

ANALYSIS

My Antonia (1918)

Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

Wallace Stegner

If, as is often said, every novelist is born to write one thing, then the one thing that Willa Cather was born to write was first realized in *My Antonia* (1918). In that novel the people are the Bohemian and Swedish immigrants she had known in her childhood on the Nebraska plains; the prose is the prose of her maturity—flexible, evocative, already tending to a fastidious bareness but not yet gone pale and cool; the novelistic skill is of the highest, the structure at once free and intricately articulated; the characters stretch into symbolic suggestiveness as trees cast shadows in the long light of a prairie evening; the theme is the fully exposed, complexly understood theme of the American orphan or exile, struggling to find a place between an old world left behind and a new world not yet created.

But to say that Willa Cather found her subject and her manner and her theme in *My Antonia* is not to say that she found them easily. When *My Antonia* appeared, Miss Cather was forty-five years old. She had already had one career as a teacher and another as an editor, and she had published a good many short stories and three other novels. The first of these, *Alexander's Bridge* (1911) was a nearly total mistake—a novel laid in London and dealing with the attenuated characters and fragile ethical problems of the genteel tradition. In writing it, Miss Cather later remarked, she was trying to sing a song that did not lie in her voice. Urged by her friend Sarah Orne Jewett to try something closer to her own experience, she revived her Western memories with a trip to Arizona and New Mexico and, after her return to Pittsburgh, “began to write a story entirely for myself; a story about some Scandinavians and Bohemians who had been neighbors of ours when I lived on a ranch in Nebraska, when I was eight or nine years old.”

As she herself instantly recognized, [her] second book, *O Pioneers!* (1913) came close to being the tune that “lay in her voice.” She wrote it spontaneously because she was tapping both memory and affection. She thought of the subject matter as a considerable innovation, because no American writer had yet used Swedish immigrants for any but comic purposes, and nobody had ever written about Nebraska, considered in literary circles the absolute home of the clodhopper. Actually there was nothing so revolutionary about the subject matter—it was merely one further extension of the local-color curiosity about little-known places and picturesque local types. Hamlin Garland had done German and Norwegian immigrants very like these, on Wisconsin and Iowa farms very like Miss Cather's Nebraska ones, in *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891). *O Pioneers!* was new in its particulars, but not new in type, and it was not Willa Cather's fully trained voice that was heard in it. In its method, the book is orthodox; the heroine, Alexandra Bergson, is a type of earth goddess; the theme is the theme of the conquest of a hard country that had dominated novels of the American settlement ever since James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pioneers* in 1823. Miss Cather's novel, in fact, is considerably slighter and simpler than Cooper's of similar title.

In her third book, *The Song of the Lark* (1915), we can see Miss Cather systematically and consciously working for the enlargement and complication of her theme. The locale, at least in the beginning, is again Nebraska, though she calls it Colorado; the chief character is again a local girl of immigrant parentage, great promise, and few advantages. But the antagonist here is not the earth, and triumph is nothing so simple as the hewing of a farm out of a hard country. To the problem of survival has been added the problem of culture. The struggle is involved with the training of Thea Kronborg's fine voice; the effort of the novel is to explore how a talent may find expression even when it appears in a crude little railroad town on the plains, and how a frontier American may lift himself from his traditionless, artless environment to full stature as an artist and an individual.

Here we see developing the dynamism between old world and new that occurs strongly again not only in *My Antonia* but in *One of Ours* (1922), *The Professor's House* (1925), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), and several of the short stories such as "Neighbor Rosicky." It is as if Miss Cather conceived the settlement of her country as a marriage between a simple, fresh, hopeful young girl and a charming, worldly, but older man. Thea Kronborg's German music teacher, Herr Wunsch, is the first of those cultivated and unhappy Europeans who people Miss Cather's fictions—exiles who, though doomed themselves by the hardships of pioneering, pass on sources of life and art to the eager young of a new land. Thea, like Alexandra Bergson before her and Antoinia Shimerda later, is that best sort of second-generation American who learns or retains some of the intellectual and artistic tradition of Europe without losing the American freshness and without falling into the common trap of a commercial and limited 'practicality.' These are all success stories of sorts, and all reflect a very American groping toward a secure identity.

But even *The Song of the Lark* was not the precise song that lay in Willa Cather's voice. Or rather, it was the right tune, but she sang it imperfectly. The story of Thea Kronborg's struggle to become an opera singer is told with realism so detailed that it is exhausting; and it ended by offending its author nearly as much as the pretentiousness of *Alexander's Bridge*. "Too much detail," she concluded later, "is apt, like any form of extravagance, to become slightly vulgar." She never tried a second time the "full-blooded method": When the next book came along, quite of itself, and with no direction from me, it took the road of *O Pioneers!*—not the road of *The Song of the Lark*.

