

## **Landscape of Change: An Ecocritical View of Willa Cather's *My Antonia***

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*"Call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality."*

*-D.H. Lawrence*

Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918) is one of the greatest novels in American literature and considered to be her finest literary achievement. A compelling tale of the challenges immigrant families face upon their arrival on a new land, *My Antonia* is also a coming-of-age story set within Cather's own familiar pastoral scenery of Nebraska. Indeed, part of Cather's genius is her ability to provide the landscape setting in the novel with a life of its own, becoming a silent, yet active character within the text. This essay takes an ecocritical view of the philosophical sense of place by focusing on interconnectivity of the human spirit and landscape.

Ecocriticism is the study of the environmental perspective within literature, an interdisciplinary study of science, philosophy, history, and ethics. It is the focus on how physical environment is effective in literature. According to Cheryll Glotfelty one of the questions ecocritics ask themselves is "in addition to race, class, and gender, should *place* become a new critical category (xix)?" Glen Love writes that "in ecological observation there is no organism without an environment, no environment without an organism" (93). He also notes Aristotle's statement in *Physics* that "the power of place will be remarkable." Susan Rosowski observes, "Cather is profoundly identified with the places that shaped her and that she wrote about" (viii). As Cather herself points out:

“An artist has an emotion and the first thing he wants to do with it is to find some form to put it in, a design” (qtd. in Love 91). Jim Burden’s sense of place is seen through Antonia Shimerda who symbolizes the embodiment of Cather’s relationship to the Nebraskan prairie, making *p/lace* a relevant concept in literature as it helps establish the character’s self-identity. Additionally, while scholars debate Cather’s ecological viewpoints in her fiction, which vacillate between anthropocentric and biocentric positions, Cather’s ecological stance is largely anthropocentric, meaning land should be utilized for human advancement.

The story begins with the migration of newly-orphaned Jim Burden and the Bohemian Shimerdas into the plains of Nebraska. The Shimerdas seek a new life in America and opportunities of fortune for their children. Interestingly, Cather eliminates background information of Jim’s past and memories of his parents, perhaps to direct the reader’s attention solely to the memories of his halcyon days of youth with Antonia on the Nebraskan plains. Jim confirms this point when he speaks of his parents and in regards to his past: “I had left even their spirits behind me. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out” (11). The negative aspects of moving to a foreign land and the immigrant family’s struggle to adapt become a significant part of the story. The novel contrasts the migrant and the immigrant experience which shape their sense of place, not distinct from their sense of identity, just as the landscape is in part shaped by humans.

In his “Frontier Thesis” Frederick Jackson Turner states: “The European immigrant must exchange what he views is the cultural norm of everyday life and adapt to new ideologies and create new habits to successfully integrate into the community.

The pioneer does not forget his origins in civilization; but at first, the frontier environment is ‘too strong for the man’ and he must adapt or die” (qtd. In Taylor 3). Indeed, the description of the immigrant family’s new dwelling foreshadows their troubles as Jim and his grandparents visit for the first time. Jim describes the “land is of little value for farming,” while the home is a cave not fit for the elements of the prairie winter (18). Jim notes that in spring the Shimerdas were “fairly equipped to struggle with the soil” (69). Being able to work the land is a matter of survival and provides the immigrants with a feeling of pride and control which is key in establishing a relationship with their new homeland.

However, financial strains and the inability to farm on their new land inhibit the Shimerdas adaptation to their new home. Being unable to communicate with their neighbors leaves Mr. Shimerda with a feeling of helplessness and displacement as he mourns for the life he had in Bohemia. Mr. Shimerda cannot cope in the new land because Bohemia is a part of his identity and he feels a great loss. He clings to his newfound friendship with Russian neighbors Peter and Pavel. Still, his health begins to deteriorate. All he has known in life has changed and so he lives his life in the past with only memories providing comfort. The Shimerdas’ nonexperiential position makes them vulnerable and dependent upon the kindness of their neighbors. It is only within young Antonia in which there is a feeling of hope, as Cather portrays her character as one with ebullience. Antonia’s young age and her curiosity of the environment and its people make it easier for her to adapt to her new home.

