CHAPTER- 3

UNUSUAL ENDURANCE IN THE FEMINIE SPIRIT

I

My Ántonia may well turn out to be Willa Cather's most fondly remembered and best loved novel.1 Willa Cather wrote My Ántonia while living in New Hampshire. The novel takes place in rural and small town Nebraska. While living in the town Willa met Annie Sadilek, a close friend of her whom she knew and admired and maintained a lifelong, affectionate relationship in Red Cloud later used for the Ántonia 's character.

As perceptively observed by Rene Rapin: “My Ántonia”: is a life like portrait of a pioneer girl.”2 The novel depicts, Ántonia the spirited daughter of Bohemian immigrant family. The Shimerdas are the first Bohemian family to move to this area. Cather tells us from the first how to pronounce the name Ántonia: Án-ton-ee-ah, with the stress on the first syllable. That European detail finally sets the tone for the story of the immigrants from Bohemia. The novel written with great craftsmanship opens on a train in the early 1880s. On the same train are the Shimerdas, who are emigrating from Bohemia and will be the Burdens’ nearest neighbours; Jim is too shy to meet Ántonia the only member of the family who barely speaks English. Jake, the farmhand of the Burden family tells him that a Bohemian immigrant family “can’t speak English, except one little girl, and all she can say is “We go Black Hawk, Nebraska” (4).

The European family arrives with little money to seek the fortune. Jim is very much eager to see Ántonia, as Jake comments: “She’s not much older than you, twelve or thirteen, may be, and she’s as bright as a new dollar” (5). Her wild-looking
hair, her eyes like the sun shining on brown pools, her spontaneity, make her seem nature's child, and is able to direct Jim's awakening to beauty.

The Shimerda have come to America at Mrs. Shimerda's insistence so that their eldest son, Ambrosch can find success. Like his mother, Ambrosch is shrewd and greedy looks arrogant and like he has a bad temper. His father is a cultured man, a weaver and fiddler who enjoyed playing the violin in the old country. But in the American Midwest he was extremely homesick because he spoke no English and was unaccustomed to living in a strange land and to working in the fields. Shimerdas have had a streak of bad luck from the moment they arrived in America. Upon their arrival in America the Shimerdas had no 'cellar in which to store food, had no chicken coop,' and because of that, they were living on rotten potatoes. The girls slept in 'hole dug' in order to keep them warm during the cold nights in their small sod houses. As Mr. Shimerda whispers:

   In the rear wall was another little cave, a round hole than an oil barrel, scooped out in the Back earth... I saw some quilts and a pile of straw. The old man held the lantern. "Yulka" he said in a low, dispraising voice, 'Yulka; My Ántonia! ..."

As Ántonia slipped under his arm she cried:

   It is very cold on the floor, and this is warm like the badger hole.
   I like for sleep there,' she insisted eagerly. 'My mamenka have nice bed, with pillows from our own geese in Bohemie. (75)

   Ántonia's father wanted to make sure the Burdens knew they were 'not beggars in the old country; he made good wages, and his family were respected there'. However in America, they were struggling just to obtain the basic needs and had trouble just fulfilling those (76).
Ántonia Shimerda indeed has a hard and difficult life. Her family is pitiable and the Shimerdas are disheartened. She must sacrifice her own happiness to help her family survive the tough seasons on the wild Nebraska prairie. The harsh conditions have made her experience more than other girls of her age. "Ambrosch and Ántonia were both old enough to work in the fields; and they were willing to work. But the snow and the bitter weather had disheartened them all" (76). She has left a country where her family had been ‘respected and successful,’ for a new place unfamiliar to her. Ántonia continues to hold on to the Bohemian traditions she learned from her father. Her family brings ‘token of their country, but her other family members are quick to integrate modern American ways’ with their own.

The Shimerdas have been badly cheated in their move out to the land and they are in great need. Jim is impressed with Mr. Shimerda, a gentleman who is respectful of children, but Mrs. Shimerda’s importunate manners and, his eldest son, Ambrosch rudeness bother him. As the Shimerdas arrive they are Jim’s Burden nearest neighbours and one of the early immigrants and the first Bohemian family to America. The immigrants badly survive their first winter. “They could not speak enough English to ask for advice, or even to make their most pressing wants known.”

Ántonia announces: ‘My papa find friends up north, with Russian mans. Last night he take me for see, and I can understand very much talk. Nice mans, Mrs. Burden. One is fat and all the time laugh. Everybody laugh .The first time I see my papa laugh in this kawn-tree. Oh, very nice!”(33).

The Shimerdas bought their homestead and farm from a fellow Bohemian, Peter Krajiek. He was able to manipulate his prices without the Shimerdas knowing and without a chance of getting caught. He has overcharged them for inferior land,
worn-out work animals and poor quality household items. So Mr. Shimerdas ardent desire of Ántonia learning English is reflected:

He took a book out of his pocket, opened it, and showed me a page with two alphabets, one English and the other Bohemian. He placed this book in my grandmother’s hands, looked at her entreatingly and said, with an earnestness which I shall never forget, ‘Te-e-ach, te-e-ach My Án-tonia! (27)

Ántonia had opinions about everything, so Mr. Shimerda admires her. He has faith, confidence in his daughter rather than in his sons. It is he who refers to her first as My Ántonia! Every day she runs ‘barefooted’ to the Burdens home to pick up a few English phrases. Jim teaches English and about America to Ántonia and they have the great adventure roaming about the prairie. Ántonia and Jim instantly become friends. After the first snowfall, they take a long ride over the transformed landscape in Jim’s new sleigh, pulled by his pony. The Shimerdas are not doing very well in their new country, but they do become friends with two Russian men, Peter and Pavel as they speak a similar dialect. Jim’s grandparents try to help the Shimerda’s through the winter by taking them supplies as “by the time they paid Krajiek for the land, and bought his horses and oxen and some old farm machinery, they had very little money left.” But the hardships are too much for the homesick Mr. Shimerda, who ultimately commits suicide.