The next one was, of course, *My Antonia*. But the road it took was not quite exactly that of *O Pioneers!* For though the place is still Nebraska and the protagonist is still an immigrant girl contending with the handicaps of a physical and emotional transplanting. *My Antonia* is a major novel where the earlier ones were trial efforts. *O Pioneers!* was truly simple; *My Antonia* only looks simple. *The Song of the Lark* was cluttered in its attempt to deal with complexity; *My Antonia* gives complexity the clean lines and suggestive subtlety of fine architecture.

One technical device which is fundamental to the greater concentration and suggestiveness of *My Antonia* is the point of view from which it is told. Both of the earlier "Nebraska novels" had been reported over the protagonist's shoulder, with omniscient intrusions by the author. Here the whole story is told by a narrator, Jim Burden, a boyhood friend of Antonia, later a lawyer representing the railroad. The use of the narrative mask permits Miss Cather to exercise her sensibility without obvious self-indulgence: Burden becomes an instrument of the selectivity that she worked for. He also permits the easy condensation and syncopation of time—an indispensable technical tool in a novel that covers more than thirty years and deals in a complex way with a theme of development. Finally, Jim Burden is used constantly as a suggestive parallel to Antonia: he is himself an orphan and has been himself transplanted (from the East, from Virginia), and is himself groping for an identity and an affiliation. In the process of understanding and commemorating Antonia, he locates himself; we see the essential theme from two points, and the space between those points serves as a baseline for triangulation.

The parallel is stressed from the beginning, when Jim, an orphan of ten, arrives in Black Hawk, Nebraska, on his way to live with his grandparents, and sees the immigrant Shimerda family huddling in bewilderment on the station platform, speaking their strange lost tongue. As he is driven to the ranch under a great unfamiliar sky, across a land that planes off mysteriously into darkness—"not a country, but the material out of which countries are made"—Jim feels so lost and strange and uprooted that he cannot even say the prayers that have been taught him back in Virginia. "Between that earth and sky I felt erased, blotted out. For Jim, protected by his relatives, the strangeness soon wears away. For the Shimerdas, who have none of the tools or skills of farmers, no friends, no English, and who discover that the land they have been sold is bad and their house a sod cave, transplanting is a harsher trial, and harder on the old than on the young, and on the sensitive than on the dull.

With the help of their neighbors the Burdens, the Shimerdas make a beginning, but before their first Christmas in the new land Papa Shimerda, gentle, helpless, homesick for the old life in Prague, has killed himself with a shotgun. Survival, which Miss Cather presents as a process of inevitable brutalization, is best managed by the grasping Mama Shimerda and her sullen son Ambroz. The fourteen-year-old girl,

Antonia, pretty and intelligent and her father's darling, must put off any hope of schooling and become one of the breadwinners for her miserably poor family. The deprivation is symbolic: this is the deculturation enforced on the frontier. The one thing beautiful in her life, the thing she shares with Jim, is the land itself, the great sea of grass, the wild roses in the fence corners of spring, the mighty weathers, and the tiny things—insects and flowers and little animals—that the eye notices because on the plains there is so little else to take the attention.

Antonia and Jim as children share a kind of Eden, but they are going toward different futures. At the end of the first long section, which is divided between the presentation of the hardships of an immigrant family and Miss Cather's delicate nostalgic evocation of the freedom and beauty of the unturned land, Jim and Antonia are lying together on top of the Burdens' chicken house while a great electrical storm comes on and "the felty beat of raindrops" begins in the dust. Why, Jim asks her, can't she always be "nice, like this"? Why must she all the time try to be like her brother Ambroz? "If I live here like you," Antonia says, "that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us."

There are gradations in the penalties of exile; the most violently uprooted have the least chance. Section Two of the novel reinforces this idea by moving the action from the half-idyllic country to the limited and restricting little town of Black Hawk. In pages that forecast some of the attitudes of Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* (1920), Miss Cather reveals the pettiness and snobbery, the vulgar commercialism, the cultural starvation, the forming class distinctions, the pathetic pleasures of a typical prairie town just beyond the pioneering stage. Antonia, Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball, and other Bohemian, Norwegian, and Swedish immigrant girls work as servants in the houses of the so-called "better families," and though they are snubbed by the town girls they demonstrate in their vitality and health something sturdier and more admirable than the more advantaged can show. Those for whom "things are easy" develop less character than these girls deprived of school, forced to work at menial jobs, dedicating their wages to help their families back on the farm. They do not even know that Black Hawk is a deprived little hole, but throw themselves wholeheartedly into the town dances and into any pleasure and excitement their world affords. Miss Cather sums up both desire and deprivation in a brief winter scene....

It is Jim Burden speaking, but he speaks even more for the "hired girls" than for himself, for he is not confined within Black Hawk's limitations as they are. For him there is more than crude colored glass; opportunity opens outward to the state university in the city of Lincoln. For Antonia and the others there is only housework, the amorous advances of people like Wick Cutter, the town money-lender, and the probability that eventually they will marry some farmer of their own immigrant background, who will work them like farm horses.