After a blizzard hits the prairie, the Burdens help the Shimerdas with necessities. Grandmother Burden states, “they’re wanting in everything, and most of all in horse-

sense. Nobody can give ‘em that” (47). For the immigrant, there are numerous factors one must consider before judging their inability or unwillingness to fully integrate and cope in a new country. As Jeff Malpas states in his article “Place and Human Being”, “there are countless instances in which the idea that some individual or group has a special connection to some particular place, whether village, town or region, the basis for acts of violence and exclusion, of varying degrees, against those who are seen as not of that place—as ‘other”” (Malpas 21). Likewise, Rachael Collins writes “While Mrs. Burden delivers her aid to the Shimerdas in a way that forcefully asserts her sense of her own superior cultivation, her interaction with the Shimerdas underscores the relationship between an ethic of cultivation and a culture of domination” (52). When Mrs. Shimerda presents Mrs. Burden with a Bohemian ingredient for cooking, Mrs. Burden is offended by the smell and cannot understand the Bohemian ways of cooking, so she dismisses the gift and downplays Mrs. Shimerda’s kind gesture.

However, the “other” factor becomes part of the community’s progression as they learn to adapt to each other due in large part to the immigrant youth’s ability to imbue a vitality of life and contributing new ideas, music, languages, and stories. As in a patchwork quilt, each family becomes a part of the land pieced together within “the material in which countries are made” (Cather 11). Interestingly, Jim comes across a “faint marking in the grass, a great circle where the Indians used to ride” (39). The great Indian circle is a reminder that before there were white settlers, Native American inhabitants once called the area home. Jim mentions that “when the first light spray of snow fell over the marking, it looked like strokes of Chinese white on canvas” (39). This illuminates the point that Jim views what he cannot comprehend as foreign regardless

of the fact that *he* is the foreigner. Also, Jim's reflection of the marking provides a period of stasis in a story which has a feeling of movement throughout. Though this was the period for American pioneers, the marking is a symbol presenting different phases for different groups of people. At one point or another, each group has played a role in shaping the land. The identities of these groups of people and the environment are intertwined by their contributions throughout history.

Glen A. Love writes in his book *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology, and the Environment*, "the reasoning for revaluation of place is increasingly influenced by the allying of place to body in which the primacy of the lived world of bodily experience is the foundation for all human thinking, meaning, and communication" (93). Mr. Shimerda's depression caused by feelings of detachment to his new home and overwhelming nostalgia of his homeland leads him to commit suicide. After his death, Jim observes that "it was homesickness which killed Mr. Shimerda. He continues to wonder whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country" (59). But one could also make the argument that his spirit never left his homeland. Bohemia is a great part of Mr. Shimerda's identity. The move to America from the only place he has ever known and from a community of support into a foreign place, with hardships from the beginning, was too much for him to bear. It made adapting to his new home almost impossible and not even the love for his family was enough to save him. Mr. Shimerda's spirit was overpowered by the feeling of displacement and loss of his manhood by being completely dependent upon strangers.

Progress and change continue as Jim lives with his grandparents on the prairie. While the "sea of red grass" is prevalent and largely untouched, time and

industrialization cause changes in the landscape. The feeling of movement throughout the story is seen when Jim states, "I felt motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping..." (15). Years later Jim observes "the tall red grass near Mr. Shimerda's grave which was never mowed was like a little island. Never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, without wishing well to the sleeper." At this point in the novel, the "red grass had been ploughed under and under until it had almost disappeared" (68). As the characters grow older, the landscape seems to reflect their changes. Jim's observation at Mr. Shimerda's grave is a nostalgic scene in which he pays homage to both the deceased and to the period in his life which contributed to his own personal progression and sense of self-identity.