And so on a poor plot of land, neighboring Jim’s grandparents flourishing farm, a family of Bohemian immigrants struggles to survive. Ántonia the oldest daughter, a ‘cheerful, resourceful’ young woman shoulders much of the responsibilities for the family and the farm. Jim asks Ántonia to attend school with him, but Ántonia cannot make the time to go. She has to help thresh wheat crops for
her family. Her ardent desire is to turn the wild land into one good farm. Owing great love for the family she takes pride that she can handle men’s work. Ántonia somewhat enters the men’s sphere by doing heavy farm work. The Bohemian immigrant, a brave and hardy creature doing ‘a man’s work, breaking sod with the oxen’, is thus seen growing coarser everyday:

Her outgrown cotton dress switched about her calves, over the boot and tops. She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor. Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf. (122)

She boasts that she can work just as much as her older brother, Ambrosch. Ántonia partakes in the household chores, being devoted to the family despite its unhealthy environment as Jim narrates:

Ántonia was washing pans and dishes in a dark corner. The crazy boy lay under the only window, stretched on a grainy-sack stuffed with straw. As soon as we entered, he threw a grain sack over the crack at the bottom of the door. The air in the cave was stifling, and it was very dark, too. A lighted lantern, hung over the stove, threw out a feeble yellow glimmer. (73)

Misery plaques and inevitable overcomes Ántonia’s father, in contrast to Ántonia’s remarkable perseverance. He eventually gives in to his despair leaving his family to fend for themselves. With the passing away of Ántonia’s father, there is a great sense of unease and apprehension that can almost be unbearable to a little girl. As any child, the loss of a parents is probably the most substantial event in her life and equally difficult to get over. Although Ántonia never forgets her father, she uses her strength to move on.
Ántonia does not love the rest of her family the way she loved her father. Her
life is full of disappointment and frustration. After the death of her father Ántonia and
Jim spends a few moments of togetherness and when Ántonia saw Jim she ran out of
her dark corner and threw her arms around him. Jim is all sympathetic towards,
Ántonia could “feel her heart breaking as she clung to him!” and Oh, Jimmy’, she
sobbed,’ what you think for my lovely papa! (115). As a ‘beautiful young girl’
Ántonia had the most trusting responsive eyes in the world, ‘love and credulousness
seemed to look out of them with open faces’.

Mrs. Burden regrets that Mr. Shimerda has left Ántonia alone and alienated in
a hard world with his suicide. Ántonia faces yet another terrible heartache and
struggle, but Mrs. Burden’s words ring true. Mrs. Burden says in dismay and sadness,
“He’s left her alone in a hard world”. After her father’s death, Ántonia must work in
the fields, help to herd the cattle and tend the crops. She does not have time for
English lessons anymore. It was the first major hardship the immigrant Shimerda’s
faced when her father shot himself in the mouth and committed suicide.

As perceptively remarked by Philip L. Gerber:

Ántonia is trapped in the worst possible conditions on the
Nebraska Divide: in denture to a town family, uneducated bereft of
special talents yet maintaining a steel like equanimity.\(^3\)

Ántonia being not a scholar, for there is no time for school; Jim notices that
Ántonia still wishes she could go to school for she wants to be as intelligent and
educated as her father had been. But Ántonia sacrifices the opportunity to become
educated to help her family’s farm survive. She does not have the freedom to take
time off from framing. More over she gives up school in favour of her brother she
says:
I aren’t got time to learn. I can work like mans now. My mother can’t say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. (123)

The summer season lifts Ántonia’s depressed and sadness spirits. After the death of her father last winter, the land reworking itself for the threshing of crops cheers Ántonia.

Ántonia’s life is distorted by her father’s death. At the age of fifteen,

She was a tall, strong young girl... She brought her horses up to the windmill to water them. She wore her father’s boots, his old fur cap... One sees that draught-horse neck among the peasant women in all old countries (122).

Ántonia takes a man’s place behind the plow. On the prairie the elements, the sky and the land impose a communal harmony in all the meager human organizations.

Oh, better I like to work out of doors than in a house! She used to sing joyfully. ‘I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man.’ She would toss her head and ask me to feel the muscles swell in her brown arm. (138)

Ántonia out like a man, hired by Ambrosch, “all through the wheat season, she went from farm to farm, binding sheaves or working with the threshers” (147).

Ántonia had lost her feminine nature as being observed:

Ántonia ate so noisily, like a man, and she yawned often like a man, and kept stretching her arms over head as if they ached... Ántonia was out in the fields from sunup until sundown. “On Sundays she helped her mother make garden or sewed all day... Ántonia was proud of her strength. Her brother put upon her some chores a girl
ought not to do”... She worked “sunburned”, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust plastered, I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr. Shimerda, who could say so little, yet managed to say so much, when he exclaimed, ‘My Ántonia!’ (126)

Jim is annoyed and dismayed at Ántonia’s manners, and at the same time, however, in the physical descriptions of her, he greatly admires and eroticizes her physical strength and masculine vitality. Jim and his grandmother are concerned about Ántonia, for she seems not to care much about anything other than farming and ploughing.

Jim’s household was glad to have her in the house. ‘She was so gay and responsive that one did not mind her heavy, running step, or her clattery way with pans’ (138). Grandmother was in high spirits during the weeks when Ántonia worked for the Burden’s family. Ántonia loved to help Jim’s grandmother in the kitchen and to learn about cooking and housekeeping. She would stand besides her, watching her every movement. ‘Tony’ as Jim calls her, is spontaneous generous, eager to emphasize and admire the best in others. As Jim narrates “She liked me better from that time on, and she never took a supercilious air with me again. I had killed a big snake—I was now a big fellow” (50).

Ántonia life out in the fields with those rough threshers is working the land. Despite the many hardships, Ántonia remains cheerful and optimistic. She knows that she and her family must sacrifice much of their happiness to make up in a new unfamiliar country. Jim’s Grandmother acknowledges that Ántonia was a pretty girl ever seen by her. When Ántonia first came to this country, and had that gentle old man to watch over her, she was a pretty a girl as ever I saw (153). Though Tiny and Lena and the Marshall Norwegian Anna the hired girls were growing prettier
everyday, Ántonia, like Snow-White in the fairy tale, was still fairest of them all! During the few weeks after the death of Mr. Shimerda, The Burdens enjoy Ántonia’s cheerful personality, and Jim’s grandmother begins to take a protective interest in her. Mainly because of this grandmother recommends Ántonia for a domestic position with the neighbors, the Harlings. The Burdens move into the town of Black Hawk and grandmother gets Ántonia a job with their next-door neighbor, the Harlings.

The Norwegian Mrs. Harlings is a ‘bundle of productive energy.’ Decisive and enthusiastic she creates a home, which Jim likes to visit as a change from the sedate life of his grandparents. On Mrs. Burden’s recommendation, Mrs. Harlings hires Ántonia to work for her, and teaches her how to manage a bustling household. Her ‘violent likes and dislikes’ affirmed themselves in all the everyday occupations of life. Mrs. Harlings liked Ántonia from her first glimpse. She felt they knew exactly what kind of girl she was. After grandmother’s introduction “Mrs. Harlings finally agreed to pay three dollars a week for Ántonia’s services” good wages in those days. Seventeen-year-old Ántonia, though ‘barefooted’, ‘ragged’ and ‘sunburned’, Mrs. Harlings finds her beautiful and talented and realizes, she will learn quickly to be helpful: “She has such fine brown legs and arms, and splendid colour in her cheeks—like those big dark red plums” (153).

Mrs. Harlings was a good housewife she have a good audience to her husband who was a grain merchant and cattle buyer. “In his absence his wife was the head of the household. She was charged with the energy’ she was quick to anger, quick to laughter, jolly from the depth of her soul” (148). After Ántonia comes “into service” at the Harlings, Jim’s pride in her harmony with her cultured mistress is unmistakable and under Mrs. Harling’s guidance, he sees her growing into a fulfilled young woman.
Describing their vigorous characters, he says: They had strong, independent nature, both of them. They knew what they liked, and were not... (180).

