a new kind of strength in the gravity of her face." At this meeting she asks Jim whether he has learned to like big cities, adding that she would die of loneliness in such a place. "I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly," she says; and after they part Jim feels "the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at night-fall," and he wishes he could be a little boy again, and that his way would end there.

When Jim revisits Ántonia and her thriving family, she has in some ways relapsed toward the past. "I've forgot my English so." She says, "I don't often talk it any more. I tell the children I used to speak it real well.' She said they all spoke Bohemian at home. The little ones could not speak English at all—didn't learn it until they went to school." But her children, her involvement in life, makes her concerned for the future. She has lived "much and hard," reflects Jim as they meet, but "she was there, in the full vigor of her personality, battered but not diminished, looking at me, speaking to me in the husky, breathy voice I remembered so well." Jim, however, is not recognized by Ántonia at first, even though he has "kept so young." He is less battered, perhaps, but he is more diminished.

So it is that Ántonia, who is always conscious of the past, is nevertheless free of it, and capable of concern for the future. And her past is not merely that of a generation or so. Jim observes, "She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true.... It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races." Whereas Jim, who has no such connection with the past, who came to Nebraska without a family and rode on a wagon into a new life which he felt was beyond even the attention of God, is still bound by the recent past, by what has happened to him in his own youth, and he lives in both the present and the future only vicariously through the plans and lives of others. He reflects, "In the course of twenty crowded years one parts with many illusions. I did not wish to lose the early ones. Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can happen to one again." Jim is haunted by the past, by the sense that, in the phrase of Virgil which is the novel's epigraph, *Optima dies ... prima fugit*. When he contemplates in the closing lines of his narrative the road on which he had entered his new life as a boy, he reconsiders his whole existence:

I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is. For Ántonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past.

Ántonia's life is not tragic. She is neither defeated nor destroyed by life, not even diminished. Yet the distinguishing characteristic of this novel is its elegiac tone; the eternal note of sadness pervades especially the closing passages of the book. The direct cause of this element of sadness is the nostalgia of Jim Burden, through which the story of Antonia filters down to the reader. But behind Jim Burden's nostalgia, and merged with it, is the nostalgia of Willa Cather herself.

There is a suggestion in this novel and in the earlier *O Pioneers!* that the younger brothers and the sisters of this splendid generation of pioneer women will not be their equals. Emil Bergson—the youth in *O Pioneers!* for whom his older sister Alexandra labors and plans—attends the university, escapes from the plough, only to ruin several lives through his adulterous love. And in *My Ántonia* there is the suggestion that the coming generations will be less heroic and more ordinary than the present breed. Jim Burden at one point muses on this problem, thinking of the hired girls in Black Hawk:

Those girls had grown up in the first bitter-hard times, and had got little schooling themselves. But the younger brothers and sisters, for whom they made such sacrifices and who have had "advantages," never seem to me, when I meet them now, half as interesting or as well educated. The older girls, who helped to break up the wild sod, learned so much from life, from poverty, from their mothers and grandmothers; they had all, like Ántonia, been early awakened and made observant by coming at a tender age from an old country to a new.

The circumstances which formed *Antonia* will not be repeated; the future will be in the hands of a diminished race. It is the feeling which haunts Willa Cather's novel. *Antonia* looks to the future of her children, but Jim Burden knows that the future will be at best a poor imitation of the past. *Antonia*'s life is a triumph of innocence and vitality over hardship and evil. But Willa Cather does not celebrate this triumph; rather, she intones an elegy over the dying myth of the heroic Innocent, over the days that are no more.

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Willa Cather

1873-1947

Also known as: Willa Cather, Willa Sibert Cather, Willa Silbert Cather

Birth: December 7, 1873 in Back Creek Valley, Virginia
Death: April 24, 1947 in New York, New York
Nationality: American
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"Sidelights"

Willa Sibert Cather is among the most distinguished American women in early twentieth-century fiction. She wrote most of her major works between 1913 and the late 1920s, during an age that encompassed World War I and spanned massive social change and modernization. As related by Louis Auchincloss in *Pioneers and Caretakers*, Cather felt that the world had split in two after 1922 and that she "belonged to the earlier half." Her writings reflect a desire to withdraw from the modern world into the refuge of a stable past.

Critics have compared Cather's balanced, carefully crafted, and evocative prose style to that of other writers, including mentor Sarah Orne Jewett, American novelist Henry James, and French naturalist Gustave Flaubert. Cather strove to preserve the past through her works, depicting the harsh life of pioneering immigrant farmers who settled the prairies of the western United States in such novels as *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*. Several other novels and the bulk of her short fiction explore another recurring theme--the complexities of the artistic temperament: Cather often portrayed artists in conflict, wrestling between the sophisticated allure of the East and the freedom and earthy simplicity of the West. According to Frederick J. Hoffman in *The Modern Novel in America*, "The creative artist is in closest sympathy with what Miss Cather regards as the complete life."

Cather's writings are based largely on her early childhood experiences. Born in the Shenandoah Valley region of Virginia, she moved with her family to Red Cloud, Nebraska, a market town among the state's vast prairie lands, when she was nine years old. Cather grew up among European-born ranchers and farmers. She recognized the harshness of the immigrants' life-style and witnessed the development of their children into an imaginative new generation of Americans with dreams of a life rich in the arts: she would eventually incorporate into her fiction both the stoicism and the ambitions of the body of people with whom she matured.

After graduating from the University of Nebraska in 1895, Cather moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she worked as a journalist, editor, and teacher. In 1906 she accepted a position as editor of *McClure's* magazine in New York City. Having spent more than a decade nurturing her literary aspirations in her spare time, Cather realized by 1911 that she needed to devote more of her time and energy to writing in order to reach her creative potential. That year, at the urging of her friend Jewett, she resigned her post at *McClure's*, forsaking journalism for a career as a full-time writer.

While Cather is known primarily for her novels, her first published work was a volume of poetry titled *April Twilights*. The 1903 collection prefigures the themes of human struggle, unrealized potential, the search for self, and a retreat to the past that would color the author's later fiction, but many critics have agreed that Cather's sentiments are not best expressed in verse. Calling her "one of the few authentic voices among the prose writers of today," Eunice Tietjens, writing in *Poetry*, judged, "Miss Cather is not at heart a poet."

Cather's second publication, a collection of short fiction titled *The Troll Garden*, appeared in 1903. The volume's stories are written in tightly woven, lyrical prose, foreshadowing the graceful and economic style that would become the author's trademark. Each story in *The Troll Garden* features an artist or a character of artistic temperament, and several of the selections are set against the backdrop of a raw prairie. In "*The Sculptor's Funeral*," an artist's body is brought back to his home on the prairie for burial; yet, even after his death, the village natives fail to appreciate the man's artistic sensibilities. Another story, "*The Wagner Matinee*," centers on a young man's impressions of his Aunt Georgina, a woman who has led a somber and stifled existence on the plains. Upon attending a concert featuring the music of German composer Richard Wagner, Georgina undergoes a renewal, obtaining from her experience of the music a more enlightened sense of herself. These stories, and others like them, support Hoffman's claim that Cather's "strongest and most bitter criticism of the prairie culture was that it could not understand or abide the artistic soul."

Cather elaborated on the theme of unfulfilled ambitions in the most successful of *The Troll Garden* stories, "*Paul's Case*." This time, however, the main character is not in conflict with prairie life; rather, Paul, a young dreamer, feels smothered by the static, working-class existence in Pittsburgh. He is drawn to the glamour, excitement, and sophistication of New York. After stealing money from his employer, he travels to the city, takes a room at the Waldorf, and outfits himself with all the amenities of the New York elite. When the money is spent, Paul abandons hope of a brighter future and kills himself. Analyzing the story in *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, E. K. Brown asserted, "In the end Paul ... can't go home again; he has burned his bridges and has no wish to rebuild them." "*Paul's Case*" is generally regarded as the most striking pronouncement of Cather's belief in the power of the human imagination. The character's impatience, spiritual nihilism, and ultimate despair render him unable to triumph over what Cather portrays as the merely physical constraints of his milieu.

Cather's first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, was not a critical success. Originally composed while Cather was still an editor at *McClure's* but not published until 1912, the slim book tells of bridge builder Bartley Alexander, a married man in love with a London actress. After deciding to leave his wife for his other love, Alexander is called to inspect a bridge being constructed over the St. Lawrence River. Like Alexander's character, the bridge is flawed; it falls during the inspection, carrying the man to his death. Though critics conceded that it was well constructed, *Alexander's Bridge* was faulted for its overly contrived plot. David Daiches, writing in *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction*, deemed the work "a mere literary exercise," arguing that in spite of its Jamesian precision and excellent descriptive passages, the novel "nevertheless fails in that the central emotional situations are never fully realized."

Cather expressed little satisfaction with *Alexander's Bridge* and reportedly regarded her next work

of fiction, *O Pioneers!*, as her first fully realized novel. The product of two of Cather's earlier short works, *O Pioneers!* focuses on Alexandra Bergson, the strong and determined daughter of a Swedish immigrant. Left to carry on her father's struggle against the harsh prairie lands of the West, the industrious Alexandra fights to keep her family together and sacrifices her youth and beauty to a lifetime of hard labor. While the story ends with Alexandra's eventual success and happiness in her later years with a man worthy of her love, a majority of critics have suggested that the novel gains most of its emotional thrust from a narrative digression involving duplicitous lovers. In this episode Alexandra's youngest brother, Emil, falls in love with Marie Shabata, wife of a gruff and burly Bohemian neighbor. Marie and Emil rendezvous in an orchard; when her husband discovers them together, he kills them both. In a *Bookman* review of *O Pioneers!*, Frederic Taber Cooper called the murder of the lovers "perfect as it is by itself." David Stouck, writing in *Prairie Schooner*, defended Cather's inclusion of the love triangle in the story, stating that "in terms of the novel's epic theme--and it is the epic note which prevails at the end--the death of the lovers is necessary to give Alexandra's story a tragic depth and to allow her old antagonist, nature, to reassert its power.... Their death gives Alexandra's life a tragic quality because they represent essentially everything for which she has lived and fought."

Cather's next novel, *The Song of the Lark*, established several stylistic and thematic trends that would dominate her later works. The story turns on Thea Kronborg's rise to fame in the operatic world. The daughter of a Swedish preacher, young and vibrant Thea lives with her family in the small and uninspired town of Moonstone, Colorado. Her affinity for music and fascination with the world of art lead her to study music in Chicago. Following rigorous training in the city, the aspiring soprano retreats to the Southwest for a summer to reflect on the course of her life. Surrounded by the timeless, serene desert--a rich repository of native American artifacts--Thea contemplates the meaning of art. While bathing in a stream below an ancient cliff dwelling, she finds a piece of broken Indian pottery and, in studying it, derives a view of art in general: "The stream and the broken pottery: what was art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself?"

The novel ends with Thea's triumph as an opera star. According to Auchincloss, Cather felt in retrospect that *The Song of the Lark* "should have ended with Thea Kronborg's first surmountal of her difficulties, that having escaped to Chicago from the stultification of Moonstone, where a concert or operatic career was inconceivable ... she should have been left, one foot firmly set on the first rung of her long ladder." Most critics have agreed that the second half of the novel lacks the power of the first. *New Republic* contributor Lawrence Olson echoed the conclusions of several reviewers when he wrote: "Instead of embracing and exploring the fractured consciousness of modern man and reassembling it in a new creative reality ... [Cather] took refuge in the attractive but unsupported idea that youth is finer than age, or that art is finer than life."

Many critics reviewing *The Song of the Lark* claimed that Thea's personality and emotions are subordinated to her ambitions. Perhaps the most succinct criticism of the character's development came from Auchincloss, who judged that Thea "is too much an artist, too little a woman." In *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice*, Sharon O'Brien speculated that Cather--a quintessential tomboy in her youth--lacked an innate sense of her "female self" and, therefore, had difficulty portraying women in her fiction. Criticism of Cather's later novels focused not only on the author's perceived failure to create multidimensional female characters, but further suggested that Cather was unable to represent true dramatic relationships in her work. Clifton Fadiman, writing in *Nation*, explained that "Cather's conception of passion is broad. It includes passion for one's work, one's children, one's friends, one's land, one's memories, and for beautiful objects and experiences. But it does not extend, except formally, to sex."

My Antonia, Cather's 1918 novel, is widely regarded among the author's finest works. Reminiscent of the earlier prairie novel *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia* tells the story of Bohemian immigrant farm girl Antonia Shimerda, a heroic character who has become a literary archetype for the Earth Mother. Narrator Jim Burden, neighbor to the Shimerdas, grows up with Antonia and chronicles her

family's struggles to establish themselves on the Nebraska plains. The two characters share a love of the heart which is never expressed physically. Jim goes away to college and studies the classics; Antonia becomes involved with a railroad worker who impregnates and abandons her. The heroine has her baby and eventually finds happiness with a Czechoslovakian farmer named Cuzak. Years later, Jim--now a lawyer in the East--returns to Nebraska to find Antonia physically aged and weary, but exultant in her happy marriage and her many children. In an article for *Literary Review*, T. K. Whipple declared that Antonia's ultimate contentment proves Cather's "world is tragic ... but not futile."

In *My Antonia*, Cather once again expresses an almost obsessive longing for the past, this time through the character of Antonia's father. Homesick for his native land, Mr. Shimerda despairs and shoots himself. While several critics found Cather's recurring preoccupation with the past destructive, Whipple recognized an element of passion in the theme: "To have cared intensely about anything," the critic concluded, "is not to have lived in vain."

