

# Happiness Is Returning to Nature: An Ecocritical Interpretation of *My Antonia*

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## Abstract

This essay is an ecocritical study of *My Antonia* by the well-known American woman writer Willa Cather, exploring how Antonia, daughter of an immigrant family from Bohemia, overcomes hardships in her life and triumphs in the American frontier in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The essay demonstrates that it is Antonia's harmonious life with nature that provides her with vitality and integrity, which is crucial to her survival and prosperity, concluding that happiness is returning to nature.

**Keywords:** Willa Cather; *My Antonia*; Nature, frontier

*My Antonia* (1918) is the epic novel by Willa Cather, one of the most remarkable American woman writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who depicts the early European immigrants' arrival on the American frontier and their adaptation to wilderness necessity. Antonia, the heroine of the novel, is the eldest daughter of the Shimerda family, who have emigrated from Bohemia and settled on a patch of property in the Nebraska plains. Through the eyes of her friend Jim Burden, we see Antonia's singular personality bloom amid struggles with domestic misfortune, cultural isolation and agricultural toil.

According to the ecological observation that there is no organism without an environment and no environment without an organism<sup>i</sup>, Scott Slovic, first president of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, has argued that "there is not a single literary work anywhere that utterly defies ecological interpretation"<sup>ii</sup>.+ Uniquely portraying the American experience of immigrant pioneers, this novel especially deserves such an interpretation. Ecofeminist critic Vera Norwood argues that women write wilderness differently, experiencing immersion rather than confrontation, "recognition" rather than "challenge."<sup>iii</sup> Cather's first-hand experience of Nebraska's rough beauty and the immigrant settlers' adventurously farming its prairies supplied the imaginative material for *My Antonia*, and Jim Burden becomes her mouthpiece. That is to say, while the novel is obviously about Antonia, it is also quite clearly about Jim's view of her and the influence she has had on his mind. Antonia is the novel's frame, the window on to the landscape that the narrator looks out upon when he wishes to conjure up that deeply felt connection with the land that is beyond language, what Cather calls "the incommunicable past" (175) that they possessed together in the closing words of the novel.

When Jim first met Antonia at the age of nine, he found her a pretty little girl four year older than him. Newly arriving at the Nebraska prairie, they saw endless wilderness before their eyes:

As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the color of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running. (10)

This is the land which Antonia will deeply rooted in. Soon we are told that the Shimerda family are cheated of their money and compelled to live in a dirt cave because of the family's ignorance of farming and lack of English. When winter comes, Antonia's shiftless father commits suicide in extreme poverty and coldness and nostalgia for his old life in his homeland. At the age of fifteen, Antonia has to work like a man in the fields, her arms and throat burned as brown as a sailor's, and her neck comes up strongly from her shoulder like the bole of a tree out of the turf (60). The Shimerdas and others on the great plains are making their peace, if not their fortune with nature: a feeling for the earth—a struggle with nature. This feeling is natural—Madhav Gadgil points out that kinship and reciprocity, which hold human societies together, was, in subsistence-agricultural peoples, extended to include nonhumans as well because nonhuman members of the fellowship provided humans with food, water, and shelter<sup>iv</sup>. Jim remembered Antonia's eyes were big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood. Her skin was brown, too, and in her cheeks she had a glow of rich, dark color (14). Isn't she the image of the Goddess of earth?

Antonia demonstrates an unrestrained love of life. As a girl, she shows her love of nature when singing in the garden and an eagerness for learning the English names for things around her; when she grows a bit older, Antonia is hired out by her brother to work for the Harling's family in town and she is willing to take pains to please the children she take care of; as a young woman, she shows the same vitality when hurrying off in an irresponsible manner to dance at the Vannisq tent. Her wild-looking (14) hair reminds the reader of the female worshippers of Dionysus whose disheveled hair was an indication of their ecstatic celebration of life. Against the marmoreal chill of death, writes Andrew Ettin, life on this bountiful earth, filled with moments of small yet important pleasures, is itself pastoral.<sup>v</sup> Obviously, Antonia has an intuitive perception of this pastoral wisdom. Elizabeth Sergeant believed that Cather intended for Antonia to be an integral part of the land and a maternal presence to which a youth like Jim Burden could only respond with love:

Her role was so primeval, and so much woman's whether she plowed for her brother or cooked for Mrs. Harling in Black Hawk, that a detached lonely

boy could think of her in the confused terms of a youthful projection of love and nature blended<sup>vi</sup>.