The Harlings had children of Ántonia’s age. According to Mrs. Harlings the greatest fault of Ántonia was that “she so often stopped her work and fell to playing with the children” (155). Mrs. Harlings is being dedicated to her family and is responsible for running her household very efficiently. Being very systematic in upbringing her family, these qualities impress Ántonia and finds in Mrs. Harlings model for her own life. Jim frequently spends time with the Harlings and Ántonia. Ántonia had been looked upon more as a ward of the Harlings than as one the hired girls. At the Harlings she loved to put up “lunches, mend ball-gloves and sew buttons, bake the kind of cakes they liked.”

Ántonia enjoyed social life; she gained reputation as a good dancer.

The young men began to joke with each other about ‘the Harlings’ Tony’ as they did about ‘the Marshalls’ ‘Anna’ or ‘Gardeners’ Tiny’. The moment the lighted tent comes into view she would break into a run, like a boy. There were always partners waiting for her; she began to dance before she got her breadth (205).

Though dancing was considered as a sign of moral lassitude. Ántonia considers it the sole source of fun and pleasure. She enjoyed music too. As her father was a musician in his native Bohemia. Dancing provides a connection to her musical past. She excels in dancing and becomes very popular. As a result stern Mr. Harlings forces her to choose between the dances or his employment. For Ántonia the dancing pavilion become irresistible, and her success there brings a stream of admires to the Harlings back door.
Against the town stands Ántonia, unconcerned about gossip and social standing, not dependent upon accomplishments associated with worldly prestige. The manner of subsistence of life on the prairie is depicted:

The life that went on in them seemed to me made up of evasions and negations; shifts to save cooking, to save washing and cleaning, devices to propitiate the tongue of gossip. This guarded mode of existence was like living under a tyranny. People’s speech, their voices, their very glances, became furtive and repressed. Every individual taste, every natural appetite, was bridled by caution. The people asleep in those houses, I thought, tried to live like the mice in their own kitchens; to make no noise, to leave no trace, to slip over the surface of things in the dark. The growing piles of ashes and cinders in the back yards were the only evidence that the wasteful, consuming process of life went on at all (219).

The fullness of life that Ántonia embodies is thus symbolically cast out of the homes of respectable families, when she rebels for the first time. She prefers her dances against the desire of the Harlings and Ántonia herself is exposed to attempted rape by the unsavory Cutter and finally to seduction and abandonment by the handsome ne’er-do-well Larry Donovan. Ántonia leaves the Harlings to take up job in the home of the lecherous Wick Cutter. Wick Cutter was the money-lender and a notorious philanderer who had fleeced poor Russian Peter. Though he had pious upbringing, he followed the crooked ways of the world. He knew little Swedish, which gave him a great advantage with the early Scandinavian settlers.

After Ántonia went to live with the Cutters, she seemed to care about nothing but picnics and parties and having a good time. Dancing has been the one of the
positive outlet that she has found in all her time in America. It is the sole source of fun and pleasure that has entered her life. Since her father was a musician in his native Bohemia, dancing provides a connection to her musical past.

When she was not going to a dance, she sewed until midnight.

Her new clothes were the subjects of caustic comment under Lena’s direction she copied Mrs. Gardener’s new party dresses and Mrs. Smith’s street costume so ingeniously in cheap materials that those ladies were greatly annoyed, and Mrs. Cutter, who was jealous of them, was secretly pleased (214).

This shows Ántonia was talented and also industrious.

Wick Cutter who likes to gamble and has evil desire. The Cutters fight about the question of inheritance and each blames the other for remaining childless. At the end of the summer after the Cutters left Black Hawk on a business trip Ántonia comes to the Burdens. Grandmother noticed that she seemed troubled and distracted. Ántonia informed grandmother that Mr. Cutter had told her not to sleep away from the house and be out late in the evening while he was gone. Cutters prohibition is expressed:

Mr. Cutter had put all the silver and important documents under Ántonia’s bed and told her that she had to sleep there in order to keep them safe. He strictly forbade her to ask any of the girls she knew to stay with her at night she would be perfectly safe, he said as he had just put a new vale lock on the front door (246).

Worried that Mr. Cutter is playing some sort of tricks, she gets Jim to sleep at the Cutters in her bed, while she stays with grandmother. On the third night, Jim awakes to find Mr. Cutter trying to grope him. They get into a fight, with Mr. Cutter
beating Jim fiercely about the face. Jim runs back home and in the morning feels disgusted, ashamed, and angry with Antonia. He refuses to see her or a doctor and is worried about word getting around town.

When Ántonia and Grandmother go over to the Cutters’ house to pack up Ántonia’s belongings, they find her room in disarray. They also find Mrs. Cutter, who is indignant because her husband intentionally put her on the wrong train so that he could come back to Black Hawk for an intended rendezvous with Ántonia. When Cutter return from Omaha he finds Jim instead of Ántonia. In the fight Jim gets hurt and Cutter gets ashamed, as such Ántonia escapes a near rape.

As rightly remarked by Anthony Millspaugh:

Ántonia escapes this squalor, moves to town a place of white fences and good green yards.... wide, dusty streets and shapely little trees growing long the wooden side walls” — to become “hired girls” for a prosperous family.6

Having pushed all thoughts of Wick Cutter from her mind Ántonia meets Larry Donovan an arrogant young train conductor, who was a kind of professional ladies’ man, “and falls in love with him.” Ántonia often went to the dances with Larry Donovan. She wore dresses made like Mrs. Gardener’s black velvet. She was lovely to see, with her eyes shining, and her lips always a little parted when she danced that constant, dark colour in her cheeks never changed (223). Larry Donovan, was usually cold and distant with men, but with “women he had a silent, grave familiarity, a special handshake, accompanied by a significant, deliberate look” His peculiarity is depicted:

He took women married or single, into his confidence, walked them up and down in the moonlight. Telling them what a mistake he had
made by not entering the office branch of the service, and how much better fitted he was to fill the post of General Passenger Agent in Denver than the roughshod man who then bore that title (305).

Her suitor for many years, Larry finally proposes to her. Things go great between the two and Ántonia soon moves out to be with her fiancé. It is assumed that everything is fine. However this is not the case. Prepared to marry him, she follows Larry to Denver, where he stays with her as long as her dowry lasts. Then he disappears, leaving Ántonia pregnant.

Ántonia eventually comes home carrying two burdens. In fact, one of them is literally weighing her down. Larry does not receive the job he was intimating and proceeds leaving Ántonia alone with his baby. The prejudice before mentioned comes back with tremendous vindictiveness as news of Ántonia's situation spreads around town. The townspeople wait to see what Ántonia's next step will be. They soon learn that her supposed shame is actually pride, and she is soon backing to her spirited self once again. The town expects her to hide her baby from the world, but ironically, she goes to the town photographer and has a picture taken and framed extravagantly.

