

MY ÁNTONIA



Willa Cather

With an Introduction and Notes

by Gordon Tapper

George Stade

Consulting Editorial Director



BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS
NEW YORK

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FROM THE PAGES OF *MY ÁNTONIA*

If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. (page 11)

That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep. (page 17)

The low sky was like a sheet of metal; the blond cornfields had faded out into ghostliness at last; the little pond was frozen under its stiff willow bushes. Big white flakes were whirling over everything and disappearing in the red grass. (page 42)

Whenever I saw her come up the furrow, shouting to her beasts, sunburned, sweaty, her dress open to the neck, and her throat and chest dust-plastered, I used to think of the tone in which poor M. Shimerda, who could say so little, yet managed to say so much when he exclaimed, “My Án-tonia” (page 78)

Winter lies too long in country towns. (page 110)

“I ain’t never forgot my own country.” (page 142)

She remembered home as a place where there were always too many children, a cross man and woman piling up around a sick woman. (page 174)

In that singular light every little tree and shock of wheat, every sunflower stalk and clump of snow-on-the-mountain, drew itself up high and pointed; the very clods and furrows in the fields seemed to stand up sharply. I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there. (page 192)

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 ever happen to one again. (page 197)

It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races. (page 211)

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WILLA CATHER



Willella Sibert Cather was born on December 7, 1873, in the small Virginia farming community of Winchester. When she was ten years old, her parents moved the family to the prairies of Nebraska where her father opened a farm mortgage and insurance business. Home-schooled before enrolling at the local high school, Cather had a mind of her own, changing her given name to Willa and adopting a variation of her grandmother's maiden name, Seibert, as her middle name. As a young woman she met Annie Sadilek Pavelka, a schoolmate who would later become the main character in her acclaimed novel *My Ántonia* (1918).

During Cather's studies at the University of Nebraska, she worked as a drama critic to support herself and published her first piece of short fiction, "Peter," in a Boston magazine. After graduation, her love of music and intellectual pursuits inspired her to move to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she edited the family magazine *Home Monthly*, wrote theater criticism for the *Pittsburgh Daily Leader*, and taught English and Latin in local high schools. Cather published her first short story collection, *The Troll Garden*, in 1905. She moved to New York City the following year to work for *McClure Magazine* as a writer and eventually the magazine's managing editor.

Considered one of the great figures of early-twentieth-century American literature, Willa Cather derived her inspiration from the American Midwest, which she considered her home. Never married, she cherished her many friendships, some of which she had maintained since childhood. Her intimate coterie of women writers and artists motivated Cather to produce some of her best work. Sarah Orne Jewett, a successful author from Maine whom Cather had met during her *McClure's* years, inspired her to devote herself full-time to creating literature and to write about her childhood, which she did in several novels of the prairies; one of the best known is *O Pioneers!* (1913), whose title comes from a poem by Walt Whitman. A critic of the rise of materialism, Cather addressed the social impact of the developing industrial age in *A Lost Lady* (1923), which was made into a film starring Barbara Stanwyck. For *One of Ours* (1922), a novel about World War I, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1923.

In her later years Cather produced some of her most recognized work. For *Death Comes for Archbishop* (1927) she won a gold medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1931 she received the Prix Femina Americaine for *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), a collection of short stories. Two years after publishing her last novel, *The Best Years* (1945), Willa Cather died of cerebral hemorrhage, on April 24, 1947, in New York City. A collection of short fiction, *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948), and a literary treatise, *On Writing* (1949), were published after her death. Among Cather's other accomplishments were honorary doctorate degrees from Columbia, Princeton, and Yale Universities.

THE WORLD OF WILLA CATHER AND MY *ÁNTONIA*

- 1638** Dutch explorer Peter Minuit leads Swedish immigrants to establish the first Swedish colony in Delaware Bay.
- 1848** The California Gold Rush stimulates emigration from Scandinavia to the U.S. Midwest.
- 1855** Walt Whitman publishes the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poems he will expand in several editions before his death in 1892; his poem “Pioneers! O Pioneers!,” which will have an impact on Willa Cather, will be published in his collection *Drum Taps* in 1865 and incorporated into the 1881-1882 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.
- 1862** The passage of the Homestead Act encourages immigrants to cultivate the U.S. prairies; immigrant settlement in the Midwest increases significantly.
- 1873** On December 7 Willa Cather is born, the eldest of her parent’s seven children, in Winchester, Virginia, a farming village near the Blue Ridge Mountains.
- 1877** Sarah Orne Jewett, who will become one of Cather’s mentors, publishes *Deephaven*, her first collection of stories and sketches, about small-town life in New England.
- 1883** The Cathers join Willa’s grandparents and her uncle George in Webster County, Nebraska.
- 1884** The Cathers settle in Red Cloud, Nebraska, a railroad town on the prairie, where Cather’s father opens a farm mortgage and insurance business. Most of their neighbors are European immigrants. Cather enrolls in Red Cloud High School and meets Annie Sadilek Pavelka, on whom she will base the title character in her novel *My Ántonia*.
- 1890** Cather graduates from high school and moves to Lincoln to study for the entrance exam for the University of Nebraska.
- To finance her education, she works as a drama critic for the *Nebraska State Journal*.
- 1892** New York City becomes an immigration mecca as Ellis Island opens on February 14. Cather’s short story “Peter,” which will later be incorporated into *My Ántonia*, is published in a Boston magazine.
- 1895** Cather graduates from the University of Nebraska and returns to her family in Red Cloud.
- 1896** She moves to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she begins work as an editor at the *Home Monthly*, a family magazine, and as an editor and drama critic for the Pittsburgh *Daily Leader*, a newspaper.
- 1901** Cather teaches English and Latin at Central High School in Pittsburgh, then transfers to Allegheny High School, where she becomes head of the English Department.

