

My *Ántonia* **by Willa Cather**

About the Book

Widely recognized as Willa Cather's greatest novel, *My Ántonia* is a soulful and rich portrait of a pioneer woman's simple yet heroic life. The spirited daughter of Bohemian immigrants, Ántonia must adapt to a hard existence on the desolate prairies of the Midwest. Enduring childhood poverty, teenage seduction, and family tragedy, she eventually becomes a wife and mother on a Nebraska farm. A fictional record of how women helped forge the communities that formed a nation, *My Ántonia* is also a hauntingly eloquent celebration of the strength, courage, and spirit of America's early pioneers.

Praise for the Book

"No romantic novel ever written in America, by man or woman, is one half so beautiful as *My Ántonia*. It is the finest thing of its sort ever done in America"
— **H. L. Mencken**

"Can one name another American novel whose emotional quality is so true, so warm, so human as that of *My Ántonia*?"
— **Clifton Fadiman**

"To reread Cather is to rediscover an arresting chapter in the national past."
— *Los Angeles Times*

"The time will come when Willa Cather will be ranked above Hemingway."
— **Leon Edel**

About the Author

Willa Sibert Cather

American writer (1873–1947)

WORKS

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR

- *April Twilights* (Boston: Badger, 1903).
- *The Troll Garden* (New York: McClure, Phillips, 1905).
- *Alexander's Bridge* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1912); republished as *Alexander's Bridges* (London: Heinemann, 1912).
- *O Pioneers!* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1913; London: Heinemann, 1913).
- *The Song of the Lark* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1915; London: Murray, 1916); revised as volume 2 of *The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937).
- *My Ántonia* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1918; London: Heinemann, 1919).
- *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (New York: Knopf, 1920; London: Heinemann, 1921).
- *One of Ours* (New York: Knopf, 1922; London: Heinemann, 1923).
- *April Twilights and Other Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1923; London: Heinemann, 1924; enlarged edition, New York: Knopf, 1933); abridged in volume 3 of *The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937).
- *A Lost Lady* (New York: Knopf, 1923; London: Heinemann, 1924).
- *The Professor's House* (New York: Knopf, 1925; London: Heinemann, 1925).
- *My Mortal Enemy* (New York: Knopf, 1926; London: Heinemann, 1928).
- *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (New York: Knopf, 1927; London: Heinemann, 1927).
- *Shadows on the Rock* (New York: Knopf, 1931; London, Toronto, Melbourne & Sydney: Cassell, 1932).
- *Obscure Destinies* (New York: Knopf, 1932; London, Toronto, Melbourne & Sydney: Cassell, 1932).
- *Lucy Gayheart* (New York: Knopf, 1935; London, Toronto, Melbourne & Sydney: Cassell, 1935).
- *Not Under Forty* (New York: Knopf, 1936; London, Toronto, Melbourne & Sydney: Cassell, 1936).
- *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (New York: Knopf, 1940; London, Toronto, Melbourne & Sydney: Cassell, 1941).
- *The Old Beauty and Others* (New York: Knopf, 1948; London: Cassell, 1956).
- *Willa Cather on Writing* (New York: Knopf, 1949).
- *Writings from Willa Cather's Campus Years*, edited by James R. Shively (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1950).
- *Willa Cather in Europe*, edited by George N. Kates (New York: Knopf, 1956).
- *Early Stories*, edited by Mildred R. Bennett (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1957).

- *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965).
- *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-1896*, edited by Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966).
- *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*, 2 volumes, edited by William M. Curtin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970).
- *Uncle Valentine and Other Stories*, edited by Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973).
- *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*, selected and edited by L. Brent Bohlke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

COLLECTION

- *The Novels and Stories of Willa Cather, Autograph Edition*, 13 volumes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937-1941).

OTHER

- Georgine Milmine, *The Life of Mary G. Baker Eddy*, ghostwritten by Cather (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1909).
- S. S. McClure, *My Autobiography*, ghostwritten by Cather (New York: Stokes, 1914; London: Murray, 1914).

BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

The literary reputation of Willa Cather has steadily risen since her first volume of short stories appeared in 1905, but her present stature as an important American writer rests largely on her twelve novels, most particularly *My Ántonia* (1918), *A Lost Lady* (1923), and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). In recent years, however, Cather has also achieved recognition for a substantial body of short fiction, written over the entire period of her literary activity from her teens to her death. This fiction portrays the lives of a diverse group of characters ranging from midwestern immigrants to middle-class easterners to cosmopolitan singers and artists.