Only widow Steavens knew how Ántonia got ready to be married and how she came back. During the spring and summers the pregnant girl worked in the fields for Ambrosch. Ántonia never went to town because she didn't want to see anyone. She knew she had toothaches, but wouldn't go to dentist. Mrs. Steavens was the only one who went to see her. Once the widow suggested to Ambrosch that, by working so hard the girl would lose her self-respect. Ántonia was annoyed when Larry Donovan runs away from her. As she told to Mrs. Steavens, Larry had no job. He was fired, blacklisted for knocking down, fares. He lived with her till her money gave out. He
was not hunting for job at all. She feels he has gone to Old Mexico, to make his fortune.

This episode reveals that Ántonia’s deepest need was to love someone and to be a mother. She wanted this so much that she was blind to Larry Donovan’s unsuitability, and became pregnant. The next time Jim saw Ántonia, she was out in the field ploughing corn. All that spring and summer she did the work of a man on the farm; it seemed to be an implicit affair:

She was quiet and steady. Folks respected her industry and tried to treat her as if nothing had happened. They talked, to be sure; but not like they would if she’d put on airs. She was so crushed and quiet that nobody seemed to went to humble her. .. She talked about the grain and the weather as if she’d never had another interest, she always looked dead weary (314).

After being disgraced in her marriage, Antonia shuts herself off from outside society and tries to regain her independence by working the land as she used to. Ántonia worked on through harvest and threshing, though she was too modest to go out threshing for the neighbours, like when she was young and free. She has begun to herd Ambrosch’s cattle in the open ground. Sometimes she used to bring then over the west hill, ... she had thirty cattle in her bunch, it had been dry, and the pasture was short, or she wouldn’t have brought them so far. Ántonia worked on through Ambrosch responded angrily that the widow should keep those ideas to herself. Ambrosch was obviously the boss so she stayed away after that. In the fall when Ántonia was herding cattle, Mrs. Steavens would sometimes meet her on the prairie and talk to Ántonia. She reminisced to the widow about her father and the old days of
playing with Jim on the prairie. Though her father is dead she draws the inspiration from the past memories. Ántonia recalls her father:

Look at my papa here; he’s been dead all these years, and yet he is more real to me than almost anybody else. He never goes out of my life. I talk to him and consult him all the time. The older I grow, the better I know him and the more I understand him (320).

As a young girl she discovered masculine independence and strength by plowing the ground, and after her marriage scandal she works industriously. In winter Ántonia was seen dressed in heavy men’s clothes. As Jim narrates: she wore a man’s long overcoat and boots and a man’s felt hat with a wide brim….her steps getting heavier’ (316). After herding her cattle in the snow Antonia went into her room, closed her door. She was in a terrible pain. She got her cattle home, turned them into the corral, and went into the house, into her room behind the kitchen, and shut the door. There, without calling to anybody, without a groan, she lay down on the bed and bore her child. Her mother came to fetch the widow, who took care of the newborn. When the widow Steavens showed it to Ambrosch his response was to “put it out in the rain-barrel”. Since Mrs. Steavens took care of her when the baby was born Ántonia was not frightened in fact she was proud of her baby.

Ántonia got on fine. She loved it from the first as dearly as if she’d had a ring on her finger, and was never ashamed of it. It’s a year and eight months old now, and no baby was ever better cared-for.

Ántonia is a natural-born mother (318).

Ántonia raises the baby very dearly without hesitation and loves it tenderly. Any other girl would have kept her baby out of sight, but Tony, of course, must have its picture on exhibition at the town photographer’s in a great gilt frame” (303).
She further comments:

Father Kelly says everybody's put into this world for something,
and I know what I've got to do. I'm going to see that my little
girl has a better chance than ever I had. I'm going to take care of
that girl, Jim (321).

Ántonia married a Bohemian named Anton Cuzak short, with curly black hair.
He looked like 'humorous philosopher' who had hitched up one shoulder under the
burdens of life. 'Trained as a furrier, he is not used to farming, and would have
become discouraged without Ántonia's strength'. He is gentle and accepting and
somewhat amused to be the father of ten children. Even though he misses city life,
he's devoted to Ántonia. Jim finds him 'a most companionable fellow'. When Jim
returns to black Hawk, he finds Ántonia completely changed:

Ántonia came in and stood before me; a stalwart, brown woman,
flat chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled... The eyes that
peered anxiously at me were-simply Ántonia eyes. I had seen no
others like them since I looked into them last, though I had
looked at so many thousand of human faces. As I confronted her,
the changes grew less apparent to me, her identity stronger. She
was there in the full vigour of her personality, battered but not
diminished; looking at me, speaking to me in the husky, breathy
voice I remembered so well (332).

Ántonia's did not recognize Jim at the first glance. When she meets Jim she
was thinner than I had ever seen her, and looked... 'worked down,' but there was a
new kind of strength in the gravity of her face, and her color still gave her that look of
deep-seated health and ardour (319). Jim had remained young, but though Ántonia
had become old, ‘she had not lost the fire of life’. “Her skin, so brown and hardened, had not that look of flabbiness, as if the sap beneath it had been secretly drawn away” (336).

Ántonia’s informs Jim how “she and her husband had come out to this new country when the farm-land was cheap and could be had on easy payments. Antonia seems very much a part of the land, even though people keep leaving and she is left alone. She wants to live and die in the country, which she knows and loves. The land has nurtured and strengthened her in the past, and she hopes it will do the same. Her tenacity is here by revealed:

I’d always be miserable in a city. I’d die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree and where all the road is friendly. I want to live and die here (320).

As perceived by James Seaton: Ántonia’s own marriage to Anton Cuzak is secure; because the two are not romantic lovers but live together on “terms of easy friendliness, touched with humor.” The first ten years were a hard struggle. Her husband knew very little about farming and often grew discouraged.

We’d never have got through if I hadn’t been so strong. I’ve always had good health, thank God and I was able to help him in the fields until right up to the time before my babies came. Our children were good about taking care of each other (343).

Ántonia is among her brood of children yet full of life and energetic, in the plethora of fruit and trees surrounding her house; in the myriad of farm animals running around, her children are very sympathetic that portrays her genuine qualities:

Two of them are seen bending over a dead dog, with one of them not more than four or five was on his knees his hands folded and
his bare head drooping forward in deep dejection and the other
comforting him in his language (329).

Two of the girls helped mother washing dishes at the sink, laughing and
chattering and a little one on a stool playing with a rag baby. The older one wore
shoes and stockings, was a ‘buxom girl’ with dark hair and eyes calm and self-
possessed (331). Anna, Yulka, Anton, Nina, and Leo ‘worst of all’ as Ántonia calls
him as he’s never out of mischief for a minute but ‘loves him the best of all’. Rudolph
the eldest, followed with Jan, Lucie, Ambrosch, and Martha being married Ántonia is
happy to see her with the baby. The little ones could not speak English at all as
Ántonia always spoke Bohemian at home as she loved to keep her traditions.

