

WILLA CATHER'S MY ANTONIA:

A PROSE ELEGY

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF
ARTS AND SCIENCES

BY
PEGGY SPEECE FARNEY, B. A.

DENTON, TEXAS

MAY 14, 1969

Texas Woman's University

Denton, Texas

May 11, 1969

We hereby recommend that the thesis prepared under
our supervision by Peggy Speece Farney
entitled WILLA CATHER'S MY ANTONIA:
A PROSE ELEGY

be accepted as fulfilling this part of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Committee:

Antony Hall Wiley
Chairman
Glady's Magdocks
Dean Bishop

Accepted:

F. J. Morrison
Dean of Graduate Studies

PREFACE

Willa Cather once said that she wrote for an older generation, a generation which had known and understood the value of living and working with the land. And so she probably did. Were she living now, I think that she might be pleased to see how modern generations finally have come to understand what she said in much of her writing, how modern generations have come to realize that setting and environment are important in life. Today, with increasing concern about air and water pollution and about the overcrowding of our cities, we are discovering the advantage of living close to nature. New towns, such as Columbia, Maryland, are being planned so that each residence has a view of a lake or a shady grove and so that each residence has a plot of ground upon which the inhabitants can play games or plant flowers. Concerned about the vanishing wilderness, Congress is setting aside large tracts of natural, wild land--grasslands, swamps, forests, and deserts.

Willa Cather saw that man was losing a great deal in shrugging off his rural, frontier heritage,

and by the time she wrote My Ántonia, published in 1918, she was already mourning the close-to-the-land frontier life that had passed. She wrote My Ántonia as a tribute to the immigrant pioneers who homesteaded the prairies, but she especially wrote it as an elegy to their way of life which she came to regard as honest and fulfilling. In this study, I have tried to show how My Ántonia is an elegy, not only in plot, characterization, and theme, but especially in setting and structure.

I wish to extend special gratitude to Dr. Autrey Nell Wiley, Chairman of the Department of English and my advisor, critic, and teacher throughout my graduate studies as well as throughout the writing of my thesis. She first suggested this study on Willa Cather and gave me many valuable ideas during the writing. I also wish to thank Dr. Gladys Maddocks, who first interested me in regional writers, and Dr. Dean Bishop, whose explanation of the pastoral elegy gave me the inspiration to compare My Ántonia with an elegy. Both gave time to read the thesis and to serve on my examining committee. Personal thanks must go to my husband, who has encouraged me throughout my graduate studies and who has served as an ex-officio critic of all my writing, and to my parents, without whose dedication to education this thesis would never have been written.

Peggy Speece Farney
Peggy Speece Farney

May 14, 1969

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CHAPTER I

WILLA CATHER FROM 1873 TO 1918

On a typical Nebraska August day, with the sun blazing down upon the concrete highway and the wind whipping across the cornfields, I drove into Red Cloud, Nebraska. The town, like most Nebraska towns, hangs on tenaciously from season to season depending upon the corn and wheat to see it through another year. Not an hour goes by without talk about the weather in worrisome, hopeful, despairing tones: in winter, snow is hoped for; in spring, rain is needed; in summer, hail is feared. And always there is the wind. In winter it causes unbelievable blizzards, and in summer it can become destructive tornadoes. But corn and wheat and especially the extreme weather are not unique to Red Cloud, and it was none of these that caused me to go out of my way to visit the small town. I had come to visit the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Museum, a small struggling institution dedicated to the preservation of anything to do with the woman who was Red Cloud's most famous citizen. Although a native Nebraskan (indeed, I grew up not 75 miles from Red Cloud), I doubt that I had appreciated Willa Cather fully before I wandered about

the museum, learning to see with her eyes and to think with her mind. I had not appreciated before the wonderful longing quality of her prose; a longing like my own for the openness and freeness of the prairie land, a longing that I now realize is a part of many of us who have grown up on the vast plains and prairies of Middle Western America. Neither had I appreciated the heritage of the immigrant pioneers who came to Nebraska: the pioneers who plowed the soil, who found its underground water, who helped make the land all that it is today.

Willa Cather is often called a traditionalist because she wrote so often about days gone by and because she wrote in a clear, simple style uncluttered by obscure references. Certainly, she sprang from the group of writers whom we have come to designate as regionalists. But to call Willa Cather a regionalist is not saying enough, for into the mixed bag of regionalists we tend to throw the sentimentalists, the local color writers, and the romanticists. Willa Cather is more than any of these. Although she often wrote about one region, her best work transcends mere local color: she does not just tell us about a way of living in one region; she tells us all how we might make our lives richer. Robert E. Spiller says that the fault of the regionalists is that they were

not clear on the "distinction between fact and fiction, reality and romance"¹ and that therein was their failure. Miss Cather, however, seems to have been aware of the distinctions and to have used both reality and romance to her benefit.

It is actually to Miss Cather's credit to be linked with regionalism, because had she not been, her works would have denied her very regional upbringing. To grow up in Nebraska in the 1880's and 1890's was to grow up in a very provincial and parochial atmosphere, especially so because the nearest city of any consequence was 100 miles away. Although her life was subsequently to take her to the eastern cities, first Pittsburgh, and then New York, it was Nebraska where Willa Cather began her writing career as a reporter and critic for the Nebraska State Journal. Even more important, years later Willa Cather returned to Nebraska in her memory to produce her finest novels. Living in the eastern cities brought her to a much keener appreciation of the past--not just her own past, but that of the region from which she had come and that of her nation as well.

Willa Cather made her mark on Nebraska. All school children today learn her name; most are required

¹The Cycle of American Literature (New York: The New American Library, 1963), p. 116.

to read one of her novels or short stories. In her hometown of Red Cloud a group of dedicated persons has preserved many of her possessions and many of the objects and structures relating to her works. At the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, a modern, thirteen-story men's dormitory bears her name. In the state capitol there is a bronze bust of her likeness. Nebraska cannot forget her, for she immortalized its pioneer past in many of her short stories and most particularly in her novels O Pioneers! and My Ántonia. It probably goes without saying that none of this could be if Nebraska had not first made its mark on Willa Cather. The prairie country that she elegized had a profound effect upon her; indeed it shaped and perhaps even limited her art.

Miss Cather was not a native-born Nebraskan, however. She was born on December 7, 1873,¹ in Frederick County, Virginia. She was named Willa after her father's dead sister, but the name Willa also was linked to her grandfathers, both of whom

¹E. K. Brown, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 17. A note on this page by Leon Edel, who completed this biography after Brown died in 1951, indicates that Brown had done extensive research to verify the date of birth. Exact records were not kept by either the family or Frederick County, and Miss Cather herself gave different dates at different times in her life.

were named William. Both grandfathers descended from Virginia pioneer families, but differed in their politics. William Cather served in the Union Army; William Boak came from Confederate, Deep South stock.¹ Willa Cather's father, Charles Cather, was too young to join his father in the Union Army, but early in his marriage his Northern sympathies alienated him from the Boaks, with the exception, seemingly, of his mother-in-law. The Cathers were living with Mrs. Boak when Willa, their first child, was born, but they moved to Willowshade, William Cather's farm, not long after.²

Willa lived at Willowshade for nine years. She liked the big, roomy house, but even more pleasant were the rocky pastures, the woods, and the sluggish stream at the back of the farm. Willa liked to spend her time out in the fields with her father, helping him herd the sheep he fattened for Baltimore markets.³ Although she did not attend school, she learned to read and write under the able direction of her grandmother Boak.⁴ Willa Cather's Virginia years remained in her memory and formed the basis for her last novel,

¹Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willa Cather: A Memoir (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1953), p. 15.

²Ibid., p. 14.

³Brown, pp. 20-21.

⁴Ibid., p. 20.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl, which appeared in 1940, seven years before her death. This novel was the only one that she ever wrote using material from her Virginia years.

Charles Cather moved his wife and four children to Nebraska in 1883. He was not the first of his family to be lured West by the promise of free land under the Homestead Act. His brother George had taken his family to Webster County, Nebraska, in 1873--the year Willa was born. And William Cather had joined his son George in 1877. For a girl of nine, the move was heartbreaking. Willowshade and most of its furnishings were sold. Like Jim Burden in My Antonia, Willa could not imagine why anyone would want to leave Virginia.

Red Cloud, Nebraska, located in the western half of Webster County, was unlike Virginia. In 1883 it was a bustling frontier railroad town of about 1,000 persons. Although much of the surrounding land had been settled, the rolling, treeless country still retained a wild, unsettled look. Commenting on the effect that the move to Nebraska had upon Willa Cather, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, a friend whom Miss Cather first knew in New York in 1910, says: "The move at such a tender age from the damp, shady, mountainous beauty of the Shenandoah Valley to a raw, treeless and nearly waterless land had been cruel for a

child."¹ It is doubtful that Willa Cather found the move cruel: she, perhaps, was unhappy at leaving familiar surroundings, but in Nebraska she made many new friends. Indeed, O Pioneers! and My Ántonia reveal that Miss Cather appreciated more than most persons the sort of life that was common on the frontier in the 1880's. Miss Sergeant manages to make the prairie life sound very unattractive: "Eighteen miles from the tall, gaunt homestead house . . . was a stagnant creek, all but dried up in summer. A few ragged, forked cottonwoods grew along the banks. Yet to this meagre travesty of running water the Cather children were determined to go to play. They had become frantic tree-worshippers."² The Nebraska countryside may have appeared this ugly to Willa Cather from time to time, but the ugliness of Miss Sergeant's descriptions just does not bear out the many other feelings which the young Willa Cather must have harbored. E. K. Brown writes about Nebraska differently: "If it was lonely, it was spacious; and even when Willa Cather was a little girl she was pleased with broad vistas and turned to places where her privacy was secure. In the more hospitable seasons the high plains had a

¹P. 17.