The geographical settings of Willa Cather's fiction reflect her deep attachments to the several areas in the United States which, at one time or another, she called home. Born in Back Creek Valley, Virginia, to Charles F. and Mary Virginia Boak Cather, Cather (who was baptized Wilella) was part of a family that traced its ancestors to colonial America and from there to Ireland. From childhood she had a keen sense of the values of an enduring tradition and the strengths and struggles of pioneer life. In 1883 she and her family moved to Nebraska, settling finally in Red Cloud.

By the time of her graduation from high school and the beginning of her studies at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln in fall 1891, Cather had come to appreciate two sometimes contradictory aspects of life in the Midwest — the simplicity of a stoic people rooted to a harsh existence and the imagination of youths who, like herself, longed for

lives of art and beauty. The pioneer strain in Cather kept her tied to the earth and manifested itself in her practical decision to pursue her art while supporting herself as a journalist and drama critic for the *Nebraska State Journal* while at the university. These endeavors earned her statewide recognition, even some renown outside Nebraska, and — after she earned an A.B. degree in 1895 — led to her acceptance of a position in June 1896 as editor for the magazine *Home Monthly* in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Cather's life in Pittsburgh for the next ten years was crucial for her development as a writer. She concentrated her energies on poetry and short fiction. In summer 1897 she resigned her editorship and that fall she began teaching Latin and English in a public high school. Through the friendship of Isabelle McClung, whom she met in 1899, Cather was provided a home in which she could work and a cultural milieu conducive to her interests. While she was living in Pittsburgh her first book, the poetry collection *April Twilights* (1903), and her first collection of fiction, *The Troll Garden* (1905), were published.

In 1906 Cather was hired as an editor of *McClure's* magazine in New York City. Cather's years at the magazine provided her new opportunities for artistic development; yet her duties there restricted the time she could devote to her fiction. In fall 1911, with her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912; serialized in *McClure's*, February-April 1912), about to be published, Cather relinquished journalism entirely for imaginative writing. Her long apprenticeship was over.

During the next two decades Cather produced her major novels, a second collection of short fiction, *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920), and established an international reputation. Her renown rested on her ability to capture the essence of life on the midwestern plains and in the Southwest, a region she first visited in 1912 and came to love for its aesthetic and spiritual qualities. While her novels of this period are set in the Midwest and West, the relatively few short stories she wrote during this time are set in Pittsburgh and New York.

During the 1930s Cather produced three novels and an important collection of short fiction, *Obscure Destinies* (1932), and oversaw the publication of the Autograph Edition of her works (1937–1941). In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), her last novel and the last book published in her lifetime, Cather turned to her Virginia roots, recreating her birthplace as it was before the Civil War.

Until her death in 1947 Cather maintained residences in New York City but frequently traveled to the American West and to Europe, developing a deep emotional attachment to France. From her years at *McClure's* until her death at age seventy-three she lived with her close friend Edith Lewis. In her fiction Cather often reflected on the necessary sacrifices artists must make so that their creations might live, and in choosing a solitary, intensely private life for herself, Cather unwaveringly made such sacrifices.

She was much honored during her lifetime, receiving a Pulitzer Prize (1922) for *One of Ours* (1922), the William Dean Howells Medal of the American Academy of Arts and

Letters (1930) for *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), the National Institute of Arts and Letters Gold Medal (1944), and several honorary doctorates.

Twenty-five years after Cather's very first published story, "Peter," appeared in the 21 May 1892 issue of *Mahogany Tree*, Cather reworked it as an episode in *My Ántonia*. Cather frequently drew upon her early stories for later works, and Peter, the old Bohemian who destroys his violin rather than allow it to be sold by his acquisitive son, is a character type that often appears in her fiction. The story expresses her sympathy for the old, her reverence for music and the past, and her rejection of exploitative materialism. "Peter" also employs, in rough form, the narrative technique of time shifting that would become almost a hallmark of her short fiction.

All but one of Cather's undergraduate stories are set on the Nebraska plains and have European immigrants as their major characters. Sometimes the plains demand of their settlers a reluctant admiration, but more often life on the plains provides a cruel lesson in the survival of the fittest. The naturalism of these early stories was to be gradually modified and transformed in Cather's later fiction. "A Night at Greenway Court" (*Nebraska Literary Magazine*, June 1896), which takes place in colonial Virginia, employs an older narrator who looks back on his youth and tells of the rivalry between two aristocrats over the portrait of a beautiful woman. Here is an adolescent, sentimental rendering of a situation that fascinated Cather throughout her life: a male narrator in the act of re-creating his youthful adoration of a beautiful woman.