For the four years between 1918 and 1922, Cather published only two works, a volume of short stories titled *Youth and the Bright Medusa* and a novel, *One of Ours*. The *Youth and the Bright Medusa* collection, published in 1920, borrowed largely from stories previously printed in *The Troll Garden*, but also contained several newly anthologized selections, including the critically acclaimed "*Coming, Aphrodite!*" Four years after the release of *My Antonia*, Cather finally completed her fifth novel, *One of Ours*, in 1922. The central character, Claude Wheeler, is a virtuous youth who lives in an increasingly materialistic and prosperous Nebraska. Disillusioned by the deteriorating values of his family, he enlists in the armed forces and dies in battle during World War I. Reviewers felt that Cather's treatment of the Nebraska scenes approached the quality of her best work, but they also alleged that Cather oversimplified the war. Granville Hicks, writing in *English Journal*, called Cather's conception of World War I "romantic and naive," and added, "For Miss Cather, as for Claude, the war provides an escape from apparently insoluble problems." Despite such criticism, *One of Ours* earned the Pulitzer Prize in 1922.

Cather's next novel, *A Lost Lady*, garnered greater praise. Published in 1923, *A Lost Lady* chronicles the death of an era. Following an accident that leaves her once-powerful husband, Captain Forrester, an invalid, Marian Forrester begins a gradual process of moral degeneration. She longs for a life of culture, wealth, and sophistication, an existence which seems unattainable in the face of her husband's condition. Instead of turning her back on the petty bourgeois world of the present, Marian succumbs to its demands, taking refuge in the false comforts of alcohol and sexual abandon. She becomes what Hicks termed "the product of changed times" and a "symbol of the corruption that had overtaken the age."

According to John H. Randall III in *The Landscape and the Looking Glass*, "The deterioration of Mrs. Forrester's character ... reflects the social disintegration brought about the rising tides of commerce" in post-World War I America. The character is lost "between the pioneer and commercial generations," the critic continued, "unable to act according to the values she holds." Deeming *A Lost Lady* "Cather's most explicit treatment of the passing of the old order" and "the central work of her career," Lionel Trilling, writing in *After the Genteel Tradition*, suggested: "Miss Cather shares the American belief in the tonic moral quality of the pioneer's life; with the passing of the frontier she conceives that a great source of fortitude has been lost."

Perhaps the most powerful expression of Cather's disillusionment with the modern world is her 1925 novel *The Professor's House*. Having earned a prestigious literary prize for his multi-volume history of the Spanish in North America, Professor Godfrey St. Peter finds himself weary and uninspired. The completion of the enormous composition leaves him without a focal point for his creative energies. St. Peter's wife sets out to furnish an ostentatious new house with the professor's prize money. Reflecting on the materialistic nature of his family and society at large, St. Peter begins to reminisce about a former student, Tom Outland, who had died in the war. At

this point in the story, the narrative breaks to accommodate an account of young Tom's pursuits prior to enrolling at the professor's college, including his discovery of prehistoric cliff dwellings in Colorado and his unsuccessful efforts to secure their preservation. The story then returns to St. Peter, who emerges from a near death experience with a new resolve to go on living.

New Statesman contributor Paul Binding considered *The Professor's House* "one of the 20th century's fictional masterpieces." Alfred Kazin, writing in *On Native Grounds*, agreed, declaring the novel "the most persistently underrated" of Cather's works. He further stated: "The story of Godfrey St. Peter is at once the barest and the most elaborately symbolic version of the story of heroic failure [Cather] told.... For St. Peter is at once the archetype of all her characters and the embodiment of her own beliefs."

Cather followed *The Professor's House* with her most inflammatory fiction, *My Mortal Enemy*, about a selfish, embittered, old woman who--looking back on a life lacking monetary prosperity--mourns the day she married for love. The author's next novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, emphasizes the very contentment and tranquillity that was missing in *My Mortal Enemy*. Set in mid-nineteenth-century New Mexico, the episodic story is a fictionalization of the life and achievements of Archbishop Lamy, the territory's first appointed bishop. The novel spans more than four decades in the lives of the archbishop and his vicar, "men of a singular nobility of mind and radiance of personality," commented Binding. The critic proceeded to note an "absence of ambiguity" in the world of the novel: its characters "move through a wild, undisciplined land and lo! the bad are immediately seen in their badness, the good are rewarded, and the middling feel better for contact with such sanctity."

Several critics decried the lack of conflict in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, implying that Cather's inability to reconcile herself to the modern world forced her to create a haven of beauty and idealism in the past. Kazin asserted that in the novel, the author's characters "no longer had to submit to failure; they lived in a charming and almost antediluvian world of their own. They had withdrawn, as Willa Cather ... withdrew." Daiches concurred, arguing that "this lively creation of a golden world in which all ideals are realized is ... fundamentally a 'softer' piece of writing than, say, *My Antonia* with its frustrations counterbalancing successes, or than *The Professor's House*, whose main note is of heroic failure." Despite such criticism, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* earned substantial acclaim for its evocations of the Southwest, and it remains one of Cather's most widely read works.

Shadows on the Rock, published in 1932, marks a further retreat into the past, this time to late-seventeenth-century Quebec. Focusing on one year in the lives of a widowed apothecary and his twelve-year-old daughter, the novel is regarded less for its dramatic action than for its lush descriptive passages and depiction of life along the St. Lawrence River. The book was written at a particularly difficult period in the author's life, following her father's death and the grave illness of her mother. Critics have suggested that Cather--craving stability during trying times--set *Shadows on the Rock* in Quebec because of the city's consistent resistance to change.

Cather's 1932 short story collection *Obscure Destinies* enunciates familiar themes of tradition and retrospection through three stories set in the Midwest. The most famous of these, a selection titled "*Old Mrs. Harris*," concerns three generations of women in Nebraska. Cather based the characters on her experiences in Red Cloud living with her mother and grandmother. Absorbed in their own lives, the two younger women fail to appreciate Mrs. Harris until after her death. Cather's portrait of isolation and aging was widely praised and, together with "*Paul's Case*," ranks with her best short fiction.

In 1935 Cather published another novel, *Lucy Gayheart*, which turns on the relationship between young pianist Lucy Gayheart and married baritone Clement Sebastian. Lucy and Clement fall in love, but, following a European summer concert tour, Clement accidentally drowns. After months

of remorse and mourning, Lucy vows to resume her career in music; then, while skating on an ice-covered river, she falls through and drowns as well. In an article for *Prairie Schooner*, Paul Comeau theorized that in writing *Lucy Gayheart*, Cather was "not seeking to define the artistic process as she had done previously" but was "reflecting on that process in the distinctly philosophical context of life, death, and immortality." Comeau continued, "The primary concern then is not to establish the continuing vitality of Lucy Gayheart ... but to preserve and reflect on her memory."

Although *Lucy Gayheart* sold well, many critics faulted its predictability and oversentimentality. Trilling voiced the opinions of several reviewers, stating that the novel's "characters are unattached to anything save their dreams." Geismar, however, credited Cather with creating "the most complete love relationship" ever to appear in her writings.

Cather's final novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, was published in 1940. Based on an actual event, the story recounts a young girl's arduous life as a slave during the Civil War. Touching on issues of miscegenation, sexual exploitation, jealousy, and racism, the novel earned praise as a provocative, accomplished work.

In an essay from the 1936 collection *Not Under Forty* titled "*The Novel Demeuble*," Cather called her approach to the novel "unfurnished": "Out of the teeming, gleaming, stream of the present," she wrote, a novel "must select the eternal material of art." Commenting on the author's lifelong literary achievements, Daiches concluded: "She belongs to no school.... The heroic nostalgia that pursued her until the end first changed her from a minor imitator of James to a novelist of fierce originality and individuality, and from the moment she discovered herself with *O Pioneers!* she went her own way with remarkably little notice of her contemporaries. She developed a style both strong and supple, combining forthrightness with sensitivity: she was one of the least showy novelists of her time." Cather died of a massive cerebral hemorrhage on April 24, 1947, in her New York City apartment.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Given name originally Wilella; born December 7, 1873, in Back Creek Valley, VA; died of a cerebral hemorrhage, April 24, 1947, in New York, NY; daughter of Charles F. (a rancher and insurance salesman) and Mary Virginia (Boak) Cather. **Education:** University of Nebraska, A.B., 1895. **Memberships:** American Academy of Arts and Letters.

AWARDS

Pulitzer Prize for fiction from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, 1922, for *One of Ours*; Howells Medal from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, 1930, for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*; Prix Femina Americaine, 1932, for distinguished literary accomplishment; Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, 1944; honorary degrees from University of Nebraska, University of Michigan, University of California, and Columbia, Yale, Princeton, and Creighton universities.

CAREER

Newspaper correspondent in Nebraska, c. 1890-1895; *Daily Leader*, Pittsburgh, PA, telegraph editor and drama critic, 1897-1901; traveled in Europe, 1902; Allegheny High School, Pittsburgh, teacher of English and Latin and head of English department, 1902- 1905; *McClure's*, New York, NY, managing editor, 1906- 1911; full-time writer, 1911-1947.



The Benda Illustrations to My *Ántonia*: Cather's "Silent" Supplement to Jim Burden's Narrative

Jean Schwind

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The Benda Illustrations to *My Ántonia*: Cather's "Silent" Supplement to Jim Burden's Narrative

I

AS JIM BURDEN comes to the end of his story about the "central figure" of his childhood and "all that her name recalls," he briefly describes the personal memoirs that Ántonia herself has kept for over twenty years (*Ántonia*, introd.).¹ The most important difference between Ántonia's account of the past and Jim's is immediately apparent. Less comfortable with language than is her Harvard-educated friend, Ántonia preserves the "characters of her girlhood" in pictures rather than in words. Once fluent in English, Ántonia has "forgot" her adopted language since her marriage to Anton Cuzak and doesn't "often talk it any more" (335). She has not forgotten her history, however, and the "succession of pictures" that Ántonia shares with Jim on the first night of his visit to the Cuzak farm wordlessly confirms the details of Jim's long narrative. In images as sharply defined as "the old woodcuts of one's first primer," the "incommunicable past" of Jim's story is preserved as a vital "family legend" in the Cuzak household:

Ántonia brought out a big boxful of photographs: she and Anton in their wedding clothes, holding hands; her brother Ambrosch and his very fat wife, who had a farm of her own, and who bossed her husband, I was delighted to hear; the three Bohemian Marys and their large families. (349)

The most interesting pictures in Ántonia's collection follow photographs of Lena Lingard and the Harlings, and Ántonia shows them as the climax to her account. In a "tintype of two men, uncomfortably seated, with an awkward-looking boy in baggy clothes standing between them" and in a photograph of "a tall youth in striped trousers and a straw hat, trying to look easy and jaunty," Jim Burden, the narrative voice of *My Ántonia*, is embodied for the first time.

Cather's original 1918 introduction to the novel emphasizes the importance of Ántonia's pictures. Of critical importance to a proper understanding of *My Ántonia*, this introduction serves the same purpose as "The Custom House" preface to *The Scarlet Letter*: presenting the narrative that follows as an independent artifact, the authorial "I" speaks as the editor and publisher of another writer's manuscript. At the opening of *My Ántonia*, "Cather" happens to meet Jim Burden—an old friend who now works as a lawyer for "one of the great Western railways"—on a train. Reminiscing about the people and places of their past as they cross the plains of Iowa, Cather and Jim continually return to a "central figure" who summarizes the "whole adventure of [their] childhood" in the West. When Jim suddenly wonders aloud why she has "never written anything about Ántonia," Cather responds with a proposal:

I told him I had always felt that other people—he himself, for one—knew her much better than I. I was ready, however, to make an agreement with him; I would set down on paper all that I remembered of Ántonia if he would do the same. We might, in this way, get a picture of her. (1918, xii-xiii)

Jim enthusiastically agrees to the plan, and "months afterward" he delivers his manuscript to Cather at her New York apartment. Recounting Jim's proud delivery of his "thing about Ántonia," Cather concludes with what appears to be an admission of personal failure. Forced to confess that her own account of Ántonia has "not gone beyond a few straggling notes," Cather replies to Jim's parting advice with a remarkably ambiguous disclaimer:

"Read it as soon as you can," he said, rising, "but don't let it influence your own story."

My own story was never written, but the following narrative is Jim's manuscript, substantially as he brought it to me. (1918, xiv)

The meaning of Cather's crucial editorial qualification—*My Ántonia* is only “substantially” Jim Burden's manuscript—is clarified by the most important suppressed passage of the 1918 introduction. While Jim's memories of *Ántonia* ultimately take a narrative form (“I simply wrote down what of herself and myself and other people *Ántonia*'s name recalls to me” [1918, xiv]; “I simply wrote down pretty much all that her name recalls to me” [1926]), for Cather *Ántonia*'s name immediately evokes pictures rather than words: “To speak her name was to call up pictures of people and places, to set a quiet drama going in one's brain” (1918, xii). Cather stresses her pictorial memories of *Ántonia* in the proposal that constitutes the central fiction of the 1918 preface. The goal of their joint account, Cather tells Jim, will be to “get a picture” of *Ántonia*.

The “pictures of people and places” that shape Cather's memory of *Ántonia* anticipate *Ántonia*'s tintypes and photographs in a way that directs our attention to a critically neglected aspect of *My Ántonia*: the novel's illustrations. That the printed text of Jim's manuscript incorporates a series of pictures strikingly like the “old woodcuts” recalled by *Ántonia*'s photographs explains Cather's cryptic description of *My Ántonia* as only “substantially” Jim Burden's story. The pictorial imagery that identifies Jim's “editor” with *Ántonia* and distinguishes the “editor” from the author she introduces suggests that the novel's illustrations are Cather's most important editorial addition to the “substance” of Jim's narrative. Not only does Cather overtly insist on her pictorial imagination in the 1918 introduction (“To speak [*Ántonia*'s] name was to call up pictures . . . to set a quiet drama going in one's brain”), but Jim's literary friend also never promises to *write* about *Ántonia* when she proposes the joint account, further emphasizing the importance of the novel's illustrations. Agreeing only to “set down on paper” all her memories of *Ántonia*, Cather leaves the matter of her artistic medium open in a way that invites us to take the pictures of *My Ántonia* as fulfilling her promise to provide a separate account of Jim's heroine.

