

The Quest for Stability in Willa Cathar's

Novle *My Antonia*

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I

Willa Cather (1873-1947) sought to capture the gradation of human emotion through carefully selected descriptive and narrative touches and firmly controlled management of dramatic scenes, situations, dialogue, and point of view. Cather's novels and stories drew increasingly upon her personal experiences and memories.

The old settlement of Virginia and the new lands of Nebraska formed the bedding ground for Willa Cather's talents; so did the layers of memory she found across the North American continent, from New Mexico to Canada. She saw the full-blooded European immigrants, Czechs and Swedes, plowing the unbroken land, on the way up from peasants to proprietors.

The paper shows Willa Cather's theme of the quest for stability and deals with one of her essential novels, *My Antonia* written in 1918. This novel shows how Cather re-created her own feelings as a child coming to live on the prairies and describing the experiences through the eyes of her character Jim Burden. *My Antonia* concentrates mainly on how Antonia sought stability. She obtains it through great strength and courage, an almost superhuman talent for heroic struggle and fortitude. She is a tough, patient creature who undergoes a symbolic courtship with the land. The land first coerces her, but eventually she is able to dominate it and like it like her own children. She thus acquires the stability that is needed to keep her going in life.

The paper also deals with the other major character, Jim Burden. After the loss of his parents, Jim moves to live on the prairies. He feels perplexed on how to establish a stable future for himself. With Antonia's persistence and encouragement to make him pursue his studies, he manages to obtain and accomplish the required stability.

Willa Cather was born into a genteel, middle-class family in Winchester, Virginia in 1873. Cather moved at the age of nine with her family to the awesome, empty prairies of frontier Nebraska. There she witnessed the brutalizing effects of pioneer life on civilized immigrants, forced literally to dig their sod houses out of the land itself and to coax a living out of a hostile though beautiful environment. Willa Cather observed and remembered the little town of Red Cloud, Nebraska which became, in her maturity, her most successful subject matter in her works.

Willa Cather received her elementary schooling at home, from her mother, and she read to herself from the family's collection of books. Her mother's teaching, based on the English classics and on Latin was good enough that enabled her to perform excellently at high school. After graduating from high school, Cather was impatient to leave Red Cloud and eager for the learning and culture the University of Nebraska at Lincoln promised her. She worked hard and impressed her teachers as a fine student. After supporting herself first as a journalist and later as a high school teacher, she began to write stories and poems in a variety of well-known magazines. Her journalistic success and creative writing caught the admiration of the publisher and editor, S.S. McClure who persuaded her to go to New York to become the associate editor of *McClure's*.

During the six years as an editor for *McClure's* (1906-1912), Cather wrote some of her best novels beginning with *Alexander's Bridge* (1912). The success of her novels made it possible for her to quit journalism in 1912 to devote herself solely to writing fiction (an advice she took from the short story writer, Sarah Orne Jewett). In 1913, Cather wrote *O Pioneers!* in which she fictionalized her Nebraska experiences and memories, *Song of the Lark* in 1915, and with *My Antonia* (1918) Cather achieved her first popular success. She continued to live in New York but took frequent visits aboard and to the prairies. She died quietly in her home in New York at the age of seventy three in 1947.

Most of her novels are devoted to the theme of immigration. She portrayed how the immigrants pioneered in a new harsh land and struggled hard enough in order to achieve the required stability. Cather wrote a collection of short stories which also deal with the theme of the quest for stability. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s she received a number of awards, confirming her place as an important literary voice.

On Cather's tombstone is an inscription taken from a sentence of her novel *My Antonia*: "That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great." Cather also believed that "The Best Years" (the title of one of her stories) are always the ones left behind her. She wrote an epitaph in her novel *My Antonia* taken from Virgil's Georgics: "optima dies... prima fugit" which explains Willa's concept toward life that the best days are the first to flee. That is why she thought that man should capture the best of his opportunities when given the chance.

II

Willa Cather managed to manifest in her art a representation of the reaction between the soul of man and its quest for stability in a specific environment. She wrote about the lives of characters working upon and wrought upon by a new land. The novel can also be considered as a semi-autobiography of the writer.