Cather's interest in human psychology and behavior manifests itself in her Pittsburgh stories. Some of these stories are set in the Midwest, but others have urban settings. The independent, spirited female is introduced in "Tommy, the Unsentimental" (*Home Monthly*, August 1896). An instinctive appreciation for life communicated between the old and the young is the major theme of "Jack-a-Boy" (*Saturday Evening Post*, 30 March 1901). "The Count of Crow's Nest" (*Home Monthly*, September and October 1896) and "The Prodigies" (*Home Monthly*, July 1897) echo a Jamesian theme, the manipulation of young and old by mercenary family members who should be devoted and protective. In "Nanette: An Aside" (*Courier*, 31 July 1897) and "A Singer's Romance" (*Library*, 28 July 1900) Cather introduces artist figures. In each story an opera singer sacrifices a personal relationship for the private, emotionally draining, life of art.

"A Resurrection" (*Home Monthly*, April 1897) prefigures Cather's later use of the shifting center of consciousness, through which she is able to establish reader sympathy for two or more different characters. Cather seems to have been searching for and experimenting with character and theme during 1896–1902, but it was not until she wrote the stories collected in *The Troll Garden* that she could skillfully unite content and technique.

The stories in *The Troll Garden* are written in the clean, graceful prose style that is one of the most distinctive characteristics of Cather's mature fiction, a combination of economy and lyricism. For this collection Cather carefully selected and arranged stories that share a common theme — the intrusion of the insensitive, vulgar, or brutal on beauty and imagination. In each story locale is intricately related to character, and like Nathaniel

Hawthorne or Edgar Allan Poe, Cather carefully creates a mood through symbolically suggestive descriptions. Each of the stories concerns in some way an artist figure's effect on, or transformation of, others.

In the opening story, "Flavia and Her Artists" (previously unpublished), the artist is the exploiter; the foreign artist Roux benefits from Flavia's hospitality but eventually betrays her by satirizing her in print. In "The Sculptor's Funeral" (*McClure's*, January 1905), now ranked among Cather's best short stories, the body of artist Harvey Merrick is brought back to his prairie home for burial. Most of the village's citizens and Merrick's family are portrayed in varying degrees as insensitive and hypocritical, unable to appreciate Merrick's character or art. Only his inarticulate father and Jim Laird, a boyhood friend who is now a lawyer, react sympathetically. Now wedded to materialism, Laird can only partially express his appreciation of Merrick's artistic and moral integrity. The person Laird once was seems finally to be buried with Merrick.

The complex characterization in "The Garden Lodge" (previously unpublished) has been largely unrecognized. The story's center of consciousness, Caroline Noble, a woman who rejects her romantic, artistic impulses for a life of restraint and discipline, is masterfully realized, especially in the story's surrealistic evocation of her irrational self in a nightmarish dream.

The last two stories, "A Wagner Matinée" (*Everybody's Magazine*, February 1904; extensively revised for inclusion in *The Troll Garden*) and "Paul's Case" (previously unpublished) are ranked, by common consensus, at the very top of Cather's short fiction, and "Paul's Case," probably the finest story Cather ever wrote, is now considered an American classic. Aunt Georgina, the simple plainswoman of "A Wagner Matinée," is viewed through the eyes of her nephew, who is witness to her transformation from a stoical silence to a joyful, but poignant, self-expression triggered by her sense of communion with the music at a Wagner concert. Aunt Georgina's strength of character belongs to the plains, while her soul belongs to the music.

"Paul's Case" is the thematic and artistic culmination of *The Troll Garden*. Young Paul is not an artist; yet he has an artist's temperament, a yearning for the beauty and intensity of feeling he thinks only a glamorous environment can provide. With stolen money he escapes from the stifling, workaday world of Pittsburgh and goes to New York City. His search is for some inexpressible means of transcendence from his commonplace existence, but, once he has spent the money, he believes he has no way to achieve his desires: "The carnations in his coat were drooping with the cold, he noticed; their red glory all over. It occurred to him that all the flowers he had seen in the glass cases that first night must have gone the same way, long before this." Paul forgets the promise of what still might await him and commits suicide. He fails to realize the power of his own imagination, one of the most urgent themes in Cather's fiction. She believed in the infinite possibilities of the imaginative life, no matter what one's physical environment, and she recognized the tragic poignancy of those who, like Paul, are too impatient to realize that power.