The implicit assertion of Cather's 1918 introduction and of the closing scene dominated by *Ántonia*'s “boxful of pictures”—that *My Ántonia*'s pictures are not expendable decorations but an essential part of the novel—is made explicit in Cather's correspondence with Ferris Greenslet,

her editor at Houghton Mifflin. The publishing history that can be reconstructed from Houghton Mifflin records of *My Ántonia* clearly reveals that Cather not only commissioned W. T. Benda's illustrations for her fourth novel but did so in the face of considerable opposition from Greenslet and others. For over twenty years, from the time she started planning the drawings with Benda in 1917 until 1938, when Greenslet finally promised in writing that all future editions of *My Ántonia* would contain the original illustrations, Cather waged a constant battle with her editor and Houghton Mifflin's publicity and art departments over the issue of illustrating *My Ántonia*.²

The grounds of Houghton Mifflin's opposition to Benda's simple pen-and-ink line drawings varied from year to year. In 1917 the publicity department argued that company money would be better spent on a single substantial wash drawing that could be used as a frontispiece and on promotional posters (TS. 62). When Richard Scaife—a director on Houghton's publicity staff—finally (and rather condescendingly) agreed to print Benda's “little sketches,” he refused to pay more than \$150 for them, which was the going rate for a single conventional frontispiece (TS. 84). The stingy Houghton Mifflin art budget forced Cather to scale down her original scheme for twelve drawings to the present eight (TSS. 48, 62). Twenty years after Cather's initial battle with Houghton Mifflin over her “little” pictures, a new threat arose. In 1937 Ferris Greenslet proposed to tap the market for more expensive gift books with a deluxe edition of *My Ántonia* illustrated with color plates by Grant Wood. Cather's response was an emphatic letter insisting that plain *Ántonia* must be saved from flashy color illustrations in general and from Wood's illustrations in particular (TSS. 230, 354). She concluded with a plea for the permanent retention of the Benda plates.³ Throughout her wrangles with Greenslet, Scaife, and others, Cather consistently defended the Benda illustrations as an indispensable part of her text. When Houghton Mifflin dropped the Benda illustrations in a cheap 1930 reprint of *My Ántonia* (forgetting, however, to delete “with illustrations by W. T. Benda” from the novel's title page), Cather considered the book an unauthorized edition (TS. 199).

The publishing history of *My Ántonia* is important because it reinforces the central fiction of the novel itself. Just as the fiction of *My Ántonia*

makes "Cather" responsible for illustrating the manuscript that she introduces and edits, so the actual history of the illustrated text testifies to Cather's exercising authority over the novel's carefully planned pictorial supplement. Cather's letters reveal that she not only independently commissioned the Benda pictures but acted as artistic director of the project. At the same time that she was writing her introduction to *My Ántonia* in late 1917, Cather was closely supervising Benda's illustrations to the novel. From approving Benda's preliminary sketches to making final decisions about where to place the pictures within her printed text, Cather governed the process of illustrating *My Ántonia* quite autocratically. She determined both the old-fashioned "woodcut" style and the separate subjects of the eight-plate series and reserved the right to reject any work that displeased her.

The difference between Benda's typical magazine work and his *Ántonia* drawings indicates Cather's authority over the novel's illustrations. Primarily a decorative painter and an illustrator for magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, *Century*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Scribner's*, W. T. (Wladyslaw Theodor) Benda probably first met Cather while she was working at *McClure's*. Unlike the plain pen-and-ink sketches of *My Ántonia*, Benda's usual pictures in *Vanity Fair* and other popular magazines are fashionable charcoal drawings. Intricately detailed and reproduced in halftones, these illustrations have a three-dimensional depth and a mimetic sophistication that are conspicuously lacking in the stark black-on-white sketches—with the bold linearity of "old woodcuts"—in *My Ántonia*.⁴ Significantly, Cather's interest in Benda was provoked not by his conventionally stylish and highly finished magazine pieces but by what were seemingly his most unimportant and minor works. In a letter to Richard Scaife, Cather explains that her plan to illustrate *My Ántonia* was inspired by Benda's work in a novel by Jacob Riis, *The Old Town* (TS, 63). Benda did two sorts of drawings for Riis: framed, full-page illustrations executed in charcoal (Benda's favorite medium) and reproduced in halftones on glossy paper and much smaller pen drawings ("head-and-tail pieces") interspersed between the lines and in the margins of Riis's text (Riis 21, 104). In the relative artlessness of Benda's plain head-and-tail pieces, Cather saw the perfect, minimal art for depicting her artless Nebraska plains.

Yet if Houghton Mifflin records clearly establish Cather's authority over the illustrations to *My Ántonia* and stress the importance of her pictorial supplement to Jim Burden's text, they also raise a troublesome question about Cather's written supplement to Jim's memoir in the novel's introduction. When Cather revised the introduction to *My Ántonia* in 1926, she dropped the sections of the 1918 version that most pointedly insist on the importance of the novel's pictorial imagery. Both Cather's description of the "pictures of people and places" evoked by her memories of *Ántonia* and her final editorial hedge (that the following narrative is only "substantially" Jim's manuscript as he delivered it to Cather) are deleted in 1926. More significantly, "Cather" does not this time propose an artistic partnership to "get a picture" of *Ántonia*. A major figure in the 1918 introduction, Cather-the-author virtually disappears in the revised introduction. Instead of the professional writer who inspires Jim to write an account of *Ántonia* and promises to "set down" one of her own, "Cather" is now merely an editor explaining how the manuscript of an old friend came into her possession. When in the 1926 introduction Cather and Jim accidentally meet on a western train, Jim has already been writing about *Ántonia* for some time to amuse himself on "long trips across the country." Cather tells Jim she'd like to read his account, and Jim agrees to show it to her "if it were ever finished." The 1926 introduction concludes roughly as the 1918 version does, with Jim delivering his manuscript to Cather "months afterward."

If, as I propose to argue, Benda's illustrations provide an important subtext that illuminates Jim Burden's words, why does Cather in her revised introduction eliminate all references to pictures and to her pictorial imagination and effectively mute her editorial contribution to the "substance" of Jim's text? The Houghton Mifflin records are once again revealing. While Cather herself was never satisfied with the introduction to *My Ántonia* (she admitted on several occasions that the introduction was the only part of the novel she found tedious to write and acknowledged that her prose sounded forced), the impetus for the 1926 revision came from Ferris Greenslet.⁵ Greenslet pressed Cather to revise the first edition of *Ántonia* for both economic and aesthetic reasons. Houghton Mifflin was planning a more elaborately bound and expensive edition

for 1926, and Greenslet convinced Cather that the moment was ripe for making some long-discussed changes in her text. If Houghton Mifflin could promote the 1926 reissue as a definitive new edition, Greenslet argued, immediate and long-range sales would be much greater than for a simple reprinting (TSS. 270, 273). If Greenslet had one eye on his corporate ledgers, he also had an eye critically focused on *My Ántonia*. He had long felt that the introduction to the novel destroyed the "classic outline" of Jim Burden's first-person narrative (TS. 273). Essentially, he objected that Cather's introduction was superfluous: the detailed accounts of Jim's loveless marriage to "Genevieve Whitney" and his escapist "Western dreams" of boyhood freedom and adventure make Jim's unsuccessful adult life unnecessarily explicit. Insisting that the unhappiness of Jim's later life is implicit throughout the last book of the novel, Greenslet advised Cather to dispense with the introduction (TS. 273).

Although she disagreed with Greenslet about dropping the introduction entirely, Cather agreed with his primary reservations about it—it lacked subtlety and especially made the failure of Jim's personal life far too explicit. That Cather took her editor's advice seriously is evident in the major excisions of the 1926 *Ántonia*. Recognizing Cather's reluctance to eliminate the introduction, Greenslet recommended two sizable cuts. The paragraph describing Jim's wife and her eastern chic should be dropped ("I do not like his wife" is sufficient editorial comment, Greenslet noted; the rest should be left to the reader's imagination). Greenslet further advised that the following paragraph about Jim's persistent romanticism be extensively blue-penciled (TS. 273). Cather not only agreed to the pruning that Greenslet suggested but made additional cuts of her own; together they eliminated more than a third of the original preface.

The difference between the opening lines of the 1918 and 1926 editions suggests the principal effect of Cather's revisions. In 1918 Cather introduces her narrator as "James Quayle Burden": "Last summer I happened to be crossing the plains of Iowa in a season of intense heat, and it was my good fortune to have for a traveling companion James Quayle Burden—Jim Burden, as we still call him in the West" (1918, ix). Evidently feeling her original opening too heavy-handed in anticipating the immaturity ("James" is still

"Jim") and suppressed anxieties (Quayle=quail) that color Jim's narrative, Cather wisely allows Jim's name to speak for itself in 1926: "Last summer, in a season of intense heat, Jim Burden and I happened to be crossing Iowa on the same train." The same urge to make Jim's *burdensome* adulthood more subtly implicit at the outset of *My Ántonia* explains Cather's reconsideration of the introduction's central fiction. In 1926 responsibility for the genesis of *My Ántonia* significantly shifts from Cather to Jim. While originally Cather and her proposal for a collaborative "picture" of Ántonia inspire Jim's memoir, in the revised text Jim has long been taking refuge from his adult life in the history of his childhood past. The account of Ántonia that Jim has been writing "from time to time" on long train trips delicately compensates for the passages about Jim's "brilliant marriage" and unrealized "Western dreams" that Cather cut at Greenslet's suggestion. Unlike the manuscript described in the first introduction—produced by Jim in a burst of enthusiasm between his meeting with Cather on the train and his arrival at her apartment several months later—the manuscript of the 1926 *Ántonia*—written "from time to time" over the years—testifies to a need for living in the past that betrays Jim's present unhappiness.

If Cather's 1926 revisions give the introduction a subtlety and psychological penetration that do justice to the novel proper, they also deemphasize the importance of the Benda illustrations in *My Ántonia*. Since "Cather" no longer promises to "set down" her own memories of Ántonia, the 1926 edition does not explicitly invite us to consider the novel's illustrations as Cather's editorial supplement to Jim's manuscript. Yet in dropping the fiction of a coauthored *Ántonia*, Cather strengthens the fiction of her editorial authority over Jim's work. Cather speaks exclusively as Jim's editor in 1926; she is no longer both Jim's editor and the literary muse who inspires him to write. By stressing her editorial authority, Cather simultaneously suggests that Jim's narrative is inadequate (hinting that Jim's "romantic" vision of the past is extremely partial and in need of correction) and identifies herself as the editor and friend who will compensate for Jim Burden's deficiencies.

The importance of "Cather's" editorial role in *My Ántonia*—and the extension of her editorial voice beyond the introduction—is immediately

emphasized on the opening page of Jim's story, where "Cather" speaks in a footnote. Cather's note about the pronunciation of *Ántonia's* name not only asserts her editorial presence in the novel proper, but it also suggests the nature of her continued additions to the "substance" of Jim's story. The detailed instructions that Cather sent to Houghton Mifflin regarding the layout of the opening pages of *My Ántonia* indicate the importance of her editorial intrusion on the first page of book I. Jim's story must directly follow her introduction, Cather told Greenslet, and white pages for "My Ántonia" and "Book I: The Shimerdas" should be omitted (TS. 77). Cather's opening layout in the 1918 edition dramatically juxtaposes Jim's final act of authority or authorship—he amends the title of his manuscript by adding the prefix "My" to "Ántonia"—and Cather's first editorial annotation. On the one hand, Jim's possessive prefix insists on the idiosyncrasy and conventionality of his account. "My

Ántonia" implies the cultural framework of Jim's Virginia homeland—where women are denied independence by the chivalric codes of male proprietors. Cather's footnote, on the other hand, is inspired by a concern for "getting a picture" of the unique cultural identity and (by Old Dominion standards) the "masculine" authority that distinguish *Ántonia* from the transplanted southern belles in the West: "The Bohemian name *Ántonia* is strongly accented on the first syllable, like the English *Anthony* . . ." (1918, 1; 1926, 3).

Emphasizing *Ántonia's* individual autonomy as it does, Cather's note to the opening line of *My Ántonia* responds to the subordinating effect of Jim's possessive "my" with a directness that preserves the fictional intertextuality of the 1918 *Ántonia* cooperatively "set down" by Jim and Cather. Like the 1918 introduction, Cather's single footnote invites us to read *My Ántonia* as the collaborative effort of Jim Burden and his "editor." Reading *My Ántonia* as Cather presents it—as a critically edited or "supplemented" text—thus necessarily entails a serious consideration of the novel's visual textual supplements. To read Cather's story, we must read "Cather's" story. We must go beyond Jim Burden's narrative and examine the "quiet drama" that Jim's editor provides to "get a picture" of *Ántonia*.

MY ÁNTONIA

BY

WILLA SIBERT CATHER

Optima dies . . . prima fugit
VIRGIL

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
W. T. BENDA



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge

Illus. 1. Title page of *My Ántonia* (1918), with Houghton Mifflin logotype.

II

The illustrations of *My Ántonia* describe an artistic development that sharply counterpoints the "little circle" of Jim's narrative (illus. 1-9). Benda's "quiet drama" in pictures is in one crucial respect like Jim Burden's narrative: it is prefaced by the editor of *My Ántonia*. Just as Jim's text is introduced by "editor" Cather, Benda's series of eight plates has an important pictorial prelude or preface in the editorial logotype on the title page of *My Ántonia*. That the pictorial drama of *My Ántonia* begins on Houghton Mifflin's title page rather than with Benda's first plate is suggested by Jim's study of the book Cather quotes in her epigraph, Vergil's *Georgics*. Stargazing on a warm spring night in Lincoln, Jim is rather unromantically recalled to his studies by Venus:

My window was open, and the earthy wind blowing through made me indolent. . . . in the utter clarity of the western slope, the evening star hung like a lamp suspended by silver chains—like the lamp engraved upon



Illus. 2. Plate 1 of *My Antonia*. Group portrait of the Shimerda family.



