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Note: This paper is from a very informal class report, and as such, is not the most serious and complete discussion of the critical attitudes surrounding Cather's work. I include it only because so far, I have not received any other critiques on this issue. With any luck, this will change and I will soon have a paper with substantial and complete discussion. Until then, scan this essay and let it spark your own conclusions.

My Antonia: a Survey of Critical Attitudes

Whenever I feel that the “struggle” of feminist studies is old and tired, that most people have “gotten it” and that there's not really so much to fight against anymore, all I really have to do is go to old literary criticism to remember that we have come a long way and that perhaps the way is not so near the end still. When you consider that women's writing and position in society have changed so much yet still changed so little, you realize why the struggle must continue. The reason I bring this up is that when I was doing my research for this report, the first article I re-read stunned me. Grant it, this was written in 1937, but since Lionel Trilling was and still is a pre-eminent literary scholar, his opinion is a reflection and a reaffirmation of the bias against the kind of writing which we are studying on this webpage– domestic fiction.

Trilling is one of those critics who judge Cather as a “failure.” When he discusses Cather's “mystical concern with pots and pans” in his essay “Willa Cather” we feel that he does not think that a proper subject for the talent that Cather displays. And when he says “It has

always been a personal failure of her talent that prevented her from involving her people in truly dramatic relations with each other. (Her women, for example, always stand in the mother or daughter relation to men; they are never truly lovers”(Trilling 13). Presumably this is not a truly dramatic relationship. Knowing this attitude that trivializes the relationships of women to women, we realize that women were and probably still are defined in relation of their position to men. So when we discuss *My Ántonia*, we have a good place to start: Jim's possession of Ántonia's story. (This idea: possession of Ántonia by Jim, will be further discussed in James Miller's essay).

Much of the earliest criticism of *My Ántonia* focuses on the apparent failure of the narrative. Many critics take the title of the story and its introduction at face value. When the story says it is to be about Ántonia, it must be about her! Therefore, many critics see the stunningly crafted pieces of “variation from a theme” – the stories of Peter & Pavel (the Russians and their wolves) and the sections of the novel dealing with the hired girls Lena Lingard and others-- as divergences which weaken the overall structure of the novel. In other words, these stories distract us from the real story, that of Ántonia and her relationship with Jim. Other critics talk mostly about the landscape of Cather's stories, the way the pioneer story and the struggle with nature is a vital piece of her work. This is partly why, I think, Cather has been viewed as a minor writer of “local color” for so long. Because she sketches her landscapes with such simplicity and yet detail, many critics do not look past the landscape to see the characters and the true drama that they play out.

An example of a critique which accepts the critical opinion that the novel is “defective in structure” is James E. Miller's 1958 essay “*My Ántonia: A Frontier Drama of Time.*” I group his essay here because he spends the bulk of the essay arguing that the defect of structure is overcome when we look at the cyclical nature of time in the novel as its unifying theme. This article does seem to be one of the first ones that looks to disprove the “failure” of Cather's narration. Of course, by disproving this argument, Miller is still working within the context of failure/success by which I don't think other writers (read male authors) are judged.

Miller begins his argument by pointing out that many critics “have felt the unified emotional impact of *My Ántonia* and have grappled with the puzzling problem of the book's actual lack of consistent central action or unbroken character portrayal” (Miller 52). Miller argues that there seems to be no consistent character portrayal, “The action in *My Ántonia* is episodic, lacks focus and abounds in irrelevancies”(Miller 52). But Miller believes that there is a consistency within the novel, that of the evocation of feelings which the reader has. He discusses elements of symbolism and cyclical passing of time as the unifying device of the novel. “When Jim Burden, dissatisfied with *Ántonia* as his title, prefixes the “My” he is informing the reader in advance that the book is not about the real *Ántonia*, but rather about *Ántonia* as personal and poignant symbol” (Miller, 52). Of course, it isn't Jim who puts the “My” into the title, but the narrator, presumably Cather. Miller argues that it is Jim's narration which shapes and “informs” *My Ántonia*.