²Ibid.

vigorous beauty to which she responded with joy."¹

Charles Cather spent little more than a year living on the farm in a small community where his father and brother also lived--a community located northwest of Red Cloud. In 1885 he moved to Red Cloud, where he opened an office dealing in loans and mortgages on farm property. In town, Willa went to a regular school for the first time. On the farm, both her grandmother Boak, who had accompanied her daughter's family west, and her grandmother Cather taught her. Miss Sergeant reports that Willa Cather always felt she got her best education from her grandmothers, who read her the Bible and Shakespeare.² Even after she entered public school, Willa Cather continued to learn from persons who were not, strictly speaking, teachers. From Mrs. Charles Wiener, a Frenchwoman married to a German immigrant, she learned both French and German. From an old German music teacher, she learned an appreciation and understanding of music that surfaced in her later novel, The Song of the Lark. From an English storekeeper she received a lasting appreciation of Greek and Latin literature.³

¹Pp. 28-29.

²P. 17.

³Brown, pp. 35-36.

Even more valuable than language or music or literature were the lessons in simplicity and honesty that Willa Cather drew from the foreign immigrant people around her. The Scandinavian and Bohemian women who had accompanied their husbands to a new land and a new way of life held her lifelong admiration and gave her ideas for short stories and novels.

Willa Cather was unlike most of the teen-aged girls of Red Cloud, and her antics often surprised the small community. In her mid-teens she was convinced that she would become a doctor, and an active interest in zoology plus medical instruments her family had inherited from an uncle led her to perform experiments on animals. At this time she also took to wearing the departed uncle's Civil War cap which conveniently bore the initials W. C. The uncle's name was William Cather. She also took to wearing cropped hair and boyish shirts and jackets. At her high school commencement in 1890, Willa Cather, then 16, gave an address entitled "Superstition versus Investigation," in which she defended the scientist's right to experiment. Obviously the criticism over her medical experiments rankled.¹

¹Brown, pp. 42-44.

In the fall of 1890 Miss Cather left Red Cloud, which by now must have been very stifling for a young woman with progressive ideas, and went to Lincoln, where she enrolled in the University of Nebraska. She lacked enough credits to be classified as a freshman, her high school not being accredited, so she spent a year in the University's preparatory school before entering a four-year course of study which concentrated on literature. Her interest in science and her early decision to be a doctor apparently left her after her first English course in prep school. Her instructor there, Professor Ebenezer Hunt of the University faculty, found her written work to be of extremely high quality, and he arranged for a paper of hers to be published anonymously in the local newspaper, the State Journal. This paper, "Some Personal Characteristics of Thomas Carlyle," was Willa Cather's first published work. Years later she looked back on the event and realized it was a decisive one, for after that she never thought about science again.¹

But other factors, too, must have been involved in her turn toward writing. Lincoln in the 1890's as it is described may not sound like a cultural center to today's urbanized world, and probably it

¹Brown, p. 51.

was not much of a cultural center compared to Eastern cities of its own day, but viewed through the eyes of a small town outstater, Lincoln must have been a myriad of delightful things to do and see. Even today, the farm and small town students who still make up much of the University's population find Lincoln to be an exciting and sophisticated place, even though today's young person is often far better acquainted with art, music, and cultural activities than were most of the students of Willa Cather's day. In Lincoln, Miss Cather met persons who were curious about their environment. Among them were Louise and Olivia Pound,¹ sisters of Roscoe, Dorothy Canfield, daughter of the chancellor of the University and later an author, and Charles H. Gere, editor of the State Journal, and his family. Little wonder that with all these literate persons around her Willa Cather became interested in writing.

Miss Cather's last two years at the University were hard ones, for her family suffered heavy financial losses in the drought years that began in 1893 and did not end until 1897. But those last two years were also productive. She edited the school yearbook, the Sombrero, in 1894. She also became interested

¹In view of their long friendship, it seems fitting that the women's dormitory structure matching Cather Hall is named Pound Hall.

in journalism through a reporting course, and she was invited to become a regular contributor to the State Journal. This chance to write--and especially to write dramatic reviews about the plays that held so much fascination for her--plus a chance to earn her own money resulted in a "prodigious number of columns."¹

After being graduated from the University of Nebraska in 1895, Willa Cather went home to Red Cloud. She helped her father, who had managed to keep his business going despite the general financial panic the drought years caused, but she felt guilty at not helping the family more. Occasionally she went to Lincoln to visit old friends and to do some writing for the State Journal. In the winter of 1896 she tried to get a place on the English faculty at the University. She knew her age and her sex were against her, and she was not surprised when she did not get the appointment.² It was through the Geres that she finally received a chance to go to work: Charles Axtell, a Pittsburgh businessman and a friend of Charles Gere, asked her to come to Pittsburgh and help edit The Home Monthly, a magazine he was founding. Miss Cather went to Pittsburgh in June, 1896.³

¹Brown, pp. 65-66.

²Ibid., p. 72.

³Ibid., pp. 72-73.

She spent a year on The Home Monthly before leaving to become an assistant to the telegraph editor on the Pittsburgh Leader, a more exciting and challenging job. Being on the Leader also gave her a chance to get back to writing dramatic criticism, the kind of writing she had enjoyed most in Lincoln. During her years on the Leader, Willa Cather began to mature as a writer. She wrote for a short-lived journal called Library, served as a guest drama critic one summer for the New York Sun, and placed verse in the Critic, McClure's, and the Criterion. She also published a story in Cosmopolitan and an article in the Ladies' Home Journal. By 1900 she wanted to be free of the grind of newspaper work, and in 1901 she took a teaching position at Central High School in Pittsburgh. The next year she transferred to Allegheny High in the same city and remained there until 1906.¹

During the time she was in Pittsburgh, Miss Cather's first book was published. April Twilights, a small volume of poetry, published in 1903, won Willa Cather "a measure of recognition and a marked degree of respect from her fellow teachers and pupils" but little else.² In 1905 she finished a collection

¹Brown, pp. 85-92.

²Brown, pp. 112.

of short stories and sent them to McClure Phillips & Company in New York. S. S. McClure himself read them, liked them, decided to publish them under the title The Troll Garden, and convinced the woman who wrote them that she ought to come to New York and accept an editorial position on his famous magazine.¹

One of Miss Cather's first assignments on McClure's magazine was one which took her to Boston, where she spent many days verifying and editing a long story on the life of Mary Baker Eddy, a manuscript which had been submitted to McClure's by Georgine Milmine, the wife of a Rochester, N. Y., newspaperman. The biography was so startling that McClure knew every scrap of information about Mrs. Eddy and the Christian Science sect she founded had to be verified. The assignment was an important one for Willa Cather, for it was in Boston that she met Sarah Orne Jewett, the writer who brought the Maine woods to American regional writing. As Brown notes, it seems natural there should have been an affinity between the two women. Both had grown up in small towns; both had seen economic factors cause those towns to decline. Both women held a deep admiration for the older, country persons they had known as children.² At the time of their meeting, 1908,

¹Brown, p. 122.

²P. 139.

Miss Jewett had already learned what Willa Cather had yet to completely understand: that writing from one's own experience and background produces the very best work. Miss Jewett died the following year, but her advice and criticism that she put in her letters to Miss Cather made a lifelong impression on Willa Cather.

Miss Cather's first novel appeared in 1912. It was called Alexander's Bridge, and it is the story of a civil engineer who wants to keep his home life intact, carry on an affair with a beautiful London actress, and build superb bridges all at the same time. The novel is not a particularly good one. Its biggest failing, as Brown points out, is that the characters somehow never seem very real, probably because Miss Cather was not really acquainted with the upper class, sophisticated professional person as she sought to portray him.¹

Late in 1911, however, Miss Cather wrote a story that displayed the kind of writing that was to be uniquely hers. "The Bohemian Girl" appeared in McClure's in 1912 and brought, it seemed to Willa Cather, unexpected praise. In the first place, the magazine tried to pay her the unusually high price

¹P. 160.

of \$750: Miss Cather would accept only \$500.¹ Miss Sergeant reports having been delighted with the story, and she says: "It had exactly the potential I had divined in her . . . I found a fine quality of conviction in the relationship of the people to the country, and a great beauty of sensuous style in describing it."¹ "The Bohemian Girl" is a story of the Divide, that land between the Republican and Blue Rivers that Willa Cather had known so well as a child. The story centers around a young man of Norwegian extraction who comes back to the Divide after a twelve-year absence and persuades a Bohemian girl, the wife of his slow-witted brother, to run away with him to Norway. The plot may be a bit unsatisfactory, but the description of the people and places of the Divide is not. Here, at last, after many years in the East, Willa Cather returns to the West. Here she rediscovers Nebraska.

In 1912 Miss Cather left McClure's. She took a long vacation in the Southwest to visit her brother Douglass. In the Southwest she found the Indians and Mexicans whom she came to love as much as the immigrant people of Webster County, and she found a wild land that would later emerge in stories and novels. After her trip, she stopped in Red Cloud to see the wheat

¹Pp. 76-77.

harvest and then went to Pittsburgh where she stayed with old friends and worked on an old manuscript.

That manuscript became O Pioneers!, published in 1913. This novel is basically the story of Alexandra Bergson, a Norwegian girl who helps run her father's homestead and eventually turns it into one of the most prosperous places in the county. The novel tells the story of the pioneer as it had not been told before-- indeed, as it could not have been told before. In it, Willa Cather combined an intimacy with pioneer life and the ability to look at that life objectively; this combination resulted in an honest, yet appreciative look at a group which meant so much to Middle Western America.