Illus. 3. Plate 2 of *My Antonia*. Mr. Shimerda with gun.



Illus. 4. Plate 3 of *My Antonia*. Bohemian woman gathering mushrooms.



Illus. 5. Plate 4 of *My Antonia*. Jake Marpole carrying a Christmas tree on horseback.



Illus. 6. Plate 5 of *My Antonia*. Antonia plowing.



Illus. 7. Plate 6 of *My Antonia*. Antonia and Jim watching the sunrise.



Illus. 8. Plate 7 of *My Antonia*. Lena knitting.



Illus. 9. Plate 8 of *My Antonia*. Antonia driving cattle in a blizzard.

Drawings from *My Antonia* by Willa Cather, illustrated by W. T. Benda, published by Houghton Mifflin, Boston. © 1918, 1926, and 1946 by Willa Sibert Cather; © 1954 by Edith Lewis.

the title-page of old Latin texts, which is always appearing in new heavens, and waking new desires in men. It reminded me, at any rate, to shut my window and light my wick in answer. (263)

The title-page engravings of Jim's Latin textbooks direct our attention to the classical logotype on the title page of *My Ántonia*, a miniature portrait of Arcadian Pan (an image that, though "given" by the publisher, is exploited by Cather, who adds a classical motto to the title page to emphasize the importance of its engraved Pan [illus. 1]). The pictures of *My Ántonia*—progressing from the title-page Pan, who plays his pipe within the shelter of an Arcadian bower, to the final portrait of Ántonia bent against the high winds of a prairie blizzard—vividly dramatize the evolution of the new, antipastoral art demanded by the stark Nebraska flatlands. A land not yet "a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made," the new world that Ántonia Shimerda and Jim Burden enter on the same train requires a radical revision of old-world conventions and cultural traditions. The repudiation of Arcadian Pan in the graphic art of *My Ántonia* points to the wider implications of Jim's note about Nebraska's "down in the kitchen" revision of what had always been "'out in the kitchen' at home" in Virginia: a world with "no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields" subverts not only pastoral landscape conventions but conventions of language, architecture, and human relations as well. Compelling owls to live a "degraded" subterranean existence because of the lack of trees and promoting Bohemia's most "highly esteemed" hunting target—badgers—to a safer status of friendship ("I won't let the men harm him," Jim's grandmother says of the badger who raids her chicken coops. "In a new country a body feels friendly to the animals" [17]), Nebraska thoroughly confounds the "due order and decorum" of both Virginia and Europe.

If the illustrations to *My Ántonia* depart from the classical conventions of its title-page Arcadia in order to depict unbucolic Nebraska, the text of the novel announces Jim's failure to respond creatively to his "new world" (3). Throughout *My Ántonia* it is evident that Jim suffers from the same poverty of imagination that makes Mr. Shimerda deny the possibility of civilized life outside "the old world he had left so far behind" (86). Like Ántonia's father, Jim cannot participate

in shaping a new world because he remains "fix[ed] . . . to the last" in old-world ideals (96).

Although Jim condemns the "tyranny" of custom as the most deadly sin of Black Hawk, he implicitly admits his own contribution to it by the virulence of his indictment of the "conventional" town and its "guarded mode of existence" (201-19). While he recognizes that the imported southern standards of "respectability" and "refinement" upheld by Black Hawk's transplanted Virginians are as incongruous as the appeals to noblesse oblige and chivalry made in Lincoln by Ordinsky, the Polish violin teacher in love with Lena Lingard, Jim's rebellion against these outmoded codes of gentility never moves beyond self-indulgent brooding. He is finally governed by the same feeling—a "respect for respectability stronger than any desire"—that he contemptuously describes as the chief characteristic of Black Hawk's "young man of position," and Jim's complicity in the town's "wasteful, consuming process of life" is nowhere more apparent than in his relationship with Ántonia. Jim's failure to challenge the "stupid" cultural prejudices of his town is summarized by his last word as an author. Amending the title of his manuscript to "My Ántonia," Jim simultaneously reaffirms the patriarchal authority of "genteel" Mr. Shimerda ("Who could say so little, yet managed to say so much when he exclaimed, 'My Ántonia!'") and confirms the ethnic hierarchies of "refined" Black Hawk. (In the "good old plantation" tradition, Jim speaks of the "hired girls" of the town as if they were the property of their employers. His references to "the Harlings' Tony," "the Marshalls' Anna," and "the Gardeners' Tiny" preserve "the spirit if not the fact" of the d'Arnault "Big House" served by a "buxom young Negro wench" [185].)

The social conventions that Jim honors by prefixing the possessive adjective to his title determine the entire course of his romance with Ántonia. Jim not only respects the limits that deny Black Hawk's "young man of position" more than a "jolly frolic" with the country girls but continually tries to remake Ántonia in the image of the anemic "daughters of the well-to-do," who embody the town's ideal of pure womanhood (198). Threatened by Ántonia's pride in her "manly" strength and taste for outdoor work, Jim joins forces with his grandmother to "save" Ántonia from "chores a girl ought not to

do" (126). Jim's brutal description of *Ántonia* at the plow informs his objections to her "rough ways":

. . . *Ántonia* came up the big south draw with her team. How much older she had grown in eight months! . . . She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor's. Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf. One sees that draught-horse neck among the peasant women in all old countries. (122)

As Jim sees it, *Ántonia's* claim to a "man's" work is more than a violation of Black Hawk's sense of propriety: it is a violation of human nature. Repeatedly warning *Ántonia* that she is being "spoiled" by heavy field work, Jim attempts to subdue the "strong independent nature" that distinguishes *Ántonia* from the town's disembodied "cherubs" (199). Fastidiously disturbed by the beads of perspiration that gather on *Ántonia's* upper lip "like a little mustache" as she picks vegetables with him in the garden (138) and by the way she eats with noisy relish "like a man" rather than with nibbling female delicacy, Jim is repulsed by the unladylike independence that attracts him to *Ántonia* in the first place. Although he ridicules the notions of "refined" femininity that require the young women of Black Hawk to live like cripples (because "physical exercise was thought rather inelegant for the daughters of well-to-do families," they travel even the shortest distances by horse and buggy), Jim nonetheless worries that *Ántonia* is losing the "nice ways" that distinguish ladies from laborers (125).

In her introduction to *My Ántonia*, "Cather" hints that Benda's "pictures of people and places" provide a needed corrective to the "romantic" bias of Jim's story. To understand the effect of this pictorial corrective, it is necessary to understand the faulty literary vision that the illustrations are expressly designed to offset. The romantic excesses of Jim's narrative constitute an artistic failure that mirrors Jim's personal failure to accept *Ántonia's* challenge to Old South notions of "a lady's privilege" (136). In the same way that Jim's life is tyrannized by "refined" social conventions, the art of his story is dominated by the stale literary conventions of popular and pastoral romances.

Traditional estimates of *My Ántonia* as a "large-minded" celebration of the American West

marked by the "yea-saying vision of Whitman" ignore the descriptive clichés, stock characters, and exaggerated Vergilian posturings that pervade Jim Burden's debut as an author (Brown 156; Woodress 179).⁶ Contrary to Jim's modest claim that his "thing about *Ántonia* . . . hasn't any form," *My Ántonia* is shaped by the forms of two extremely convention-bound literary genres, the pastoral elegy and the dime-novel western. As Robert Taft has noted, cheap dime novels played an important part in the western migrations of the late nineteenth century. By 1884 (roughly the year Jim Burden journeys to Nebraska reading "a 'Life of Jesse James'"), dime novels were being criticized in New York newspapers for breeding eastern discontent and for inspiring young men "to go west and be cowboys" (Taft 358). While the novel that Jim recalls as "the most satisfying book [he] ever read" may not have inspired his actual trip westward, since he is already en route west when Jake Marpole buys "Jesse James" for him from a railway vendor, it is undoubtedly a principal muse of his recreation of that journey in *My Ántonia*. The influence of Jim's favorite adventure stories is evident throughout his narrative, both in the specific details of his descriptions (Otto Fuchs, for instance, the hired hand on the Burden's farm, is presented by Jim as a "lively and ferocious" cowboy who "might have stepped out of the pages of 'Jesse James'" [6]) and in the broader vision of "Bad Lands" untamed by civilized manners and laws that forms the backdrop of Jim's nostalgic "Western dreams" (370).

The classical studies that Lena Lingard interrupts when she visits Jim in Lincoln would seem to suggest that his "Jesse James" days are over. The particular chapter of Vergil that Jim is pondering when Lena enters his room, however, supports Lena's pointed greeting: "You seem the same . . . except you're a young man, now, of course" (266). The Jim studying Vergil in Lincoln is essentially "the same" boy who first traveled to Nebraska under the influence of Jesse James. That Lena finds Jim absorbed in book 3 of the *Georgics* points to the second muse of *My Ántonia*: Jesse James is assisted by Arcadian Pan. On the whole, Vergil's *Georgics* departs from the idyllic pastoral themes of his earlier works to provide practical advice to native Italian farmers. The four books of the *Georgics* separately treat four major rural enterprises: agriculture, viticulture, animal husbandry, and beekeeping. The book Jim

considers the poet's "perfect utterance" is ironically the one where Vergil detours from the "new path" he blazes in the *Georgics* to carry his Muse from ideal Arcadia to real Mantua (Vergil 69).⁷ Discussing the care of flocks and herds, Vergil notably lapses into the pastoral mode of the *Eclogues* in *Georgic* 3. Bucolic shepherds momentarily supplant rustic farmers as an elegiac tone overwhelms Vergil's pragmatic advice about cattle breeding:

O streams and forests of Arcadian Pan!
 All other subjects which could charm a mind
 At leisure for a song, are they not staled
 Even to vulgar ears?

 Delay not long
 The mating of your cattle, but supply
 An oft succeeding offspring to the herd.
 Life's first, best season soon takes flight away
 From hapless, mortal creatures. (69, 72)

As Jim passes from the tutelage of Jake Marpole (the reader of "too many of them detective stories" who buys "Jesse James" for Jim) to that of Gaston Cleric (the classics scholar who directs Jim's college studies in Lincoln), the golden West of the dime novel is replaced by Vergil's golden Arcadia in Jim's romantic vision. Just as *The Lives, Adventures, and Exploits of Frank and Jesse James* celebrates the frontier outlaw unhindered by the restraints of society, so the classic pastoral laments the loss of precivilized Arcadian bliss. The natural antagonist of Arcadia's "first, best days" is the unnamed villain of the James boys' West: the responsibility and maturity of adult life.⁸

The strange combination of pastoral and dime-novel conventions that informs *My Antonia* is thus not as eclectic as it first seems. "El Dorado"—the western lure that prompts Jesse's father to abandon his family on the first page of "Jesse James"—is a cattle-country Arcadia. Jim's art, unlike the art of W. T. Benda's "quiet drama" in pictures, never moves beyond the Arcadian Pan of Houghton Mifflin's title page and the opening line of Vergil's third *Georgic*. Throughout *My Antonia*, Jim misrepresents his "new world" because his narrative art is archaic, unrealistic, and unmodern. While the differences between Vergil's pastoral shepherds and America's dime-novel desperadoes are many, in the context of *My*

Antonia Vergil and Jesse James similarly explain Jim Burden's failure as a storyteller. Jim never manages to "get a picture" of *Antonia* and her prairie life because his narrative art depends on irrelevant romantic conventions. The footloose lone rangers and "Wild West" outlawry of popular fiction like Jim's dime novel are as psychologically and sociologically remote from *Antonia's* world as Vergil's Arcadia is historically and culturally remote. Further reflecting a failure to invent the new forms demanded by a new world, Jim's narrative uses Homeric epithets (the "wine-coloured" sea of grass), epic similes (prairie winds recede like "defeated armies, retreating"; a sunset has the "exultation of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero's death—heroes who died young and gloriously" [53, 40]), and stock pastoral laments about the "incommunicable past" (372). Critics who have objected to the racism of the novel's "pick-aninny" portrait of Blind d'Arnault have failed to see that Jim's "docile and happy" black musician (192) is of a piece with Otto Fuchs (a western cowboy straight "out of the pages of 'Jesse James'"), his sinister villain (wicked Wick Cutter, an "inveterate gambler" and merciless loan shark, "a man of evil name throughout the country"), his "very Biblical" grandparents (a "snow-white beard" and "oracular" voice identify Mr. Burden as an Old Testament prophet; Grandma Burden is more vaguely defined as a "gingerbread baking" matriarch), and his bifurcated vision of "real women" (225).⁹

Faithful to the tradition of "satisfying" dime westerns, Jim's female types are limited to "Snow-White in the fairy tale" and the "reckless" heroine of *Camille* (215, 272). That both types endanger male autonomy—one through domestication, the other through seduction—is the school marm-chorus girl theme of Jim's many narrative digressions. The "revelation" that Jim experiences when he returns to the *Georgics* after Lena's visit makes the same point as the tale of the "two men who fed the bride to the wolves," Otto Fuchs's story about the "sorry trick" played on him by a mother of triplets, and the history of "Crazy Mary" Benson. *Georgic* 3, the immediate context of Jim's "precious" recognition of "the relation between girls like those [Lena, the Bohemian Marys, and the Danish laundresses] and the poetry of Virgil," digresses at length to warn readers of the need to curb "mad lust." Cautioning breeders that the "fair heifer," like the