In his article "Biocentric, Homocentric, Theocentric Environmentalism," Patrick Dooley says this of Cather, "while her deepest environmental impulse is in favor of homocentric position of conservation, she also sides with a biocentric position of preservation" (65). Indeed, Cather's biocentric position can be seen through the eyes of Grandmother Burden and Jim while in the garden as she tells him "not to fear the big badger that comes out of his hole once in awhile and kills a chicken, [I] would not do any harm to him. In a new country a body feels friendly to the animals" (16). While leaning against a pumpkin and observing life all around him in the form of insects and bugs as well as gophers and plants, Jim states that he "is something that lay under the sun, like the pumpkins, and did not want to be anything more" (17). His feelings of contentment and happiness in that moment in that space and time creates in him a sense of connectivity with nature, a numinous experience which will be inscribed within

his heart and mind. Indeed, later in the novel Jim describes the prairie in autumn as being like the “bush that burned with fire and was not consumed” (28).

Jim’s friendship with Antonia Shimerda introduces new experiences and adventures on the prairie creating memories the two friends will cherish for a lifetime, and will ultimately be the reason he writes a book about his beloved friend.

Acknowledging that all inhabitants were at one point immigrants, Cather blurs the distinction of the “exotic other” by portraying Antonia as resilient and optimistic, antithetical to her late father. Eager to learn the new language and to explore the new world with Jim helped the young Antonia to adapt easily. According to Jay Appleton in *The Symbolism of Habitat*:

Our habits of environmental perception, while they are invariably modified and shaped by cultural, social, historical, and personal experiences, are not created out of nothing by those influences; rather they are derivatives of mechanisms of survival behavior which were already there, elements of our innate make-up. Environmental perception is the key to environmental adaptation which is in turn the basis of survival... (qtd. in Love 89).

Antonia’s respect for nature is seen early in the novel as she and Jim are laying out in the grass, she finds an insect and tries to make it comfortable. The insect’s song reminds her of an old beggar woman in Bohemia, and touches Antonia to the core as she cries for the past (27). Later in the novel, Antonia finds a hollyhock which reminds her of Bohemia as she tells Jim “we have this flower very much in the old country. It always grew in our yard and my papa had a green bench and a table under the bushes” (128). While she embraces her new country and its cultural differences, she remains loyal to the traditions of her birth place. She does not forget her past but builds from it. Cather’s portrayal of Antonia as a female farmer is an interesting symbol of a changing

landscape and a sign of modernity. As Jim points out, “I found that I remembered the conformation of the land as one remembers the modelling of human faces” (164). By reshaping the land, Antonia was also discovering more about herself as a woman.

According to Dooley, “the natural world made to fit human designs is a recurring theme celebrated by Cather” (67). Indeed, Cather’s anthropocentric conservationist position can be seen when Jim visits the prairie later in his life. “The old pasture land was now being broken up into wheatfields and cornfields, the red grass was disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing” (163). Dooley notes Cather’s view of the natural world existing to “serve human welfare and to satisfy human desires. It is a pristine world that must be humanized, for in its original, natural state, it can be an alien, hostile place” (66). Another example within the novel is when Otto Fuchs must travel horseback to a far distance in the bitter cold to get the coroner and the priest for Mr. Shimerda and in response to Fuchs’ concern about his horse, Mrs. Burden replies “this is no time to be over-considerate of animals” (58). Although Cather’s ecological viewpoints are debatable, it’s important to remember that it was a different time then in regards to population and the use of natural resources. A sense of place means there is also a feeling of responsibility to do what one feels is best at the time, and the ways in which this is done will always be a matter of perspective.