The Cather stories that appeared in periodicals from 1905 through 1912 do not, overall, have the power or artistry of those in *The Troll Garden*. Cather's duties at *McClure's* restricted the time she could spend on writing fiction, and she devoted much of her free time to work on her first novel. Most of her short fiction of this period, including the Jamesian tale "Eleanor's House" (*McClure's*, October 1907) and the Hawthornesque story "The Profile" (*McClure's*, June 1907), is derivative. Her work at the muckraking *McClure's* doubtless influenced her inclusion of explicit social protest in stories such as "Behind the Singer Tower" (*Collier's*, May 1912), which focuses on capitalist exploitation of immigrant workers. Cather's major fiction eschews blatant social commentary.

Two stories of this period, however, are evidence of Cather's development as a writer. In "The Enchanted Bluff" (*Harper's*, April 1909), which was later revised as a section of her novel *The Professor's House* (1925), Cather employs the rock with an ancient village at its top as a symbol for the eternal verities of the universe. The boys in the story, who sense the supernatural power of the rock, never fulfill their plans to climb it. As they grow older they become more and more immersed in the trivialities of the material world.

"The Bohemian Girl" (*McClure's*, August 1912) foreshadows *My Ántonia*. Nils Ericson, who has gone east to make his fortune, returns to his home on the plains. Having already made his decision to break with the past, he persuades Clara Vavricka, the wife of his older brother, to elope with him. Clara's vitality, her love of music and dancing, and her desire for adventure all work to turn her away from the lonely life she envisions for herself on the plains. While Cather does not condemn Clara's decision, she also demonstrates clearly that life on the plains has its virtues and that they are perhaps even more compelling than adventures in the East. When Eric, the youngest Ericson brother, is tempted to leave his mother to live with Clara and Nils, he hesitates in midjourney and takes the train back home. As his mother accepts him back, "happiness filled his heart." The tension between the West and the East, between loyalty and liberation, is not simply resolved. The story is an indication of Cather's move back to a fictional treatment of the Nebraska landscape, which would fuel her creative energies as much as, perhaps more than, the East. Certainly this return to western sources manifests itself in most of the novels Willa Cather wrote over the next twenty years, but her ten published short stories of 1915–1929 (seven of which were uncollected until 1973) have urban settings. Of the stories from 1915–1929 included in *Uncle Valentine and Other Stories* (1973), five are set in New York and two in Pittsburgh.

The New York stories which appeared in periodicals from 1915 to 1920 generally explore the behavior of the business and commercial classes. Cather is clearly drawing upon her experiences in publishing as she continues to present sympathetic portraits of those who resist the superficial rewards of money and power. "Consequences" (*McClure's*, November 1915) is intriguing because of its connection with Henry James's "The Jolly Corner" (1908). Cather's protagonist, Cavanaugh, is not confronted by the ghost of his alter ego, however, but by an actual person who may embody the spirit of Cavanaugh's dead twin brother. Cavanaugh's subsequent suicide seems to be his acceptance of guilt for his material success, perhaps at the cost of his brother's life. In

“The Bookkeeper’s Wife” (*Century*, May 1916), a rather lightweight story, Bixby steals money from his firm so he may marry a woman who appreciates a more comfortable life than he is able to provide. Ironically, as Bixby fails in both his job and his marriage, his wife aggressively succeeds in the business world.

“Ardessa” (*Century*, May 1918) is a humorous treatment of an ironic situation (indeed many of these stories have comedic touches that are usually not attributed to Willa Cather). The setting is a magazine office run by a self-indulgent secretary who eventually loses her position because of her inattention to her duties. The young, efficient Becky Tietelbaum is willing to do these very tasks that Ardessa shuns, and in the process Becky achieves the power that Ardessa has self-assuredly believed to be her own. The more-serious story “Her Boss” (*Smart Set*, October 1919) also presents a sympathetic portrait of a young woman, Annie Wooley, who sacrifices her own ego for the benefit of her employer. Yet, after his death, his wife and children refuse to acknowledge a bequest he has made to Annie.

