

10 CRITICS DISCUSS

My Antonia (1918)

Willa Cather

(1873-1947)

“Miss Cather is a craftsman whom I have often praised in this place, and with increasing joy. Her work for ten years past has shown a steady and rapid improvement in both matter and manner. She has arrived at last at such a command of the mere devices of writing that the uses she makes of them are all concealed—her style has lost self-consciousness; her feeling for form has become instinctive. And she has got such a grip upon her materials—upon the people she sets before us and the background she displays behind them—that both take on an extraordinary reality. I know of no novel that makes the remote folk of the western prairies more real than *My Antonia* makes them, and I know of none that makes them seem better worth knowing.”

H. L. Mencken
Smart Set
(February 1919)

“In *Antonia*’s contented domesticity Miss Cather offers a modern variation of an old theme. In the pages of Mrs. Stowe the latter stages of *Antonia*’s career would have been treated as steps of abnegation, the surrender to a sense of duty in a home on earth which would be rewarded by a mansion prepared on high. By most contemporary novelists it would be treated as complete defeat, with no compensation here or hereafter. But Miss Cather with all her zest for studio life, has retained an imaginative regard for four walls and a hearthstone, and the vital experience of mothering a family.”

Percy H. Boynton
Some Contemporary Americans
(Chicago 1924) 169-70

“In *My Antonia*, *Antonia Shimerda*...became the symbol of emotional fulfillment in motherhood on a Western farm. The thesis was arresting, appearing as it did in 1918 at the very moment when farm and village life were coming under the critical eyes of the novelists intent upon exposing its pollution. Without satire or bitterness and with only a little sentimentalism, Willa Cather pictured a strong character developing under severe difficulties which would crush a less heroic soul, surviving the most primitive hardships in a sod hut, toiling like an ox in the field with the men, enduring want, cut off from ordinary pleasures, withstanding betrayal and the cheap life as a hired girl to a triumphant serenity as mother to a healthy group of shy, awkward but happy and laughing boys who are content with their life on the farm.”

Harlan Hatcher
Creating the Modern American Novel
(Farrar & Rinehart 1935) 66

“*Antonia* has less spectacular attributes of heroism, and exhibits the usual instincts of self-preservation hardly at all. She is gentle and confiding, and her strongest impulse is to give well-being and happiness to others. Yet the maternal current is so deep and sure in her that it saves her from mediocrity. Goodness, often negative and annoying, amounts in her to heroic effluence. It touches everything round her with reality. ‘She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize as universal and true.... She 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 foodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last.... She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.’ In actual life *Antonia* was a Bohemian girl who was kind to Willa Cather in her childhood. In the novel *Antonia* has become so real that, while not in the least a symbol of herself, she brings symbols to mind, as only reality can do. It is not easy to say things so illuminating about a human being as Willa Cather says about *Antonia*. It is all but impossible to create a character with such

sympathetic art that words like these about Antonia and the apple tree toward the end of the book only confirm and interpret an impression already made.”

Carl Van Doren
The American Novel 1789-1939, 23rd edition
(1921; Macmillan 1940-68) 286-87

“Jim Burden and Antonia Shimerda arrive as children in pioneer Black Hawk, Neb., he from Virginia and she with her family from Bohemia. With his companion, Jake Marpole, and the frontiersman and hired man Otto Fuchs, Jim lives on his grandparents’ prosperous farm; but the Shimerdas are tricked into buying a squalid, underdeveloped track, where the impractical, music-loving father attempts to create a farm, aided by his vulgar, nagging wife, their grown son Ambrosch, the adolescent Antonia, her young sister Yulka, and the idiot boy Marek. Although the Burdens aid him with food and supplies, Shimerda in homesick despair commits suicide, and Jim’s grandfather employs Ambrosch and Antonia, who later has to work in the fields. After the Burdens move to town, Antonia becomes a maid in the household of their neighbors. Despite their trying experiences with various employers, including amorous old Wick Cutter, she remains quiet, sincere, and industrious. Jim, after attending the state university and Harvard, learns of Antonia’s elopement with Larry Donovan, a railway conductor who deserts her and her child. She then returns in disgrace to work on her brother’s farm. Twenty years later when Jim visits Nebraska, he finds her a stalwart, middle-aged farm wife, married to mild, friendly Anton Cuzak. They have many children, and it is Antonia’s strength that maintains the family, but she will possess the laughter and inner core of pioneer integrity which always distinguishes her. ‘She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races’.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 518