Ántonia never got ‘down-hearted’. ‘She loved her children and always
believed they would turn out well’. Antonia promises she will never allow her
daughters to work for others but will try her best to sacrifice for the betterment of
them. She trains her daughters Nina, Yulka, Anna and Lucie to maintain her house in
order. Her favorite is twelve-year old, mischievous Leo, who was born on Easter.
There is a lively atmosphere with a pleasant supper and lively musical performances
by the children.

As Jim observes:

These children seemed to be upon very much the same terms
with Ántonia as the Harling children had been so many years
before. They seemed to feel the same pride in her, and to look to
her for stories and entertainment as we used to do. (351)

Ántonia belonged to a farm and Jim realizes how much Antonia and the
land are intertwined although her husband knew very little about farming and often
grew discouraged:
The first ten years were a hard struggle...there wasn’t a tree here when we first came. We planted everyone, carrying water for them and had been working in the fields all day. I couldn’t feel so tired that I wouldn’t fret about these trees when there was a dry time. They were on my mind like little children (340)...At some distance behind the house were an ash grove and two orchards, a cherry orchard, with goose-berry and currant bushes between the rows, and an apple orchard, sheltered by a high hedge low-branching mulberry bushes (339).

Ántonia now prefers the country and never gets depressed the way she did in the city because it gives her a greater chance to fulfill herself as she comments: “Ántonia kept stopping to tell me about one tree and another. I love them as if they were people” (340). Ántonia is always conscious about her husband’s comfort and works for his happiness. Anton Cuzak, her husband was amused by her resourcefulness. Antonia loves him that she makes him forget his earlier misfortunes. He admires her for her tireless hard struggle on the soil. He is amused to be a father of ten children. Her support and sympathy for him enables him to change his life.

As rightly opined by Robert E.Scholes:

So it is Ántonia, who is always conscious of the past, is nevertheless free of it, and capable of concern for the future. And her past is not merely that of a generation or so.8

Jim tells Ántonia how much she means to him. Ántonia is a sweetheart, wife, mother and sister to Jim; she is his female complement as they grew up together in an unsettled empty environment. Ántonia captures universal human attitudes in herself and brings them out in other people She is richest in life and love. As Jim acclaims:
She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct universal and true....All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions... She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races (353).

Jim and Ántonia's relationship reveals many other traits of Antonia.

Jim and Ántonia meet in a journey while traveling by train. Jim ten years old is on his way to his grandparents house in Nebraska to begin a new and different life due to death of his parents. Being abandoned from his family, he unites with his grandparents and at this moment with Ántonia as well. Jim does not realize it at the time, he and Ántonia are embarking on shared adventures and their lives will intertwine in complex ways. The casual encounter or a train becomes the beginning of a mutual journey in the American West.

On Sunday morning Jim drives across fields of red grass to visit the new Bohemian family that has recently settled. Jim and Ántonia (Tony) become friends. They explore their new homeland together. Suddenly Ántonia comes up to Jim, and they run through the fields hand in hand. The physical environment and the emotions it creates in Jim to discover the fullness of the new world is realistically pictured:

We were running up the steep drawside together. ...When we reached the level and could see the gold tree-tops, I pointed toward them, and Antonia laughed and squeezed my hand. ... We raced off toward Squaw Creek and did not stop until the ground itself stopped. ... We stood panting on the edge of the ravine, looking down at the trees and bushes (25).
Tony was “barefooted, and she shivered in her cotton dress” and was comfortable only when they lie down next to each other in the middle of a field. They experience nature together as stare up at the blue sky. While they were having their reading lesson on the warm grassy bank, a little insect of the palest frailest green hopped painfully out of the buffalo grass. Tony all concerned for the tiny creature, made a warm nest for him in her hands; talked to him “gaily and indulgently” in Bohemian. Ántonia offers Jim one of her rings but Jim refuses instantly. Jim does not exactly know how much help the Shimerdas need, and are prevented from finding out because of differences of language and culture.

After three years in the country, Jim’s grandparents, move to the town of Black Hawk so that Jim can go to school. Ántonia follows Jim as his family moves. She gets employed in the household of Burden’s neighbours. She comes into town to work for the Harlings in their home. As Jim goes off to college he loses touch with Ántonia but then, through Lena, become connected to Ántonia again. Finally, twenty years later, Jim travels back to see Ántonia and her new, “enlarged” family. He was glad to see that Ántonia was finally again and enjoyed meeting all her children as well as her husband. It is Ántonia who lets Lena to come closer to Jim. Ántonia warns Jim not to get mixed up with the Swedish girls for a similar reason. Ántonia fears that he may fall in love, get married, and then never leave Black Hawk. In warning, Jim not to flirt with Lena, Ántonia has Jim’s long-term interests in mind.

Ántonia seems beyond the realm of sexual desire, and relations with Jim seem always chaste and innocent, though sometimes intense, Jim cannot think of Ántonia in a sexual light because she is more than just the beloved to him; she is a maternal, feminine presence in his life that cannot be limited simply to the role of lover. John H.
Randall: notes that Antonia now prefers the country to city life where all the ground is friendly. Robert E. Scholes rightly opines that:

Jim feels “the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at night-fall,” and he wishes he could be a little boy again, and that his way would end there.

When Jim revisits Antonia and her thriving family, she has in some ways relapsed toward the past. “I’ve forgot my English so”. She says, “I don’t often talk it any more. I tell the children I used to speak it real well.” She said they all spoke Bohemian at home. The little ones could not speak English at all-didn’t learn it until they went to school”.

Jim adores Antonia as seen in this episode:

Do you know, Antonia, since I’ve been away, I think of you more often of the world. I’d have like 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 a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don’t realize it. You really are a part of me (321).

John H. Randall notes that: ‘She is reborn to civilization’ when she goes to town to live and relearns nice ways of doing things. Finally, after learning all she has to learn, she is ready to take her place in the society by starting her family of her own and is reborn once again into the human community. Wallace Stenger acclaims: Jim is himself groping for an identity and an affiliation. In the process of understanding and commemorating Antonia he locates himself.

Antonia represents an alternative to Jim’s life as middle-class American boy. Throughout the story Antonia as a presentation of a life very different from Jim’s and
as a strong bond with the land shows us Jim’s life as a middle-class American boy. Unlike Jim, she’s able to move away from all the stereotypes and boundaries of her class and gender. Ántonia is a lot less inhibited than Jim is and listens to her heart more.