The most-interesting and best-known story of these years is “Coming, Aphrodite!,” first published in the August 1920 issue of *Smart Set* as “Coming, Eden Bower!” The version of the story that is included in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* is substantially different from the one in *Smart Set*. Since “Coming, Aphrodite!” is the most sexually explicit of Cather’s stories, it may be that the story was censored by H. L. Mencken, the *Smart Set* editor.

The beautiful Eden Bower, destined to be a famous opera singer, has a brief summer affair with Don Hedger, a struggling artist who relishes his privacy and believes that his mind and art can be nurtured only away from the public glare. Cather’s narrator agrees with Hedger: Eden “did not guess that her neighbor would have more temptuous adventures sitting in his dark studio than she would find in all the capitals of Europe, or in all the latitude she was prepared to permit herself.” Yet, Eden has an independent, spirited quality that Hedger lacks, and her balloon ride at Coney Island demonstrates the risks she is willing to take to fulfill her desires. The story ends rather optimistically, for both Eden and Hedger achieve their goals — her name on a New York marquee, his name on paintings that have earned a quiet, but admiring, notice.

In addition to “Coming, Aphrodite!” and four stories from *The Troll Garden*, *Youth and the Bright Medusa* includes “The Diamond Mine” (*McClure’s*, October 1916), “A Gold Slipper” (*Harper’s*, January 1917), and “Scandal” Pa (*Century*, August 1919) — all united by the theme of the exploitation of the artist. Cressida Garnet, the opera singer in “The Diamond Mine,” and Kitty Ayrshire, also an opera singer and the central figure of “A Gold Slipper” and “Scandal,” are beautiful women who maintain their artistry by sheer force of will in the midst of betrayal by family, friends, and acquaintances. Each woman, however, has an admirer who is attentive to her and allows her the freedom to be what she wishes. As in most of Cather’s stories of beautiful but vulnerable women, this admirer also acts as narrator.

There is some evidence of a feminist perspective in these stories that was not apparent in Cather's earlier short fiction, although it emerges in novels such as *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *The Song of the Lark* (1915). Kitty Ayrshire, for instance, in defending her choice of independence and a career to a stolid and arrogant businessman protests that men see women primarily in terms of sex and fail to see that when women are confronted with "danger and difficulty" they have "important qualifications" for survival.

Cather's magazine publication in the 1920s included only "Coming, Aphrodite!" and two Pittsburgh stories, "Uncle Valentine" (*Woman's Home Companion*, February 1925) and "Double Birthday" (*Forum*, February 1929). Like "The Diamond Mine," "Uncle Valentine" is one of a very few Cather stories narrated by a woman. It also employs the sort of a story-within-a-story framework that Cather refined in some of her novels. "Uncle Valentine" demonstrates the importance of place for the artist's creativity. Valentine Ramsey composes his finest music during a one-year period when he can wander at leisure on his neighbor's wooded estate. After his former wife purchases that estate, Valentine loses his sense of identity, moves to Paris, and still feeling displaced, is killed as he steps into traffic. In "Double Birthday" an old man and his middle-aged nephew who share the same birthday are spiritually bolstered by renewing their friendship with a woman who was part of their past.

Obscure Destinies (1932), Cather's third collection and the last to be published in her lifetime, contains three thematically linked stories set in the Midwest: "Neighbour Rosicky," "Old Mrs. Harris," and "Two Friends." As the book's title suggests, the protagonists in these stories never know fame or glory; yet they achieve integrity, dignity, and humanity through their enduring devotion to family and friends.

The title character in "Neighbour Rosicky" (*Woman's Home Companion*, April 1930) is a kind and generous Bohemian immigrant who helps his American daughter-in-law to understand the Bohemian's attachment to the land and loyalty to family. The friendship that develops between the two harkens back to such early stories as "Tommy, the Unsentimental," which also dramatizes an instinctive communion between the old and the young.

In contrast, "Old Mrs. Harris" (first published as "Three Women" in the September-November 1932 issues of *Ladies' Home Journal*) emphasizes the isolation and displacement of the aged and dying. The family of Mrs. Harris, the oldest of several women in the story, views her only in terms of her social roles of grandmother and mother. Only two female outsiders, the immigrant neighbor Mrs. Rosen and the maidservant Mandy, see her as an individual with her own needs and desires. The three women to which the original title refers — Mrs. Harris; Victoria, her daughter; and Vickie, her granddaughter — all have loving attachments to one another, but life intrudes upon their expression of this love. While there is some sympathetic communion between Mrs. Harris and Vickie, the young girl's preparation for college often creates a barrier. Victoria is oblivious to both her mother and her daughter, absorbed by her social functions and her unwanted pregnancy.