“maiden fond and fair,” saps male strength, Vergil’s poetry “relates” to women like Lena as Jim’s narrative does: negatively. Blanche Gelfant’s wonderful summary of the moral lesson behind Jim’s episodic stories—“the woman must go” (75)—applies equally well to his classical source:

. . . naught of discipline so fortifies
 A powerful beast as that he be restrained
 From joy of Venus and blind passion’s goad,
 Whether bull or stallion be thy care.
 Therefore the bull is exiled and confined
 In lonely fields. . . .
 Sight of his female wastes his strength away
 By slow degrees, and bids him seek no more
 Green pastures or cool woodlands; for her charm
 Sweetly entices, and her woovers proud
 In horn-locked duel the wild suit decide. (79)

The conventions that circumscribe Jim Burden and his narrative dramatically illuminate the invention of the novel’s illustrations. The significance of *My Antonia*’s pictorial supplement is most overtly suggested by the pictorial imagery within the “substance” of Jim’s text. At both the beginning and the ending of *My Antonia* Jim Burden inadvertently identifies himself with Black Hawk’s most avid collector of “desired forms and faces,” the telegrapher who “nearly smoked himself to death” for the pictures of actresses and dancers on cigarette coupons (218). On his first Christmas in Nebraska, Jim compiles ads, holy cards, and colored lithographs cut from “good old family magazines” to make a picture book for Antonia’s sister, Yulka. A frontispiece lithograph of “Napoleon Announcing the Divorce to Josephine” (yet another version of “the woman must go”) introduces a collection of smaller “Sunday-school cards and advertising cards” from Jim’s “old country” of Virginia (81). To the final scene in the Cuzak’s parlor, Jim contributes pictures from an “old country” more distant than the East Coast. Pictures of Prague and Vienna hang in the background of the scene where Antonia shows Jim her family photograph collection. Both cityscapes are gifts from Jim, sent home to Antonia during his travels abroad. “Napoleon Announcing the Divorce to Josephine” and the framed pictures in the Cuzak parlor effectively distinguish Jim from both Antonia and Benda, his central subject and his illustrator. While the authors of the novel’s two “dramas” in pictures are artists of a new world,

Jim Burden remains an “old world” art collector. Like the chain-smoking telegrapher, Jim is devoted to ideal “forms” that have nothing to do with Black Hawk realities.

A collection of outmoded forms and conventions, Jim’s narrative is most aptly summarized by the metaphor Cather used to describe her own first novel, *Alexander’s Bridge*: it is “very like what painters call a studio picture,” a work marked by lessons of a master and by rigid adherence to established rules of composition (“My First Novels” 91).¹⁰ The art of Benda’s pictorial drama essentially responds to Jim’s studio piece with the assertion Cather would later articulate in “The Novel Demeublé” (1922): to describe a radically new world and the woman who embodies the “whole adventure” of growing up in it, the accumulated “furniture” of art—“all the meaningless reiterations . . . all the tired old patterns”—must be thrown out the window (51).

The “furniture” that Jim’s editor-illustrator discards to “get a picture” of Antonia is defined most vividly by the opening and closing scenes of Benda’s eight-plate series. The movement from Benda’s opening family portrait of the Shimerdas to his final portrait of Antonia is marked by parallel developments in form and content. “Huddled together on the platform” of the Black Hawk railway station, the Shimerdas occupy the artistically constructed, measured space that is western art’s principal piece of Renaissance “furniture” (illus. 2). Emphasizing the illusory depth of his framed space by his oblique angle of vision, Benda composes the figures in his nichelike enclosure in the classic triangular form of traditional holy family groups. The central figure of the composition is appropriately the moving force of the Shimerda family, Mrs. Shimerda. Hugging a tin box against her breast “as if it were a baby,” Mrs. Shimerda is an old-world Madonna poised on the brink of a new virgin land that promises “much money [and] much land” for her sons and “much husband” for her daughters (90).

Mrs. Shimerda’s tin-box “baby” ironically underscores the difference between the sacred tradition that Benda evokes in his triangular grouping and the secular worldliness of Mrs. Shimerda’s maternal ambitions. Substituting the fiercely mundane Mamenka Shimerda for the heavenly mother of conventional Madonna and Child paintings, Benda prefigures the more radical revision of traditional iconography that distinguishes his fi-

nal portrait of a new-world Madonna (illus. 9). Benda's final portrait of Ántonia "driving her cattle homeward" in a December blizzard fundamentally redefines the conventional holy family evoked in plate 1. Dressed in "a man's long overcoat and boots, and a man's felt hat with a wide brim," her steps heavy with the weight of her advanced (and illegitimate) pregnancy, Ántonia is a "lonesome" revision of the Shimerda group. Benda's final scene unites mother, father, and child in a single commanding figure. The "quiet drama" of *My Ántonia* thus achieves the redefinition of maternity that Lena Lingard insists on in guiding her brother's selection of monogrammed handkerchiefs. Like Lena's recommendation of "B for Berthe" rather than "M for Mother," Benda's final portrait of Ántonia asserts the individual identity that Jim dilutes in the possessive prefix of his title.

The landscape surrounding Benda's new Madonna redefines by indefiniteness the pictorial space of plate 1. If the artistically controlled and mathematically "possessed" space of the railway platform reflects Jim's appropriative title, the best text for the barely articulated landscape of Benda's last scene is Lena's response to critics of her relationship with Ole Benson: "It ain't my prairie" (169). The mensurational perspective of plate 1 asserts a mastery of space that is further emphasized by the railway setting of the composition. As Barbara Novak observes in her study of nineteenth-century railway photography, the "linear imperialism" of the railroad provides a vivid metaphor for the artist's attempts to order and control the vast American wilderness within a limited picture space (180).

In Benda's final scene, the "linear imperialism" of space brought under human control gives way to the unconquered natural anarchy of a prairie blizzard. Limited only by the physical dimensions of the page, Benda's unframed winter landscape extends infinitely in all directions. Distinctions between land and sky obliterated by flying snow, the featureless expanse of the prairie defies artistic definition. In contrast to the constructed pictorial space that shelters the Shimerda family in plate 1, the open setting of Ántonia's portrait is notably artless: the landscape of Benda's final scene—the natural whiteness of the book page—both antecedes and overwhelms his art. In this evolution, Benda's art demonstrates its superiority to Jim's. While Jim's narrative ends as it begins, with an as-

sertion that art is a means of fixing or "possessing" reality (Jim's final words return us to the curious possessiveness of his title: "*My Ántonia*" allows its author to "possess . . . the precious, the incommunicable past" [emphasis added]), Benda's art evolves in recognition of a world "outside man's jurisdiction" (7).

The importance of the artless "white waste" of Ántonia's winter landscape is suggested by Cather's first published art review. The white space that represents a December snowstorm in plate 8 alternatively evokes the white heat and "burning sun" of a Nebraska summer in Benda's penultimate plate, the full-length portrait of Lena (illus. 8). In the 1895 review, Cather describes the crucial difference between the overhead sun to which Lena is constantly exposed and the moments of "magical light" at dawn and dusk that Jim celebrates in his text. When Cather wrote about the annual exhibit of Lincoln's Haydon Art Club in her "As You Like It" column, art was still rare enough in Nebraska to inspire reviews that were more reverential than judgmental. Cather's criticism of a painting on loan from the Chicago Art Institute is remarkable, then, both because it dares to be sharply irreverent and because it contrasts so strikingly with her opening statement about the "privilege and blessing" of seeing portraits by Carl Newman and Weston Benson in the gallery's "inner sanctum":

Richard Lorenz's "In the West" is at once strong and disappointing. The worst thing about it is the title. It is a western subject and a western man placed it in an unwestern atmosphere. . . . the picture is not western. The impressionists say it is "keyed too low." Whatever that may mean the lights are certainly at fault and the color is too tame. The sunlight is gentle, not the fierce, white, hot sunlight of the West. Sunlight on the plains is almost like sunlight of the northern seas; it is a glaring, irritating, shelterless light that makes the atmosphere throb and pulsate with heat. (125)

The "fierce, white, hot sunlight" that Cather stresses in her review informs both Benda's portrait of Lena and Cather's instructions to Houghton Mifflin about its placement in the text: it is to appear low enough on the page to give the effect of a vast open space baking under a high-noon sun (MS. 75).¹¹

The light of Lena's overhead sun illuminates Jim Burden's lyrical descriptions of the "horizontal light" that Benda depicts in plates 2 and 6

(illus. 3 and 7). The golden moments that Jim translates into “picture-writing on the sun”—Mr. Shimerda against a sunset “like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed” and the “heroic” plow in the center of the red disk on the horizon—point to Claude Lorraine as emphatically as Jim’s red “fingers of the sun” point to Homer’s “rosy-fingered” dawns (244). The oblique rays of Jim’s literary landscapes are an essential feature—or, to use Cather’s terms, a standard piece of furniture—of ideal landscapes derived from Claudian pastorals. The magical “sudden transfiguration” of the day that Jim describes in such detail is the traditional “picturesque moment” of dawn or dusk when sunlight joins heaven and earth in an enveloping atmospheric radiance. The fierce white light of Lena’s portrait responds to Benda’s graphic rendition of Jim’s roseate heavenly “fingers” (pls. 2 and 6) with the charge Cather levels at “In the West”: limited to the most atypically gentle moments of a scene characterized by “glaring, irritating, shelterless light,” Jim’s “picture-writing” is skillful but essentially “unwestern.”

The vertical orientation of Benda’s two final scenes not only controverts Black Hawk’s simplistic Snow White–Camille dichotomies by linking visually *Ántonia* and Lena but also recalls Jules Breton’s *Song of the Lark* (illus. 10), the painting that provides the title for Cather’s last novel before *My Ántonia*, and clearly anticipates the climactic final plates of Benda’s pictorial “drama.”¹² In Breton’s painting, a centrally positioned French peasant girl stands arrested in her work (she is presumably—and rather stagily—harkening to the song of an unseen lark). The girl’s alert, upright pose is emphasized by the horizontal expanse of the stark fields surrounding her, and her commanding stance is further stressed by the curved reaping hook that she holds in suspension. The reaping hook of Breton’s girl, Lena’s knitting needles (pl. 7), and *Ántonia*’s cattle whip (pl. 8) serve the same pictorial function as the batons, swords, and firearms featured in the “old portraits” of Virginia gentry that Jim recalls: they are iconographic symbols of command, independence, and authority.

In the “quiet drama” of *My Ántonia*, Benda’s Breton-like figures respond not to the song of an offstage lark but to the outmoded conventions of two earlier female portraits, the sheltered Madonna of plate 1 and the mushroom gatherer of plate



Illus. 10. Jules Breton, *Song of the Lark* (1884). Art Institute of Chicago.

3 (illus. 4). In the latter drawing a natural shelter replaces the artificial shelter of the railway station in plate 1. The bowed branches of a tree follow the same curve as the bent form of the woman picking mushrooms beneath it, forming an arbor like Arcadian Pan’s (illus. 1). The harmonious forms of the woman and the tree express the accord between human life and nature in the old Bohemian world Mrs. Shimerda describes as she gives a bag of dried mushrooms to Jim’s grandmother: in the world of the mushroom gatherer, “things for eat” can be collected like manna (78). In Benda’s final scenes, however, the sharp contrast between the shelterless flat expanse of the prairie and the erect figures of Lena and *Ántonia* suggests natural opposition rather than harmony. The featureless landscape of Benda’s final plates provides its inhabitants with neither food nor shelter gratis. The plates that immediately follow Benda’s mushroom gatherer insist on the realities of a world where “all things for eat” must be wrested from the soil by brute force (pl. 5, illus. 6: two immense horses strain to pull *Ántonia*’s



Illus. 11. Frederick Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness* (1860). Cleveland Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. William H. Marlatt Fund.



Illus. 12. Frederic Remington, *A Dash for Timber* (1889). Courtesy Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth.

plow through the tough prairie sod) and where arboreal shelters are the products of human art rather than natural munificence (pl. 4, illus. 5: the young pine Jake carries home across his saddle is the first fruit of the Burdens' efforts to "civilize" treeless Nebraska).

Ántonia and Lena thus respond to Benda's stooped peasant woman by asserting the "masculine" authority—signaled by their unsupported upright stance and their staves of command—demanded by a new world where nature is not maternally providential. Benda's full-length prairie portraits repudiate the Wild West illustrations of Jim's "most satisfying book" in the same way that they challenge the idyllic landscape of the mushroom gatherer. The cover illustration of Jim's *Lives, Adventures, and Exploits of Frank and Jesse James*, crude though it is, summarizes the frontier aesthetic of traditional depictions of the West in American art. Straining to push past a log barrier that the James boys have erected on the tracks, the train that dominates the cover vividly dramatizes the desire to "escape restraints" that Jim Burden describes as the impetus of "every frontier settlement" (209). The impulse to flee the constraints of "smothery" civilization (as Huck Finn put it) and the constant westward movement that the impulse propelled inform popular landscapes of the American West from Frederick Church's 1860 *Twilight in the Wilderness* (illus. 11) to Frederic Remington's 1889 *Dash for Timber* (illus. 12).

In both horizontal extension and compositional emphasis on movement through space, the scenes of Church and Remington represent the western landscape traditions that Benda revises in his portraits of Ántonia and Lena. In Benda's full-length portraits, the horizontal spatial movement that distinguishes Remington's line of cowboys and the "linear imperialism" of parallel planes that leads us through Church's wilderness is replaced by ver-

tical stasis. Unlike Remington's space-conquering cowboys, Benda's still, two-dimensional figures barely displace the space they occupy. While the West represented by Church and Remington is essentially Whitman's "Open Road"—a national thoroughfare for "traveling souls" perpetually en route to El Dorado—Benda's West is not a public highway but a place of precarious personal settlement. Both Ántonia and Lena are portrayed with their feet firmly planted on the ground as they engage in the civilized arts that make life possible in the "most unlikely place in the world." Benda's women quietly inhabit the vast space that the James boys are forever "just passin' through" with a maximum of noisy bravado. (And the reader who brushes past these illustrations without dwelling on them as Ántonia and Lena dwell within them is guilty of James-boy insensitivity to the "quiet" story they tell.)