My Antonia is a representative of Willa Cather's theme of the immigrant pioneers-the Swedes, Norwegians, Poles, Bohemians (Czechs) who bravely make a new settlement of the frontier in order to seek the required stability. She showed the nobility and beauty of the wild prairie; the brave, enduring foreigners who suffer as they farm it. The Nebraska that Cather saw and lived was not as Doris Grumbach stated, "simply territory or one homestead place on the American continent, but a universal symbol of suffering and hardship overcome by the indomitable immigrant spirit."(1)

The heroine of the novel (Antonia) is a woman close to the soil. She stood for the triumph of what was vigorous, tough, and beautiful in a region where other people seemed to suffer repression or defeat. *My Antonia* as Spiller stated is, "the story of a great (tough) woman ennobling common things and a common struggle by elemental passion...Antonia is such a character...determined upon happiness and getting it because she never counts the costs."(2)

The story is told by the hero Jim Burden, a boyhood friend of Antonia, later a legal counsel for one of the great Western railways. At ten, after the death of his parents in Virginia, Jim travels to Nebraska to live with his grandparents. He sees the immigrant Shimerda family huddling in bewilderment on the station platform, and listens to their strange language. As he is driven to the ranch to meet his grandparents, he crosses the vast empty prairies that stretch mysteriously into the darkness. He feels lost and uprooted, "between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out."(3) Like Jim Burden, when Cather first moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska she felt the loss of familiar landscape, of the hills of Virginia with its trees and fields that she was accustomed to in her childhood years. Cather experienced in Nebraska's prairies "a kind of erasure of personality."(4) However, in Cather's later novels, she began to write about the prairies and described them as those of her best days like those in her novel *My Antonia*. It is interesting to note that the great Nebraska novels were written by Cather from the distant comfort of her New York residence. For Willa Cather as Ford stated, "landscape was an emotion as well as a place, even more, a living entity."(5) Writing from a distance, she portrayed with exactitude the hardships and determination of the immigrants.

Jim's strangeness soon wears away because he is under the protection of his grandparents. Unlike the Shimerdas, who have none of the tools or skills of farmers, no friends, no English, and who discover that the land that they have bought and paid too much for is bad and their

house is a sod house. Thus, adjustment for them is a harder task. With the help of their neighbours the Burdens, the Shimerdas make a beginning and welcome the Burdens and the food they bring them. The Shimerda family consists of the father who is a frail, melancholic, unused to farm work; the mother who is a shrewd and sharp woman; two sons-Ambrosch, a young boy of nineteen, and Marek, a retarded boy; a young girl, Yalka, who is mild and obedient; and the fourteen- year old Antonia who is energetic, warm-hearted and her father's darling. Later in the novel, Antonia is the only member of the family whose perseverance and strong will-power in coaxing the land was worth the trouble of her father's decision in immigrating from his own land. He could sense that one day his brood and forthcoming generations would be able to become the proprietors.

Mr. Shimerda asks Jim to teach Antonia the English language. The one thing beautiful in Antonia's life, the thing she shares with Jim, is the land itself, the great sea of grass, the wild roses in the fence corners of spring, and the mighty weathers. Survival is pretty harsh for Mr. Shimerda that he cannot adjust nor endure the hardships of the new life. He manages to make two Russian friends who speak a little of his language. But one of them leaves Nebraska after the other dies. Mr. Shimerda's depression deepens at the loss of his only friends and is unable to endure the tough circumstances that immigrants face such as drought, frost, prairie fires, isolation and homesickness. Mr. Shimerda thus puts a tragic end to his life by committing suicide. Jim recalled that, "Mr. Shimerda had not been rich and selfish: he had only been so unhappy that he could not live any longer."(I, p.67)

Survival has to be achieved by the grasping Mrs. Shimerda, her sullen son, Ambrosch, and most of all by Antonia who must put off any hope of schooling to become one of the bread winners for the sake of her poor miserable family. Hence, she becomes attached to their land and does most of the hard work on the prairie along with her brother Ambrosch. They have to be tough in order to face the atrocious conditions on the land.