- 1902** She visits Europe.
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- 1903** Upon her return from Europe, Cather publishes a collection of verse, *April Twilights*.
- 1905** She publishes *The Troll Garden*, her first collection of short stories; it includes “Paul’s Case,” a story, set in Pittsburgh, of a young man with tragically frustrated aspirations.
- 1906** Cather moves to New York City to write for *McClure’s Magazine*, where she eventually will become the managing editor. She moves in with Edith Lewis, a colleague at *McClure’s*.
- 1908** Cather meets Sarah Orne Jewett, a successful writer from Maine, who encourages her to pursue writing full-time and inspires her to write about her experiences in Nebraska.
- 1911** She begins to write “Alexandra,” which will become part of *O Pioneers!*, a semi-autobiographical novel about the early Scandinavian and Bohemian settlers of Nebraska.
- 1912** Cather’s first novel, *Alexander’s Bridge*, is published, and she works on “The White Mulberry Tree,” which will become another part of *O Pioneers!* She visits the Southwest for the first time.
- 1913** *O Pioneers!* is published, dedicated to Sarah Orne Jewett.
- 1915** Cather visits Mesa Verde in Colorado. *The Song of the Lark*, a psychological novel that explores the meaning of aesthetics and music, is published. Cather returns to the Southwest and visits Wyoming and Nebraska; she meets her childhood friend Annie Pavelka again.
- 1917** While living in New Hampshire, Cather writes *My Ántonia*, based on Pavelka.
- 1918** *My Ántonia* is published to critical acclaim; H. L. Mencken calls it the greatest piece of fiction written by a woman in America.
- 1920** American women win the right to vote with passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Cather publishes *Youth and the Bright Medusa*, a collection of eight short stories; *The Nation* hails it as a representation of “the triumph of mind over Nebraska.”
- 1922** Cather publishes *One of Ours*, a novel about World War I.
- 1923** Cather wins the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*. She criticizes the developing industrial age in the novel *A Lost Lady*.
- 1925** Cather publishes *The Professor’s House*, a novel that juxtaposes a teacher’s middle-aged disillusionment and his memories of the work of a brilliant student.
- 1926** She publishes another novel, *My Mortal Enemy*, in which the heroine regrets the choices she has made.
- Cather publishes the historical novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, set in the American

- 1927** Southwest. The Hollywood film version of *A Lost Lady*, starring actress Irene Rich, premieres in Red Cloud; a second version, starring Barbara Stanwyck, will be released in 1934.
- 1930** Cather receives the gold medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.
- 1931** She publishes *Shadows on the Rock*, a collection of three short stories for which she is awarded the Prix Femina Americaine in 1933.
- 1932** She publishes more short stories in *Obscure Destinies*.
- 1935** She publishes *Lucy Gayheart*, a novel that turns on the tension between artistic values and those of hometown life.
- 1936** Cather publishes *Not Under Forty*, a collection of literary critiques.
- 1940** She publishes *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.
- 1945** *The Best Years*, Cather's last novel, is published.
- 1947** On April 24 Willa Cather dies of a cerebral hemorrhage in her Madison Avenue apartment in New York City. She is buried in New Hampshire.
- 1948** *The Old Beauty and Others*, a collection of Cather's shorter fiction, is published.
- 1949** Her literary treatise *On Writing* is published.
- 1974** Cather is inducted into the Hall of Great Westerners in Oklahoma City. The Nature Conservancy buys a 210-acre plot of grassland south of Red Cloud and dedicates it as the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie.
- 1988** Cather is inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca, New York.

INTRODUCTION



IT WAS NOT UNTIL the age of forty-five and the publication of her fourth novel, *My Ántonia* (1918) that Willa Cather established herself as a kind of poet laureate of the American prairie. Although she had been publishing poems, short fiction, and essays since the early 1890s as a precocious undergraduate at the University of Nebraska, Cather endured a long apprenticeship of spadework, first in Pittsburgh and then in New York, as a teacher, editor, and journalist. In 1912, after six frenetic years as the managing editor at *McClure's Magazine*, Cather resigned in order to launch her career as a novelist. Her first effort, *Alexander's Bridge*, was a failure in Cather's later estimation, but the Jamesian tale of adultery set in Boston and London provided the impetus for three important novels written in quick succession, that draw heavily upon Cather's childhood on the Nebraska prairie: *Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and *My Ántonia*.

By the time *My Ántonia* appeared, the influential H. L. Mencken was already one of Cather's champions, but he was not alone in his superlative reaction to what he considered not only Cather's most successful novel yet, but "one of the best that any American has ever done" ("My Ántonia," p. 10; see "For Further Reading"). When Cather died in 1947, her published works included twelve novels, three collections of stories, one book of verse, a volume of essays, and a great deal of uncollected prose, much of which engages subject-matter far removed in time and space from her Nebraska-inspired fiction. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), for instance, is her much-admired historical novel based on the circumstances of a nineteenth-century Catholic mission in New Mexico, while *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), set in seventeenth-century Quebec, is even more remote from the midwestern plains. Yet it is with her prairie trilogy—and *My Ántonia* in particular—that Cather defined her literary voice.

When Cather began working on the stories that would become the nucleus of *O Pioneers!*, writing about farmers in Nebraska amounted to a fairly severe breach of decorum, at least in the eyes of certain members of the literary establishment. As Cather herself put it:

The 'novel of the soil' had not then come into fashion in this country. The drawing room was considered the proper setting for a novel, and the only characters worth reading about were small people or clever people (*Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, p. 963).