Innocent and kind-hearted as she is, Antonia was deserted by her boastful sweetheart Larry Donovan and she must return in shame to her mother's home. Even in bearing her child she fulfills the role of New World Demeter, who sanctions the fertility of both the land and woman:

That very night it happened. She got her cattle home, turned them into the corral, and went into the house, into her room behind the kitchen. There, without calling to anybody, without a groan, she lay down and bore her child. (150)

Antonia's maternal instinct surfaces in her careful tending of both the land and her children. With the maternal affection of Demeter, Antonia vows to protect her daughter from masculine forces: "I'm going to see my little girl has a better chance than ever I had. I'm going to take care of that girl, Jim" (152). And, she keeps her words: Not until her illegitimate daughter grows up and marries, does Antonia reluctantly give her up. Antonia herself becomes Charity, the greatest virtue, for even her faults had resulted from abundance of love— as she confesses at the end: "The trouble with me was I never could believe harm of anybody I loved" (163).

Antonia's integrity and endurance is symbolized in a plow in a high field during a sensuous and poetic sunset:

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 (118).

This image could remind the reader of Aeneas's vision of weapons glow red in the sun's rays, arms that would serve to defeat the Latins<sup>vii</sup>. In Antonia's case, the plow is her weapon to defeat evils in her life— when she devotes herself to cultivation of the land with the plow, her tears of humiliation, sadness and bewilderment dissolve into the earth with her sweat and bring about good harvest.

Rather than lead a life of self-imposed guilt or exile, Antonia rebounds: she marries a fellow Bohemian immigrant, Cuzak, and the two beget a family bursting with energy and good humor. Antonia and her husband are devoted to one another, as devoted as good friends, and their relationship becomes the foundation for Antonia's renewed life, rooted in family, earth, and the cycles of the farm seasons. She tells Jim directly that she would be miserable in a city. She remarks: "I'd die of lonesomeness. 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" (152). When Jim returns to the prairie to see Antonia after they have departed twenty years

before, he finds that the waste land has been transformed into fertile farm and Antonia has a paradisaical garden to prove that she belongs to the farm. Jim finds that her farm does not have the orderliness of Alexandra Bergson's but is lush with natural vegetation. The house is nearly buried in a forest of hollyhocks, and thorny locust hedges enclose the yard. A deep peacefulness envelops the orchard which is full of sun, like a cup+(161) and rich with the smell of ripe fruit. Jim observes, when he had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last+(167).

Finally, Antonia stands before Jim, a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled+(157). He finds the toothless Antonia aged but not broken, instead glowing with the fire of life+(159), delighted with her husband and happy children, and proud of their productive farm. Her husband used to be a city man and he didn't like country life at first. At first I near go crazy with lonesomeness, he said frankly, but my wife is got such a warm heart. She always makes it as good for me as she could. Now it ain't so bad; I can begin to have some fun with my boys, already+(173)! Now, her children press around her, and the farm in general offers a picture of fecund creativity, of swarming life: Ducks and geese ran quacking across my path. White cats were sunning themselves among yellow pumpkin on the porch steps+(156). Jim notices the physical harmony of this country family, whose members were not afraid to touch each other+(165). In Cather's law middle frontier the family unit is a defense against isolation<sup>viii</sup>, and Antonia's achievement involves mixing family and prairie and the Emersonian ideal of self-reliance. Antonia loves life so much that she is even kind to animals. Explaining her fear of guns to Jim, Antonia says: Ever since I've had children, I don't like to kill anything. It makes me kind of faint to wring an old goose's neck+(162). Antonia is like the archetypal Great Mother, a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races+(167). Farm life is simple but wholesome. Professor David W. Orr says: Elemental things like flowing water, wind, trees, clouds, rain, mist, mountains, landscape, animals, changing seasons, the night sky, and the mysteries of the life cycle gave birth to thought and language. They continue to do so, but perhaps less exuberantly than they once did<sup>ix</sup>. Living in an environment containing almost all the above-mentioned elements, it's no wonder that Antonia prospers.