Jim's narration at first concentrates on the seasons, the first year that the Shimerdas are

there-- the beauty of the land and the fall when they first arrive, the harshness of the winter, and then the vibrance of the spring following Mr. Shimerda's death. Then there is the summer, in which *Ántonia* goes to be hired out... she is moving cyclically into adulthood while Jim is still a child. This narrative “seasonal shape” is further shaped through Jim's narrative in the way the rest of the structure of the novel proceeds. The first part is on the farm, then in the city. When *Ántonia* moves into the city, she is again growing up more than Jim. Then Jim moves away to college, and *Ántonia* is thrust into adulthood with a “marriage” and birth, while Jim & Lena “play” at adult love in college. Finally, Jim moves into a very odd marriage and then goes back to the farm with *Ántonia* and her children. Jim identifies more with the children than he does with *Antonia* here. Jim is still incomplete, whereas *Ántonia* is an adult . . .her body is worn but her spirit is still there whereas we get the idea that Jim's spirit is a little lost even though his body seems younger, less touched by time. Miller discusses the passage of time as the structure of the novel:

The Shimerdas, the first book of *My Ántonia*, introduces from the start the drama of time in the vivid accounts of the shifting seasons. . .portraying the terrible struggle for mere existence in the bleakness of the plains' Winter, dramatizing the return of life with the arrival of Spring, and concluding with the promise of rich harvest in the intense heat of the prairie's Summer. This is Jim Burden's remembered year, and it is his obsession with the cycle of time that has caused him to recall *Ántonia* in a setting of the changing seasons. (Miller 55)

Another similar argument is that:

It is in the dramatization of *Ántonia* from the girlhood of the opening pages through her physical flowering in the middle books to, finally, her reproduction of the race in a flock of fine boys in the final pages of the book that her life is represented, like the year with its seasons, as a cycle complete in its stages of birth, growth, fruition and decline. Although *Ántonia's* life represents a greater cycle than that of the year, the pattern remains the same in both. (Bloom, 55)

Bloom continues to argue that:

If in Book one *Ántonia* represents the eternal endurance under supreme hardship of woman appointed propagator of the race, and in Book II she represents the overflowing liveliness and energetic abundance of physical woman come to the flower, in Books III and IV she symbolizes the calm and faithful endurance of woman eternally wronged . . . But Willa Cather insists on *Ántonia's* appearing in a double role, not only as woman wronged, but also as woman fulfilled in her destiny. (Bloom, 55)

These arguments clearly accept the structure of the novel as an argument that is solely about *Ántonia*, when, in reality, it is more about Jim.

Another of the types of critiques of Cather's novel has begun to appear— one that places the novel within the construct of myth and relationship in a manner that it has not been placed

before. Rather than simply looking at the novel as a grown up child's narrative, this type of analysis looks beneath the surface for meanings that lurk in and around the narrative. This type of critique is exemplified by Blanch H. Gelfant's 1971 reading of sexual imagery in *My Ántonia* from the essay "The Forgotten Reaping Hook: Sex in *My Ántonia*."

Gelfant argues that "our persistent misreading of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* arises from a belief that Jim Burden is a reliable narrator. Because we trust his unequivocal narrative manner, we see the novel as a splendid celebration of American frontier life" (Gelfant 104). However, Gelfant declares that we cannot accept Jim's narrative position as unchallengeable. "Jim Burden belongs to a remarkable gallery of characters for whom Cather consistently invalidates sex. . . . Whenever sex enters the real world. . . it becomes destructive, leading almost axiomatically to death" (104). This argument calls into question the narrative structure, and leads us to question more of what appears in the novel. Gelfant points out that "Jim forgets as much as he remembers, as his mind sifts through the years to retrieve what he most needs-- a purified past in which he can find safely from sex and disorder" (105).

Gelfant's argument speaks for itself, so I will cite a rather long passage from the essay, without much of my own explanation:

Ántonia is cast as a
mythopoeic memory. . . an affecting creation story with Ántonia a central fertility figure
"a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races." . . . In Jim's dream of Lena, desire
and fear clearly contend with one another. With the dreamer's infallibility, Jim contains