Her next novel, The Song of the Lark, appeared in 1915 and reflected her interest in music. But it was the novel which followed The Song of the Lark that gave Miss Cather her place in literature. In the summers of 1915 and 1916, Miss Cather visited Taos to further explore the Southwest. After each of these visits she stopped in Red Cloud. Brown writes:

One day in 1916 she drove out to a farm on the Divide and saw, surrounded by many children, Anna Pavelka, a Bohemian woman whom she had known well, very well, when they were girls. It seemed to her that this woman's story ran very close to the central stream of life in Red Cloud and on the Divide, that she stood for the triumph of what was vigorous, sound,

and beautiful in a region where these qualities so often seemed to suffer repression or defeat. Before she returned to New York, Willa Cather had begun to write this story in My Ántonia.¹

My Ántonia was published in 1918. Although Miss Cather published eleven more books, including One of Ours, which won the Pulitzer prize, and the well-received Death Comes for the Archbishop, it seems to me that My Ántonia is her best both artistically and thematically. Miss Cather's first stories of Nebraska may seem bleak, but My Ántonia is not: by 1918 Willa Cather had been away long enough to write about Nebraska in the way Miss Jewett foresaw that she could, with warmth and vitality. The book is more than a novel; My Ántonia is a tribute, an elegy to the immigrant pioneers who came to Nebraska. I shall discuss this novel in depth in the rest of this paper, showing how it is an elegy in theme, setting, and structure.

¹p. 199.

CHAPTER II

PERSONAS IN MY ÁNTONIA

Before we assess My Ántonia as an elegy, we must consider first the novel's personas in relation to its plot and its characterization and later, its theme, setting, and structure. It is interesting to note that in My Ántonia Miss Cather has modeled her characters after people whom she knew in Nebraska. Ántonia's real-life counterpart was a woman named Anna Pavelka, who was about four years older than Miss Cather. Anna worked as a hired girl for a family who lived near the Cathers in Red Cloud, and later she lived on a farm with her husband and many children in Webster County. Miss Cather used to write to Anna, and she always remembered the family with gifts, especially when times were hard. The story of My Ántonia is, in large part, the story of Anna Pavelka.¹

The novel's point of view is basically that of a first person narrator who reports upon events and his own feelings about those events. Interestingly, the novel has two first person narrators or personas,

¹Mildred R. Bennett, The World of Willa Cather (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1951), pp. 46-49.

one in the introduction and one for the rest of the novel. In the introduction the first person narrator, whom we assume to be Miss Cather, is traveling by train to Nebraska when she meets an old friend, Jim Burden. Jim tells Miss Cather that he is working on a memoir about a Bohemian girl, Antonia, whom they both knew many years ago when they all were children. Miss Cather says she would like to see the finished manuscript, and sometime later Jim brings it to her in her New York apartment. Thus in an introduction of only a few pages, Miss Cather sets the stage, showing why Jim Burden happens to be the narrator for the rest of the novel, and letting us know that the relationship between Jim and Antonia is not a romantic one.

As the novel opens, Jim Burden becomes Miss Cather's persona. We know that Jim is speaking of a part of his life that happened long ago, for in the introduction he and Miss Cather speak of the Nebraska years as being "years ago." It is, therefore, with little surprise that we find Jim to be about ten years old in the first chapter. Through his eyes we first see Nebraska as he first sees it--from the train on which he is traveling from Virginia to Nebraska. Jim writes: "I first heard of Antonia on what seemed to me an interminable journey across the great midland

plain of North America."¹ This first person technique is used throughout the rest of the novel. Miss Cather's persona is Jim Burden. Always, the reader sees things through Jim. The effectiveness of this device cannot be overemphasized. In the first place, the use of the first person makes the novel highly personal, just as any elegy is likely to be. The personal feeling that we get from being privy to Jim's thoughts makes us become a part of Jim's longing at the end. Second, through the first person, Miss Cather is able to express ideas which are highly subjective--ideas that might seem out of place in a third person narrative. And third, by telling *Antonia's* story through another person, Miss Cather is able to make *Antonia* a symbol² of "the precious, incommunicable past" that the novel elegizes.

Through Jim Burden the novel takes shape in the form of five books, each with its own title and story. Book One, entitled "The Shimerdas," introduces us to *Antonia Shimerda* and her family and tells of

¹*My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, and Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1954), p. 3. All subsequent references are to this edition.

²David Daiches, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1951), p. 44.

Jim's and Antonia's early childhood days on the Nebraska prairie. As the book begins, Jim has come on the train from Virginia to live with his grandparents, who have a farm near Black Hawk, Nebraska. Both of Jim's parents have died recently. Also on the train headed for Black Hawk is an immigrant family. No one in the family speaks English except for a girl of about twelve who keeps saying, "We go Black Hawk, Nebraska."¹ Later Jim discovers that this family has settled near his grandparents' homestead and that they have bought a homestead from an unscrupulous man and are living in a poor dugout with very little in the way of household goods. Jim makes friends with the girl whom he first saw on the train and learns that her name is Antonia. She is a cheerful, happy girl and obviously her father's favorite. Jim promises Mr. Shimerda that he will teach Antonia to speak proper English; and as the summer passes, Jim and Antonia spend happy hours together. But the first winter on the prairie is a hard one. There is much snow. Mr. Shimerda, not used to the new country and unable to overcome the homesickness which plagued him, commits suicide. When spring comes, Antonia should be in school, but she feels she must help her older brother plow the fields. Jim finds the field work

¹p. 4.

unbecoming for a girl and also discovers that being able to do a man's work has made *Antonia* boastful. The *Shimerdas* manage to make the farm passably productive, but the going is rough. *Antonia* does not seem to mind her new life. At the end of Book I, she says to Jim, "Oh, better I like to work out-of-doors than in a house!"¹

Book II, "The Hired Girls," is set in the town of Black Hawk. Jim, now several years older, and his grandparents have moved to town. They soon settle into the routine of town life, and Jim finds that he has a great deal to learn now that he is in school with more persons his own age. Next door to the *Burdens* live the *Harlings*, a family of Norwegian descent. The *Harlings* are a generous, cheerful family; and when their hired girl leaves them, Mrs. Burden suggests that they try *Antonia*. Although *Antonia* is good help on the farm, her family needs the ready cash her wages will bring. So *Antonia* moves to town and joins other immigrant girls who make up the town's class of hired girls. *Antonia* likes living in town: she meets other girls like herself; she attends social functions. She especially loves going to dances. After one of these dances, a young man who is engaged to someone else walks *Antonia* home and attempts to

¹P. 138.

kiss her. Mr. Harling hears Antonia refusing the kiss with a slap and later orders her to quit attending the dances or to find another job. Antonia cannot bring herself to give up the dances which are the first really social and happy events in her life; so she leaves the Harlings and gets a job with the Cutters. Mr. Cutter, who is known as something of a woman-chaser, attempts to arrange for Antonia to be in the house alone, but his plan fails. Antonia goes back to the farm. Just before Book II ends, Jim is graduated from high school and, after a dull, listless summer, decides to attend the University of Nebraska in the fall.

Book III, entitled "Lena Lingard," is the story of Jim's years at the University in Lincoln. Here we leave Antonia for a time and focus on Jim as he becomes aware of the world outside Black Hawk, Nebraska. Jim meets an outstanding professor, Gaston Cleric, and under his guidance Jim's first year at college proves to be a profitable one. Jim says: "I shall always look back on that time of mental awakening as one of the happiest in my life. Gaston Cleric introduced me to the world of ideas; when one first enters that world everything else fades for a time, and all that went before is as if it had not been. Yet I found curious survivals; some of the figures of my old life seemed to be waiting for

me in the new."¹ The principal figure of Jim's past life proves to be one of the hired girls whom he had known through Antonia. A skillful seamstress, Lena Lingard has left Black Hawk to go into business for herself in Lincoln, where she establishes herself as dress-designer for some of the town's richest and best-dressed women. It is she who first goes to call on Jim, and a romantic, yet distant relationship springs up between them. The book deals almost entirely with the time Jim and Lena spend together. It is obvious that the relationship must end. Lena loves her work and does not want to marry, and Jim must finish his studies. Nevertheless, the two share many good times. Eventually Jim's studies begin to suffer, and at the end of the book he makes the decision to transfer to Harvard, to which Gaston Cleric is going also. Although this chapter on Lena might seem to be out of place in the novel, it seems to me that it is necessary in two ways. First, Lena is one of the immigrant girls. She has many of the qualities that Antonia has. Jim has never allowed himself to think of Antonia romantically. If he really admires Antonia as much as the novel indicates, it would seem natural that there would come a time when he would be infatuated with her qualities. Jim's relationship with Lena shows

us how easily he might have fallen in love with *Antonia*. Second, before Jim can come to any real comprehension of what his past means to him, and of what *Antonia* means to him as a part of that past, he must put time and experience between himself and that past. Book III helps the reader put some time and experience between the present narrator and the earlier one, the boyhood Jim.

Book IV, "The Pioneer Woman's Story," tells of the first of two homecomings. This homecoming occurs after Jim's two years at Harvard are over and after he has come back to visit his grandparents before entering law school. His grandmother has written to him about *Antonia's* sad plight: *Antonia* fell in love with a railway conductor and went to Denver to marry him. Later, she was forced to come back home, pregnant and unmarried, because he had run away to Mexico. Jim regrets that such a thing should have happened to *Antonia*, but at this time he wants to know the whole sad story. He calls on the Widow Steavens, who manages the place Jim and his grandparents lived on when Jim was a boy. She tells him the tale from a very sympathetic point of view. *Antonia* came home from Denver, the Widow Steavens says, and started right in helping on the farm with the plowing and corn-husking just as she had always done. When the baby was born,

Antonia took great pride in the child, even to having its portrait done by the photography studio in Black Hawk. After talking with Mrs. Steavens, Jim goes to see Antonia. He has a long, warm conversation with her, telling her about his life in the East. She tells him how she hopes to give her child a good life. Jim ends the talk by promising to come back and see her again sometime.

Book V, "Cuzak's Boys," tells of the second homecoming. It does not come about for a good number of years, and in the meantime Jim has married. His marriage is childless and, it is hinted, unhappy. Jim has thrown himself into his career. When he finally finds the time and inclination to go back to Nebraska, he finds Antonia married to a Bohemian immigrant like herself, Anton Cuzak. The Cuzaks have a very large family, and they live on a well-cared-for farm. Antonia's illegitimate daughter, whom Cuzak reared as his own, is now married, and she has a baby of her own. Book V concerns itself entirely with descriptions of the farm: its beautiful orchard where every tree is given the special attention necessary to get trees to grow on the prairie, its big barn, its rich fields. It is at the Cuzaks' that Jim comes to realize how much his prairie childhood means to him: he has been away

long enough to recognize the goodness of his old life. Through descriptions of the activities of the Cuzak household during Jim's visit we get a glimpse of a contented family, a good family; and the contrast with Jim Burden's hurried city life and barren marriage makes Antonia's life seem even more contented.