Jim compared Antonia with girls he had considered less worthy, and in what at first may seem a digression he inserts the success story of Tiny Soderball, who had speculated on the Klondike and become so rich in gold that nothing interested her much but making money+(143). Tiny's story is intertwined with Lena's when the two spinsters share life together in San Francisco and ends on the sour note that Tiny became like someone in whom the faculty of becoming interested is worn out+(143). Thus Jim actually distinguishes Antonia, who, despite personal tragedy, summoned the courage to

live well in middle age and beyond. Her final success in his eyes will be as golden spiritually as Tiny's is materially, and whose extraordinary interest in all living things is perpetual. While Antonia remained on the frontier, doing the work required to turn a wild landscape into the domestic basis of civilization, Jim went to east to study law and then to become a powerful railroad company lawyer. Although Jim has "kept so young" (159) that he is not recognized by Antonia at first, he knows that his life is sterile and empty. Jim Burden's great worldly success seems to pale beside the rich and fruitful life of Antonia. Jim's fall is a complex failure of happiness and his return is obviously connected to a mid-life crisis, a theme handled in most Cather's novels, which involves reflections on and return to youth or childhood. Definitely therapeutic, the return is a question of his own survival and he feels "the old pull of the earth" (152). He in essence becomes a son of Antonia and experiences the sense of "coming home to myself" (175), of becoming one with "ground and sun and sky" (11).

James Woodress calls Antonia "the most heroic figure of them all, both the Modonna of the Wheat fields and the embodiment of the American Westering myth". Cather's portrait of Antonia is widely acknowledged as one of the most memorable characters in 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature<sup>xi</sup>. Through her, Cather celebrates the vitality and fruitfulness of the pioneering era as a type of lost paradise. According to the Renaissance pastoral, this paradise includes many elements: beauty of location, erotic idealism, harmony between humanity and nature and evidence of regenerative powers in nature and its goddess (woman with simple virtues)<sup>xii</sup>. Overcoming hardships of her life through stalwart struggle, Antonia triumphs - her triumph is based on quests for permanent value and meaning. For her, happiness is "to be dissolved into something complete and great" (12) - this something is self-evidently nature. But can it be possible today for us to gain happiness - to return to nature? *My Antonia* is not simply a study on an individual, but on the destiny that binds us into the future.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Glen A. Love, *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003) 93.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>iii</sup> Vera Norwood, "Heroines of Nature: Four Women Respond to the American Landscape," *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, C. Glotfelty and H. Fromm, eds. (London: University of Georgia Press, 1996) 334

<sup>iv</sup> Madhav Gadgil, "Of Literature and Artifacts," *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993) 365-80

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- <sup>v</sup> Glen A. Love, *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2003) 84
- <sup>vi</sup> Mary Ruth Ryder, *Willa Cather and Classic Myth: the Search for a New Parnassus* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) 150.
- <sup>vii</sup> Mary Ruth Ryder, *Willa Cather and Classic Myth: the Search for a New Parnassus* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) 144.
- <sup>viii</sup> John J. Murphy, *My Antonia: the Road Home* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989)
- <sup>ix</sup> David W. Orr, *Love It or Lose It: The Coming Biophilia Revolution,+ The Biophilia Hypothesis*, Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson, eds (Washington, D.C.: Island, 1993) 425
- <sup>x</sup> Mary Ruth Ryder, *Willa Cather and Classic Myth: the Search for a New Parnassus* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) 161
- <sup>xi</sup> Diane Telgen,, ed, *Novels for Students*, vol.2 (New York: Gale, 1997) 196
- <sup>xii</sup> John J. Murphy, *My Antonia: the Road Home* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989)

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