“Antonia does not see the future of the land like Alexandra; she is a part of it. But her emotions run deeper, and she has none of the Swedish girl’s solidness. (‘She was a Bohemian girl who was good to me when I was a child. I saw a great deal of her from the time I was eight until I was twelve. She was big-hearted and essentially romantic.’) She comes out of an immigrant family which lacks the barest essentials of life. The father, a sensitive man of considerable cultivation, kills himself when he fails to make his adjustment to the New World wilderness. When, after her father’s death, Antonia goes to work in the fields like a man, she loses her ‘nice ways,’ as Jim’s grandmother had said she would. Later, when the Italian Vannis come to Black Hawk, she develops the dance craze and all that goes with it. Nothing much happens to Antonia except that she manages to get herself betrayed by a rascally railroad conductor and left with a baby to support. ‘She loved it from the first as dearly as if she’d had a ring on her finger, and was never ashamed of it.’ After this episode, Miss Cather leaves Antonia for twenty years, then reintroduces her, the wife of a commonplace Bohemian and the mother of fourteen children, a battered woman who has lost her teeth but who still retains ‘the fire of life’.”

Edward Wagenknecht
*Cavalcade of the American Novel:
From the Birth of the Nation to the Middle of the Twentieth Century*
(Holt 1952) 324-25

“*My Antonia* (1918) is the story of Antonia Shimerda, daughter of Bohemian immigrants in the Nebraska prairie land. The story is related by Jim Burden, a friend of Antonia who has much the same relation to the immigrant population of the prairie that Miss Cather herself had. The Shimerdas are sold bad land and have a hard struggle during the first years of their farming career. Mr. Shimerda is a dreamy and impractical musician who was goaded into leaving Europe by his wife, who hoped for greater opportunities for her son Androsch in the new world. Mr. Shimerda, crushed by the severity of pioneer life, commits suicide, and his daughter Antonia is forced to assume the burden of the farm work. Her splendid energy and optimism carry her through this ordeal; she is at her best when struggling against the challenge of the soil. Later the family moves to town and Antonia becomes a hired girl, but this change in her social status brings only ruin to her.

She is deceived and abandoned by an unscrupulous railway employee; disillusioned, she returns to the country to bear her illegitimate child. Her life diverges from Jim's for awhile, and when he encounters her next she is comfortably married to Anton Cuzak and is raising a large family; she has found her place in life. A sub-plot relates the careers of Pavel and Peter, two Russian immigrants who are continually dogged with ill luck. This novel, usually considered Miss Cather's best by critics, nevertheless suffers from a structural flaw: the interest shifts from Jim to Antonia, and the reader has difficulty making up his mind which the story is about. The title is intended to suggest that it is about 'Jim's Antonia,' that is, about the character of the girl as seen through the young man's eyes. But in the third section we lost sight of Antonia almost completely as the author concerns herself with Jim's education at the University of Nebraska and his romance with the Swedish farm girl Lina Lingard.

Yet in the end it is Antonia who dominates the book: vigorous, unselfish, possessing a certain sensitivity and yet realizing her basic limitations, she is content to devote her life to the hard labor of the farm and to her children, leaving the world of culture and education to the more fortunate Jim. The portrait of Mr. Shimerda is masterful; here Willa Cather most eloquently expresses her admiration for the European culture brought by the immigrants to the western prairie. On the other hand the bleakness and cruelty of life in the Old World is suggested by a story told by Pavel the Russian on his deathbed: two years before, as a sledge-driver in Russia, he had thrown a bride and groom to the pursuing wolves to save his own life. This story, interesting in itself but having little organic connection with the main plot of the novel, well illustrates the difficulties in construction in which Miss Cather often finds herself."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 195-96

"*My Antonia* is the most famous of Willa Cather's prairie novels and is generally considered to be her best. It contains the fullest celebration ever to come from her pen of country life as opposed to the life of the cities, for the book is one long paean of praise to the joys of rural living and shows her a passionate advocate of the virtues of a settled agricultural existence.... Native born or immigrant, all the good characters in the book sooner or later yield to the spell of the land, and there is no doubt in the author's mind as to whether country or city is the real America....