The stories of the three women create a complex mosaic, but Cather's narrator has most sympathy for the grandmother, whose isolation is starkly dramatized. Only after her death does she become an object of "much attention and excitement." Among Cather's finest short stories, "Mrs. Harris" deserves to be ranked with "Paul's Case."

"Two Friends" (*Woman's Home Companion*, July 1932), not as strong as the other two stories in the collection, is linked to them by its elegiac tone. Two close friends, both businessmen, separate after an insignificant political quarrel, and the young narrator, who has been witness to their closeness, can only lament a friendship "that was senselessly wasted." It would be too simplistic to describe these stories in *Obscure Destinies*, in their return to an earlier America, as Cather's nostalgic evocation of the past; for they illustrate, and do not easily resolve, the tension between belief in permanent values and the realization that human existence is all too vulnerable and transitory. Cather's nostalgia, if that word is appropriate, is not for a certain period in the past, or for a certain place, but for the experience of sharing, the experience of a mutual joy and understanding.

Cather's last short stories were published posthumously in *The Old Beauty and Others* (1948). None of these is among Cather's best fiction, but "The Old Beauty" (written in 1936) is notable for its structurally intricate narration about the final days of a beautiful woman imprisoned by her past. Her guilt over her indifference to the many men who had admired her is the price that she pays for the "exceptional gift" of beauty. While the characters in this story are similar to others in Cather's fiction, the emphasis on the debilitating effects of memory strikes a fresh note. Lady Longstreet steadfastly, almost irritatingly, refuses to gain any satisfaction from the present; and the story's movement from present to past, from one consciousness to another, illustrates Cather's continuing dexterity with narrative technique. Of her last stories, this one most firmly rejects an illusory nostalgia. Even Lady Longstreet's request to be buried in Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris is an empty salute to the past, a choice made by other "ladies who had once held a place in the world."

"The Best Years," the last story Cather wrote, is weakened by sentimentality as it returns to the theme of "Neighbour Rosicky." This time the protagonist is a young woman who in her short life has an enduring impact on her family, friends, and students. "Before Breakfast," the last story in the collection, is memorable primarily for its hero's rejection of the business and scientific world for solitude in the natural world, where he can restore his spiritual being. The story reflects Cather's own rejection of public life. To the very end she sought privacy and decried any act that violated the sacredness of the individual self and its expression.

Cather's determination to control the destiny of her reputation led her to include only *Youth and the Bright Medusa* and *Obscure Destinies* in the collected edition of her works. While these two books certainly include her finest short stories, she wrote many other good stories. Now that nearly all her stories have been collected, the variety within her short fiction is more readily apparent, and the expanded canon can only enhance her reputation as a short-story writer.

PAPERS

Cather's manuscripts and letters are scattered among the Guy W. Bailey Library, University of Vermont; the Clifton Waller Barrett Library, University of Virginia; the Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh; the Colby College Library; the Houghton Library, Harvard University; the Huntington Library, San Marino, California; the Morgan Library, New York City; the University of Nebraska; the Nebraska State Historical Society; the Newberry Library, Chicago; the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, Red Cloud, Nebraska; and the Yale University Library.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Source: Hewitt, Rosalie. "Willa Sibert Cather." *American Short-Story Writers, 1880–1910*. Ed. Bobby Ellen Kimbel and William E. Grant. *Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 78*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989. *Literature Resource Center*. Gale.