A high point of Jim's life in Lincoln is a performance of *Camille* that he and Lena Lingard attend. Like so many of Miss Cather's scenes, it expands effortlessly out of the particular and into the symbolic. The performance is shabby, the actors are broken-down, but to Jim the play is magic. Its bright illusion concentrates for him everything that he hopes for as he starts east to Harvard to continue his studies, going further from his country, back toward the intellectual and artistic things that his country has left behind or possesses only in second-rate and vulgarized forms. It is worth observing that Jim Burden leaves Nebraska on a note of illusion.

Section Four returns us to Antonia and to Black Hawk. Back after two years at Harvard, Jim hears that in his absence Antonia has eloped with a railroad conductor and that after being deceived and abandoned she has returned to her brother Ambroz's farm to bear her child and work in the fields like a man. The contrast between her pitiful failure and Jim's growing opportunities is deliberate; so is the trick of letting Jim come back to Antonia little by little, first through the stories told of her by townspeople and only later in person. When he does finally go to the farm to see her, the deliberate structural split that began with Book Three is finally mended. Their lives will continue to run in different channels, but they have rediscovered the "old times" that they have in common, the things that by now Antonia could not bear to leave. "I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly," she says. Her bond is with the land—she all but *is* the land—while Jim will go on to law school and to occupations and associations unimaginable to her. Again Miss Cather catches a significant moment in a reverberating image, to show both the difference and the intimate relationship between these two....

“I’ll come back,” Jim says, leaving Antonia, and she replies, “Perhaps you will. But even if you don’t, you’re here, like my father.” Because we must give scenes like these more than realistic value, we recognize here an insistence, not only on the shared beauty of childhood in the new land, but on the other tradition that is going to go on operating in Antonia’s life, the gift of her father with his gentleness and his taste. In Antonia, new world and old world, nature and nurture, meet as they meet in Jim, in different proportions and with different emphasis.

The union of two worlds is made explicit in Book Five, when twenty years later Jim Burden returns again to Nebraska and finds Antonia married to an amiable, half-successful Bohemian farmer, with a brood of healthy boys. She is no longer an eager girl, but a worn woman. But the same warmth of spirit still glows in her, and her life that had been half-wrecked has been put back together. In most ways, hers is an American family; but within the family they speak only Czech, and thus something of Papa Shimerda, something of Bohemia, is kept—something related to those strangenesses that Jim Burden had noted as a small boy: the dry brown chips he saw the Shimerdas nibbling, that were dried mushrooms picked in some far-off Bohemian forest; and the way Mama Shimerda, given title to a cow by Jim’s grandfather, seized his hand in a totally un-American gesture and kissed it. A partly remembered but valued tradition and an empty land have fused and begun to be something new.

As for Jim Burden, we understand at last that the name Willa Cather chose for him was not picked by accident. For Jim not only, as narrator, carries the “burden” or tune of the novel; he carries also the cultural burden that Willa Cather herself carried, the quintessentially American burden of remaking in the terms of a new place everything that makes life graceful and civilized. To become a European or an easterner is only to reverse and double the exile. The education that lured Jim Burden away from Nebraska had divided him against himself, as Willa Cather was divided. Like people, the education that comes from elsewhere must be modified to fit a new environment. In becoming a man of the world, Jim Burden discovers that he has almost forgotten to be a man from Nebraska. It is Antonia, who now achieves some of the quality of earth goddess that Alexandra Bergson had in *O Pioneers!*, who reminds him that no matter where his mind has been, his heart has always been here.

Jim Burden at the end of the novel is in the same position that Willa Cather was in when she finally found the people and themes and country that she was “born to write.” The final paragraph is like the closing of a door, shutting in things that until now have been exposed or scattered. As Jim walks through the country he stumbles upon a stretch of the old pioneer wagon road of his childhood.... It is difficult not to hear in that passage the voice of Willa Cather, who like Jim left raw Nebraska to become a citizen of the world, and like him was drawn back. Jim Burden is more than a narrative device: he is an essential part of the theme, a demonstration of how such an American may reconcile the two halves of himself.

And Antonia is more than a woman and a character. Jim describes her toward the end as “a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.” Miss Cather, who did not believe in laboring a point any more than she believed in overfurnishing a novel, clearly wanted us to take away that image of Antonia. A mine of life, the mother of races, a new thing forming itself in hardship and hope, but clinging to fragments of the well-loved old. Hence *My Antonia*—any American’s Antonia, Willa Cather’s Antonia. No writer ever posed that essential aspect of the American experience more warmly, with more nostalgic lyricism, or with a surer understanding of what it means.

Wallace Stegner
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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.