I

The first part, concerning the struggle of the Burdens and the Shimerdas with the wild land, is described in terms of animal imagery; as in *O Pioneers!* the central symbol is the unbroken colt. This represents inchoate material waiting to have form imposed upon it, vitality ready to be harnessed by order. Antonia too is waiting to have form imposed upon her; by her father, by the Burden family, and by the Harlings, form being in this context the stamp of civilization itself. The imposition of form on wild nature is a difficult thing, as those who do the task and have the strength to achieve it find out; Mr. Shimerda fails at the task and kills himself, while even Antonia barely survives. But she does survive.

II

In the book's second part the dominant image is the plough. Both Antonia and the land are now ready to be creative and fertile; to produce children and crops. This section contains the struggle between town and country traditions, with Antonia absorbing both: she first learns from and then emancipates herself from the Harlings. Unlike her father, she is able to triumph over adversity—in her case, an unfortunate love affair.

III

In the third section of the book the dominant image is the earth-goddess in the garden of the world. This section shows the final fruition of both woman and land, which comes about because Antonia is able to combine the vitality of nature with the order of civilization, both in her own life and in the life of the land. In this section Jim Burden meets adversity and is inspired by Antonia....

Antonia's great achievement and the chief subject of the book is the founding of a family....the center of interest shifts back and forth between Jim and Antonia, and the result is best understood as the story of parallel lives. In her later novels Willa Cather often has a double protagonist such as this, one of whom resembles herself and the other someone who is not herself but whom she admires. One of these usually stands for the contemplative life, the other for the life of action.... In *My Antonia* this double protagonist consists of Jim Burden and Antonia, who, true to the best traditions of the romantic movement, stand for head and heart, respectively. It is as if Antonia actually lives life, while Jim merely records it, or at best lives vicariously through her.... Together he and the friend of his youth make a complete personality, but it is Janus-faced, one of them looking forward and the other back. Antonia has the whole future for her domain; Jim Burden has only the past.... Willa Cather loads the story in Antonia's favor, not only by emphasizing Jim's obvious admiration for her, but by making all the significant action take place in Nebraska....

The first part deals with two opposed family groups, the Shimerdas and the Burdens, and their struggles with their environment. The second, beginning with the Burdens' removal to Black Hawk, deals mostly with the contrasting modes of life in country and town. This forms the major part of the book. The third, which describes Jim's return to Black Hawk after an absence of twenty years, shows Antonia's final success in achieving her goal in life, a family of her own. This last section fails to carry out the parallel structure of the previous parts except in briefest outline. The introduction tells us that in the intervening period Jim Burden has contracted an unfortunate and childless marriage which differentiates him from the fecund and happily married Antonia. This would have given Willa Cather a splendid opportunity to develop the theme of the rootless city marriage versus the more stable country union, a theme which appeared later in *A Lost Lady* and *My Mortal Enemy*.... Willa Cather seems to have doubts as to whether the two modes of life can ever be rendered compatible. In addition, it also recalls her distrust of marriage in general. The marriage of the Cuzaks is as idyllic a union as she was ever to portray in any of her novels, and yet even here there is the suggestion not only of female dominance but of marriage as being inevitably frustrating....

Time after time the family is represented as being the source of all civilized values; it is the only social unit which she conceives of with any degree of intensity. She was able successfully to portray human relations in a family of the kind she had known in a way in which she was not able to portray, for instance, passionate love between a man and a woman. The interesting thing about her conception of the family is that it constitutes a Platonic hierarchy. Each member is assigned his own individual role, his status being defined by his duties toward the family considered as a corporate group. There is a regular ladder of rank starting with the children and proceeding up through the parents to the grandparents, who in *My Antonia* are regarded as the ultimate repositories of wisdom.... The home has become a kind of sanctuary; for Willa Cather the one thing that alleviates the terrible insecurity of emigration is the emotional protection furnished by the accepted modes of thought and feeling found within the family unit....