Cather was fortunate, however, that a group of iconoclastic young critics were clamoring for American writers to liberate themselves from a "genteel tradition" of high culture ruled by European canons of taste and subject matter. In such works as *The Wine of the Puritans* (1908) and *American Coming-of-Age* (1915), Van Wyck Brooks argued that the United States was suffering from a cultural malaise produced by an unhealthy gulf between these genteel pretensions and the social realities of American life. In his view, this bifurcated condition reflected a longstanding tension between the country's material achievements and its spiritual ideals, a tension symbolized by two American types often at odds with one another. The practical ethos that transformed the United States into an industrialized nation was embodied by the "Pioneer" type, while the more reflective "Puritan" spoke

for the country's foundational desire to create a utopian community. Brooks and others were impatiently on the lookout for writers who would usher in an era of cultural rejuvenation by following the example of Walt Whitman, who they believed had reconciled these opposing strains of the American character through his transformation of vernacular materials into a radically new kind of poetry imbued with a transcendent vision of the democratic self.

It is not surprising, then, that Cather's early novels were so well received, since their protagonists tend to fuse the qualities of the pioneer and the puritan. Set in marginal locales far from the centers of genteel culture, these works document the harsh realities of rural life and commemorate the generation of settlers who, in Cather's words, "subdued the wild land and broke up the virgin prairie" (quoted in Lee, *Willa Cather*, p. 8). Part of what makes Cather such an important voice in American literature is that she reproduces the national mythology of the frontier while simultaneously revising it by placing indomitable women at the center of the cultural script. Conquering the land, however, is only the most obvious part of the story. What is probably most distinctive about the representation of the countryside in *My Ántonia* is the way in which Cather dwells on the more ineffable empowerment of the self as it gives itself up to an overwhelming, sublime landscape.

When Jim Burden, the narrator of *My Ántonia*, first arrives on the prairie, he is profoundly shaken by the featureless void into which he feels he has been marooned:

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.... I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction.... 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 (p. 11).

In this early scene, Jim is so disoriented by an unfamiliar landscape of absence that he feels obliterated, not uplifted, by its vastness. Like many other characters of modern literature, he is radically alone: "Outside man's jurisdiction" and beyond the power of prayer, he has been plunged into a nihilistic world where things "did not matter." Within just a few pages, however, Jim's alienation modulates into ecstasy. Captivated by the perpetual motion of the "shaggy, red grass," he realizes that the "whole country seemed, somehow, to be running" (p. 16). Rather than being terrified by the sensation that he has traversed some kind of boundary, he becomes exhilarated: "I wanted to walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world, which could not be very far away" (p. 16). Finally, he gives in completely to the loss of self that is provoked by the formless landscape, within which he feels not like an individual but a mere "something":

I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more.... Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great (p. 17).

Relinquishing oneself to "something complete and great" sounds more like Buddhist enlightenment than the true grit of an American pioneer. Jim's epiphany, however, is very much in the American grain, since it closely resembles what is arguably the central passage in the literature of American Transcendentalism, in which Ralph Waldo Emerson declares, "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all" (*Essays and Lectures*, p. 10).

It is important to keep in mind that Cather has created Jim as a middle-aged narrator living in Ne

York who is looking back with nostalgia at his youth on the prairie. In some sense, then, the epiphany in this early scene is experienced not only by a ten-year-old boy, but also by an older man coming to terms with his mortality through an act of memory. As the novel progresses, the mood becomes increasingly retrospective, since Jim becomes more and more distant from his original relationships with both the landscape and Antonia, the companion of his youth. An important turning point in Jim's relation to the past occurs while he is a college student studying the classics. Struck by Virgil's "melancholy reflection" that "the best days are the first to flee" (p. 159), Jim associates this sentiment of loss with his own memories of the prairie, which he finds crowding upon him during his studies. Virgil's phrase, "Optima dies ... prima fugit," which is also the epigraph for *My Ántonia*, is taken from the *Georgics*, a pastoral depiction of rural life. With this reference to Virgil, Cather places her novel in dialogue with the traditions of pastoral literature, which tend to idealize country life as simple, virtuous, and pure. Some pastoral works are also deeply elegiac, as they lament the gap between the "best days" of their legendary Arcadia and the less noble, even corrupt present. At this point in the novel when Jim reads the classics, childhood, along with the untamed landscape and memory, become his Arcadia, a mythical spot in time to which he yearns to return. As Jim says after an emotional parting from Antonia, "I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end" (p. 192) on the prairie. Whether or not Cather shares her narrator's nostalgia has been a matter of critical debate, but there is no question that Cather asks readers to ponder how the pastoral idea of a utopian garden has affected American attitudes to the landscape and history of the nation.

Because the protagonists of Cather's American pastoral are primarily immigrant farmers, her work also resonates with the important and often contentious debate during the 1910s over immigration to the United States, which surged to record levels between 1880 and World War I. In the opening pages of *My Ántonia*, the reader is almost as surprised as Jim to hear a "foreign tongue" (p. 10) upon completing his journey from Virginia deep into the American heartland of Nebraska. Eventually coming into contact with a wide range of immigrants, including transplanted Bohemians (Czechs), Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, and Russians, Jim resists the xenophobia casually expressed by his traveling companion, who believes one is "likely to get diseases from foreigners" (p. 10). This kind of animus against immigrant populations, which became prominent during the 1910s, was voiced by such notorious racist ideologues as Lothrop Stoddard and Madison Grant, who in 1920 claimed that immigrants would "in time drive us out of our own land by mere force of breeding" (quoted in Michaels, *Our America*, p. 28). Arrayed against such nativist views were figures like Randolph Bourne, who strove to remind his fellow Americans that "the Anglo-Saxon was merely the first immigrant." In his important 1916 essay "Trans-National America," Bourne even went so far as to challenge the widely accepted notion that immigrants should be completely assimilated into the "melting pot" of American society: "America is coming to be, not a nationality but a trans-nationality—a weaving back and forth, with the other lands, of many threads of all sizes and colors" (p. 262). In certain respects anticipating contemporary notions of a multicultural society, Bourne believed that the United States would be strengthened by immigrant communities that preserved their ethnic autonomy.