Characterization in the novel is effective. Although a major figure, Jim does not stand out as a character nor is he meant to. He is the persona. He is there to record another's story, and so it is that Antonia is the person about whom we learn the most. She is probably the most fully developed figure in the novel. We first see her when she is about twelve. She and her father are very close, and through their relationship we see the sensitivity to others that Antonia will have throughout her life. When her father commits suicide, we see Antonia's great strength. She plows the fields and does all the things a farm hand would do in an effort to keep the homestead going. It is this great strength in the face of the never-ending battle to make a living off the land that is Antonia's greatest characteristic. This is the strength that Jim notes in the novel's final book when he says: "She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races."¹ Thus Antonia

¹P. 353.

comes to be more than just another pioneer woman; she is the symbol of all the women who had the strength and courage to help conquer the land.

In addition to *Antonia*, there are some splendid renderings of minor characters. Lena Lingard and *Antonia's* father are the best of these. Lena is a beautiful girl who has got ahead in the world by hard work and brains. Her strength in the face of hard times is much like *Antonia's*, but there is about Lena an aura of passion and of mystery that *Antonia* does not have. Lena, in fact, has a reputation as a temptress. When she was a young girl tending cattle on the prairie, an older farmer in the area used to come and talk to her while she was working. The farmer, a Norwegian immigrant like Lena, was married to a woman who had spent some time in a mental hospital and who still startled her neighbors by her bizarre actions. Years later, Jim learns that all this farmer wanted was someone to converse with in Norwegian, someone who would not be laughing at him for his mentally ill wife. Jim learns to appreciate Lena's drive for success, but for all her beautiful mysteriousness, Lena really is not very feminine. She rejects the idea of marriage, feels that children only tie a woman down, and so in the end, it is a woman like *Antonia*, who stayed on the land and worked it and brought life to it, who earns

Jim's lasting admiration.

Antonia's father, though a tragic figure and a failure, nonetheless is sympathetically portrayed. It is much to Miss Cather's credit that while elegizing the pioneers who were strong and who conquered the land, she is able to treat one who failed so sympathetically. Mr. Shimerda was a weaver in the old country, and he was also a talented violinist. Neither skill is very useful in running a farm in Nebraska. The man is never quite able to adjust to farming; he is unable to adapt to a new country. His suicide symbolizes his failure. Mr. Shimerda represents a number of persons who simply are not able to cope with pioneer life. He is not portrayed as a man whose failure is an evil flaw. On the contrary, he is pictured as being polite and very formal, almost as if his very gentility kept him from adjusting.

Important as characterization, plot, and point of view are to My Antonia, their importance lies in the way they advance Miss Cather's themes in the novel and the ultimate goal of elegizing pioneer life. There is, it seems to me, one great theme in the novel: everything else serves to advance the purpose of showing that living close to the land will yield a good and beautiful way of life. Of Willa Cather's Nebraska novels, John H. Randall III says: "It is as if Willa

Cather had finally made up her mind that her true allegiance was to the soil."¹ And that is exactly what Jim Burden does in My Ántonia: in the end he acknowledges that all that is good in his life has come from the soil. There seem to be, however, at least two stages that Miss Cather takes the reader through before determining in the final book of the novel that the country life is best. First, we see the harshness of life on the prairie; then we see the pettiness and the evil of town society. Finally, as the country and city life are played against each other, we see the triumph of country life for those who are strong enough to survive.

The harshness of pioneer living is not romanticized in My Ántonia. Even though living on the land may be good, it is difficult. And Miss Cather "is willing to represent the hard lives of the Nebraska farmer."² The Shimerdas arrive in Nebraska during the fall. That first winter, because they have had no chance to store food from the summer before, is very hard on them. The Shimerdas do not have proper clothing: the girls wear cotton dresses all winter long, and

¹The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, and Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1960), p. 74.

²Edward A. and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy (Carbondale: University of Illinois Press, 1962), p. 8.

Mr. Shimerda and his son take turns wearing a single overcoat. As for food, the situation gets worse and worse, and one day the Burdens' hired man tells of meeting Ambrosch, Antonia's older brother, while out hunting:

" 'I guess rabbits must be getting scarce in this locality. Ambrosch come along by the cornfield yesterday where I was at work and showed me three prairie dogs he'd shot. He asked me if they was good to eat. I spit and made a face and took on, to scare him, but he just looked like he was smarter'n me and put 'em back in his sack and walked off.' "¹ Much later in the novel, when Jim goes back to Nebraska after his two years at Harvard, the hard prairie life is reflected in Antonia's thin, worn body. Jim is startled at this time to remember that she is only twenty-four years old. Roy Meyer, in a long study of the farm novel, notes that "The average farm novel has tended to be sentimental and has avoided the hard country problems,"² but he says that the two exceptions to this are O. E. Rolvaag and Willa Cather.³ Granville Hicks, too, notes that Miss Cather's works are saved from romanticizing because they are "to some extent, the faithful

¹Pp. 70-71.

²The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 193.

³Ibid., p. 192.

recollection of a noble episode in the conquest of the American continent."¹ Indeed, in My Ántonia, the difficulty of conquering the land is a theme.

A second theme, and a contrasting one, is the pettiness of town life. Meyer says: "The town . . . was the natural dwelling place of evil,"²

Although in My Ántonia the town is not so much a place of evil as it is of pettiness, nevertheless, there is some indication that town life is to be regarded as at least bad, if not evil. Black Hawk seems to contain an unusually large number of dull or malcontented persons for a town its size. There are the old men who gather at the drug store every evening to tell raw stories. There is the old German who can talk of nothing but his taxidermy. The telegrapher at the depot smokes an unhealthy amount of cigarettes so that he can trade the coupons for pictures of actresses and dancers. And the station agent spends his time writing to officials requesting a transfer to Wyoming. And it is in town, among these persons, that Ántonia has her unhappy experience with the Cutters. Here is where she meets the railway conductor who is to abandon her later. In a larger city, Denver, Ántonia meets

¹The Great Tradition (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), p. 223.

²P. 11.

the disgrace of becoming an unwed mother. Jim, too, feels the bad influence of town life. In Black Hawk he becomes dissatisfied with life and yearns to be free of the restrictions society places upon him.

He says:

On starlight nights I used to pace up and down those long, cold streets, scowling at the little sleeping houses on either side, . . . how much jealousy and envy and unhappiness some of them managed to contain! The life that went on in them seemed to me made up of evasions and negations; shifts to save cooking, to save washing and cleaning, devices to propitiate the tongue of gossip. This guarded mode of existence was like living under tyranny. . . . The people asleep in those houses, I thought, 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.¹

When Jim goes to Lincoln, we see further evidence of the bad influence of town living. In Lincoln Jim becomes involved with Lena Lingard, and eventually his studies suffer so much that he must flee to the East. And, of course, he eventually lives in a large city, where he makes an unhappy and barren marriage. Jim seems to flee from town to city, never really finding what it is that will make his life worthwhile. Antonia makes the same mistake for a time: after Black Hawk she goes to Denver expecting to be married. It is only after she comes back to the farm and again takes up the country life that she begins to live a

¹p. 219.

rich, full life. Lena Lingard, with her business success, would seem to be the exception to the theme that city life is bad. But Lena's life consists only of that business success: she has no children who share and extend her life. And in this novel, Antonia's family, with all of its obvious affection and concern for each other, is Antonia's glory. Despite a hard life, Antonia is the truly happy person. She has learned that life on the farm is best. She says to Jim: " ' . . . I belong on a farm. I'm never lonesome here like I used to be in town. You remember what sad spells I used to have, when I didn't know what was the matter with me? I've never had them out here. . . . ' " ¹

The contrasting of country and city life throughout the novel resolves then in the declaration that the country life is best. As Meyer says, "farm life, with its intimate association with the soil and the forces of nature, [is] . . . intrinsically more wholesome and more natural than life in a largely man made environment." ² Randall sees Miss Cather's theme as being that of a Garden of Eden, where the

¹P. 343.

²P. 11.

farmers work "constantly and lovingly with the land."¹ Although this is true to a certain extent, I feel it ignores her presentation of the hard side of farm life and of the persons who cannot survive a battle with the land. Miss Cather is aware that farm life is not a Garden of Eden, but I think it is precisely because farm life during the homesteading days was difficult that she sought to elegize it. In My Antonia Miss Cather meditates in a formal manner upon the pioneer life and its virtues. At the time she wrote this novel she herself realized that the pioneer life was gone, that the land had been settled and conquered, and that urban ways were being felt on the farm. But she took the pioneer life and preserved it in this novel much as an elegist would have meditated on death. Willa Cather's purpose is very close to that of the formal elegist's: she has preserved forever the memory of something that has died.

¹P. 77.

CHAPTER III
SETTING IN MY ÁNTONIA

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a kind of writing unlike anything previously done began to make itself prominent in America. As Robert E. Spiller says in The Cycle of American Literature, after 1865 American literature "began to pay less attention to general ideas and more to immediate facts of life."¹ This attention to life led to what is now called local color with emphasis upon "setting as characteristic of a district, region, or era,"² more specifically one particular locale. Local color is often said to have had its start with Bret Harte in such stories as "The Luck of Roaring Camp," but it knew its greatest moments with Mark Twain. It was popular because it was uniquely American; it stressed the uniqueness of America's vast and varied communities. Spiller attributes much of the growth of local color to the immigration westward and the settling of the

¹P. 113.