Discussion Questions

1. The first narrator in *My Ántonia* is an unnamed speaker who grew up with Jim Burden and meets him years later on a train. Jim tells his story in response to this mysterious figure, who disappears from the novel as soon as the Introduction is over. How does this first narrator's disappearance foreshadow other withdrawals within this novel, which at times resembles a series of departures? Why might Cather have chosen to frame her narrative in this fashion?
2. When Jim arrives in Nebraska, he sees "nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." [11-12] Yet at the novel's end that landscape is differentiated. It has direction and color — red grass, blue sky, dunshaded bluffs. We are reminded of the beginning of the Book of Genesis, and of God's parting of the heavens from the earth. To what extent is *My Ántonia* an American Genesis? What are its agents of creation and differentiation?
3. Just as *My Ántonia*'s setting is initially raw and featureless, its narrative at first seems haphazard: "I didn't arrange or rearrange. I simply wrote down what of herself and myself and other people's Ántonia's name recalls to me. I suppose it hasn't any form." [6] Is Burden's description really accurate? Although the narrative proceeds chronologically, its structure is unconventional, as Ántonia is present in only three of the five sections and much of her story unfolds via exposition. What effect does Cather produce by telling her story in this fashion?
4. One of the greatest difficulties facing the Shimerdas and other immigrant families is that posed by their lack of English, which seals them off from all but the most forthcoming of their neighbors. Yet even American-born arrivals to Nebraska find themselves set apart. As the narrator notes in the Introduction, "no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry, we said." [3] What is the nature of this freemasonry? What experiences do the inhabitants of this world share that are alien — and perhaps incommunicable — to people raised elsewhere? Does the shared experience of the novel's pioneers end up counting for more than their linguistic and ethnic differences?
5. What is it that makes Mr. Shimerda unable to adapt to his new home and ultimately drives him to suicide? Is he simply too refined — too rooted in Europe — to endure the harshness and solitude of the prairie? Before we jump to too easy a conclusion, we might consider the fact that the novel's other suicide, Wick Cutter, is a crass, upwardly mobile small-town entrepreneur. What do these two deaths suggest about the prerequisites for surviving in Cather's world?

6. From their first meeting, when Jim begins to teach *Ántonia* English, he serves as her instructor and occasional guardian. Yet he also seems in awe of *Ántonia*. What is it that makes her superior to him? What does she possess that Jim doesn't? What makes her difference so desirable?
7. At times Jim's feelings towards *Ántonia* suggest romantic infatuation, yet their relationship remains chaste. Nor does Jim ever become sexually involved with the alluring — and more available — Lena Lingard. Curiously, *Ántonia* appears to disapprove of their flirtation. And, whether he is conscious of it or not, Jim seems wedded to the idea of Tony as a sexual innocent. Following the failed assault by Wick Cutter, "I hated her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness." [186] How do you account for these characters' ambivalent and at times squeamish attitude toward sexuality? In what ways do they change when they marry and — in *Ántonia*'s case — bear children?
8. Just as it is possible to read Lena Lingard as *Ántonia*'s sensual twin, one can see the entire novel as consisting of doubles and repetitions. *Ántonia* has two brothers, the industrious and amoral Ambrosch and the sweet-natured, mentally incompetent Marek. Wick Cutter's suicide echoes that of Mr. Shimerda. Even minor anecdotes have a way of mirroring each other. Just as the Russians Peter and Pavel are stigmatized because they threw a bride to a pursuing wolf pack, the hired hand Otto is burdened by an act of generosity on his voyage over to America, when the woman he is escorting ends up giving birth to triplets. Where else in the novel do events and characters mirror each other? What is the effect of this symmetry and its variations?
9. In one of her essays, Willa Cather observed, "I have not much faith in women in fiction." [cited in Hermione Lee, *Willa Cather: Double Lives*. New York, Vintage, 1991, p. 12] Yet in *Ántonia* Cather has created a genuinely heroic woman. What perceived defects in earlier fictional heroines might Cather be trying to redeem in this novel? Do her female characters seem nobler, better, or more deeply felt than their male counterparts? In spite of this, why might Cather have chosen to make *My Ántonia*'s narrator a man?
10. For her epigraph Cather uses a quote from Virgil: *Optima dies . . . prima fugit*: "The best days are the first to pass." How is this idea borne out within *My Ántonia*? In what ways can the novel's early days, with their scenes of poverty, hunger and loss, be described as the best? What does Jim, the novel's presiding consciousness, lose in the process of growing up? Does *Ántonia* lose it as well? How is this notion of lost happiness connected to Jim's observation: "That is happiness: to be dissolved into something complete and great"?

11. Although *My Ántonia* is elegiac in its tone — and has been used in high school curricula to convey a conservative view of the American past — it is also notable for its striking realism about gender and culture. Not only does the novel have a female protagonist who prevails in spite of male betrayal and abuse (and two secondary female characters who prosper without ever marrying), it also portrays the early frontier as a multicultural quilt in which Bohemians, Swedes, Austrians, and a blind African-American retain their ethnic identities without dissolving in the American melting pot. Significantly, at the novel's end Ántonia has reverted to speaking Bohemian with her husband and children. How important are these themes to the novel's overall vision? Do they accurately reflect the history of the western frontier?

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