In her prairie novels, Cather echoes this conviction that immigration would enrich the nation, and this may be one reason why Bourne was so enthusiastic when he reviewed *My Ántonia*. *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* are set among the immigrant farmers who struggle to cultivate the "Divide," the region near Red Cloud, Nebraska, to which Cather herself relocated with her family in 1883. In both novels, Cather favors the children of immigrants who preserve their parents' way of life. Alexandra Bergson, the Swedish heroine of *O Pioneers!*, endures lean years to become one of the mo-

prosperous farmers in the county, but instead of Americanizing like her unappealing brothers, she holds onto Scandinavian folkways. Her home is furnished with “things her mother brought from Sweden” (*Early Novels and Stories*, p. 178), her housekeepers are Swedish girls looking to marry her Swedish farmhands, and she protects Ivar, the old Norwegian man “despised” by assimilated members of the family because, as he puts it, “I do not wear shoes, because I do not cut my hair, and because I have visions” (p. 182).

In some ways this persistence of the “old country” as a cultural force is even more striking in *My Ántonia*. At the end of the novel, Antonia presides over a large family steeped in the culture of her native Bohemia. Like herself, her husband, Anton Cuzak, is a Bohemian immigrant, and since Bohemian is the language spoken at home, their children do not learn English until they go to school. During Jim Burden’s culminating visit to the Cuzak homestead, Ántonia’s children boast that “Americans don’t have” delicacies like their spiced plums and *kolaches* (Czech pastries), and one of her boys plays “Bohemian airs” on the violin that Ántonia’s father had brought with him when he emigrated to Nebraska.

What is most interesting about this portrait of an unassimilated immigrant household is Cather’s somewhat paradoxical suggestion that these kinds of families will generate an American identity still in the process of being born. In fact, Cather raises this idea that the United States remains an unformed nation in the very first chapter of the novel. Recalling his first sight of the uncultivated Nebraska landscape, Jim feels that it is “not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made” (p. 11). At the end of the novel, when Jim calls his beloved Antonia “a rich mine of life like the founders of early races” (p. 211), one cannot help thinking that Cather is elevating Antonia into a mythological figure who is both Earth Mother and the progenitor of an inchoate American culture.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, many American writers believed that they could rejuvenate the national self-image by placing such nineteenth-century figures as Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Herman Melville at the center of a newly configured American literary tradition now taken for granted. In 1925 Cather staked her own claim to a revised national canon, asserting that the “three American books which have the possibility of a long, long life” (quoted in Orvell, “Time Change, and the Burden of Revision in *My Ántonia*,” p. 31) are Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country Girl* and *The Pointed Firs*. Like Cather’s prairie novels, all of these works are firmly grounded in regionally specific American subject matter, and Cather is implicitly claiming a place for herself in this distinctive American tradition of writing. Including Jewett’s 1896 work in this lineage was provocative, not only because of the tendency to marginalize women writers, but also because Jewett was not at the time considered a major figure. Cather was not uniformly friendly, however, to women writers, many of whom she found too “feminine.” She admired those she considered truly great, such as Jane Austen and George Eliot, but she also declared, “I have not much faith in women in fiction. They have a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable” (*The World and the Parish*, p. 276). Cather was, for instance, quite critical of Kate Chopin, going so far as to attack *The Awakening* (1899) for its “unbalanced idealism” (*Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, p. 912). Although she created strong female characters in her prairie novels, Cather was more interested in asserting her right to participate in a male literary tradition than in promoting an alternative female canon.

By including Jewett in her very selective pantheon of literary predecessors, Cather was paying tribute to a woman whose literary example and personal friendship played a significant role at a

important juncture in Cather's life. Although Jewett and Cather did not meet until the year before Jewett's death in 1909, their friendship and correspondence should not be underestimated. For one thing, Jewett was instrumental in persuading Cather to leave *McClure's* in order to devote herself to what Jewett called "the thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper" (quoted in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, p. 849)—that is, to literature and not to the journalism upon which Cather herself feared her creative energies were being squandered. Crucially, Jewett also encouraged Cather to draw more directly upon her formative years in Nebraska. Like the cultural critics in revolt against the genteel tradition, Jewett was a strong proponent of grounding literature in the local and the ordinary, and her unsentimental depictions of the quietly heroic women of rural Maine in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* are unmistakable models for the resilient heroines of Cather's prairie novels. When she met Jewett, Cather was still trying to emulate the "transatlantic" fiction of Henry James. Jewett, however, predicted that "one day you will write about your own country. In the meantime, get all you can. One must know the world so well before one can know the parish" (*Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, p. 942).