²Literary History of the United States, ed. Robert E. Spiller and others (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 304.

the Western half of the United States. He says that the mixture of old and new ideas, of native and foreign elements gave rise to a new type of writing.¹

After the 1880's local color was less popular nationally, but its type did not disappear. Out of the local-color movement came regionalism, which differed from local color in that it emphasized a larger area-- a region rather than a specific locale. More important, however, regionalism seemed to avoid the major fault of most local color, the fault of not coming to grips with life's problems, of not recognizing that good writing must reflect more than a reporting of how people live. The political and economic thinking of the times probably had much to do with the regionalism movement in literature: the late 1800's saw an America of isolationist persuasion, an America that believed in independence not only of the nation but of the region and the individual as well. Thus, the writing of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century reflected the thoughts, the peculiarities, and the habits of the region the writer knew best. But regionalism has suffered under the same taint that local color did, for too often it is dismissed as merely entertaining, without depth. Granville Hicks says that the regional

¹The Cycle of American Literature, p. 108.

movement was a part of the "sectional self-consciousness" which the nation experienced before it attained national unity and that the development of sectional interests was necessary before national unity could be realized.¹ He says that the aim of the regionalists "was to make imaginative use of the kind of life that was familiar to them."² He notes that the regional movement was a break with romanticism, but he feels that the concentration on the past found so often in regionalism led to an ultimate breakdown in reality and actually re-established romanticism.³ Spiller says much the same thing, but he feels that one of the shortcomings of the regionalists was their failure to make clear what was reality and what was romance.⁴ Both seem to agree that the great concentration on the past, on what once was, reduced much of the regionalism movement to a too-fond backward look, a sighing for the lost times.

It would, however, be a mistake to dismiss regionalism as being too sentimental, too romantic, for modern American fiction owes much to the regional

¹The Great Tradition, p. 49.

²Ibid., p. 60.

³Ibid., pp. 60-61.

⁴The Cycle of American Literature, p. 115.

writers. Specific regional novels and regional authors stand among America's best. Sinclair Lewis' Main Street, Ernest Hemingway's Nick Adams stories, William Faulkner's novels of the South, and John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath are all regional.

Willa Cather was undeniably a regionalist writer in that she used the Middle West and the Southwest as a basis for most of her novels; yet she never let her regionalism run away with the themes of her novels. She was a good regional writer according to a definition phrased by John T. Frederick: "A good regional writer is a good writer who uses regional materials. His regionalism is an incident and condition, not a purpose or a motive."¹ In My Ántonia, Miss Cather uses the Middle West, but it is easy to see that she does not want the reader to finish the novel saying, "So that's the way the pioneers in Nebraska lived." Rather, she wants the reader to realize something greater: she wants the reader to begin to understand life. Miss Cather truly is "concerned with the realities of the human spirit"²; that is, she wants her reader to

¹Out of the Midwest (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1944), p. xv.

²Dayton Kohler, "Willa Cather: 1876-1947," English Journal, XXVI (September 1947), 337.

realize something universal from her writings.

In My Ántonia it is easy to see Miss Cather's regionalism: the novel is set in her girlhood home, Nebraska. In the introduction to the novel, Miss Cather notes that those who grow up in small prairie towns are of a kind unto themselves; and in many ways, she proceeds in the novel to prove this point. She uses setting, the setting of the countryside around a town that she calls Black Hawk, Nebraska, and she does so to demonstrate the effects--good and bad--that the homestead and small town ways of life had on the people. She uses descriptions of the social structure of the small town to show us what true pettiness is. She uses the weather and the land to show the bountifulness of the region. The setting is extremely important to the novel: the geographic setting, the social setting, the setting in time all contribute to the elegiac qualities of the novel. Indeed, it is through setting that the tone and the theme of the novel are made most clear.

Most of the setting is natural. Miss Cather emphasizes nature, including the weather, the seasons, and the geography of the countryside. She uses nature not only for scenery, but often for imagery and symbolism as well. David Daiches says that "Willa Cather always

surrounds her moments of crisis with an appropriate mood derived from natural description."¹ A closer examination of My Ántonia confirms this opinion.

Miss Cather uses weather often to reflect the usual Middle Western farmer's attitude towards the weather and to create various moods in My Ántonia. Even today in the Middle West, the weather is still the most vital force in a farmer's life. It is the most unpredictable force. Consequently, the Middle Westerner comes to appreciate rainy, damp days as much as sunny, warm ones, for both kinds make the crops grow. He has a distrust of wind. He fears extreme cold; and although he needs snow for moisture, he fears blizzards which may isolate his stock. Miss Cather uses these common feelings to set a mood: often through her descriptions of the weather the reader learns to anticipate hard times that will come upon the characters in the novel.

Miss Cather makes special use of cold and snow as symbols of evil: "Cold is man's enemy."² Her best use of cold is in Book I. Carefully planned descriptions of the cold, late fall and early winter

¹Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction, p. 38.

²Randall, p. 110.

weather are obviously intended to set a tone of apprehension as Miss Cather prepares us for the tragedy of Mr. Shimerda's suicide. Late in the fall Jim and Antonia are out on the prairie. Mr. Shimerda, who has been hunting rabbits, stops to talk to the children. Jim admires the man's strange, foreign-made shotgun, and Mr. Shimerda tells Jim that he can have the gun when he marries. Jim recalls: "The old man's smile, as he listened, was so full of sadness, of pity for things, that I never afterward forgot it. As the sun sank there came a sudden coolness and the strong smell of earth and drying grass. Antonia and her father went off hand in hand, and I buttoned up my jacket and raced my shadow home."¹ A little later Miss Cather writes about two Russian brothers of whom Antonia is very fond. Mr. Shimerda, Antonia, and Jim go to visit the brothers when one of them is ill: "After the sun sank, a cold wind sprang up and moaned over the prairie. . . . We burrowed down in the straw and curled up close together, watching the angry red die out of the west" ² The ill brother dies that night. Later in Book I, Miss Cather describes the first snow of the winter: "The sky was like a sheet of metal; the blond cornfields had faded out

¹Pp. 42-43.

²P. 52.

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."¹ That day Jim takes Ántonia and her younger sister for a sleigh ride. In their exuberance, the children go too far: ". . . when we turned back--it must have been about four o'clock--the east wind grew stronger and began to howl; the sun lost its heartening power and the sky became grey and somber."² As a result of the exposure to the cold, Jim catches a bad cold. Just before Christmas, the weather gets worse: "The flakes came down so thickly that from the sittingroom windows I could not see beyond the windmill--its frame looked dim and grey, unsubstantial like a shadow. The snow did not stop falling all day, or during the night that followed. . . . the storm was quiet and restless."³ Despite the weather, the Burdens and the Shimerdas enjoy a good Christmas. In the week following Christmas, however, Ántonia confides to Jim: "My papa sad for the country. He not look good. He never make music any more. . . . He don't

¹P. 62.

²P. 65.

³P. 80.

like this kawn-tree."¹ In January the worst weather of all comes. Miss Cather describes a big snowstorm:

All day the storm went on. The snow did not fall this time, it simply spilled out of heaven, like thousands of featherbeds being emptied. . . . Neither grandmother nor I could go out in the storm, so Jake fed the chickens and brought in a pitiful contribution of eggs. . . . Next day our men had to shovel until noon to reach the barn . . . There had not been such a storm in the ten years my grandfather had lived in Nebraska.²

She concludes the description of the storm with the statement: "That was a strange, unnatural sort of day."³ This statement comes to have prophetic meaning in the light of the events which follow. The following day, the Burdens learn that Mr. Shimerda, who never was able to adjust to the ways of the new country, committed suicide the previous evening. The unnatural day before, with its extreme cold and its irregular schedule, has foreshadowed Mr. Shimerda's death. The world, for a time, has gone off schedule. The cold weather continues for several more days, and it is difficult for the Shimerdas to get a coroner and then a priest out to their farm. It is five days before it is possible to bury Mr. Shimerda in a grave that has to be hacked out with axes.

¹p. 89.

²Pp. 92-93.

³p. 94.

The next time Miss Cather speaks of a winter storm, she has reached Book II. At the beginning of Chapter VI, she writes: "Winter comes down savagely over a little town on the prairie. The wind that sweeps in from the open country strips away all the leafy screens that hide one yard from another in summer, and the houses seem to draw closer together."¹ A few lines later she says that the "pale, cold light of the winter sunset did not beautify,"² and the words that she gives to Jim Burden are "It was as if we were being punished for loving the loveliness of summer."³ Although this chapter goes on to tell of happy winter gatherings, Miss Cather's use of cold here and in the beginning of the next chapter brings a feeling of apprehension about the entire experience of living in town. Miss Cather notes: "Winter lies too long in country towns; hangs on until it is stale and shabby, old and sullen. On the farm the weather was the great fact, and men's affairs went on underneath it, as the streams creep under the ice. But in Black Hawk the scene of human life was spread out shrunken and pinched, frozen down to the bare stalk."⁴

¹P. 172.

²P. 173.

³Ibid.

⁴Pp. 180-181.

Although it is some time before all of the bad things that are to happen are finally revealed, we are prepared for hard times by the use of such bleak descriptions.

It is during the summer following the harsh winter that Antonia has a quarrel with her employers, the Harlings. Antonia's employer demands that she quit attending dances after a young man, engaged to someone else, walks Antonia home from a dance and attempts to kiss her. Antonia refuses to give up the dances, and she leaves the Harlings' and takes a job with Wick Cutter, the town's disliked money lender, and Mrs. Cutter, with whom Cutter is constantly quarreling. At one point while Antonia is at the Cutters', the couple goes to Omaha, leaving the Bohemian girl alone in the house. Antonia is nervous at being alone; so Jim sleeps at the Cutters' in her place. One night, Wick Cutter, who escaped from his wife by putting her on a train for Kansas City, comes back hoping to find Antonia alone in the house. Antonia escapes trouble this time, but the incident is indicative of the sorrow yet to come. Eventually, Antonia falls in love with a railroad conductor, Larry Donovan, who lures her to Denver with thoughts of marriage. Even though it is some time before the reader learns the entire story of Antonia's broken engagement and her illegitimate child, it is Miss Cather's earlier insistence

upon the bad effect of cold weather that first leads the reader to suspect that *Ántonia* will have difficult times.