The second thing Ántonia represents to Jim is a close tie to the land. As much as he loves the land, Jim is able to give it up for the city, whereas Ántonia is the happiest there. The differences between Ántonia and Jim almost spell out what the Nebraska prairie means to two really specific different types of people. He’s all about progress, and he doesn’t mind when the grassland are wiped out for railroads. He looks at the land as an instrument for progress. Although he is married to a woman of social prominence; his childlessness and marital estrangement dampen his spirits. Ántonia on the other hand thinks of the lands as a divine entity driven by its own force. 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. At the end the of novel Cather portrays Ántonia in her orchards touching all of her trees that she planted and took care of ‘like people.’

When the sophisticated, world-traveled, perhaps even world weary Jim Burden returns to the prairie scenes of his boyhood, Jim finds Ántonia of his youth, her passion for life everywhere evident: in the family she has raised, in the home she keeps, and in her flourishing farm. Having come full circle, Jim has rediscovered his youth: Ántonia will always represent the best of his life. She is his ‘every woman—wife, mother, sister. She is the endless prairie and the immense sky’ (321).

No matter how she tries, Ántonia cannot escape the prejudices that surround the town. Working as a hired girl, a job that demands the skill of a housekeeper and a many, Ántonia becomes as outcast in the city. Consequently, she is forced to
associate with only other working girls like herself. Yet it is not just her job that earns her the dislike, it is the color of her skin. Working in the fields of the country, Ántonia had gained a remarkable tan.

The latter, although accepted in the country, brands her a peasant in the town. No refined lady would ever subject herself to the brutal country sun. The men of black Hawk referred to as, although they could do almost anything else. The man who personifies this statement is Wick Cutter, a licentiousness man who tries to rape Ántonia. However, Wick’s plan does not work due to Ántonia’s cunning and acute perception, which allows her to discern well before hand what Wick’s intentions really were. She uses her intelligence and takes refuge in Jim Burden’s house until she deems the situation safe to do otherwise.

As perceptively remarked by Philip Gerber:

In her struggle to tame life, Ántonia gropes, fumbling repeatedly. She runs a zigzag path but makes relentless progress. If ever there were a true-born victim of circumstance, it should be she a stranger, unacclimated to frontier life, unable to speak the lingua franca, socially outcast, with a defeated dreamer for a father, a harridan for a mother, a sullen lout for a brother. But Ántonia transcends every disadvantage and does so without soiling herself. ¹³

Ántonia has managed to make her husband happy for twenty-six years in one of the loneliest regions in the world, even though he was a city man and occasionally had spells of homesickness for the theaters and lighted cafés of the Old World. In spite of many hardships Ántonia has to undergo during the course of her life, she remains to all a symbol of strength, courage, and happiness. She never gives up her dreams or her responsibilities. She takes what life hands her, and does so with
a smile. At the times when she has the right to give up, it is then when she is the strongest, and it is then we see the true Ántonia. Anton calls her ‘my woman’ to express his deep love for his wife. Antonia also express her love for her husband calling him ‘my man’.

Ántonia Shimerdas actually progress from care-free little girl to plodding farm and then from farmhand to hired girl and later from hired girl to wife and mother is being skillfully traced in the novel. By working in the fields, Ántonia is able to gain the respect and independence that men her age do. Her productivity becomes the measure of her worth, regardless of her gender. Though Ántonia’s working as a farm laborer is perhaps unconventional, her success suggests that women should be allowed to make the same choices as a man can. By depicting Ántonia as a strong, determined woman, Cather is asserting that there should be no limitations set on a woman’s potential.

As rightly remarked by John H. Randall III: “Ántonia’s great achievement and the chief subject of the book is founding of a family... Willa Cather had finally made up her mind that her true allegiance was to the soil”. This is reflected in the character of Ántonia. James Woodress noted that "in one sense Cather had been preparing to write My Ántonia for a third of a century" having known and admire Annie Sadilek for that length of time. Cather was particularly impressed with Sadilek’s ability to endure adversity and still retain her enjoyment of life. In 1921 she told a reviewer that Sadilek was "one of the truest artists [she] ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, in her love of people and in her willingness to take pains". These qualities are embodied in the title character of My Ántonia and are revealed by means of a complex narrative structure. Ántonia's character reveals these qualities.
Ántonia, a mine of life, the mother of races, and a new thing forming itself in hardship and hope, but clinging to fragments of the well loved Old World. Hence *My Ántonia* is any American’s Ántonia, Willa Cather’s Ántonia. No writer ever posed that essential aspect of the American experience more warmly, with more nostalgic lyricism, or with a surer understanding of what it means. Ántonia is a very simple character. She represents a strong personality with her strength of physique and strongly defined idiosyncrasies can hold our attention and capture our emotion.

As aptly perceived by John H. Randall III:

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.

Ántonia had the desire to learn every aspect of the wild land. Ántonia is the person whose inner strength enables her to live the enviable life. Cather glorifies frontier values of independence, hard work, and asceticism, and she implicitly contrasts it to the competition and isolation of modern society. Ántonia spends her whole life fighting yet she is not known to be belligerent. She is constantly being battered, but still has no visible scars. Although she suffers all through her life, she somehow manages to keep an optimistic outlook. Ántonia is one of those rare people who gain character, rather than resentment, by enduring hardship.
When Willa Cather wrote her novel *My Ántonia* in 1918, there probably was not any doubt that it was the story of a woman's accomplishment. However, today there have been many critics that claim this work to be the legacy of a girl's struggle, not triumph. This leaves readers with the choice of interpreting the book as enlightening or depressing. One can confidently say at the end of the novel that Ántonia's triumphs. Willa Cather remarked, in one of her essay, "I have not much faith in women in fiction" Yet in Ántonia Cather has created a genuinely heroic woman.\(^{18}\) I totally agree with Philip Gerber who has perceptively observed in the portrayal of Ántonia that "To Cather she is cause for celebration; she justifies the human race."\(^{19}\) Though she belongs to ordinary class still there are many extraordinary traits in her. Ántonia's life are manifestations of the rural virtues that Jim associates with his grandparents and their beautifully managed old farm; cleanliness, order, decorum. Antonia now signifies nourishment, protection fertility, growth, and abundance energy in service. It is not the fine arts that Antonia comes to symbolize for Jim Burden, but the domestic ones. He is able to see her permanently, as the maker of formal gestures which he says, "we recognize by instinct as universal and true."\(^{20}\)

Economic pressure clearly shapes the lives of immigrants daughters in Ántonia. Her narrative relates immigrants' women struggle for persistence on the land. Their personal tragedies; necessitate sacrifices and sufferings. Antonia's instinct plunges her always into life's mainstream, disregarding money, position, possessions or career. At forty-four, she is the mother of eleven children, a grand mother without her former beauty. She is "grizzled," "flat-chested," "toothless," and "battered", consumed by her life of childbearing and field work. To live merely for the rich experience of living itself is the "career" she labors.
John J. Murphy is one of the few critics who recognize the importance of Ántonia's status as immigrant. He states:

Jim is representative of the dominant culture as opposed to foreigners like Ántonia who are seen as inferior by virtue of that foreigners. Ántonia achieves her apotheosis despite the dominant culture, and the fact that she is "rescued" by a non-American, Cuzak, is extremely pertinent. He sees Ántonia as retreating, in the final section of the book, from the American culture which has rejected her as inferior and "identifying with the differences that have limited her."²¹

The persistence of national culture in Antonia's family is apparent in their using the Czech language. The bilingual proficiency has a rootedness that Jim loses, and he attempts to supplant his own sense of dislocation by planning trips back to Nebraska. Cathers concern for the loss of cultural background appears on Nebraska's Czech immigrants transplanting their own language. The presence of Hispanic cultures, Native American cultures and Eastern European cultures is also "crucial" to the true "sense of Americanness". By marrying a fellow Bohemian and by teaching her children to speak their native language and retain Bohemian music and dance, Antonia preserves her own cultural strand. In the last section the violin reappears as "Leo, with a good deal of fussing got out his violin, it was old Mr. Simerdas's instrument, which Antonia had always kept, and it was too big for him. But he played very well for a self taught boy."(347) Willa Cather's depiction of her eponymous heroine, Ántonia clearly derives from and helps constitute the larger discourse of cultural pluralism.
SECONDARY WOMEN CHARACTERS

Lena Lingard:

Willa Cather depicts the struggle of the hired girls with the society. Lena Lingard was one of the hired girls who work for wages in Black Hawk. Lena Lingard is 'Chris Lingard’s oldest girl.' Lena Lingard was not one of the most respected people in town but she wanted to improve herself. ‘As she thought the work on the farm was endless she wanted to get away from it. Lena had left the farm at a young age to become a seamstress and study under Mrs. Thomas, a well known dress-maker in town. Her mother supported her decision and Lena was planning on making some money and helping her mother, back on the farm.

I’ve seen a good deal of married life, and I don’t care for it. I want to be so I can help my mother and the children at home, and not have to ask wife of anybody (162). Lena would be chased by guys and their girlfriends because she would flirt so much and that would upset the girl friends, and that’s the reason the town talked about her. Surely none of them represented more of a menace than Lena Lingard.

As perceptively observed by Terence Martin:

A blonde, Nebraskan Circe, Lena is a temptress who “gave her heart away when she felt like it”, as Jim says, but kept her head for business”. Lena Lingard, demure, soft and attractive, Lena radiates sexual charm without guile or effort. She is the most innocently sensuous and beautiful of all the women in Willa Cather’s work.22

Even the married Ole Benson and the proper young bachelor Sylvester Lovett the son of the local bank president, have become obsessed men because of her. Her
landlord Colonel Raleigh in Lincoln later and The Polish Violin teacher, Mr. Ordinsky, are entranced by Lena and suspicious of Jim on her account.\textsuperscript{23}

She danced every danced like a waltz of coming home to something, of inevitable, fated return (222). The eldest of many children, used to herd cattle on the prairie for her father. Though she was poor and ragged, her yellow hair, pale white skin, and soft, violet coloured eyes made her attractive. She had a gentle, easy personality. Although Lena and Ántonia are friends, they are very different. Tony wants to make money so her family’s farm will prosper. Lena is disillusioned about family life, and never wants to return to the farm.

Lena is more easy going, detached person, who wants to be left alone to have a good time. Lena tells of her grandfather rebelliously marrying a Lapland woman. Lapp girls were considered dangerously attractive to the men in Norway. “I guess that’s what the matter with me is. They say Lapp blood will out “says Lena referring to her weakness for men.

As perceptively observed by E. K. Brown:

Lena hates laboring on the farm, wants nothing to do with having to please and work for a husband, and refuses to enter a life of constant, pregnancy and childcare. Instead, she leaves the rural.\textsuperscript{24}

Lena has grown from a ‘barefoot farm girl into a well-groomed’, accomplished young woman. Jim enjoys occasional dinners and leisurely Sunday breakfasts at Lena’s place. They play and laugh together. He finds her very pretty and sees now why the Norwegian Ole Benson used to hang around her. Across the hall from Lena lives an emotional Polish violinist who is jealous of Jim’s attraction to her. The violinist is also jealous of the Landlord, a widower who has a soft spot for Lena. Jim declares that all three of them are in love with Lena.
As perceptively observed by Dorothy Tuck McFarland,

The young men of Black Hawk’s American families including Jim are naturally drawn to the vigor and attractiveness of immigrants daughters like the pretty Norwegian Lena Lingard. But the social consciousness of the town has decreed that Black Hawk boys should marry Black Hawk girls which, after some longing glances at the hired girls they do so. 25

Lena is now established as a dress maker in Lincoln and is well on her way to become a business success. But she offers a kind of opium dream of sensuality, promising endless pleasure. Dallying with her, Jim loses interest in his classes and drifts aimlessly until his academic mentor urges him to break with Lena and follow him to Harvard. Jim hates to leave Lena. He goes to see her to discuss it. Lena informs him she’s planning never to get married. She has seen too much poverty and hard work in her family brought on by too many babies, she’d slept three to a bed till she left home at nineteen. Now she does determine to keep her independence and not be “under somebody’s thumb” (292). As such “autonomy and unconventional destiny” is seen in the subordinate characters. 26

Lena had picked up all the conventional expressions she heard (281). Lena’s assimilation to American values is too complete, however: she, like Jim, is lethargic; she has a “sleepy smile” and a “lazy, good natured laugh”. She too ends up childless: it is as if acceptance of the culture of money making precludes fertility. Lena is never a rival for the central place in the book- she has not Ántonia’s force or has insight; she is never so much alive. At times she is a foil: her fairness against beauty, her slowness and quietness against Ántonia’s vivacity. It is easy to understand how in her rosy semi-naked beauty she became so constant a figure in Jim’s adolescent dreams. 27
Like Antonia, Lena is a child of the country. She farms the land, which nurtures her until she grows into a voluptuous and fertile young woman. However in her later life Lena competes to become a successful seamstress and business woman.

Tiny Soderball:

Tiny Soderball ‘trim and slender’, with ‘lively little feet and pretty ankles’-she wore her dresses very short. She made the difference by being quicker in speech, lighter in movement and manner than the other girls (192). She works as a waitress at Mrs. Gardener’s Boys Home Hotel. Tiny like some of the immigrant who seek opportunity to make fortune, goes to the gold mines.

Tiny Soderball, made her fortune in the Klondike before settling down in San Francisco. Tiny and Lena her companion, lived in a mutually beneficial supportive relation ship: Tiny audits Lena’s accounts occasionally and invest her money for her; and Lena apparently takes care that Tiny does not grow too miserly (328). Both Lena and Tiny are independent and unconventional; Lena particularly understands and values the single self.

As perceptively observed by Deborah G. Lambert:

Lena describes marriages as “being under some body’s thumbs”.