It was not wise for them to give up or quit working on the land otherwise their long journey that made them cross continents to find the stability on the new land (America) would be absolutely worthless. Once Jim's grandmother told Antonia that, "you'll have a better house after a while, Antonia, and then you will forget these hard times."(I, p.50) After some time, Antonia gets tougher in her attitude due to the rough work that she has to undergo and endure. All her endeavours will be strictly intended to make her land a productive one. Jim recalls, "Tony [Antonia] could talk of nothing but prices of things...she was too proud of her strength. I knew too, that Ambrosch put upon her some chores a girl ought not to do... . I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr. Shimerda, who could say so little, yet managed to say so much when he exclaimed, ' My An-tonia!'"(I, p.81) Mr. Shimerda knew that his daughter, Antonia, was the most determined of all the members of his family and that he could always count on her. Thus, she begins to energize her forcefulness and powerfulness to enable her to see the change of their impotent land into a fruitful outcome.

The Burdens move to the small town of Black Hawk in section two of the novel (*The Hired Girls*). They soon become close friends with their next-door neighbours, the Harlings. Though Jim likes the town, he misses the prairie life and Antonia. Soon Antonia comes to town to work as a maid at the Harlings. Other farm girls migrate to work as servants in the houses of the so-called “better families” thinking that they could find stability and a better life there than on the prairie. They deprive themselves from school to work at menial jobs in order to dedicate their wages to help their families back on the farm. Working as maid, Antonia not only endures being away from her family, but she strives hard to face the tasks being put upon her. She uses her utmost skills and efforts in order to be a qualified and efficient maid. She exercises with fortitude her masterly competence thinking she could achieve the desired stability in town and in turn would send more of what she earns to assist her family back at the farm.

The hired girls throw themselves wholeheartedly into the town dances and into any excitement their world affords. Cather wanted to reveal, “the pettiness and snobbery [of the town life], the vulgar commercialism, the forming of class distinction, and the pathetic pleasures of a typical prairie town just beyond the pioneering stage.”(6) The fresh vivid country girls seem a threat to their languid, enervated town girls. Mr. Harling disapproves of Antonia’s love of dancing that when he asks her to stop attending the dances or seek another job, Antonia decides to leave to accept a place with the Cutters. The Cutters are despicable people and Mr. Cutter is the greedy town moneylender. On one occasion Jim saves Antonia from being attacked by Mr. Cutter. For Antonia and the other hired girls, house-work seems to be the stability that they have been seeking. Antonia, for example, has the notion and envisages that by striving and straining herself in the house chores afflicted upon her (as a maid), she could eventually meet and marry some farmer from her own immigrant background and thus would accomplish a stable life. She even conceives, though the writer does not mention it explicitly, that she could marry someone from the town and hence achieve the requested stability.

Part three of *My Antonia* shifts the focus from Antonia to concentrate on the university and city life of Jim Burden in Lincoln. Just before part two ends, Antonia advises Jim to persevere in his studies. She says, “you are going away to school and make something of yourself. I’m just awful proud of you.”(II, p.143) Since Antonia understands the fact that she no longer has the time or the ability to proceed in her education, she thus urges Jim to pursue his studies in order to be a proficient person. Her encouragement to Jim’s continuation in his studies seems to be the incentive that she once wanted to acquire. She realizes the fact that if her father had not died, she would have pursued her education and would have acquired the stability by being a learned woman. But instead, she had to strive to coax the land which later in the novel proves to her that her endurance and hardships on the land were worth the toil and efforts that she has undergone because she finally achieves the desired stability there. For that reason, Antonia prompts and impels Jim to resume his education so that he too can find the desired stability by being a self-sufficient and independent man.

The development from the beginning of the novel is traced through both Antonia and Jim. In book three, Antonia drops out of the story whereas Jim becomes an avid reader of books and has many responsive ideas under the tutelage of a favourite professor, Gaston Cleric, who in turn opens up paths of classical learning for Jim. He then decides to follow Cleric to Harvard and complete his education. The contrast in the development between Jim and Antonia is seen as Jim gains all the best opportunities of life whereas Antonia is deprived of the good chances since she faces certain agonies and burdens at that particular phase of her life.