It took quite some time before Cather returned in her fiction to her childhood "parish," Nebraska's Webster County. Like the narrator of *My Ántonia*, Cather was displaced from her original Virginia home as a young child and taken to a recently settled region of Nebraska. After about a year, the Cathers moved to nearby Red Cloud, which is the prototype for all the small towns in Cather's prairie novels: Hanover in *O Pioneers!*; Black Hawk, to which Jim moves with his grandparents in *My Ántonia*; and Moonstone, the Colorado town where Thea Kronborg begins her life as an artist in *The Song of the Lark*. In both town and countryside, Cather was intrigued by the foreign immigrants who play such a central role in these novels. The story of the Shimerdas that dominates the first section of *My Ántonia* recapitulates many of the travails faced by the Sadileks, the Czech family who lived near the Cathers on the Divide. Like the forlorn Mr. Shimerda, Frank Sadilek was a violinist who committed suicide during a brutal winter, and his daughter Annie, the source for Antonia, gave birth to a daughter after being abandoned by a manipulative railroad man who had promised to marry her.

My Ántonia reproduces these and many other details of Cather's early life, though it is not as intensely autobiographical as *The Song of the Lark*. For one thing, although Cather and Jim both moved in with their grandparents on the Divide, Cather was accompanied by her parents and was not, like Jim, an orphan. On the other hand, Cather remembers that when she was first driven to her grandparents' farm at the age of nine, she felt as if she "had come to the end of everything—it was a kind of erasure of personality" (*The Kingdom of Art*, p. 448). As we have seen, this feeling of oblivion reappears in fictional form in Jim's initial encounter with the Divide. Like Cather, he remembers feeling as if he had been "blotted out" beneath an alien sky. "I did not believe," he says, "that my dead father and mother were watching me from up there" (p. 11). Cather does not dwell on Jim's orphaned condition, but this fictional premise serves as a metaphor for the profound sense of loss that Cather herself experienced upon first encountering the "parish" that would become such an important source for her writing.

In one of Jewett's most important letters to Cather, she addresses the relationship between fiction and its autobiographical sources in words that would resonate deeply with the narrative design of *My Ántonia*. Jewett was concerned that Cather had not yet learned to see her "backgrounds ... from the outside,—you stand right in the middle of each of them when you write, without having the standpoint of the looker-on" (quoted in Lee, p. 22). In *My Ántonia*, Cather makes just this kind of effort to see her experience "from the outside" by inventing Jim Burden, the transformed version of herself who serv

as the first-person narrator. In addition to giving Jim many of her own experiences, Cather sets him on a journey into his past that echoes the imaginative reconstruction of her own childhood. In the introduction that establishes the narrative framework for *My Ántonia*, we learn that Jim is a very successful middle-aged man—"legal counsel for one of the great Western railways" (p. 3)—living in New York. Like Cather, who also lived most of her adult life in Manhattan, he is therefore geographically and culturally remote from his small-town origins. As Jewett suggested, Cather's appreciation for her provincial "parish" would be made possible by her knowledge of the wider world, and Cather places Jim in a similar position. But if Jim represents a fictional alter ego who allows Cather to observe her own return to the past from the "standpoint of the looker-on," Cather begins the novel by very explicitly distinguishing herself from her narrator.

Cather revisits her Nebraska childhood in several of her early novels, but it is only in *My Ántonia* that she creates an intriguing dialogue between herself and one of her characters, which occurs in a brief introductory section of the novel. Instead of writing from the point of view of Jim, as she does everywhere else in the novel, Cather adopts the voice of a first-person narrator who meets Jim by chance aboard a train. Although she never names this speaker, Cather suggests that it is yet another version of herself, since she very unobtrusively reveals that the narrator is both a woman and an experienced writer. (In order to distinguish Cather the author from this female narrator, who never reappears in the novel proper, many critics refer to the narrator as "Cather.") The narrator and Jim are old friends who grew up together in a small Nebraska town, and during their reminiscences they talk fondly of Antonia, who "seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood" (p. 5).

Although Jim and the narrator agree that Antonia somehow embodies the essence of their childhood, their individual relationships to her differ in several critical ways. Unlike the narrator, who has lost touch with her, Jim has reestablished a close friendship with Antonia. When Jim expresses his surprise that the narrator has "never written anything about Ántonia," the narrator confesses that she had never known Ántonia as well as he had. The two then agree that they will both try recording their memories of this "central figure" of their past. Jim cautions, however, that he is not a practiced writer (implying that "Cather" is) and will therefore have to write about Antonia "in a direct way, and say a great deal about myself. It's through myself that I knew and felt her" (p. 5). In response, the narrator draws attention to the distinction between their male and female perspectives:

I told him that how he knew her and felt her was exactly what I most wanted to know about Antonia. He had had opportunities that I, as a little girl who watched her come and go, had not. (p. 5).

On one level, the narrator is simply trying to reassure Jim that there is nothing wrong with writing about himself in the process of remembering Antonia, but Cather also seems to be offering an indirect justification for adopting a male persona in her novel. Behind the essentially transparent mask of "Cather" the narrator, Cather the author is asserting that the female perspective of "a little girl" will not do Antonia justice, because it does not allow her to understand Antonia as the object of someone's desire. Cather thought of Ántonia as her heroine, yet she gives the reader very little access to Ántonia's inner life, which is only conveyed secondhand through Jim's perspective. By allowing Jim to control the narrative, Cather distances the reader from Antonia, but it is precisely because Cather wants to imagine a man's feelings for Ántonia that she wrote the novel from a man's point of view.