The most interesting results of the contrast between the Burden and Shimerda families are the quiet judgments that Willa Cather implicitly makes on what a family should be. The Shimerda family is not a unit. It breaks down into little groups which work at cross-purposes to one another.... The Shimerdas are an anarchic disintegrating family groups which seems bent on its own destruction, and yet it produces Antonia, who emerges at the end of the novel as the family founder *par excellence*. All these traits she learned from the Burdens, and rightly so for they form a model family. But in spite of all its good qualities, it is the Burden family which dies out. The improvident family turns out to be the one that produces no one capable of carrying on its traditions. But the spirit of Grandmother and Grandfather Burden has been passed on to Antonia. That is one reason why Jim admires her so much....

The agrarian myth has it that the virtuous yeoman is virtuous no longer once he migrates to the city, even if the city turns out to be only a small town like Black Hawk. That is why the Burden family dwindles to nothing; Jim ends up a landless, childless failure, in marked contradistinction to Antonia, who stays on the land. One of the strong points of *My Antonia* as compared with Willa Cather's other novels is that in it she comes closer than she usually does to facing the problem of evil and suffering in life.... Here in a nutshell is one of Willa Cather's most glaring weaknesses: when her mind is presented with something unpleasant, it shies away from it. The problem of evil is posed, but not commented on. Instead she is

evasive and changes the subject.... The reason Mr. Shimerda kills himself is that he cannot stand life on the Divide. Like John Bergson in *O Pioneers!* he is a prime example of a man who has imagination enough to be a pioneer, but not the strength. Except his death, every single important event in his life had been determined for him by others....

Antonia may become an earth-goddess, but she gets many of her good qualities from her father, who was a town dweller. Thus Willa Cather's idea of the good country life really turns out to be that of one in which urban and rural traits which she considers desirable are combined.... Antonia's revolt against the Harlings is only one extension of the rebellion she had already begun against her own family. It is a rebellion in favor of the good things of life; years of drudgery on a remote farm with only an unpleasant mother and brother for company had begotten in her a fierce desire to enjoy life's sweets. To us the rebellion seems mild, since it consists chiefly of having a good time and going out with young men to dances, although it culminates in her being 'fooled' by Larry Donovan's promise of marriage and having a baby by him after he had abandoned her. The significance of her rebellion is that it shows Antonia's asserting her independence from her family as well as from the Harlings. This is a vitally important step for Willa Cather's early heroines, since they seem to feel that with out completely rejecting parental authority they cannot be individuals in their own right.

My Antonia is unique in Willa Cather's early writing in that in it she for once represents a happy marriage and a family at its best; that is, she is able to feel more attraction for the family than revulsion against it. Later on, Antonia, this nonconformist and rebel against the family, lives to marry and found a family of her own; having experienced many sides of life, she now knows a good deal of what life is about, and is all the better a mother for it. To achieve this effect, Willa Cather has manipulated the plot so that Ambrosch and Mrs. Shimerda are as unattractive as possible; thus a revolt from them is a revolt toward life itself. Antonia must rebel against a bad family before she can set up a good family. Thus she is able both to be a rugged individualist and later on to enjoy the advantages of group membership too....

For the town girls [Jim Burden] has nothing but a qualified contempt.... Such is Jim Burden's attack on the genteel tradition whose ideal of feminine refinement is an anemic passivity which regards any form of physical activity as vulgar. The contrast between the hired girls and their mistresses is the opposition between country and town life, between vitality and listlessness. The townspeople, blissfully unaware of their own shortcomings, looked down on the prairie-bred girls because they earned their living, because they were 'foreigners,' and (so Willa Cather hints) because they were so attractive.... This failure of town and country to mingle spells the death of the town. In her next novel, *One of Ours*, Willa Cather gives her view of what happened to communities like Black Hawk when the descendants of the original settlers lost whatever vitality their progenitors possessed. They became completely immersed in a conventional commercial existence in which they learn a great deal about how to make money but nothing at all about how to spend it wisely. Willa Cather here shows striking similarities to Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, and others who figured in the post-World War I revolt from the village....