Conversely, just as Miss Cather uses cold to signify bad, or even evil, she uses warm weather to set the mood for happy and joyful times. Early in the novel, Jim Burden discovers the delights of a garden. As he plays among the pumpkins, feels the warm earth, and watches the insects, he thinks: "I was entirely happy. 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."¹ That first summer is a good one for Jim. He learns to love his adopted land, and he makes a new friend in *Ántonia*. After that first hard winter, Miss Cather again stresses the happiness of warm weather: "When spring came, after that hard winter, one could not get enough of the nimble air."² Spring is always a good time in farming country, and for the Shimerdas, spring is the time of a new beginning; the warm weather gives the family a chance to start over. It seems significant that when Jim, a grown man, meets *Ántonia* after hearing about the birth of her daughter, it is

¹P. 18.

²P. 118.

summer time and the weather is warm. It is a sad time, yes, but the time of year causes Jim to remember their childhood friendship and the fun they had playing on the prairies in summer. Years later, when Jim returns again, it is warm weather, and he finds a very contented Antonia. The warmth of the weather and the bountifulness of the season match the love Antonia has for her home.

Closely tied in with the weather in Miss Cather's technique are the seasons. Although the most striking aspect, as previously discussed, is her tendency to picture winter as cold and drab and summer as hot and happy, there are images connected primarily with the seasons that deserve mention. Perhaps the best of these is the image of summer as a sort of goddess of plenty. Certainly, this image stems directly from Miss Cather's Middle Western background where summer is a time of growing and ripening crops, a time of joy. Some of her most lilting and lyric-sounding passages are those she writes in celebration of summer:

July came with that breathless, brilliant heat which makes the plains of Kansas and Nebraska the best corn country in the world. It seemed as if we could hear the corn growing in the night; under the stars one caught a faint crackling in the dewy, heavy-odoured cornfields where the feathered stalks stood so juicy and green. If all the great plain from the Missouri to the Rocky Mountains had been under glass, and the heat regulated by a thermometer, it could not have been better for the yellow tassels that were ripening and fertilizing the silk day by day.¹

Antonia herself furthers the image of the goddess of plenty because, along with the men, she learns to plow the fields and thresh the corn and wheat. She, too, feels the joy that summer brings. One summer Antonia witnesses a suicide when an itinerant farm worker throws himself into a threshing machine. She says, " 'Now, wasn't that strange . . . What would anybody want to kill themselves in summer for: In threshing time, too! It's nice everywhere then.' "¹

Like her picture of summer, Miss Cather's picture of spring stems from her Nebraska background. Spring in Nebraska is a tempestuous time: a time of high wind, of rainy days, of a few unexpectedly warm days. As Jim notes in Book I, "There was only--spring itself; the throb of it, the light restlessness, the vital essence of it everywhere: in the sky, in the swift clouds, in the pale sunshine, and in the warm, high wind--rising suddenly, sinking suddenly, impulsive and playful," ² It is in the spring that Jim's friendship with Lena develops, and this is no accident. It seems fitting that Jim should come very

¹p. 179.

²p. 120.

close to falling in love during such a season. And it seems just as likely that since the relationship begins in the spring, it will resemble the spring and be just a fleeting, passing thing. Willa Cather captures the unstable, nostalgic mood: "After leaving Lena, I walked slowly out into the country part of the town where I lived. The lilacs were all blooming in the yards, and the smell of them after the rain, of the new leaves and the blossoms together, blew into my face with a sort of bitter sweetness."¹

One of the most startling aspects of Miss Cather's use of nature is her very well integrated and often subtle use of natural objects, especially the sun and animals. The mention of animals, especially, often seems to be just to round out the picture of country life, but a more detailed study shows that nearly always the animal is an image for someone or some type of person. One of the more obvious examples of this usage involves a long description which Miss Cather gives of a prairie dog town where she explains that the appealing little animals are often forced to share their burrows with owls, and worse, rattlesnakes. A few paragraphs later she likens the Shimerdas' situation to that of the prairie dogs.

¹p. 227.

The Shimerdas' only contact with the rest of the community--besides their friendships with the Burdens--is through an unscrupulous Bohemian from whom they purchased their land and from whom they have been forced to purchase farm goods. Miss Cather points out that the Shimerdas are like the prairie dogs in that they tolerate the situation, not liking it, but not knowing how to change it. The comparison is an apt one. The rattlesnake, one of the most feared creatures of the prairies, appears in another episode. Jim and Ántonia are out playing one day when they chance upon an unusually large snake. Jim is able to kill the snake with a stick. By killing the creature, Jim becomes a big hero--and more grown-up--in Ántonia's eyes.

Miss Cather makes use of tiny creatures, such as insects, too. While Jim and Ántonia are playing on the prairie in early autumn, Ántonia finds a grasshopper, one of the last of the season, and takes it in her hands. As the sun begins to go down, Jim wonders, "What were we to do with the frail little creature we had lured back to life by false pretenses?"¹ At that moment Ántonia's father comes along, and Ántonia confides to Jim that her father does not seem well: he is homesick for his old country of Bohemia. In

¹p. 40.

view of Mr. Shimerda's later suicide, it is easy to see that Mr. Shimerda is very much like the grasshopper who has lived too long: he is separated from all that is familiar, all that he has learned to understand.

For Miss Cather the sun is the symbol of warmth and happiness: its golden rays light up her happiest scenes. Early in the novel, Jim describes the sunny days of his first few months on the prairie: "All those fall afternoons were the same, but I never got used to them. As far as we could see, the miles of copper-red grass were drenched in sunlight that was stronger and fiercer than at any other time of the day. The blond cornfields were red gold, the haystacks turned rosy and threw long shadows."¹ In Book II Miss Cather describes a picnic that Jim and Antonia have with other friends. Jim notes at that time: "There was a shimmer of gold on the brown river. Out in the stream the sandbars glittered like glass, and the light trembled in the willow thickets . . . The girls sat listless, leaning against each other. The long fingers of the sun touched their foreheads."² Later, when Jim visits Antonia the summer after her baby is born, he notices: "As we walked homeward

¹P. 40.

²P. 244.

across the fields, the sun dropped and lay like a great golden globe in the low west."¹ But the most sunlit scene of all comes at the novel's end when Jim returns to Nebraska after many years. He visits Antonia on her farm: "The afternoon sun poured down on us through the drying grape leaves. The orchard seemed full of sun, like a cup," ² As Antonia and Jim sit under the grape arbor talking about old times, Jim notices: "She leaned her chin on her hand and looked down through the orchard, where the sunlight was growing more and more golden."³

But it is with the landscape--the land, its hills and rivers, its trees and crops--that Miss Cather makes the greatest impact with her use of nature. The land in My Antonia is more than geography, more than geology: it symbolizes all that Miss Cather finds good about pioneer life. It is through her use of land that the elegiac nature of the novel can be most easily determined. For Miss Cather, the land seems to be a harsh, wild thing, but it is by no means untameable. Those who tame the land, however, must be strong; they must be honest and good. Tied in

¹P. 321.

²P. 341.

³P. 343.

with this concept is the notion that once the land has been tamed and parceled into neat little squares-- as it was at the time Miss Cather wrote My Ántonia--the way of life which the untamed land required is gone.

The overpowering quality of the land is evident within the first few pages of the novel. Jim has just completed a long train ride from Virginia and is riding in a wagon out to his grandparents' farm. He peers out into the night: "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 the land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made."¹ As Jim notes all these things, a strange feeling comes over him: "Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out."² Even a young boy like Jim is able to perceive the land's strength as being much greater than that of any man. The next day, under the golden sunshine, Jim does not feel quite so overwhelmed by the land. He goes out to the garden and notices how it and the cornfields and the sorghum patch are the only pieces of broken land. He notices the "rough, shaggy, red grass" and

¹p. 7.

²p. 8.

sees how when it waves in the wind it looks like a wine-colored sea. Jim has begun to appreciate the beauty of his new country.

In contrast to his grandfather's rich fields and pleasantly rolling pastures, Jim encounters a different terrain at the Shimerdas' place. The land there consists of rough hillocks and draws with banks. Miss Cather's description of the rough land around the Shimerdas' home signals and underscores the fact that the family is in for some very hard times. Their lives, for a time at least, will be as poor as the land. For Mr. Shimerda, especially, the land is harsh. He longs for the forests of his native country, and he finds the prairies frightening. After his suicide, he is buried on the southwest corner of his homestead property. Long years later, Jim recalls:

Years afterward, when the open-grazing days were over, and the red grass had been ploughed under and under until it had almost disappeared from the prairie; when all the fields were under fence, and the roads no longer ran about like wild things, but followed surveyed section lines, Mr. Shimerda's grave was still there, with a sagging wire fence around it, . . . the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island; . . .¹

It is ironic that the only place of free ground left is that where Mr. Shimerda, who could not understand the freedom of the land, is buried. It is a fitting

¹Pp. 118-119.

symbol, however, for the land did conquer Mr. Shimerda; it never yielded, not even after his death.

But for Jim, the land does not hold the harshness that it does for the Shimerdas. Jim notices only the beauty and the adventure that the land holds. Years later, he looks back upon those happy days: "All the years that have passed have not dimmed my memory of that first glorious autumn. The new country lay open before me: there were no fences in those days, and I could choose my own way over the grass uplands, trusting the pony to get me home again."¹ The fact that there were no fences conveys to the reader the feeling of absolute freedom that the boy must have felt: the freedom to move and grow and plan without the restriction of conventional boundaries. The unfenced prairie must have given a sense of freedom to all who were strong.

