

My *Ántonia* has been called nostalgic and elegiac because it celebrates the past. The inscription on the title page of *My Ántonia* is a quotation from Virgil: "Optima dies... prima fugit." This sentence, meaning "the best days are first to flee", helps incorporate all the elements of the novel I would like to discuss. It not only makes clear that Willa Cather will deal with memories of a glorious past, but also allows suitable basis to show how nature can change and affect a relationship. It also hints at the Hellenic, to a large extent pastoral tone the novel will be set in. A pastoral work retreats to an ideal rural setting. Jim Burden not only goes back to the prairie, but more importantly, he retreats to the innocent days of his very first memories. While this reflects on the focus of the paper, I will use two characters, Jim and *Ántonia*, to illustrate these issues, and show why they make this book such a delightful work of art.

*My Ántonia* is told from the point of view of Willa Cather's fictional friend, Jim Burden. He writes in the first person, and his use of the pronoun "I" makes you feel his personal involvement. The point of view is immediate and subjective. Looking back on his memories, he knows what is eventually going to happen to the characters. He persuades you to sympathize with all of them. His perception, being broad and persuasive, sets the tone for the whole book. What is the purpose of having the story told by Jim Burden thirty years later? From that perspective he can present with great clarity and tenderness the highlights of his memories. A man of the world, he is reinvestigating his values. Jim Burden sets down everything the name of *Ántonia* brings back to him. *Ántonia* represents to him the most fundamental, traditional way to lead one's life, including the virtues of hard work, charity, love, optimism, pride, and sympathy with nature.

The prairie makes one think of the forces of nature--immense, cyclical, and unpredictable. When Jim Burden arrives on his grandparents' farms, he is awed by the sight of "nothing but land." His parents are both recently dead, and he's starting life over again. The huge, impersonal land makes him feel that he has left all that's familiar. The boundless setting gives him a new perspective on his own identity. "Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out." He adopts the attitude that life will take its own identity. "Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out." He adopts the attitude that life will take its own course here on the prairie. Attracted to this idea of the vast universe absorbing him, he feels at one with the landscape.

Sometimes the author lets her meanings become clear through the symbols rather than direct explanations. Cather includes various uses of natural as well as practical symbolism throughout the book. The image of the plough magnified against the sun at the end of Book II and on the cover, symbolizes cultivation and civilization -- the ultimate domination of the uncultivated land through the toil of people like *Ántonia* and her husband. The red prairie grass symbolizes freedom, the children's shadows represent the passing of childhood, and *Ántonia* arguably symbolizes the hard work and fruitfulness of the pioneers.

As stated before, the past is what *My Ántonia* focuses around. Although the memories emanate from many years ago, each scene seems immediate and vivid, as if time has been suspended. Jim's memories from a child to when he matures are all described with lucid detail. The childhood days were best for Jim Burden, as he discovers when he leaves home. Jim's carefree childhood is flavored by the land. He will always associate his time in the country with happiness and with *Ántonia*, his playmate. After he has become successful professionally, but personally disappointed, Jim returns to Black Hawk to try to regain some of the warm feelings of the past. He finds *Ántonia* with her own family, continuing a kind of life he himself has lost. He feels he can become a child again by playing with her children. Moved by her assuredness as well as her love for the land, Jim suddenly confesses his feelings for her; he thinks of her more than anyone else from his youth. Her personality continues to influence him. "I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister--anything that a woman can be to a man. The idea of you is part of my mind." What has prevented Jim from

asking *Ántonia* to marry him? Several barriers have unknowingly stood in their way: *Ántonia* is four years older, they're from different social classes, and Jim is now far more educated than she is. Nearing the end of the book, the past is further explored as Jim spends a disappointing day in Black Hawk, where very few of the people from his youth remain. Walking out to the edge of town, he finds a half-mile stretch of the old wagon-road "which used to run like a wild thing across the open prairie." Out there he experiences once again the beauty of sunset and autumn. The memory of his first ride over that road comes to him strongly. Now he feels that this road has brought him and *Ántonia* back together. It is "the road of Destiny" along which their lives have traveled. "I had the sense of coming home to myself," Jim says, "and of realizing, in the context of the vast prairie, what a little circle man's experience is."

Looking back on it all, Jim believes, "Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past." However, Jim's memories seem to contradict his own last sentence. Full of nostalgia, Jim's memories vividly evoke the places, people, emotions of his past, and notably, *Ántonia*. As Jim tells his story, his gaze may sometimes be drawn away from her--*Ántonia* sometimes disappears for long sections--but he comes back to her with a richer sense of what she means to him.