Jan Goggans’ article “Social (Re)Visioning” states that “Cather’s understanding that “those who have not moved are the exceptional ones informs her understanding of community boundaries as shifting. The ability to ‘switch behavior according to context’ is a crucial habit” (166). Jim’s move to Black Hawk is parallel to Cather’s move from the prairie to Red Cloud. When Jim and Grandparents Burden move to the town of Black



Hawk they all adapt to their new home by engaging themselves in activities. Antonia's employment at the Harling's makes life more enjoyable for Jim in town. Still, after the excitement of the new town wears off and Jim grows older, restlessness begins to take over him as he soon realizes how out of place he feels. Accordingly, "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" (100). At this point, Jim's restlessness can be attributed to the fact that he was now a teenager wanting to break out of the familiar.

In Black Hawk there are differences in the way people behave and social order is, at least on the surface, of utmost importance for the community. Jim observes the young local men were attracted to the country girls who were now working in town to help support their families. As a result, the townspeople, including the Harlings, opposed such free-spirited behavior from Antonia and her girlfriends. Their wild, free-spirited behavior threatened the town's social order, and as such, Antonia could not work for the Harlings any longer. Jim observes the townsfolk as he takes a walk: "The life that went on [in these homes] seemed to me made up of evasions and negations. This guarded mode of existence was like living under a tyranny" (120). Although Jim cannot wait to move away from Black Hawk, one must view this as part of his "coming of age" experience and not completely as criticism against the town.

There are also differences in the physical setting of the town compared with life in the country. Jim uses the view of the river from his window as "compensation for the lost freedom of the farming country" (82). Also, there is a sense of materialism coming

from the Burdens home as Jim describes his “red plush furniture and trumpet-blowing cherubs in the parlour” (82). The town is well-kept with white picket fences and one gets the sense of a strict social order. Indeed, after Mrs. Harling meets Antonia and her mother, she tells Mrs. Burden “I can bring something out of that girl. She’s barely seventeen, not too old to learn new ways” (86). This is an example of the townspeople, specifically Mrs. Harling, wanting to preserve the social order.

Antonia’s active engagement within the town helps her to adapt to city life and become confident in the way she dealt with the townsfolk. As Jim observes, “There was a basic harmony between Antonia and her mistress. They had strong, independent natures. They knew what they liked, and were not always trying to imitate other people” (100). Malpas writes, “To have a sense of place is not to own but rather to be owned by the places we inhabit; it is to ‘own up’ to the complexity and mutuality of both place and human being” (n.p). The town dances which occurred every weekend are an example of the way Antonia, Lena, Tiny, and the other country girls found release from the social anxieties placed heavily upon their shoulders. It became a way for the girls to physically state without verbal cues to the strict townspeople that they were not in the mood for conformity. Marilee Lindemann notes that Cather “took advantage of the comparative freedom of the frontier to experiment with sex and gender- nonconformity in her adolescence. Cather could be sharply critical of the provincial character of small prairie towns and of the stifling pressure to conform” (6).

As Jim’s boredom with the town grows, he searches for people with whom to connect and finds only those who are not Black Hawk natives to be most worthy of casual conversation. A brief feeling of *déjà vu* is experienced with the train depot’s

unnamed telegrapher “who is always hoping to be transferred to Omaha or Denver ‘where there was some life’” (119). The memory of Mr. Shimerda and his overwhelming malcontent is briefly revisited at this point when the characters’ daily lives are filled with a desire to be in some other place. The need to connect and identify with others and the environment is what helps to establish one’s own identity and sense of place. The environment here includes the physical land, the community, emotional support, and the willingness to be involved.