Jim Burden's name is finally the best summary of the difference between Remington's art and Benda's and the corresponding difference between the narrative and the "succession of pictures" of *My Ántonia*. Constrained or "burdened" by the James-boy ideals of "devilish" manhood that Remington stereotypically represents, Jim incorporates the fiction of the "Life of Jesse James" into his own life and art. A lawyer "for one of the great Western railways," Jim Burden carries on his namesake's train business (albeit on the other side of the law) as he perpetuates Jesse's "golden West" in *My Ántonia*. The artistic evolution that is the "quiet drama" of *My Ántonia's* pictures simultaneously underscores Jim's failure of imagination and provides a "new world" picture of Ántonia, a picture uncluttered by the inherited furniture of Jim Burden's narrative.¹³

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Notes

¹ Significantly, no page reference is possible here because Cather's 1926 revised edition of *My Ántonia* did not paginate the introduction. As I later explain in greater detail, Cather changed the introduction in 1926 to emphasize her central narrative fiction: the claim that she is only editing and introducing Jim Burden's manuscript. Technical changes in the printed text further stress the difference between "editor" Cather and

"author" Burden. Not only are the page numbers dropped, but the entire introduction is italicized to separate "Cather's" text from Jim's typographically. Unless otherwise specified, all my references to *My Ántonia* are to the Sentry edition of the revised 1926 text. References to the first edition of the novel specify 1918 before the page citation.

² I am indebted to Mark Savin, professor of English

formerly at the University of Minnesota, for bringing to my attention the materials that document the publishing history of *My Antonia*. The pertinent letters between Cather and Houghton Mifflin personnel involved with *My Antonia* (Greenslet, Richard Scaife of the publicity staff, and "Miss Bishop" of the art department) are all at the Houghton Library, Harvard University. In the Greenslet file, see especially TS. 84, 26 Nov. 1917; TS. 270, 6 Jan. 1926; TS. 272, 17 Feb. 1926; TS. 273, 9 April 1926; TS. 354, 3 Jan. 1938. In Cather's letters, see TS. 48, 7 March [1918]; MS. 58, 18 Oct. [1917]; TS. 62, 24 Nov. 1917; TS. 63, 1 Dec. [1917]; TS. 65, 9 [Dec. 1917]; MS. 69, 26 Dec. 1917; TS. 74, Friday [Feb. 1918]; MS. 75, Saturday [Feb. 1918]; TS. 77, 20 June [1918]; MS. 81, 17 July [1918]; TS. 174, 15 Feb. 1926; TS. 176 [April 1926]; TS. 177 [May 1926]; TS. 199, 4 Dec. 1930; MS. 212, 2 Nov. 1932; TS. 230, 29 [Dec.] 1937. Because Cather's will forbids the publication of her letters, they remain uncollected and rather inaccessible, scattered in libraries from Harvard to the San Marino Huntington. The proscriptions against publishing the letters have obliged me to paraphrase rather than quote them directly.

³ In the face of Cather's strong opposition, Greenslet seems to have changed his mind about the "deluxe" *Antonia* illustrated by Wood. He readily concurred with her veto of Wood's pictures (suggesting that he, too, had doubts about the wisdom of dressing up simple and plain *Antonia*) but acknowledged that enterprising young men in Houghton Mifflin's advertising department would be disappointed by the decision (TS. 354).

⁴ A good example of Benda's characteristic magazine work is the *Vogue* illustration (July 1920) reprinted in Byrnes (248–49). While many of Benda's illustrations depict fashionable society, at the time Cather commissioned the "head-and-tail pieces" for *My Antonia* Benda was also widely known for painting western subjects (especially for a pictorial series titled "Cowboy Life on the Western Plains," 1910). In a letter to Ferris Greenslet, Cather explains that her choice of an illustrator for *My Antonia* was influenced by an important affinity between Benda and *Antonia*: like *Antonia*, Benda not only had lived in the American West but had roots in Bohemia (TS. 62). The son of a Polish pianist and composer, Benda immigrated to the United States in 1899. Cather considered him ideally suited to the task of providing a pictorial counterpoint to Jim's narrative because—like *Antonia* and unlike Jim and Mr. Shimerda—Benda successfully developed the new forms and conventions demanded by his strange new world. For a brief biographical sketch of Benda, see Samuels and Samuels.

⁵ Cather comments on her difficulties in writing the original and revised versions of the introduction to *My Antonia* in a series of letters to Greenslet (TSS. 74, 174, 176). Greenslet presents a strong argument about the weakness of the 1918 introduction in two important letters of early 1926 (TSS. 270, 273).

⁶ E. K. Brown approvingly cites W. C. Brownell's "penetrating" praise of *My Antonia* as a "large-minded" and "unmeretricious" work distinguished by its "continuous and sustained respect" for its central subject (156). According to Brown, *My Antonia* "marks a new phase in the long process of Willa Cather's reconciliation with Nebraska": in *Antonia*

Nebraska is no longer the "place to leave" that it was in *Song of the Lark* but is instead "a place to live in" (158–59). Like Brown, James Woodress tends to discount the narrow-mindedness of Jim's "thing about *Antonia*." Woodress calls *My Antonia* a "sunny novel" that combines Whitmanesque "yea-saying" and Jamesian artistry (179–80).

⁷ Because the lines in the Harvard *Georgics* are unnumbered, my citations refer to the page numbers of this standard edition of Vergil's poem.

⁸ The most famous dime novel "Life of Jesse James," *The James Boys Weekly* published by the House of Beadle and Adams, did not begin to appear until 1900, well after Jim's journey to Nebraska. It seems likely that Jim Burden's "most satisfying book" was an earlier dime western published soon after Jesse James's death, *The Lives, Adventures, and Exploits of Frank and Jesse James, with an Account of the Tragic Death of Jesse James, April 3d, 1882*. The University of Minnesota's excellent Kerlan Collection of children's literature includes two slightly different (but identically titled) versions of this novel, both unsigned and undated. I have profited from reading both; Jim's favorite book informs *My Antonia* like a palimpsest.

⁹ The most famous—and outrageous—examination of Cather's WASP bigotries and resultant fictional stereotypes is James Schroeder's. While Schroeder focuses on the "anti-Semitism" of Cather's portrait of Louie Marsellus in *The Professor's House*, he makes much broader claims about Cather's ethnic and racial prejudices (overlooking, unfortunately, the fact that the "bias" in so many of Cather's novels is not Cather's but the point of view of her first-person narrators—Jim Burden in *Antonia*—and her third-person centers of consciousness—Niel Herbert in *A Lost Lady* and Godfrey St. Peter in *Professor's House*).

¹⁰ As Cather notes elsewhere, the "master" that she follows rather too devotedly in her "studio-piece" novel (*Alexander's Bridge*) and, to a lesser extent, in her first collection of short stories (*The Troll Garden*) is Henry James (Carroll 214).

¹¹ In a letter to Ferris Greenslet, Cather even went so far as to suggest printing *My Antonia* on yellow paper to evoke the western sun (TS. 48).

¹² Houghton Mifflin used Breton's painting on the jacket of *Song of the Lark* until 1931. That Cather liked the general conception of the painting (its central female figure surrounded by a landscape like the Nebraska prairie) more than Breton's melodramatic details is suggested not only by Benda's unsentimental adaptations of the painting in *Antonia* (in pl. 7, for instance, Lena fairly bursts from her scanty dress; the carefully delineated nipple pressing against her bodice is the most conspicuous—and, for romantics like Jim, the most disturbing—detail of Benda's portrait) but also by Cather's correspondence with Houghton Mifflin. Cather's campaign to get Breton's picture dropped from the cover of *Song of the Lark* was almost as long as her battle to keep Benda's drawings in *Antonia*. (See Cather to Greenslet, TS. 18, 30 June 1915, and TS. 206, 26 Nov. [1931], for Cather's first and final pleas that Breton be evicted from her dust jacket.)

¹³ I am grateful to Kent Bales, Jonathan Hill, and Karal Ann Marling for help in refining my argument.

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Study Guide

for

My *Á*ntonia

by Willa Cather



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Meet Willa Cather



Art must spring out of the very stuff that life is made of. The German housewife who sets before her family on Thanksgiving day a perfectly roasted goose, is an artist. The farmer who goes out in the morning to harness his team, and pauses to admire the sunrise—he is an artist.

—Willa Cather

Since childhood, Willa Cather had the ability to see her own brand of art in the people, situations, and emotions of everyday life. Her unique perspective on ordinary life can be found in her celebrated novels, short stories, and essays. Cather is best known as the voice of frontier life on the American plains, where she spent the years of her youth and young adulthood. According to Cather, these were the years during which she unconsciously gathered the rich material that would inspire her to write when she was an adult. She says:

Every story I have written since then has been the recollection of some childhood experience, of something that touched me while a youngster. You must know a subject as a child, before you ever had any idea of writing, to instill into it . . . the true feeling.

Cather was born on December 7, 1873, the eldest child of Charles and Mary Virginia Cather. When she was ten years old, her family moved to a small settlement west of Red Cloud, Nebraska. Cather was at first homesick and had difficulty adjusting to the rough, open landscape of the

Nebraska prairie. However, she found that her diverse collection of neighbors was a striking and welcome contrast to the flat, drab countryside. At that time, immigrants came from all over Europe to farm in Nebraska. Young Cather was befriended by some of the older immigrant women, and their unique experiences made a strong impression on her. Later, Cather relates:

I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of these old women at her baking or butter making. . . . I always felt . . . as if I had actually got inside another person's skin.

Nebraska's immigrant settlers appear in many of Cather's novels and short stories. In *My Ántonia*, where a narrator tells the story of his friendship with an immigrant settler, parallels can be drawn between the experiences and feelings of the narrator and of Cather's early years.

Eventually, Cather's family left farming and moved into Red Cloud, where Cather attended school and decided she wanted to become a doctor. It wasn't until she attended the University of Nebraska that her attention turned to literature and writing. After graduating in 1896, she lived for ten years in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and worked as an editor of a woman's magazine, an editor and reviewer for a newspaper, and a high school teacher. During the same period, she published reviews, short stories, and a collection of poems. In 1906 Cather moved to New York City to become a staff writer and eventually the managing editor for *McClure's Magazine*.

Cather's own desire to write about the subjects she loved prompted her to leave the magazine in 1911 to focus her attention on writing fiction. Her efforts led to great literary success. Before her death in 1947, she wrote several novels and numerous poems, short stories, and essays. She also received numerous honorary academic degrees and awards, including a Pulitzer Prize and the National Institute of Arts and Letters gold medal. Today she is considered one of the major American novelists of the twentieth century.

Introducing the Novel

During that burning day when we were crossing Iowa, our talk kept returning to a central figure, a Bohemian girl whom we had both known long ago. More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood.

—Introduction, *My Ántonia*

Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* is written as a young man's reflections on the people and places of his youth. The narrator, Jim Burden, is a New York City lawyer who grew up on the Nebraska frontier. His memories show his affection for the past and his connection to his childhood friend, and paint a vivid portrait of life in Nebraska in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

From its first pages, *My Ántonia* depicts the ethnically diverse, hardworking people who came to the American plains. The novel also powerfully depicts the open landscape of the prairie and the rugged lifestyle of its settlers. In 1920, H. L. Mencken, a famous literary critic and essayist, wrote:

I know of no novel that makes the remote folk of the western farmlands more real than My Ántonia makes them, and I know of none that makes them seem better worth knowing.

The primary focus of the novel is Ántonia Shimerda, Jim's friend since childhood. Cather based the character of Ántonia on an actual friend, Annie Sadilek, whom she knew when they both lived on the Nebraskan frontier. Cather described her friend to a book reviewer in 1921 as "one of the truest artists I ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, in her love of people and in her willingness to take pains." She gives these same qualities to her fictional character.

Through Jim Burden, Cather expresses her affection for the people and landscape of her own childhood and for people like Ántonia, who represent the immigrant pioneer spirit of the West. Cather tells of their triumphs and tragedies in a quiet understated fashion. She wrote:

[My Ántonia] is just the other side of the rug,

the pattern that is not supposed to count in a story. In it there is no love affair, no courtship, no marriage, no broken heart, no struggle for success. I knew I'd ruin my material if I put it in the usual fictional pattern. I just used it the way I thought absolutely true.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The novel is set mainly in the Nebraska Divide, a rural farming area in southern Nebraska, and in Black Hawk, a town just east of the Divide. Cather grew up in this area and based the fictional town of Black Hawk on the real town of Red Cloud, which sits on the Republican River. Another setting described in the novel is Lincoln, Nebraska, where narrator Jim Burden attends school for a brief period.

The novel begins in the late 1880s and covers a period of about thirty years of the narrator's life. This was an eventful time in the actual history of Nebraska. In 1862 Congress passed the first Homestead Act, which granted 160 acres of free land in the West to anyone at least twenty-one years old who promised to settle it. The concept of providing free land to hardworking settlers was first suggested by western pioneers who were struggling to build farms on undeveloped land. They argued that, because the land was worthless until developed, Congress should give them parcels of land as a reward for helping to improve the country. Close to a million people requested homestead applications between 1863 and 1890. More farms were created in this time period than any other in U.S. history. The Homestead Act was also a key factor in the United States' expansion westward.

The Homestead Act created opportunities for many struggling American citizens and immigrants to the United States. Between 1881 and 1920, southern and eastern Europeans, including Bohemians, were part of a major immigration movement to the United States. Many of these immigrants, like the Shimerdas in *My Ántonia*, came to the United States to take advantage of available prairie land.