Section four returns to Antonia and to Black Hawk. After two years at Harvard, Jim hears that in his absence Antonia has eloped with a railroad conductor Larry Donovan and that after being deceived and abandoned she has returned to her brother's farm to bear her child and work in the fields like a man. Jim visits her briefly and their deep friendship for each other is mended, though they know that their lives will continue to run in different channels. They rediscover the old times that they had in common, the things that by now Antonia cannot endure to leave. She's become so attached to the farm that she finally realizes her stability could be found by working on the land. She says, "I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly. I want to live and die here."(IV, p.206)

Cather catches a significant moment in an image to show both the difference and the intimate relationship between Antonia and Jim:

As we walked homeward across the fields
The sun dropped and lay like a great golden globe
In the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose
In the east, as big as cart-wheel, pale silver... . For five,
Perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted
Each other across the level land, resting on opposite
Edges of the world (IV, p.206)

Cather's image states that both Antonia and Jim are like the two luminaries facing each other on opposite sides. They do not hold a grudge against each other despite the gap difference between them. They do not refrain from each other. They can feel the intimacy due to their past memories together, yet they can also sense the difference since Jim has attained his education whereas Antonia has not. The cart-wheeled silver moon is symbolic that they do not defy each other's lives or fates.

Jim promises Antonia to come back to see her again. She replies, "But even if you don't, you're here, like my father [who has committed suicide earlier in the novel]. So I won't be lonesome."(IV, p.207) Antonia can feel her father's presence despite the many years of his passing away. She feels that since she's grown older, she can understand him more now. Jim attains his stability by being an educated man and deep down he can sense that his stability is

also achieved by looking at Antonia's contentment that she has truly accomplished her stability on the land despite the burdens and torments that she has faced. She is now fully satisfied with her life. For that reason, he promises Antonia to visit her again and apparently to reinforce their stabilities. They know that each one of them will be holding a pillar of his and her own stability.

It is in Book five when twenty years later Jim returns to Nebraska again and finds Antonia married to a semi-successful Bohemian farmer (Anton Cuzak), with a swarm of healthy children. He finds her a worn woman but she still possesses the same warmth of glowing spirit. He says, "whatever else was gone, Antonia had not lost the fire of life."(V, p.216) She explains to Jim that her husband was a city man and at times was discouraged by the farm work but due to her resistance and perseverance she managed to find the stability that she always longed for. She has found it with her own family and on the farm. She has finally humanized the soil. The trees were like her own children. She says:

I love them[the trees] as if they were people...
There wasn't a tree here when we first came.
We planted every one, and used to carry water
For them... . They were on my mind like children
Many a night after he [her husband] was asleep
I've got up and come out and carried water to
The poor things. (V,p.219)

During his three- day visit, Jim enjoys Antonia's radiant delight with her children and leaves promising her to return the next summer to take the boys hunting. He stops for a while at Black Hawk and gazes at the prairie with some grief but with acceptance about his and Antonia's destiny and the precious past they have possessed but can never return.

The final paragraph of the novel sums up how Jim Burden's departure from Nebraska (earlier in the novel) has divided him against himself as Willa Cather was divided. Since the novel can be considered as a semi-autobiographic one, it is worthwhile mentioning that the voice of Willa Cather, who like Jim left raw Nebraska to become an important citizen and novelist of the world, and like him was drawn back on some visits to the beauty of Nebraska. Jim Burden as Wallace Stegner stated, "is more than a narrative device: he is an essential part of the theme, a demonstration of how such an American may reconcile the two halves of himself. And Antonia is more than a woman and a character. Jim describes her as 'a rich mine of life'."(7)When Jim could not decide whether to pursue his studies or not (earlier in the novel), Antonia persisted that he should and gave him the encouragement and full determination to continue his studies. Thus, by the end of the novel Jim comes to the realization that he has reconciled the two halves of

himself by obtaining the required stability of being an educated and a successful person. Antonia on the other hand, has established her stability through her perseverance in using her utmost efforts and energy to make a productive land. She also has obtained her stability with her own family.