After Jim and his grandparents have moved to Black Hawk, the countryside becomes much more settled, and more roads and fences come. During the summer after Jim's graduation from high school, he and Antonia and several of Antonia's friends have a picnic along the river. As the young people watch the sun go down,

¹p. 28.

they see a huge, black figure appear before the face of the setting sun:

On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained 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.¹

The plow serves as a symbol for the farmer who has conquered the land and it is a strong, apt symbol, but even more striking is the picture of the plow looming great only to sink in the landscape. The pioneer farmer has come, he has had his day, and he has disappeared, never to loom so large in shaping the nation again. The beautiful picture of the plow against the red, setting sun is Willa Cather's most poignant image: the entire elegiac quality of the novel is easily summed up in this one image. Like the plow against the sun, the pioneer way of life is gone, and just as any beautiful thing is missed when it is gone, so should the pioneer way of life be missed even though it will never come back.

Several years later, when Jim returns to the prairie after completing college, he notices that the land has changed considerably:

¹p. 245.

The wheat harvest was over, and here and there along the horizon I could see black puffs of smoke from the steam threshing-machines. The old pasture land was now being broken up into wheatfields and cornfields, . . . the whole face of the country was changing. . . . The windy springs and blazing summers, one after another, had enriched and mellowed that flat tableland; all the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea.¹

Jim realizes that the harsh pioneer life has yielded a good living for those who stayed on the land. The description seems to be a forecast for Antonia's future, even though at this time she is an overworked, unwed mother.

At the novel's end, it is the land that causes Jim to remember all the good things about his childhood and to realize what a precious gift his country childhood was. Jim returns to Black Hawk after many years and finds Antonia and her husband and family. He notices that the land has yielded many good harvests for Antonia. Later he goes into town only to find his visit there disappointing; so he decides to take a walk in the country: "I took a long walk north of town, out into the pastures where the land was so rough that it had never been ploughed up, and the long red grass of early times still grew shaggy over

¹p. 306.

the draws and hillocks. Out there I felt at home again."¹ After all his journeys, it is in this wild and still somewhat untamed land that Jim feels most at home. While taking his walk he finds traces of the road that he traveled upon his first night in Nebraska. Out there on the prairie, with the beautiful sun beginning to go down, and with the wind blowing, Jim finally realizes that what counts in his life is those early years when the prairies were still free and when strong men and women worked to make their homes. He comes to understand that *Ántonia*, the last remnant of his childhood, is also a symbol of the past, "the precious, the incommunicable past."²

¹Pp. 369-370.

²P. 372.

CHAPTER IV

THE ELEGIAC STRUCTURE OF MY ÁNTONIA

To say that My Ántonia exhibits an elegiac quality is not to say anything that the critics have not noted nor that the reasonably astute person cannot glean for himself. Alfred Kazin calls My Ántonia "the earliest and purest of her elegies."¹ Morton D. Zabel says, "Willa Cather also did something the aspirant to permanent quality rarely achieves: she wrote a few books--My Ántonia and A Lost Lady chief among them--that are not only American elegies but American classics. . . ." ² In discussing Miss Cather's writing, Bernice Slote states that "one hears an elegiac tone . . . a recurring melancholy."³ John Randall III says, "The books Willa Cather wrote after her first novel are extended lyrics in prose."⁴

¹On Native Grounds (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), p. 252.

²"Willa Cather: The Tone of Time," in Willa Cather and Her Critics, ed. James Schroeter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 227.

³The Kingdom of Art (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 33.

⁴The Landscape and the Looking Glass, p. 64.

But no one has specifically pointed out in just what ways My Ántonia is like an elegy.

Perhaps the easiest and most valid way to evaluate My Ántonia as an elegy is to compare it with a standard definition of a pastoral elegy. A pastoral elegy, by definition, must have a rural setting and must be about a very serious life-situation, if not about death.¹ Using such a general definition, we can see that My Ántonia fits the initial qualifications of a pastoral elegy: it is set in the late nineteenth century in rural Nebraska, and it deals with man's relationship to rural life. But My Ántonia fits more than just this loose, overall definition of a pastoral elegy; indeed, the elegiac quality of the novel can be seen within the very structure of the novel.

Although it may seem that in structure My Ántonia least approaches the standard idea of an elegy, nonetheless there seems to be enough basis for comparison that it is hard to imagine that Miss Cather herself was not aware of the comparison. Obviously, the standard elegy is a lyric, and it is difficult to bring lyric qualities side by side to compare with

¹William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, ed. and enlarged by C. Hugh Holman (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), pp. 165, 343.

prose ones. In prose an author has chances for digression from central themes, and clearcut divisions of structure are hard to denote; likewise in prose the reader can easily lose himself in characterization or plot, and the techniques and themes of the work are momentarily lost. In attempting to compare prose and poetry structure, the reader must keep in mind broad, general divisions, and the standard definition of a pastoral elegy gives one a very good basis for judging the elegiac structure of My Ántonia. As noted in A Handbook to Literature, the pastoral elegy conventionally includes an invocation of the muse, an expression of grief, a procession of mourners, a digression on religion, and a consolation.¹ Although the pastoral elegy is often written about a deceased person, My Ántonia is not an elegy so much about any one person as it is about a way of life that is gone, the pioneering way of life of Middle Western America that is gone forever.

My Ántonia opens with an introductory passage in which Miss Cather imagines herself on a train going to Nebraska. She chances to meet Jim Burden, who once

¹Thrall and Hibbard, p. 343. This definition is basically the same as one given in Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 215.

had been a childhood friend, and the two discuss what growing up in a prairie town was like, the people they knew there, and especially a girl named *Ántonia*.

Miss Cather writes:

We were talking about what it is like to spend one's childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn, under the stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the colour and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and grey as sheet-iron.¹

The talk is soon dominated by *Ántonia*, a girl both knew back in Black Hawk, Nebraska: "More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood. I had lost sight of her altogether, but Jim had found her again after long years, and had renewed a friendship that meant a great deal to him. . . . He made me see her again, feel her presence, revived all my old affection for her."² Jim confesses to Miss Cather that he has been writing down his memories of *Ántonia*. His writing, however, began only after he had renewed his old friendship with *Ántonia* after years of silence. Thus *Ántonia* and Jim's recollection

¹From the first page of the Introduction, which is not numbered.

²From the second and third pages of the Introduction.

of his boyhood days have been the inspiration for Jim's writing: his muse, if you will. Jim's memories of his youth are so vivid, especially his memories of the seasons and the weather, that it is easy to see why recalling them would inspire him to write. And, certainly, since Antonia proves in the novel to be an inspiring image for Jim, a renewed friendship with her must have provided a good deal of inspiration. As Jim says of her much later: "Antonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade--that grew stronger with time. . . . She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true."¹ Through Jim, Miss Cather is invoking her own muse: the Nebraska prairies that she loved. Both the prairies and the Bohemian pioneers whom she admired serve as inspiration for the work that is to follow this introduction. Thus, the introduction to the novel serves as an invocation.

As shown in Chapter II of this thesis, My Antonia contains five books, each with its own purpose and with its own plot. The first three of these books--"The Shimerdas," "The Hired Girls," and "Lena Lingard"--may be compared with the middle structure of a classic

¹Pp. 352-353.

pastoral elegy. Throughout these three books, Miss Cather lets the reader know that the only bad, the only evil thing in *Antonia's* life, the lover who deserted her and left her pregnant and unmarried, came into *Antonia's* life when she was living in town. While she lived on the farm, life was difficult for her, but good. Because Miss Cather, like many others, left the rural life, this stress on the good side of living close to the land may be seen as an expression of grief for those who have left and for the things they have missed because they left.

The first book of the novel, "*The Shimerdas*," contains by necessity the introductory material of the novel. We are introduced to the major characters, the setting, and the overall view of the course which the novel will take. But in this book, perhaps even more than in the others, we find the finest expression of grief. Had the novel been cut short with this first book, we still would have been able to understand what Jim--that is, Miss Cather--wants us to understand. The Shimerdas are immigrants from Bohemia, and when the novel opens, they have just arrived in Nebraska, as has Jim Burden also. Jim has come from Virginia to live with his grandparents on a farm near Black Hawk, Nebraska, and he and the Shimerdas arrive on the same train. As Jim becomes accustomed to life on the

plains, he makes friends with *Ántonia Shimerda*, and the two spend many hours together. Miss Cather writes of their times together in a very sympathetic manner: "All those fall afternoons were the same, but I never got used to them. . . . How many an afternoon *Ántonia* and I have trailed along the prairie under that magnificence! And always two long black shadows flitted before us or followed after, dark spots on ruddy grass."¹ Here we can see Jim's happy yet longing remembrance of his childhood days. We see not only his loss of the easy relationship with *Ántonia*, but his loss of his rural environment. Jim, although not a native Nebraskan, has learned to love the prairie, and through this first book, we realize that his love for it has not diminished. He remembers things he used to do: "I used to love to drift along the pale-yellow cornfields, looking for the damp spots one sometimes found at their edges, where the smartweed soon turned a rich copper colour and the narrow brown leaves hung curled like cocoons about the swollen joints of the stem"²; "I used to lie in my bed by the open window . . . looking up at the gaunt frame of the

¹P. 40.

²P. 29.

windmill against the blue night sky."¹ The childhood memories shape a statement of grief for things past that is not matched elsewhere in the novel.

Book II, "The Hired Girls," shows us an older Jim and an older *Ántonia*. Jim's family has moved to town where they become a part of Black Hawk's society. Later, *Ántonia* comes to town to work for the Burdens' next-door neighbors as a hired girl. Jim finds his time in town a rather lonely one. He cannot fit in with those of his own social class because he regards them as foolish, yet he knows his grandparents would disapprove of any activities which involved the country immigrant folk. Jim notes: "I thought the attitude of the town people toward these girls very stupid . . . There was not a man in Black Hawk who had the intelligence or cultivation, much less the personal distinction, of *Ántonia*'s father. Yet people saw no difference between her and the three Marys; they were all Bohemians, all 'hired girls.'"² The hypocrisy of the Black Hawk townspeople comes close to enraging him. For his contemporaries in Black Hawk, he holds contempt:

¹P. 139.

²Pp. 200-201.