The highest point of the book's middle section occurs when [Jim] goes with Antonia and the hired girls on a picnic.... In seeing the relation between girls like [Lena] and Vergil's *Georgics* he has made a discovery important enough to rank as a creative act: he has succeeded in bringing Nebraska in line with the great tradition. And the great tradition—as Willa Cather sees it, at least—is a rural tradition; one need only think of the importance which the Vergil of the *Georgics* and the Horace of the *Odes* gave to the countryside. No longer does Jim have to feel like a young man from the provinces who comes up to the metropolis and is looked down upon, nor does he have to accept the inferiority of America to Europe; he has seen the unity of all life and all art everywhere; he has seen the ultimate unity of human experience....

The settlement of America was considered to be a part of a divine plan. When the great basin of the Mississippi Valley was completely populated, it was to become not only an earthly paradise for the inhabitants, who would thus live in a latter-day Garden of Eden, but also the whole earth's granary; by means of its immense fertility it would feed the people of Europe and Asia as well.... This is one way in which Willa Cather adjusts Nebraska to the macrocosm and gives local happenings a cosmic importance.... In the middle of this earthly paradise stands its Eve, the now victorious Antonia. She has triumphed over adversity and over nature; she has wrestled with life and imposed an order on it, her order, just as she has

imposed order on the wilderness of Nebraska by converting part of it into a fruitful farm with a garden at its center. In her double role as founder of a prosperous farm and progenitor of a thriving family she becomes the very symbol of fertility, and reminds us of Demeter or Ceres of old, the ancients' goddess of agriculture. Willa Cather herself points up the comparison, and it is of value to her to do this, for she makes an earth-goddess of Antonia; the mortal who struggles with the adverse powers of nature and conquers them becomes the type of all successful human endeavor and passes over into the realm of myth."

John H. Randall III
"Interpretation of *My Antonia*"
The Landscape and the Looking Glass
(Houghton 1960)

"One of the first and still most successful ventures in realistic portrayal of the Middle West, this novel tells the story of an immigrant farm family in Nebraska, especially the fortunes of Antonia Shimerda, a daughter of the family. She longs for a life of greater sensitivity than she finds on the farm. She escapes to a town, is betrayed by a philanderer, bears an illegitimate child, finally returns to the farm and marries a fellow immigrant, Anton Cuzak. *My Antonia* is notable particularly for its lucid and moving depictions of the prairie and the people who live close to it, the farmers whose lives are controlled by storm and drought and the spring rains."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 777

"...the scene of Jim and Antonia's first encounter... What, of the important things in *My Antonia*, does Cather not tell us in this scene? The whole book is there. We have Antonia's foreignness...her hunger for life, her vulnerability. (She likes the wind blowing up her skirt. Her illegitimate pregnancy is prefigured here.) We have the difference between her and Jim: her brown eyes, his blue eyes; her recklessness, his caution; her generosity, his impatience with it. (In the refusal of the ring, we are told that the two won't marry.) And in the picture of these three children nestled deep in the grass with the great sky over them, we see how small a human being is by prairie standards, Cather's standards...."

It is instructive to compare Cather's recollections of her arrival on the plain...with what she made of it in *My Antonia*, where she gave the experience to Jim Burden... The two are very close: the child peering over the side of the wagon, the vast, trackless plain. Yet in *My Antonia* the experience has been wholly transformed. Day has become night. There is no father now, to comfort and instruct... 'The idea of you is part of my mind,' says Jim to Antonia. 'His fine long hand...had never handled things that were not symbols of ideas' (*The Professor's House*, 236), says St. Peter of Tom. 'It's the idea, the basic idea, pulsing behind every bar she sings' (*The Song of the Lark*, 356), says Fred Ottenberg of Thea's special quality as an artist. The Nebraska plain turned Cather into a Platonist...."

Joan Acocella
Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism
(U Nebraska 2000) 71, 81-82

Michael Hollister (2015)