Since Cather herself deliberately blurred the line between autobiography and fiction, her decision

write in a man's voice raises interesting questions about the connections between *My Ántonia* and Cather's sexuality. For many years Cather's lesbianism was an open secret treated with decorous euphemisms by her critics and biographers. Although it was well known that all of Cather's intimate relationships were with women, it was not until the 1970s that critics began to speak frankly about Cather's sexual orientation and its relevance to her fiction. Cather never hid her attachments with women, though she guarded her privacy carefully and shied away from publicly identifying herself as a lesbian. On the other hand, during her adolescence and early years in college she made quite a spectacle of herself by wearing her hair short, dressing in men's clothing, and calling herself "William." In addition to flaunting this masculine appearance, she became deeply infatuated with Louise Pound, her fellow student at the University of Nebraska, to whom she wrote what can only be called love letters, several of which survive. Cather's adult life revolved around two women: Isabelle McClung, the beautiful daughter of a distinguished judge who was Cather's most intimate companion between 1899 and 1916, and Edith Lewis, a copyeditor at *McClure's* and fellow Nebraskan with whom Cather lived for forty years in Manhattan.

Whether or not Cather ever engaged in sexual relations with a woman remains unclear; in fact, some critics view Cather's relationships as anachronistic examples of the romantic friendships between women that were quite common and socially accepted during the nineteenth century. Yet even a critic like Joan Acocella, who objects to reading Cather's fiction strictly through the lens of her sexuality, concedes that Cather was "homosexual in her feelings," though she believes she was "celibate in her actions" (*Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*, p. 48). What is not in dispute is that Cather felt shocked and betrayed when Isabelle McClung decided to marry the violinist Jan Hambourg in 1911. Cather eventually restored a friendship with Isabelle, but she considered the marriage "a devastating loss" (Robinson, *Willa*, p. 205). Since it was only several months after this personal catastrophe that Cather began writing *My Ántonia*, it is tempting to read the powerful sense of loss that informs Jim Burden's recollections as a reflection of Cather's depressed mood in the wake of Isabelle's marriage. In the most passionate scene between Jim and Antonia, Jim recalls parting from Ántonia for what would turn out to be a twenty-year separation:

About us it was growing darker and darker, and I had to look hard to see her face, which I mean always to carry with me; the closest, realest face, under all the shadows of women's faces, at the very bottom of my memory (p. 193).

Given the knowledge of Cather's loss of Isabelle, it is hard not to see the resemblance between this loss and Jim's separation from Antonia, especially because, as we have seen, Jim is in many ways Cather's fictional surrogate. At a time when Cather felt cut off from her intimate companion, she may have decided to speak through the persona of Jim Burden in order to more openly express her desire for women. Like Jim, preoccupied with "the shadows of women's faces," she must have felt that life was "growing darker and darker."

On one level, then, Jim's affections are a fictional echo of Cather's emotions for women, but it would be a mistake to simplify *My Ántonia* into nothing more than a covert confession of homosexual desire. By leaving Jim's inner life only partially exposed, Cather instead invites the reader to interpret his sometimes puzzling behavior in several ways, including the possibility that he is in conflict with his desires. *My Ántonia* is about a romance that never happens, and one of the most interesting things about the novel is that Cather prevents her speaker from disclosing why he never marries Antonia or becomes her lover. In fact, he himself may not know the reason. Even the title, which promises a homage to "my Ántonia," the narrator's beloved, raises the expectation of a love affair. Yet in spite of

all the conventional signs that Jim is indeed infatuated with his lively Czech neighbor, Cather never lets the incipient romance come to fruition. At the very end of the novel, Jim finally offers his most explicit declaration of love, though instead of telling Antonia, he addresses the children Antonia had had with another man, her husband, Anton Cuzak: "You see I was very much in love with your mother once, and I know there's nobody like her" (p. 207). With this statement, Cather makes overt what Jim's memoir often implies and thus confirms the reader's suspicion that Jim has all along been in love with Antonia. Yet because this statement comes after a twenty-year separation, and because it is not spoken to Antonia, it only serves to underscore the unconsummated state of their romance.

An intimacy quickly springs up between Jim and Antonia shortly after they arrive in the farming region outside Black Hawk. Antonia plays the immigrant eager to succeed in her adopted country and in the first scene between them, she impatiently asks Jim to teach her English. Jim, all but ten, readily complies; after all, he is completely captivated by her brown eyes, which are "big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood" (p. 20). As the months pass, their bond intensifies as they learn to love the wild landscape so new to both of them, but Jim also grows irritated with the fourteen-year-old girl's "superior tone" and longs to prove his nascent manhood. Jim gets his chance to show her that he "was a boy and she was a girl" (p. 31) when they are surprised one day by an immense rattlesnake. Thinking quickly, Jim kills the snake, and Antonia is indeed very impressed, calling Jim, in her imperfect English, "just like big mans" (p. 33). Thus are the seeds sown, thinks the reader, for the romance promised by the title as the two characters mature into young adults. More readers will also see that Cather has transposed to her American Eden the biblical scene in which the serpent introduces sexuality into the lives of Adam and Eve. In Cather's version, Jim kills off the serpent before it has the chance to tempt Antonia, which perhaps means that our protagonists will be more fortunate than their ancient forebears—or is it less?—and not be expelled from their prairie garden, their innocent pastoral romance. Yet Cather's understated reenactment of the Fall also suggests that the emotional bond between Jim and Antonia will never be consummated by physical passion, which is, of course, exactly how things turn out.

As the story shifts away from the Divide to Black Hawk, Cather continues to tantalize readers with the prospect of a love affair as her two protagonists emerge into adulthood. Like the other daughters of immigrant farmers working to improve their situation, Antonia secures a position as a "hired girl" for one of the well-established Black Hawk families. In Jim's opinion, these "country girls" are "almost a race apart" (p. 120) from the daughters of the prosperous town merchants because of the physical hardships and psychological testing they endured as their families struggled to cultivate the land. When dancing becomes the center of social life for the town's youth, these vigorous young women catch the eye of many sons of the "good families." Once Antonia is discovered by these other young men, Jim begins to describe her in more overtly erotic terms: "She was lovely to see, with her eyes shining, and her lips always a little parted when she danced" (p. 134).