The daughters of Black Hawk merchants had a confident, unenquiring belief that they were 'refined,' and that the country girls, who 'worked out,' were not. The American farmers in our country were quite as hard-pressed as their neighbors from other countries. . . . But no matter in what straits the Pennsylvanian or Virginian found himself, he would not let his daughters go out into service.¹

The Black Hawk boys looked forward to marrying Black Hawk girls, and living in a brand new little house with best chairs that must not be sat upon, and hand-painted china that must not be used. But sometimes a young fellow would look up from his ledger, or out through the grating of his father's bank, and let his eyes follow Lena Lingard, as she passed the window. . . . The country girls were considered a menace to the social order.²

These passages seem to express best the statement of grief found in Book II. Jim, as he grows older, realizes the hypocrisy that exists in the town society, and he is saddened by it. But even more sad perhaps, he seems to be helpless about overcoming his own tendencies to want the position of being a part of the elite. In reality, he wants to keep his position, yet choose his friends from among the immigrant class.

Book III, entitled "Lena Lingard," shows Jim's ambivalence towards the society of his town. Now a student at the University of Nebraska, Jim

¹P. 199.

²P. 201.

lives in a furnished room near the University in Lincoln. He never would have dated Lena while they were in Black Hawk, for she was just a hired girl there; but now she represents a link to his past, and he begins dating her. Lena now runs her own dressmaking shop in Lincoln, and in the larger city, where Lena is well-known among the upper level society persons with whom she does business, Jim does not find a town-country line between himself and Lena as he would have in Black Hawk. The relationship never progresses beyond that of a very good friendship, however, and it is easy to imagine that the Black Hawk social system still has its hold on Jim. No matter how much he would like to love Lena--or, for that matter, Antonia--it just is not the seemly thing to do. Lena understands the distance between herself and Jim very well. It takes her a long time even to visit Jim once she realizes he is in Lincoln, and when she finally does, she tells the housekeeper where Jim lives that she is from his hometown and that she has promised his grandmother that she will visit him. Later Lena tells Jim about the encounter, adding, "How surprised Mrs. Burden would be!"¹ Eventually Jim

¹p. 269.

spends so much time with Lena that he is unable to get any serious studying done; so when a professor friend of his accepts a post at Harvard, Jim follows him. Jim feels a great loss when he tells Lena good-by, and somehow we sense that his loss includes not only the loss of a friend, but the loss of Jim's Nebraska days. In a way, Lena represents Jim's last chance to cling to the past, but he rejects it.

Book IV, "The Pioneer Woman's Story," is much like Book II, in that its statement of grief can be seen quite clearly and stated quite simply. In this book, Jim comes back to Black Hawk, after completing two years' study at Harvard, and decides to find out what has happened to Antonia. He knows that she fell in love with a railroad conductor, that she went to Denver with him, and that he deserted her, pregnant and unmarried. He admits that he is upset about Antonia:

"I tried to shut Antonia out of my mind. I was bitterly disappointed in her. I could not forgive her for becoming an object of pity. . . ."¹

He seeks out the Widow Steavens, an old, kindly pioneer woman, who cared for Antonia after she came back to the farm to have her baby. The widow tells Jim the

¹p. 298.

sad story of *Ántonia's* trip to Denver, and her words sound much like a lament for the girl. Indeed, the widow says she "made lament" when *Ántonia* told her that the railroad conductor had run away. She says: "Jimmy, I sat right down on that bank beside her and made lament. I cried like a young thing. . . . I felt bowed with despair. My *Ántonia*, that had so much good in her, had come home disgraced."¹ Jim goes to see *Ántonia*. He finds her shocking wheat. As he walks home with her across the fields, he thinks: "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."² Jim hates facing the reality of *Ántonia's* disgrace, but he seems to find himself powerless to overlook it. He would rather return to childhood than have to admit that anything evil or sad had happened to him or to those who were close to him. But he does salvage something out of the sadness: "About us it was growing darker and darker, and I had to look hard to see her face, which I meant always to carry with me; the closest, realest face, under all the shadows of women's faces, at the

¹P. 313.

²P. 322.

very bottom of my memory."¹

We can see that Jim's statement of grief throughout the first four books has begun to move toward the last part of the elegy, the consolation. Book I shows us Jim's grief at losing his rural childhood; Book II shows Jim's grief over the discriminatory social structure of Black Hawk; Book III shows his anguish over not being able to cling to the past, and Book IV shows us his grief over *Ántonia's* disgrace as well as his short lament for having lost his childhood days. Already in Book IV, as is shown in the quotation cited, Jim has begun to find some consolation. Book V, "Cuzak's Boys," gives us a clearer statement of that consolation. In Book V, Jim returns to Nebraska after many years, and he visits *Ántonia* and her family. She has long since married a Bohemian immigrant, and she now has a large family and a reasonably prosperous farm. Jim thinks of *Ántonia*: "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 with other things . . . She was a rich mine of life,

¹P. 322.

like the founders of early races."¹ For Jim, *Ántonia* embodies all the good things of his heritage, and he feels that she has retained her integrity and greatness throughout a long, hard life: perhaps even because of that life. He finds great consolation in seeing that she has not really changed. He thinks: "I know so many women who have kept all the things she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, *Ántonia* had not lost the fire of life. Her skin, so brown and hardened, had not that look of flabbiness, as if the sap beneath it had been secretly drained away."² Jim also seems to draw consolation from seeing *Ántonia's* husband: "I found Cuzak a most companionable fellow. . . . He was still, as *Ántonia* said, a city man. . . . Yet his wife had managed to hold him here on a farm, in one of loneliest countries in the world."³ And a bit later, as the book ends, Jim finds a further consolation: "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

¹P. 353.

²P. 336.

³P. 366.

that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past."¹ From this passage we can also see that Jim is consoling himself for having at least not allowed himself to love *Ántonia* in a romantic way. In the novel, we come to realize that Jim just might like to fall in love with *Ántonia*, but he cannot bring himself to cross that invisible line that lies between his family and hers. But despite all this, Jim still realizes that *Ántonia* is the representation of all that was good about his rural background, and even though that life is gone, there is consolation in the memory of it.

Of the basic parts of a classic pastoral elegy, there are two which Miss Cather does not emphasize in *My Ántonia*: a digression on religion and a parade of mourners. One understands why a discussion of religion is not included. Because the novel is based on a universal heritage, a clearcut digression on religion would have seemed out of place. Religion is accepted as part of everyday life in the novel, and *Ántonia's* Roman Catholicism and Jim's Protestantism are not allowed to seem very remarkable. If there

¹P. 373.

is a religious lesson to be learned from the novel, it is the lesson of tolerance. The first Christmas that the Burdens and the Shimerdas are neighbors, Mr. Shimerda calls on the Burdens. Jim lights the candles on the Christmas tree:

Mr. Shimerda rose, crossed himself, and quietly knelt down under the tree, his head sunk forward. . . . I saw grandmother look apprehensively at grandfather. He was rather narrow in religious matters, and sometimes spoke out and hurt people's feelings. . . . Grandfather merely put his finger-tips to his brow and bowed his venerable head. . . . At nine o'clock Mr. Shimerda put on his overcoat. . . . He made the sign of the cross over me, put on his cap, and went off in the dark. As we turned back to the sitting-room, grandfather looked at me searchingly. 'The prayers of all good people are good,' he said quietly.¹

It is interesting that Miss Cather does not provide a procession of mourners who lament the by-gone life. Jim Burden as narrator seems to be the only one in the novel who recognizes the value of pioneer life and who mourns its passing. The Widow Steavens provides a type of lament, but she really is lamenting the more superficial tragedy of *Ántonia's* status as an unwed mother. For a novel which celebrates values and a life that have passed from the American scene, Willa Cather certainly might have tried to emphasize her point with more characters than just the narrator commenting on the past. But the fact that

¹pp. 87-88.

she does not say much for her restraint and her sense of art, for if she had, the novel would have become didactic and would have lost the elegiac quality. The procession of mourners still remains, however, in the form of all who read the novel and grasp its themes. Those who read the novel and come to have an appreciation for the pioneer, for the rural life, become a part of the mourners, a part of those who honor that kind of life.

The purpose of My Ántonia then derives from the use of elegiac conventions. In a highly original study, The Elegiac Mode, Abbie Findlay Potts says that the most important aspect of the elegy is what she calls "anagnorisis," a Greek word she translates as "recognition" or "revelation."¹ She says that anagnorisis "is the very goal" of the elegy.² And, I think, anagnorisis is the goal of My Ántonia in two ways. First Jim comes to realize how much his

¹(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 36. In this book, Miss Potts is primarily concerned with poetic diction and meter, and she primarily limits her study to William Wordsworth. I was, however, interested to note that her two major points in the book are applicable to My Ántonia.

²Ibid., p 37.

past means to him and how much the values of the past endure in Antonia. There is a moment of self-realization when he discovers that his friendship with Antonia has not diminished over the years. Second, the reader comes to realize how fulfilling the pioneer life was and, like Miss Cather, is moved to honor it. Miss Cather shows us how harsh the pioneer farm life was, but she makes us envy those who lived that life and were strong enough to conquer the land.

Another strong aspect of the elegy, Miss Potts believes, is the challenging of time. The elegy, she says, uses temporal events "as a springboard into the timeless."¹ This aspect, too, is used in My Antonia. Through the events of Antonia's life, Miss Cather gives us a picture of a strong woman, a woman we can keep in our memories and always admire. Through the use of natural setting, Miss Cather gives us a feeling of the timelessness of the prairies: the weather, the seasons, and the land will always be there. The timelessness of My Antonia might be compared to the plow that Miss Cather pictures so vividly in Book II. Jim and Antonia and their friends first see the plow silhouetted against the setting sun in such a way

¹p. 121.

that the plow seems "heroic in size." But after the sun sets, the forgotten plow sinks "back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie."¹ As the reader is absorbed in My Ántonia, the picture of pioneer life seems to loom large; later perhaps the reader will forget much of the novel's purpose. The novel will, however, still be there, just as the pioneer life symbolized by the plow will always be a part of America's heritage.

¹p. 245.

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