The final paragraph makes Jim realize that the same road which brought him and Antonia on the night of their arrival at Black Hawk is the same road that predetermined their destinies. He says:

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 for me, this had
Been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those
Early accidents of fortune which predominated
For us all that we can ever be. Now I understood
That the same road was to bring us together again.
Whatever we had missed, we possessed together
The precious, the incommunicable past. (V,p.238)

Jim's speech is reflected in Cather's epitaph in this novel "optima dies...prima fugit" that the most precious memories can never be returned or captured again. He realizes it is an "incommunicable past"(V,p.238), i.e., their pleasant childhood memories can never be returned. But despite this, they both understand that their future will hold a better life and fortune to both of them.

Jim's stability is finally found as he reconciles with himself. He realizes the fact that if it had not been for Antonia's encouragement to make him pursue his studies, he would have been a different person and would not have found the required stability in his life. Thus, by the end of the novel Jim gains his stability by being a learned and successful man. He also realizes that Antonia's stability has been found with all her endurance, determination and perseverance on the land along with her husband and children. Antonia had aspirations to find stability and with the sacrifices that she made and her full determination, she managed to attain it.

Notes

- (1) Doris Grumbach, “Forward”, My Antonia (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), p. xviii
- (2) Robert Spiller, et al., ed., Literary History of the United States (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), p. 1214-1215
- (3) Willa Cather, My Antonia (1918; reprinted 1988, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988), p. 8 All subsequent references to this text are taken from this edition.
- (4) Boris Ford, American Literature (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), p. 412
- (5) Ibid, p. 412
- (6) N.n., The American Novel (a series of lectures broadcasted by the Voice of America), p. 108
- (7) Wallace Stegner, “Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*”, n.n. The American Novel (USA: broadcasted by the Voice of America, n.d.), p. 111

III

The quest for stability has been an important theme in Cather’s works. She showed how her affinity with the region and the prairie life became increasingly a part of her art. The paper not only manifested the characters’ quest for stability but it also showed the nostalgic tone of Cather’s loneliness on the Nebraska prairie and the memories she left behind at the Western plains and the Eastern mountains of Virginia. Cather’s nostalgia is interpreted through some of her main characters, e.g., Jim Burden in *My Antonia*. Willa Cather became famous for her depictions of the pioneers who settled the American West. Throughout her career, “Cather’s heart of writing was a study of pioneers—their achievements, their motivations, and their problematic relation to those who follow.”(1)

The paper dealt with Cather’s famous novel *My Antonia*. It portrayed the obstacles and hardships that the immigrants faced in America. This novel also portrayed how such a strong individual, independent woman like Antonia struggled hard with the land and with the problems she faced in her life in order to accomplish the required stability. With her zest and fierceness, Antonia managed with seriousness to coax the land and to find the stability there with her own family. Cather made Antonia see life with a moral sturdiness and the striving of the human spirit in a special relationship to nature. The paper showed the simple heroism of Antonia and how she survived childhood poverty and adolescent seduction to marry and settle down as wife and mother on the Nebraska farm. Antonia’s aspirations towards stability are achieved at the end of

the novel with her home which is full of love and warmth and creates a fruitful union with the soil.

The paper also showed how the other major character Jim Burden attained his stability in life. After the death of his parents, Jim migrated to live in Nebraska with his grandparents. With no father or mother to give him the earnest decision to his future, he was thus confused and perplexed on how to determine his stability in life. With the aid of Antonia's urgency and gusto to pursue his studies, he was able to establish the required stability by being an educated and a successful person. Antonia clarified the path for him. Thus, he felt that he owed her a lot and was quite keen on visiting her after he attained his stability in education. He had the intensity to see how Antonia had established the stability herself through her courageous, zealous personality and how she defied the struggles that she faced. Thus, each one of them had sought and accomplished the required stability in a specific manner.

Consequently, the paper portrayed how Cather analysed her characters' dreams and aspirations. They dream of something better in their lives. Their aspirations drive them to become immigrants in a newly unknown country to them, but with perseverance and determination they achieve the required stability. Don McQuade stated that Cather's analysis of "how those dreams result in courage and not in defeat makes her narratives of hopeful immigrants and sensitive carriers of culture seem accurate deep down at the bone of truth."(2)

Notes

- (1) N.n., The Norton Anthology of American Literature, 4th ed. (New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 1989), p.974
- (2) Don McQuade and others, ed. The Harper American Literature (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Education Publishers, Inc., 1999), p.1880

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