Jim’s new chapter in life begins in Lincoln at the University where new ideas open up his mind. He is intellectually stimulated but anxious, so he holds on to memories to keep the root of self-identity safely in place. Lindemann writes “Cather shared with her character Jim Burden a sense of having grown up ‘outside of man’s’ jurisdiction’ and reveled in the westerner’s expansive sense of self and possibility” (6). In an interesting segment in the novel, Lena and Jim watch a play in town and Jim is overwhelmed with emotion. He sees a “heartless world” and failed love which leave him “mourning for Marguerite Gauthier-- the one who loves but was not loved-- sighing for the spirit of 1840 which had reached me only that night, across long years and several languages” (149). He realizes how much his friendship with Antonia and life on the prairie means to him. The heartache of two very close friends who must now take different paths fills him with nostalgia. Jim’s sense of place intertwines with Antonia as he feels happiest when he is near her.

Gaston Cleric introduces Jim to the world of Virgil as Jim reads *Georgics* and begins to reflect upon a part of the text that reads “Optima dies...prima fugit” and “Primus ego in patriam mecum...deducam Musas” (142). Jim thinks about his mentor’s

own sense of place, his *patria*, which is a strip of land along the New England coast and a place in which Gaston tells Jim “he stayed a summer night there watching the constellations on their path down the sky until the ‘bride of old Tithonus’ rose out of the sea, and the mountains stood sharp in the dawn” (141).

Jim reminisces about his childhood days after reading Virgil’s words, “the best days are first to flee.” He compares Virgil’s poetry to the country girls as he realizes that “if there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry. I understood that clearly, for the first time” (146). Recalling the day he spent swimming with the girls, as the sun went down they witnessed a majestic scene “on some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking behind it. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun” (133). The plough against the sun imagery might well symbolize the modernization of the prairie landscape. Indeed, this is yet another example of Cather’s ecological consciousness with an anthropocentric point of view. In his article “The Plow and the Pen”, Joseph Meeker writes of the connection between Virgil and the plough imagery: “the pen and the plow are fused into a beatific image of the symbolic sunset, with Willa Cather bringing the Muse to Nebraska” (86).

After completing his courses at Harvard, Jim visits Antonia who has experienced heartbreak after a broken engagement with Larry Donovan. Antonia moves back with the rest of the Shimerda clan with her baby. She tells Jim that “I’d always be miserable in a city. I’d die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly” (171). Rachael Collins observes: “Such a notion of friendly ground signifies a particular relationship to one’s environment-- one of safety, belonging, and welcoming-- and is crucial to understanding the stakes of agricultural

cultivation" (53). However, this does not only pertain to agricultural situations but also to one's sense of place to where the spirit is most alive.

Jim confesses to Antonia: "since I've been away, I think of you more often than of anyone else. The idea of you is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don't realize it. You really are a part of me" (171). Meeker writes about Cather's own experience on the prairie and her departure from it: "Cather may have loved her prairie home, but her love was not strong enough to persuade her to live with it and learn its natural history. The land is raw material in the hands of Cather's Muse, and it is the setting where the plow and the pen come together" (88). It is important to note that had Cather not live for some time on the prairie, there might not have been those emotions she experienced to conceive her great novel *My Antonia*.

One of the most beautiful scenes in the novel comes after Jim's first visit with Antonia:

As we walked homeward across the fields, the sun dropped and lay like a great golden globe along the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose in the east, as big as a cart-wheel, pale silver and streaked with rose colour, thin as a bubble or a ghost-moon. For five, perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world (171).

The sun and the moon greet each other temporarily as Jim and Antonia are about to part ways. Perhaps it is a symbol of how time pauses for one moment as the friends are in the middle of a field with the sun and the moon placing them in the center of nature's graceful gesture. Jim observes the "sunflower stalk and furrows in the fields seem to stand up high and point" (171). The two friends are in unison. The journey of self-

discovery and a sense of place within the environment and within their hearts is a natural force that even the land seems to understand.