In 1865 the Union Pacific Railroad began building its line farther into Nebraska territory.

They advertised Nebraska farmland in the East as well as in Europe. From 1869 to 1879 Kansas and Nebraska attracted a large number of settlers. Between 1874 and 1877, however, swarms of grasshoppers invaded the area and damaged much of the crops. Many settlers left

their farms and returned east. Drought, bad credit policies, and low prices on agricultural products caused further distress to Nebraska farmers. In *My Ántonia*, Cather captures the hardships facing pioneers as they tried to build new lives in unfamiliar territory.

Did You Know?

Ántonia was born in Bohemia, an area that is now part of the western section of the Czech Republic in eastern Europe. She and her family would have lived in Bohemia when it was ruled by the Catholic Hapsburg family. This family gained control of the region in 1526, was overthrown by Bohemian Protestants in 1618, and then regained power in 1620. They ruled for almost 400 years.

As part of the Hapsburg Empire, Bohemia lost most of its religious and political freedom. In 1848 Bohemian people tried to revolt but were unsuccessful. Bohemia became part of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. After World War II, the republic was taken over by Communist forces. All private property was seized and the government ruled the lives of all Czechoslovakians. In November of 1989, the Communist regime was overthrown and Vaclav Havel, a former playwright, was elected

president. In 1992, when Czechoslovakia was divided into the countries of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Bohemia became part of the Czech Republic.

Ántonia's homeland has a rich history of cultural and artistic tradition. The first university north of the Alps was established in Prague in 1348. Several Czech writers, including Franz Kafka and Milan Kundera, have greatly contributed to not only their own literary tradition but to world literature as well. World-famous composers such as Antonin Dvorak and Bedrich Smetana have incorporated their country's traditional folk music into their major compositions. Baroque architecture figures prominently in the Czech Republic, and cubistic architecture is unique to Prague. The Bohemian area is also well known for its glassblowers and their intricately wrought crystal.

Before You Read

My Ántonia Introduction and Book 1

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What people and places from your childhood do you remember most clearly? Why did they leave such a strong impression on you?

Journal

In your journal, write about a memorable person or place from your childhood. Describe the person or place in detail. What importance does the person or place have to you today?

Setting a Purpose

Read to learn about a person and a place that leave a lasting impression on a boy.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

In the settling of frontier land, immigrant families often faced greater challenges than U.S.-born settlers. Because many immigrants left their countries under difficult circumstances, they often did not have a great deal of money with which to begin their new lives. Once in the United States, some struggled with a language barrier that made meeting people and conducting business difficult. Many immigrants also experienced prejudice against their customs and religious practices. Some U.S.-born settlers were resentful of having to compete with immigrants for land or work.

Rural Nebraska

Setting, particularly the landscape surrounding Jim's grandparents' farm, plays a crucial role in the development of *My Ántonia*. Cather takes great care in detailing the natural environment that surrounds her characters. For example, to illustrate the movement of prairie grass, she writes, "I felt motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping. . . ." As you read, notice how the setting reflects the characters and influences their moods.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

alight [ə ˈlɪt] v. to step down from

clemency [klem ˈən sə] n. mercy; forgiveness

decorum [di kôr əm] n. formality; etiquette

imminent [im ˈə nənt] adj. ready to happen

interminable [in tur ˈmi nə bəl] adj. endless

laconically [lə kon ˈɪk lē] adv. abruptly; quickly

magnanimity [mag ˈnə nɪm ˈə tē] n. generosity

meritorious [mer ˈə tôr ˈē əs] adj. noble

portentous [pôr ten ˈtəs] adj. threatening

sullied [sul ˈēd] adj. tarnished

undulating [un ˈjə lāt ˈɪŋ] adj. having a wavy outline or appearance

Active Reading

My Ántonia Introduction and Book 1

Throughout the novel, the characters are sensitive to the change of seasons. On the chart below, record important events and activities that mark each season of Jim's first year on his grandparents' farm. Then review your chart and think about how each event relates to the particular mood suggested by each sea-

① Autumn

- * harvest season
- * Jim gets to know the farm
- *
- *
- *

② Winter

③ Spring

④ Summer

Responding

My Antonia Introduction and Book 1

Personal Response

Which events did you find the most memorable? Why?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Why does young Jim come to Nebraska to live? Describe Jim's first impressions of the Nebraska prairie. How does the prairie make him feel?

2. Contrast the ways of life of the Burden family and the Shimerda family. Why does Mrs. Shimerda resent the Burdens at times?

3. What happens to Antonia's father? Describe Mr. Shimerda's character and his relationship with Antonia.

4. Many of the people in the prairie community have emigrated to the United States. What cultural differences make it difficult for them to understand each other and get along? What common bonds bring them together as a community?

Responding

My *Antonia* Introduction and Book 1

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

5. How would you describe the friendship between Jim and *Antonia*? In what ways do they benefit each other?

6. Recall your response to the **Focus Activity**, remembering how people and places affected you when you were a child. Then name the people and events from this section you expect will have the greatest impact on Jim. Explain your choice.

Literature and Writing

Character Analysis

Through Jim's descriptions, readers understand that *Antonia* is a character who is high-spirited, proud, and generous. Write an analysis of Cather's portrayal of *Antonia*. In which situations does *Antonia* show each of these traits? What other traits does she display?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Cather uses figures of speech such as **simile**, **metaphor**, and **personification** throughout the novel. Similes and metaphors are types of comparisons. Similes contain the "comparing words" *like*, *than*, or *as*. Metaphors do not. Personification refers to the technique of giving human qualities to something that is not human. The following passage contains examples of all three:

The road ran about like a wild thing, avoiding the deep draws, crossing them where they were wide and shallow. And all along it . . . the sunflowers grew . . . They made a gold ribbon across the prairie.

With your group, identify and discuss the three figures of speech in the passage. Then look through Book 1 to find other examples. Discuss how Cather uses this language to convey setting.

Science Connection

The characters hear coyotes in the distance and encounter rattlesnakes, prairie dogs, and owls. What other wildlife is native to the prairie? What plants grow there? Use the Internet or library resources to research the prairie. Present your findings in a brief oral report to your class.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

My Ántonia Books 2 and 3

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What life changes and learning experiences do you expect to have as you move toward adulthood?

Share Ideas

With a partner, predict learning experiences and changes that are likely to occur as people grow older. Think about how activities and surroundings will change as well.

Setting a Purpose

Read to learn about the changes, new experiences, and mistakes that affect the lives of Jim and Ántonia as they grow older.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

In this section, Jim's Latin homework introduces him to the work of Virgil, a poet who lived in ancient Rome. Virgil wrote *pastoral* poems that idealize and celebrate rural environments. Literary works that are *pastoral* often contrast the innocence and simplicity of country life with the corruption of urban environments. Jim is reading *Georgics*, a work that deals with issues of farming and rural life in Italy. He finds two quotations from the selection particularly moving. As you read, think about why Jim finds these ideas moving and why the work of Virgil is thematically fitting for this novel.

Repetition

Though *My Ántonia* is a collection of memories that do not follow a conventional plotline, Cather ties the events of the novel together in a variety of ways. One method is her use of repetition. For example, in this section, images of nature and farming move the narrator and Ántonia to reflect on their pasts and repeat stories about what happened. There is also repetition of characters that are important to the theme. As you read this section, pay attention to how Cather reintroduces Mr. Shimerda to the story through the characters of Jim and Ántonia. Then think about why Cather brings Ántonia's father back into the story.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

affable [af'ə bəl] *adj.* pleasant

assiduously [ə sij'ōō əs lē] *adv.* steadily; industriously

entreat [en trēt'] *v.* to ask; to request

hectoringly [hek'tər ing lē] *adv.* in an intimidating, tormenting manner

incongruous [in kong'grō əs] *adj.* not consistent; absurd

parsimonious [pär'sə mō'nē əs] *adj.* stingy; extremely careful with money or resources

piquant [pē'kənt] *adj.* charming; savory

repose [ri pōz'] *n.* calm

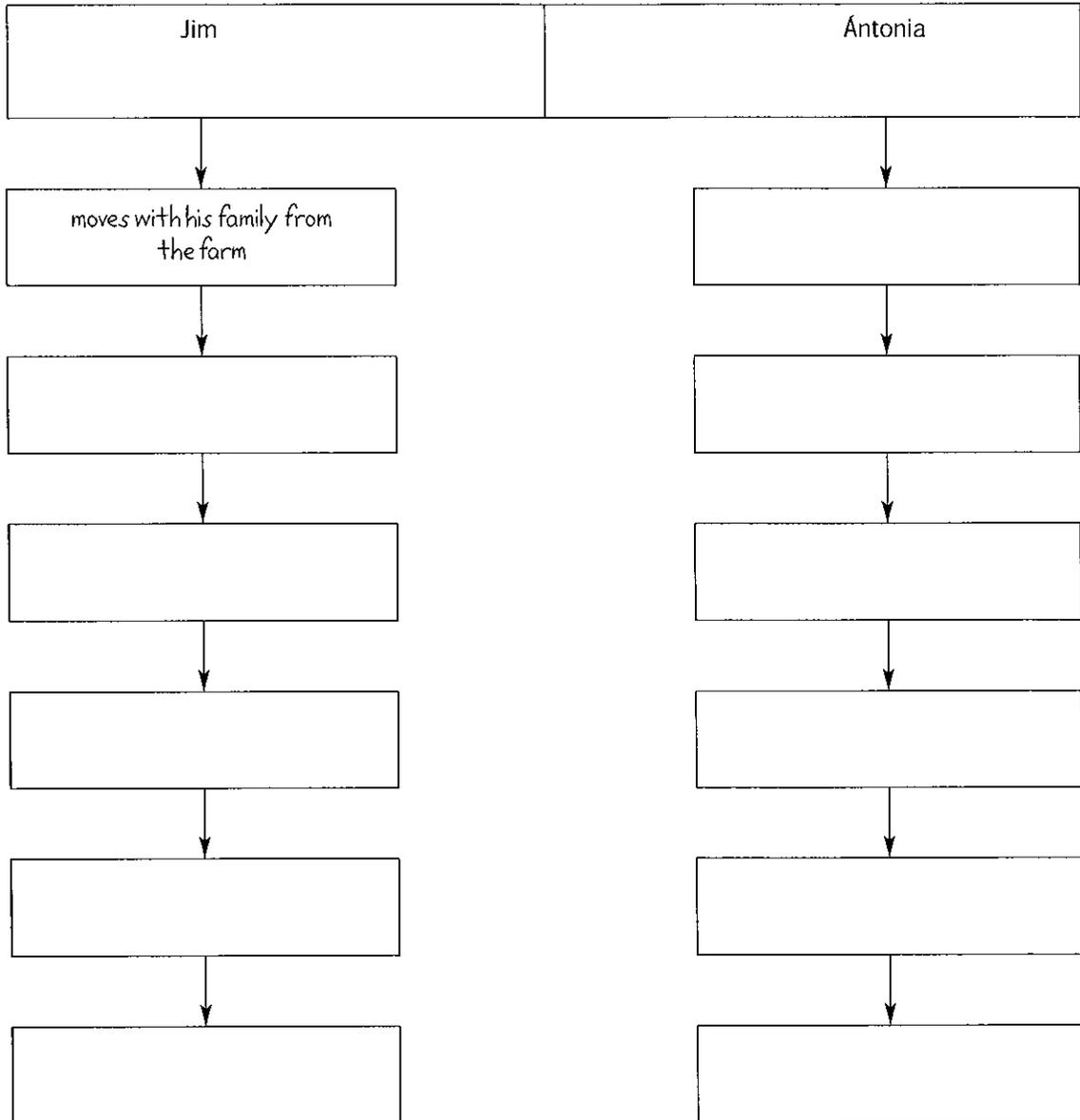
reproach [ri prōch'] *n.* criticism; abuse

unmollified [un mol'ə fīd'] *adj.* unsoothed; agitated

Active Reading

My Antonia Books 2 and 3

In this section, both Jim and Antonia experience many changes. Their surroundings change, they have new experiences, and eventually their lives go in two different directions. As you read, note these changes and experiences in the graphic organizer below. Use as many boxes as you need.



Responding

My Ántonia Books 2 and 3

Personal Response

How do you feel about the different paths taken by Jim and Ántonia? Do you want them to see each other again? Why or why not?

Review your response to the **Focus Activity**. What particular life changes do Jim and Ántonia experience in this section?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Who are the "hired girls"? How are they different from other people in Black Hawk?

2. What happens to Jim when he spends the night at Wick Cutter's home? Why does he refuse to speak to Ántonia after the incident?

3. Describe the character of Lena Lingard. In what ways is she different from Ántonia in terms of her values and her relationship with Jim?

Responding

My *Antonia* Books 2 and 3

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. In your opinion, why does Cather temporarily shift the focus from *Antonia* and devote a section of the novel to Lena Lingard?

5. Jim says of the immigrant girls who work in Black Hawk, "If there were no girls like them in the world, then there would be no poetry." Explain his statement.

Literature and Writing

Analyzing Tone

At the end of "Hired Girls," Jim joins *Antonia* and her friends for a picnic. While looking out across the country and watching the sun set, they see what Jim describes as a "curious thing": the sun begins setting behind a plow that has been left alone in a field. Its dark image stands out against the redness of the sun. Jim calls it "heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun."

Write an analysis of why Cather included this image in the novel. How might this symbol relate to a theme in the novel or to *Antonia's* state of mind at the end of this section?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

At the end of Chapter 2 of Book 3 the Virgil quotation that first appears at the beginning of the novel, '*Optima dies . . . prima fugit*' (The best days are the first to flee), reappears. In your group, discuss why this quotation is placed at this point in the novel. Think about what questions the repetition of this phrase raises. To whom or what do you think the quotation is referring at this point in the novel? What does the quotation mean to you? Do you agree with its sentiment? Why or why not?

