

# Journey into the Frontier in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*

Dr. K. Shanthi  
Research Supervisor  
Department of English  
Heber College  
Trichy 620 017

S. Sangeetha  
Research Candidate  
Department of English Bishop  
Bishop Heber College  
Trichy 620 017

## Abstract:

*My Antonia* is one of the prairie trilogies by Willa Cather. The novel probes into the nostalgic narration by Jim who yet feels elated and excited about the memories of the land where he spent his childhood. Still, both Jim and Antonia constitute an amaranthine relationship to the prairie, and as adults, they affiliate their relationship with the prairie to their life. They are engrossed by the texture, colours, climatic changes, and huge openness of the prairie landscape. Land remains an unforgettable memory in the minds of the characters. The place and the people become inseparable. The memory of the land remains in the characters' lives and despite the growing years challenging life situations.

## Keywords:

The keywords used in the article are nostalgic, landscape, bush, agrarian, cultivation, land, and prairie.

Ecocriticism is an emerging theory, which avouches the past and ongoing relationship between human beings and their environment. Many writers and critics have given a try to show the importance of man's prime responsibility towards his environment. The relationship between man and his physical, social and natural environment is both mutual and a cyclic process. The effect of one environment will eventually impinge the other. The effect will create a crisis for both man and his immediate environment. Willa Cather's novels are one such which portrays the importance of land, collision of the land in the minds of characters to remind the past constructive relationship between man and his land, regardless of the land's toughness.

Willa Cather establishes herself as a writer from American west whose works on trilogy novels are on great plains such as *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, and *The Song of the Lark*. Her family moved from Virginia to Nebraska in 1883. The time she spent in Nebraska and the frontier in her formative period became the setting of her novels. She was profoundly charmed by the people, climatic changes of the

environment and the hugeness of the prairie. She is a Pulitzer Prize winner for her novel *One of Ours* written on reflection created by World War I. Cather is always recognized for her portrayal of settlers and frontier life in the Great Plains. She was brought up in the frontier, which was explored by her from the age of nine. The prairie and the people of that land have left a metaphysical impact in the mind of Cather. Her love and respect for the prairie landscape have transformed her as a writer with the specific purpose of focusing her writings on the prairie landscape the impact of world war, populist movement on the people and the land.

The journey here is both real and surreal. More than that of the physical journey, the hypothetical journey exists in numbers. Nostalgic thoughts will have a great impact on the characters' action. Jim is no exception from the unsparing hands of the dreams of his idea of a place which into a vision, where he sets on his mission to visit his land once again.

In *My Antonia*, Jim personifies the prairie landscape as a character possessing complex traits. Prairies are ecosystems with temperate grasslands and scattered trees and sometimes without trees. The etymology of the word prairie is taken from French, which means meadow. Prairies are divided into three groups namely wet, mesic and dry. The wet and mesic are good for agricultural cultivation and the dry land is of no use due to lack of rain. The prairie is the only source of survival for farmers like the Burdens' family and the Shimerdas, and for the nourishment of the body and soul and also for sale. Jim becomes sick during the harsh winter, and one summer he is almost killed by a rattlesnake.

*My Antonia* describes the artistic development of Antonia's life that sharply contradicts Jim's narration. The novel, thus, opens with a trope of the journey, which accounts for the pioneer's journey and experiences from an old established culture to a rugged new land. The literal reality of the pioneer's experience to yield to land's coarseness for cultivation is portrayed through the immigrant Shimerdas. The Shimerdas could not make the land friendly to cultivate. As immigrants, they just wanted to survive. They do exhibit patience in understanding the nature of the land and to grow with it to experience life in tune with prairie environment. The prairie remains a relishing spirit with regard to Jim's response to the prairie, which portrays a pioneering experience when he describes the grass turned into red colour in the prairie. "The Colour of wine – stains" (Cather 15). Jim further deepens the symbolic meaning of the prairie glowing in the autumn sunlight when he compares it to the bush that "burned with fire and was not

consumed" (Cather 40). This suggests that the prairie is permeable to the sacred, which cannot be described, but felt, which is testified to in religion and myth. The sacred is equivalent to a power a life source. (Force)