But if Antonia's appeal for Jim acquires a new dimension, Cather also undercuts the romantic plot with an almost farcical scene that dramatizes both the depth of Jim's attachment to Antonia and the limits of their intimacy. After escorting Antonia home from an evening dance, Jim asks for a goodnight kiss:

"Why, sure, Jim." A moment later she drew her face away and whispered indignantly, "Why, Jim! You know you ain't right to kiss me like that. I'll tell your grandmother on you!"

"Lena Lingard lets me kiss her," I retorted, "and I'm not half as fond of her as I am of you" (

Jim attempts to seize the moment by behaving the way he knows a man should with the woman he desires, but Cather won't let the boy-man have his way. Instead, Antonia easily repulses the advance and warns Jim not to "get mixed up" with Lena, who has a reputation for letting boys go too far. Responding to Antonia's protective-ness, Jim reiterates his affection for her and indulges in a childish fit of pique:

"I don't care anything about any of them but you," I said. "And you'll always treat me like a kid I suppose."

She laughed and threw her arms around me. "I expect I will, but you're a kid I'm awful fond of, anyhow!" (p. 135)

Much is implied beneath the studied innocence of this dialogue. Antonia and Jim exchange declarations of affection, but they do not follow the expected script of a male-female relationship. For one thing, Antonia assumes a masculine posture simply by maintaining firm control over the situation. Such confident, un-ladylike behavior is consistent with the way in which she responds earlier in the novel to her father's suicide, when she eagerly takes on the strenuous task of plowing the fields and boasts that she "can work like mans now" (p. 76). Jim, on the other hand, appears somewhat feminized as he acquiesces without putting up a struggle. Of course, because Jim is four years younger than Antonia, this scene of desexualized affection comes across as completely plausible, but it is important to keep in mind that Cather may have created this age difference precisely in order to prevent her two protagonists from relating in the expected romantic fashion.

The extent of Jim's passivity is brought home once one realizes that Cather is playing off this encounter against a very similar scene that occurs only a few pages earlier. At the close of another evening of dancing, another young man, Harry Paine, also tries to kiss Antonia, but he responds to her resistance quite aggressively: "he caught her and kissed her until she got one hand free and slapped him" (p. 125). Cather does not by any means suggest that Paine's behavior deserves praise, especially since it fails to win over Antonia and Paine disappears from the narrative after this brief episode. Even in its very presence, though, this relatively minor incident reminds the reader of the gender norm, besides which Jim's acquiescence stands out more sharply. In spite of Jim's failed attempt to play the lover, he does not recall this as a moment of thwarted desire. Instead, his emotions for Antonia gush forth with an exclamation: "Her warm, sweet face, her kind arms, and the true heart in her; she was, oh, she was still my Antonia!" (p. 135). It is the refreshing honesty of Antonia's emotions that Jim remembers, not his inability to transform their friendship into a mature erotic relationship.

Looking back at this moment, then, Jim does not seem at all rueful. And yet Cather closes this chapter of their adolescence with a memory that points toward complex psychological forces at work below the surface of the narrative. In addition to the dances and their erotically charged aftermath, Jim recalls two recurring dreams he used to have during this period of his life, one about Antonia and another about Lena, her sensuous foil:

Toward morning I used to have pleasant dreams: sometimes Tony and I were out in the country sliding down straw-stacks as we used to do; climbing up the yellow mountains over and over and slipping down the smooth sides into soft piles of chaff.

One dream I dreamed a great many times, and it was always the same. I was in a harvest-field full of shocks, and I was lying against one of them. Lena Lingard came across the stubble barefoot, in a short skirt, with a curved reaping-hook in her hand, and she was flushed like the

dawn, with a kind of luminous rosiness all about her. She sat down beside me, turned to me with a soft sigh and said, "Now they are all gone, and I can kiss you as much as I like."

I used to wish I could have this flattering dream about Antonia, but I never did (pp. 135-136).

Here Jim does indeed regret that Antonia remains out of erotic reach, but the reader must supply much of the meaning that informs this regret, since Jim remains quite reticent about his inner life. In the first dream, Antonia is associated with innocent games of childhood in which gender difference seems to be completely absent. They are like two boys at play, especially because Jim calls Antonia "Tony," the nickname Cather deploys elsewhere in the novel when she wishes to emphasize Antonia's androgyny, such as when she works as a field hand on her family's farm. Cather may be suggesting that this dream represents Jim's regressive desire to return not only to the presexual world of childhood, but also to the protective, womblike "soft piles of chaff" into which he and Antonia come to rest. Yet it is impossible to miss the signs that these games are also figures for erotic pleasure, with their emphasis on the activities of "sliding," "climbing," and "slipping." Jim does not seem to be entirely aware of the erotic symbolism, and his frustration appears to stem from the fact that even in his dreams, his desire for Antonia is censored by unconscious forces that he himself may not comprehend.