Performing

Work in a pair or a small group to create a dramatization of your favorite scene in this section. In preparing your dramatization, assign parts, including the part of the narrator, and decide how you can most effectively perform each scene. For passages in which Cather does not use dialogue but has Jim describe what is being said, consider creating your own dialogue based on your understanding of the characters.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

My Ántonia Books 4 and 5

FOCUS ACTIVITY

What images come to mind when you think of the word *pioneer*?

Web It

Create a concept web for the word *pioneer*. On the lines extending from the word, list people, events, and images that come to mind. Think about what values and qualities a true pioneer must have.

Setting a Purpose

Book 4 of the novel is called “The Pioneer Woman’s Story.” Read through to the end of the novel to understand why Cather entitles Book 4 in this manner.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

My Ántonia has been labeled by critics as both **elegiac** and **nostalgic**. An **elegy** is a sad poem that laments death or loss. **Nostalgia** is a longing for one’s home or past. Characters throughout the novel refer to their pasts, both to celebrate and to express regret or resentment. Their pasts either draw them back or make them want to move forward. For example, Jim and Ántonia are continually looking back at their happy childhood experiences and wondering if they can ever find that happiness again, while Lena Lingard’s unhappy memories of farming motivate her to change her way of life completely. Ántonia clings to her Bohemian heritage, while other immigrant workers try to adopt the language and customs of the United States. After finishing the novel, think about whether the novel is more an elegiac or a nostalgic literary work.

Characterization

Writers use specific techniques to create characters. These include direct description, showing characters’ behavior, showing how others react to characters, and showing characters’ thoughts. Writers use these methods not only to give readers insight into individuals, but sometimes to characterize groups of people. In this section, Cather uses many interesting details to characterize the Cuzak family, particularly the Cuzak children. As you read, notice Cather’s techniques of characterization, and draw conclusions about the family.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

acquisitive [ə kwiz’ ə tiv] *adj.* greedy; eager to obtain

brandish [bran’ dish] *v.* to wave in a showy manner

conformation [kon’ fôr mǎ’ shən] *n.* shape or structure

droll [drōl] *adj.* amusing; odd

duplicity [dōō plis’ ə tē] *n.* craftiness; deception

irrelevant [i rel’ ə vənt] *adj.* inappropriate

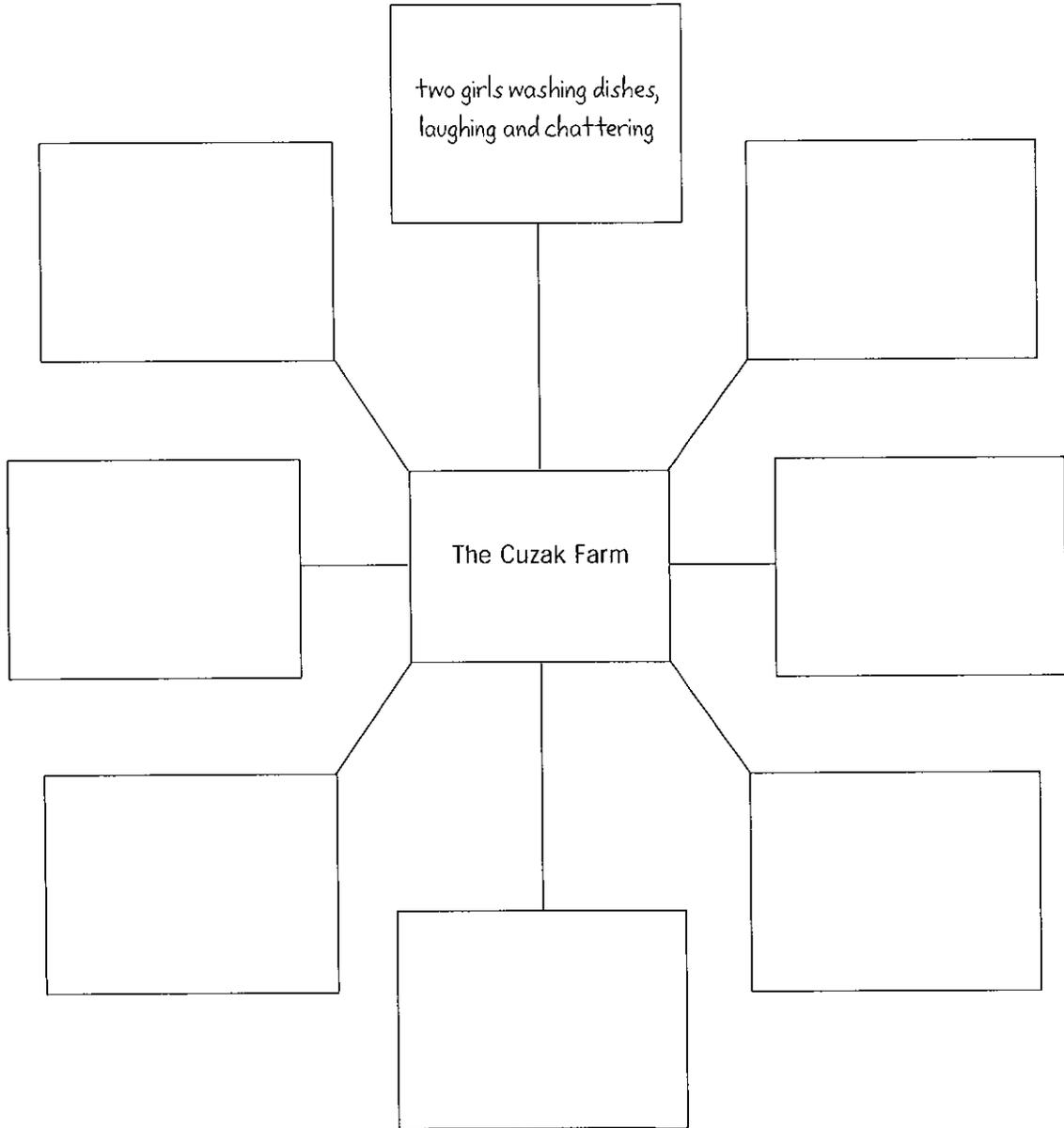
jaunty [jôn’ tē] *adj.* lively; robust

unabashed [un’ ə basht’] *adj.* open; outspoken

Active Reading

My Antonia Books 4 and 5

When Jim visits Antonia and her family at the end of this section, he is moved by what he sees. In the graphic organizer below, list the words and images that characterize the Cuzak family and their life on their farm. Choose the images that Jim finds most appealing.



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Responding

My Antonia Books 4 and 5

Personal Response

When you reached the end of the novel, how did you feel about Antonia and Jim?

Think about your response to the **Focus Activity**. Does the character of Antonia reflect any of the words and ideas you recorded in your web? Explain.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. When Jim first returns to Nebraska after being at Harvard, what does he learn about Antonia? Why does Jim feel bitterness when Mrs. Harling says "poor Antonia"?

2. What is Antonia's response to the idea of raising her child by herself? What does her response reveal about her character?

3. Describe Antonia's life with her family at the end of the novel. How does her family life affect Jim?

Responding

My Ántonia Books 4 and 5

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. When Jim sees Ántonia for the first time after so many years, he describes her as “battered but not diminished.” What does he mean? How does her appearance reflect her character and her life?

5. In your opinion, why did Jim and Ántonia never marry? Do you believe this would have been a logical path for their relationship? Why or why not?

Literature and Writing

Critic’s Review

Play the role of literary critic, and write a review of the final chapters of the novel. To prepare for your review, ask yourself the following questions: Am I satisfied with the reunion between Jim and Ántonia? Do I feel that Ántonia is fully developed as a character by the end of the novel? Does Cather use enough details to illustrate the feelings of the main characters?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

At the end of the novel, Jim talks about “what a little circle man’s experience is.” In your group, describe how Cather brings the novel full circle to demonstrate this idea. Compare the details of the landscape and the characters of the last books with details and characters of the first book.

Learning for Life

Jim leaves Ántonia’s farm with more understanding and self-knowledge than he has had in a long time. Imagine that on his train ride back to New York he decides to make a list of goals for his life, based on his experience at the Cuzak farm. Create Jim’s list of goals. These goals can include concrete plans that he mentions, such as taking the Cuzak boys hunting, and more abstract wishes for his life, such as focusing more on the values of his youth. Include specific steps he can take toward achieving his goals.

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Letter to Frances Samland

Annie Pavelka

Before You Read

Focus Question

Think about the most significant event in your life. How could you create a short story about that event? What would make people want to read it?

Background

Willa Cather distilled much of her early life into her novels and short stories. This reading tells about the origins of *My Ántonia*. It includes a letter from Cather's friend, Annie Pavelka, who was the role model for Ántonia Shimerda in *My Ántonia*.

Responding to the Reading

1. After reading the letter, what impression do you have of its author? Why?

2. How does Pavelka describe her father and his death? What clue does the description give you about Pavelka's outlook on life?

3. **Making Connections** Based on Pavelka's letter, compare and contrast Pavelka's life with that of Ántonia Shimerda. Can you see similarities? Explain.

Write A Short Story

On a separate sheet of paper, write a short story about someone from your past. Develop the character into someone who is either strong, wise, sad, or funny.

from *The House on Mango Street*

Sandra Cisneros

Before You Read

Focus Question

Imagine what it is like to move to another country where people speak a language different from your own. What cultural barriers might you experience? How would you overcome them?

Background

In these brief readings, contemporary Latina poet and short-story writer Sandra Cisneros draws four quick sketches of present-day immigrants in the United States. Notice how she skillfully shows the emotions of the characters in only a few words.

Responding to the Reading

1. Why does the woman in "No Speak English" cry when her baby learns the commercial jingle? What does her reaction suggest about her ability to adjust to life in the United States?

2. How does Esperanza in "My Name" feel about her name? What does the name represent to her?

3. In your own words, what is the narrator saying in the first and last paragraphs of "Those Who Don't"? Why do you think the narrator ended with the statement "That is how it goes and goes"?

4. **Making Connections** In "Geraldo No Last Name," many factors alienate Geraldo from the surrounding culture. What factors might have caused *Ántonia* and her family to feel alienated in Cather's novel?

Learning for Life

With a partner, list resources that would help a newly arrived immigrant. What might the government or private businesses do to increase the chances of success for these individuals? Think about education, work, and social activities. Write a brochure listing helpful resources for newcomers to the United States.

McNamara Interview / Bonacorsi Interview

June Namias

Before You Read

Focus Question

What hopes and dreams may have been common to the different groups of people immigrating to the United States in the early 1900s?

Background

June Namias has taught history and social studies and writes for educational journals as well as poetry magazines. This reading describes the experiences of three immigrants who arrived in the United States from Ireland and Italy, respectively, in the early 1900s. Their lives in the cities and jobs in the factories provide an interesting contrast to the lives of the Bohemian farming immigrants in *My Ántonia*.

Responding to the Reading

1. Why did the immigrants in these interviews leave their home countries? What difficulties did they encounter when they arrived in the United States?

2. In your opinion, should the workers in the Lawrence mills have gone on strike? Explain your answer.

3. Do you think the immigrants in this reading found the dream they were looking for when they came to the United States? Why or why not?

4. **Making Connections** The immigrants in this reading discuss some of the discrimination they experienced. In your opinion, did the immigrant farmers in *My Ántonia* experience any discrimination? Explain.

Literature Groups

Divide your group into two teams. Have each team draw up a list of pros and cons for immigrating to the city or the country at the turn of the century. Assign one team the city and the other team the country. Debate the issue.

Willa Cather Talks of Work

Willa Cather

F. H.

Eleanor Hinman

Before You Read

Focus Question

What character traits will be necessary for you to succeed in your future career? What experiences have contributed to your building those character traits?

Background

This reading contains two personal interviews with Cather. In the first interview, from the August 10, 1913, edition of the *Philadelphia Reporter*, she discusses her favorite authors. In the second interview, from the November 6, 1921, edition of the *Lincoln Sunday Star*, she discusses early life on the Nebraska prairie, the immigrants who lived there, her writing, and the ideas behind *My Ántonia*.

Responding to the Readings

1. How did Willa Cather feel about her Bohemian and Scandinavian neighbors in Nebraska?

2. What writer does Cather admire and mention often? Why? What evidence of this author's influence do you see in Cather's work?

3. Why did Willa Cather choose to make the narrator of *My Ántonia* a young man? In your opinion, was this choice a good one?

4. **Making Connections** Based on what you have read, how might you summarize Cather's philosophy of writing?

Writing a Letter

Write a letter to a young writer as if you were Willa Cather. Try to give the same kind of advice she might give.

Atop the Mound

William Least Heat-Moon

Before You Read

Focus Question

If you could live anywhere, would you choose to live in the city or in the country? Why?

Background

Author William Least Heat-Moon is best known for his books about the U.S. countryside. He has traveled throughout the United States, interviewing small-town Americans and exploring the land. In "Atop the Mound," from his book *PrairyErth*, he reminisces about his time in Kansas and his experiences hiking across the plains.

Responding to the Reading

1. According to the author, why is it inadvisable to keep "your eye on a far goal" when walking across the prairie?

2. What does the author especially like about the prairie?

3. **Making Connections** Compare Jim Burden's first impressions of the prairie with those of William Least Heat-Moon. What do their descriptions have in common?

Learning for life

Imagine that you work for a travel agency that specializes in arranging hiking trips across the prairie. With a partner, create a short commercial persuading people to buy your Nebraska or Kansas "Prairie Get-Away" vacation package. Use details from *My Antonia* or the selection from *PrairyErth* to make people want to take the trip. Then videotape your commercial and play it for your classmates, or stage a live performance. Be sure that your commercial includes enticing visuals.