Twenty years have passed as Jim and Antonia live their lives in separate worlds. Jim is an attorney for a large railway company and his wife is the antithesis of Antonia. His wife is materialistic and concerned about social status. When Jim returns to the prairie to see his Antonia, he discovers that outwardly so much has changed. Though Antonia's life is very different now, she is in fact, the same girl he's loved all those years. Now a married woman with plenty of children, Antonia has made the life for herself that she has always wanted and talked about. Her younger years spent plowing the fields were actually skills that helped her to shape the land to meet the needs of her family. Those difficult earlier years, in hindsight, helped mold the woman who will shape the landscape in her later years. Indeed, Antonia and her family reaped the rewards. Her childhood spent in a cave dwelling of cold and darkness is now replaced with a fruitful cave sheltering all the food the family can possibly have from the orchards which Antonia planted. Jim observes the children as they leave the cave which looked like an "explosion of life into the sunlight" (179).

Susan Rosowski writes, "*My Antonia* shifts the paradigm away from nativism and toward a "flexible notion of place-based community" according to which, "one's identity is constructed by the community into which one plants oneself" (xii). Antonia's sense of place has been permanently seeded within her land as she tells Jim about her orchard and the story behind each tree stating "she loves them as if they were people." Malpas states, "place is relational in character and is seen emerging through our embeddedness in the relations that make it up" (n.p.). She tells Jim how she planted

each and every tree and taught her husband Anton how to work the land. "They were on my mind like children" she says about her worries of their growth and health (179).

Antonia is a symbol of everything Jim remembers of prairie life and his childhood. He notes that "Antonia has always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade- that grew stronger with time" (186). Jim's own spiritual existence is intertwined with Antonia on the prairie. Even in his adult life he is happiest when he is near Antonia and her family. When Jim first arrived on the prairie at the age of nine, he felt like a part of him was erased and blotted out. But being with Antonia has made such an impact in his life that he feels complete and peaceful as stated at the end of his visit:

I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is. For Antonia and me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. We possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past (196).

Although Antonia is not as financially successful as Jim, she made for herself the life she always dreamed. Her perseverance and zest for life are attributes which helped her to adapt to changing situations. For Jim, "Antonia was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (186). Antonia's many children are a symbol of fertility as is the landscape which now provides the family with a fruitful life and sense of peace. Each child and each tree and plant will provide the bounty of the land for future generations. The happy memories Antonia's children will cherish, as Jim has, will instill in them the feeling of love and security in a land cultivated by their parents. It will then be their Destiny, and they will pave new roads while most assuredly surrounding themselves with Hollyhocks that Bohemians liked to plant. This is Antonia's legacy to her children and the environment.

Cather's novel sheds light on how *place* helps to shape self-identity. She deconstructs gender norms and gives examples of her own ecological imagination. Though the debate continues among critics on Cather's ecological consciousness, or lack thereof, the novel's conclusion provides an understanding of her anthropocentric view as Antonia takes Jim for a walk through her apple orchard:

There was the deepest peace in that orchard. It was surrounded by a triple enclosure; the wire fence, then the hedge of thorny locusts, then the mulberry hedge which kept out the hot winds of summer and held fast to the protecting snows of winter. The orchard seemed full of sun, like a cup, and we could smell the ripe apples on the trees (180).

This is an example of a land that has been tamed and shaped to provide for human needs. To reiterate my response to Meeker's opinion that Cather did not love the land enough to stay, when Jim tells Antonia she should have never moved to town, Antonia replies "Oh, I'm glad I went! I learned nice ways at the Harlings', and I've been able to bring my children up so much better" (181). Without travel and experience outside of one's comfort zone, there is nothing in which to compare or learn from. Although Cather may not have wished to remain on the prairie, she took from it "all the materials from which great novels are made" because of her own connection to the land. A sense of place means to build a relationship with the land through human experience and to feel a belonging and peace. Sense of place and self-identity are intertwined not only in this inspiring novel but in countless other literary texts including Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. But it was Willa Cather's sense of place that brought the Muse to the Nebraskan prairie, where Antonia's pioneer spirit is forever etched within the landscape. "*Primus ego in patriam mecum...deducam Musas*" (Virgil).



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