In sharp contrast with the dream about Antonia, the second dream is suffused with the power of feminine sexuality. The explicitly erotic focus on Lena's physicality—her bare feet, her "short skirt," her "flushed" appearance—is driven home by her frankly expressed desire to kiss Jim. Although it is perfectly clear why Jim would like to picture Antonia in such an erotic scenario, there is something puzzling about Jim's apparent lack of awareness that his dream conjoins the "luminous rosiness" of Lena's sexuality with images of death that are far from "flattering." The stubble fields and "reaping hook," which place Lena into the role of the grim reaper, are unmistakable allusions to mythic symbols of mortality. Exercising her characteristic restraint, Cather conceals as much as she reveals about Jim's psyche through these dreams. He appears both enticed and threatened by sex, since Lena's "reaping hook" indicates that on an unconscious level, Jim perceives her as a castrating figure.

In Jim's reaction to these dreams, he seems oblivious to his own conflicted eroticism, but in one of the more striking episodes of the novel, Cather places Jim in a position in which he has no choice but to be revolted by sexuality. When Jim stands in for Antonia one night at the Cutters' house, he becomes the victim of a sexual assault that had been meant for her. Finding Jim in Antonia's bed, the notorious womanizer Will Cutter is furious, since he had planned to rape Antonia, his "hired girl." Jim escapes Cutter's explosive violence, but not without sustaining injuries that he finds extremely embarrassing, presumably because they make him feel as if he himself has been the victim of rape. He is so ashamed that he forces his grandmother to keep the incident a secret, since he is afraid of what "the old men down at the drugstore" (p. 149) would think. Strangely enough, Jim is quite angry with Antonia, whom he had been trying to protect, because "she had let me in for all this disgustingness" (p. 149). Through this incident, Cather forces Jim to temporarily occupy the position of a woman who becomes the target of male sexuality run amok.

This provocative and peculiar turn in the narrative can be interpreted many different ways. On the one hand, Cather once again emphasizes Jim's discomfort with sexuality, but she also destabilizes the reader's perception of gender through a tangled crisscrossing of roles. Jim has once again been feminized, but this time he rebels against the threat to his masculinity. At the same time, however, Cutter's grotesque masculinity repels Jim, leaving him in a kind of androgynous limbo. Jim, Antonia

and other appealing figures are often portrayed as androgynous characters, but this is the only moment in the novel in which Cather expresses discomfort with even this hybridized gender.

Jim's relationship with *Ántonia* is fated to remain asexual, and this status is reinforced by the contrast Cather draws between their friendship and Jim's dealings with Lena. In addition to juxtaposing these two very different women as objects of Jim's unconscious dream life, Cather plays them against each other in several key scenes, perhaps most notably in an idyllic summer picnic Jim enjoys with a group of "hired girls" shortly before he leaves Black Hawk to attend college. During the picnic, *Ántonia* and Jim ensconce themselves beneath a protective enclosure of elder bushes and conduct a very private conversation about *Ántonia*'s parents. Suddenly appearing above them, "almost as flushed as she had been" in Jim's dream, Lena intrudes upon their privacy and proceeds to "demolish [their] flowery pagoda" (p. 143). Jim recalls that in response to Lena's flirtatious effort to help remove sand from his hair, "*Ántonia* pushed her away" and said, "sharply," "You'll never get out like that" (p. 144). In spite of this underlying tension, Lena and *Ántonia* never aggressively compete for Jim's attention. Rather than presenting the predictable melodrama of a romantic triangle, Cather merely suggests that complex emotional dynamics are at work among these three friends.

In one sense, Lena appears to win this understated contest, since it is she and not *Antonia* who enjoys a romance with Jim during his time as a college student in Lincoln. Although Cather hints at full-blown sexual intimacy, she leaves the extent of their relations characteristically ambiguous. Nevertheless, in the section of the novel that bears her name, Lena effectively supplants *Antonia*, removing her almost completely from both Jim and the reader's view. But if Lena is the only woman with whom we see Jim relate as a lover, the affair itself is treated as an immature phase that Jim needs to get over. As his mentor Gaston Cleric tells him, "You won't recover yourself while you are playing about with this handsome Norwegian" (p. 173). Jim himself acknowledges that ever since Lena had disturbed the "serious mood" of his classical studies, he had been "drifting." Through various means, Cather suggests that the couple is only "playing" at love, that it is a game lacking the emotional depth of the relationship with *Antonia*. Jim and Lena are deeply moved, for instance, by *Camille*, the famous play in which two ill-suited lovers not unlike themselves are forced to separate. Yet when their own real-life romance comes to an end, they do not appear to suffer much heartbreak at all. Jim gets to act like a man with Lena, but the relationship is never more than a distraction for him, and Lena treats it as a pleasing dalliance that will not lead to marriage.

It is important to keep in mind that when Jim narrates *My Ántonia*, he is a married middle-aged man. In the introduction to the novel, Cather hints that Jim is unhappy in this marriage, that it is one of the "disappointments" (p. 4) he has endured during the twenty-year separation from *Antonia*. But since Jim himself never speaks about his marriage, it is during his affair with Lena that he comes closest to describing himself as a suitor—a highly ironic circumstance, since Lena is quite categorical about her lack of interest in marriage. As she says in her very first appearance in the novel, "I've seen a good deal of married life, and I don't care for it" (p. 100). Just in case we've forgotten this, Lena reiterates her aversion to marriage during their affair in Lincoln. To a somewhat incredulous Jim, she insists, "I'm not going to marry anybody... Men are all right for friends, but as soon as you marry them they turn into cranky old fathers" (p. 174). As Jim later learns, Lena remains true to these sentiments and never marries. Instead, she relocates to San Francisco to be near her old friend Tiny Soderball, another former hired girl who made her fortune in the Alaska gold rush.

Ántonia wins the more important contest by becoming the inspiration for Jim's nostalgic narrative. Even so, Jim's relationship with *Antonia* remains ambiguous, in part because it is so bound up with

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