Man feels his 'Profound Nothingness' with the overwhelming omnipresence of the sacred. Jim's fresh and first experience in the prairie as he rides to his grandfather's farm during the night is remarkable. He never uses the word power yet, he feels he is clearly charged with power. Having arrived at the farm, he goes alone to his grandmother's garden and there surrenders himself completely to a kind of mystic union with the being. "I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy" (Cather18).

The life in the Prairie is something great to those who exert themselves upon it. The movement of the novel is from Jim's childhood, from the revelation of the sacred to the complexities of adult life. In this novel, the Burden family finds prairie as a source of productiveness and life, for they have been living through it and with it. Whereas the Shimerdas as immigrants find it too difficult to live in tune with the land, its language and everything that are connected to it.

In the midst of the hardships of life in prairie Antonia herself, at 14 is eager, cheerful, and full of life. For Jim, she is the personification of life itself. The plow is the face index of the pioneer on the plains. Mr. Shimerda and Coronado are the real pioneers of the prairie both in physical and spiritual sense. It is the mark that the pioneer spirit has left on them that makes the hired girls superior to the Black Hawk girls. Antonia returns to her brother's farm because she is deserted by Larry Donovan who seduced her.

Later Jim comes to meet Antonia, by this time, he is a lawyer who is married to an unsympathetic wife. Though on the surface his life seems spiritually barren, in his profession as a railroad lawyer, he has given expression to his physical and emotional attachment to the land through which his work on railway runs, his faith in it, his awareness about it, and how all these have played an important part in the development of his land. As Alexandra in *O Pioneers!* loves her land, and as in the Song of the Lark, the protagonist rejuvenates her life through the memories of the cliff, here Antonia and Jim receive happiness as they connect with the land and their love for the land becomes the source of the land's transformation.

The trilogy novels assert people's sense of love for the land and in turn, their life is richly rewarded by the land.

As Jim surrenders himself to this sun-warmed garden, Antonia surrenders herself to life. Krajiek, lived like animals in the dugout and died, for they were not able to find life in the prairie. For Antonia and Jim land is everything, but for the immigrants like Shimerdas and Krajiek they can neither work on the land nor love the land. "Mr.Shimerda, as Jim says, "Knew nothing about farming""(Martin 305).

For Jim, Antonia is means through whom he gets back to his past as he passes through his grandfather's farm where he encountered prairie for the first time in his life. Now he has "the sense of coming home to myself, and of (finding) out what a little circle man's experience is" (Cather 371-72).

Jim gets back to the road where the novel begins. It ends too as it began in the autumn of the year with his return. It is not only a literal homecoming but also conscious awareness of getting back to his deep sources which created his life, as found evidently in his childhood, in the land, and in Antonia.

Willa Cather emphasizes the preservation of agrarian values in the face of emerging industrialization during the 1930s. The advent of industrialization has thwarted the people's agrarian values. A new idea or a new practice is implemented by affecting the human beings psychologically to yield and industrialization is no exception by introducing itself as a progressive part of civilization. The advent of industrialization and the resultant loss of agrarian values can be paralleled with the imperialists who invaded the colonies. Only the impact of imperialists in the name of civilization is remembered rather than the past lost the history of any colony or country.

Despite the practices, revolutions, and changes in the world, it is the prime duty of any human to take care of his environment with responsibility. Jim, in spite of being a successful lawyer in New York, wanted to get back to his land without grumbling and compulsion. Any human being can love and remember things in memories, but getting back to it, in reality, is the greatest reward that he can give to the land.

Any advancement in industrialization and civilization is always a welcome thing but not at the cost of life . Cather is not just passionate about making her people remember their responsibilities. But she is more passionate to picture the vitality and the worth of the natural world.

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