his ambivalence in a surreal image of Aurora and Grim Reaper as one. This collaged figure of Lena advances against an ordinary but ominous landscape. Background and forefigure first contrast and then coalesce in meaning. Lena's voluptuous aspects— her luminous glow of sexual arousal, her flesh bared by a short skirt, her soft sighs and kisses— are displaced against shocks and stubble, a barren field when the reaping-hook has done its work. This landscape of harvest and desolation is not unfamiliar; nor is the apparitional woman who moves across it, sighing and making soft moan; nor the supine young man whom she kisses and transports. It is the archetypal landscape of ballad, myth, and drama, setting for *la belle dame sans merci* who enchants and satisfies, but then lulls and destroys. She comes, as Lena does, when the male is alone and unguarded. “Now they are all gone” Lena murmurs. . . . His dream of Lena and the reaping hook depicts his ambivalence toward the cycle of growth, maturation and death. The wheat ripens to be cut; maturity invites death [when Jim dreams this again in college] it has been censored and condensed, transmuted from reverie to remembrance. . . now his memory can deal with fantasy as with experience. (105)

Thus, sexuality must merge with death in a Freudian cycle that cannot be ignored. Other images of sexuality, Gelfant argues, that lead to death are the encounter with the snake (full of mythic implications which should be obvious to anyone who thinks of Adam & Eve and their resulting fall and expulsion from Eden) and the story of Pavel & Peter (wherein the bride & incipient sexuality meeting with a horrifying scene of betrayal and death.) Also Mr. Shimerda's

sexuality leads him inevitably to death. . . suicide in a land where he doesn't fit but was convinced to come by his wife.

This last critical discussion is probably my favorite one, because it doesn't see Cather as a failure for including these “irrelevant” details, instead it recognizes them for the psychological “slips” which reveal Jim's ambivalent attitude about sexuality and Antonia and Lena, all implicit images of fertility and sex. Perhaps according to traditional critics, Cather fails by including these apparent weaknesses in structural integrity of the story, but I think that it is in these details where Cather transcends the need for a woman to be defined by her relation to men. Here, the male narrator is afraid of the life/death in the woman, so he avoids relationship with that aspect of her. These women characters persist, despite their refusal to be defined in Jim's terms. Jim defines Antonia as a slightly lost girl, Lena as sexual menace– but the women do not need Jim's definitions of them to succeed, they exist for long periods without his input.

A few final points I want to go over are a couple of the names in the story: this is informal criticism, and mostly for fun, but if my speculation leads you on a hunt for truth, it is worthwhile.

Lena Lingard's name seemed to apparently not be something worth any real concern until I did a spell check. What was interesting then is that the alternate spelling suggested for her last name was “lingered.” I thought that was quite telling if you think of the sort of “lazy” sensuous way Lena is described in several passages. Also consider the fact that she seems to Linger in the minds of the men she encounters, not only Jim but Ole Benson, Sylvester Lovett, Colonel

Raleigh and Mr. Ordinski. Response? Also Lingard reminds me of “unguarded” which is what Jim is when Antonia is gone.

Then you have the **three Marys**, unavoidably making me think of the Marys of the Bible— Mary Magdalene & Mary, Christ's mother, what might it imply that these women play a part in the drama?

Ántonia is also a good name to look at for an analysis of mythic symbolism of names: Anne was Mary's mother, at some times considered to have conceived Mary without sin (or sex) but later Christian doctrine decided that two virgin birth's were one to many so Anne was said to have conceived Mary sexually and Mary was cleansed of sin in the womb. Is there something to this name that might be worth exploring? Or is this just idle speculation?

Now to look at the names **Pavel & Peter**---

– Pavel seems to me to be an ethnic (perhaps Russian?) spelling of Paul . . . who was obviously very anti-sexual in his epistles . . . Paul lays the taint of original sin on woman alone, absolving man from responsibility. “Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression” (I Timothy 2:11-14)

– Peter: was supposedly the first pope, given “the keys to the church” by Christ. Obviously the name also relates to Father (pater) or the patriarchal church who resists femininity and sexuality.

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<http://www.womenwriters.net/domesticgoddess/pdf/antonia.pdf>

page 10

Finally, in her essay, Van Ghent describes the “**hired girls**” as Caryatids, so I thought I'd make clear what those were: carved pillars representing a woman in Greek tradition (temples) They were modeled on the moon priestesses of Caryae. So in other words, the hired girls seem like statues of “goddesses” brought to life, full of motion and beauty.

Anyway, all mythic interpretations of names aside, *My Antonia* is a great story, and the criticism of it is starting to concentrate not just on the supposed “weaknesses” of the story but on the imagery and powerful drama which does appear there. Domestic fiction is not just for fun reading anymore!