Her description of Lena and Tiny undercuts their achievement and portrays them as stereotypical “old maids “who have paid for their refusal of their “natural” function.

Tiny has become a “thin, hard-faced woman, very well dressed, very reserved” and something of a miser; she says, frankly that nothing interested her much now but making money. Moreover,
tiny has suffered the mutilation of her “pretty little feet” the price of her unnatural success in the Klondike.28

Lena has been successful and her friend Tiny Soderball, another girl from the Divide, has had almost unbelievable success, but their lives in San Francisco are ‘solitary and rootless.’

**Three Bohemian Mary’s:**

The three Bohemia Mary’s include Mary Dusak had been housekeeper for a bachelor rancher from Boston and after several years in his service she was forced to retire from the world for a short time (202). She later takes the place of her friend Mary Svoboda who was similarly embarrassed. Antonia’s Mary is also a wrong wife of crooked Ambrosch and praises her instead that her children will have a great chance (224). Mary Svoboda’s the ‘best butter maker’ in all this country and was a fine manager too (349). Coming from large families they were industrious and wanted nothing but the best for their families.

The three Bohemian Mary’s were considered as high explosives to have about the kitchen, yet they were such good cooks and such admirable housekeeper, that they never had to look for a place. Three Bohemian Mary’s tried to make up for the years of youth they had lost. Every one of them did what she had set out to do, and sent home those hard-earned dollars.

**Danish Laundry Girls:**

There were four Danish girls, smiling up from their ironing-boards, with their white throats and their pink cheeks. As these girls were fond of dancing they never
missed being at the Progressive Euchre Club. The four Danish girls lived with the laundryman and his wife behind the laundry. As aptly observed by Terence Martin:

Black Hawk provides a canvas on which Miss Cather can portray social consciousness and burgeoning social change in the Nebraska of this time. Despite the domestic in vitality of the Harling family, readily available for Jim Burden to draw on...small and very proper, the town makes life for young men an initiation into monotony. Except of course for presence of hired girls. These young women, all of foreign families, bring vivacity to Black Hawk: light-hearted, gay and unpretentious, at the dances they are in great demand.29

Because the town girls have money and respectability, they are paradoxically limited in their life possibilities. They are not expected or encouraged to choose vocation for themselves, and they are just expected to get married. Their options in life are limited to becoming wife and a mother. On the other hand, the country girls who are born poor have much who is open to them. Since then families do not have the luxury of allowing them to stay at home. They have to go out into the world to work, and they there discover the myriad of possibilities open to them. They are thus able to actually choose vocation make money, more fully engage in worldly pursuits.

Terence Martin further opines that:

While the hired girls are able to break free of traditional male-female constraints, they do so at a price’’ they lose social standing and respectability. Indeed, determined town girls, if they chose, could very well become employed, but they would risk a number of social privileges. Country girls have nothing to lose and only financial
remuneration to gain. However, though their farm labor makes them more attractive than town girls, they will never be completely accepted. More often than not, however the proper young men must meet them surreptitiously, for the hired girls enjoy a lower social status than do the girls of the older American families in the town.30

Frances Harling:

She is a Norwegian, daughter of a businessman. Frances Harling is one of the vast examples of what a strong woman can be. She was her father's chief clerk, and virtually managed his Black Hawk office during his frequent absences. Because her unusual business ability... He paid her a good salary,... and [she] never got away from her responsibilities. On Sundays she went to the office to open the mail and read markets (149). She was quick at understanding the grandmothers who spoke no English, and the, most reticent and distrustful of them would tell her their story without realizing they were doing so (151). Frances taken care of the finance of many people around the country and though she is a woman, is very much trusted. 'She carried then all in her mind as if they were characters in a book or play.'

Frances is very talented. She could play the piano without a light and talk to her mother at the same time. Frances also was one of the most dependable people in town. If any one had a wedding she would bring a present. If there was a funeral she would be there to help console them. You would always count on her to be there, as she attended funerals and wedding in all weathers. A farmer's daughter who was to be married could count on a wedding present from Frances Harling (149). Frances loved dances and thought her fellow companions and had the gift of understanding.
Mrs. Gardener:

Mrs. Gardener was admittedly the best-dressed woman in Black Hawk, drove the best horse, and had a smart trap and a little white and gold sleigh. She seemed indifferent to her possessions, was not half so solicitous about them as her friends were. (182) Being the hotel owner, it was Mrs. Gardner who ran the business and looked after everything. Molly Gardener was ‘tall, dark, severe, with something Indian-like in the rigid immobility of her face’. Her manner was ‘cold, and she talked little. Mostly liked to have the best material goods in the town, and she liked to show them off.

Mrs. Harlings:

Mrs. Harlings were Norwegians, and had lived in Christiania until she was ten and her husband was born in Minnesota. She had ‘bright, twinkling eyes and a stubborn little chin. She was quick to anger, quick laughter, and jolly from the depths of her soul’. Mrs. Harling generally runs the household. “When the Harlings’ cook leaves, Mrs. Harling hires Ántonia on request of Jim’s grandmother. Mrs. Harling finds Ántonia pretty, and mandate a certain amount for her personal use.” She took up her ‘crocheting again and sent the hook in and out with nimble fingers. ‘Mrs. Harling had studied the piano under a good teacher, and somehow she managed to practice every day’ (158). And so she was an accomplished pianist; and knowledgeable about opera. She resembles Mrs. Julia Miners a very close friend of the Cather’s family. Her enthusiasm, and her violent likes and dislikes asserted themselves in all occupations of life (148). Though she does not have any real occupation, her role, as a mother is worthy of respect and much appreciated by Jim.
Frances and Mrs. Harlings exemplify female strength and initiative, and for this reason, Cather’s work can be considered progressive and profeminist. Women like Francis can have the responsibilities usually granted only to men, but such a lifestyle should be a matter of personal choice. If women like Mrs. Harling choose to raise a family, they should be celebrated for doing that too, as it is clearly a pursuit to be admired.31

Mrs. Shimerda:

The mother of Ántonia is a woman of extreme temperament susceptible to jealousy and anger. Mrs. Shimerda, during her adolescence worked as a servant girl for Mr. Shimerda’s household there she becomes pregnant thereby he is compelled to marry her against his parents wishes”. Mrs. Shimerda was a “good house wife in her own country, but she managed poorly under new conditions. “Mrs. Shimerda is a very poor house keeper and makes bad bread. Mrs. Shimerda had a ‘quick ear, and caught up phrases’ when ever she heard English spoken” (77). Mrs. Shimerda wanted to come to America because she thought that Ambrosch would be able to become rich here. She was intelligent enough to get valuable secrets from others.

Mrs. Emmaline Burden:

Mrs. Burden was one of the primitive immigrants who were well settled in Virginia. Jim’s grandmother is a very generous and tolerant woman; she took care of Ántonia, as she did not like her working out in he fields. She introduces her to Harling family. Grandmother loved cooking and prepared variety of dishes of ham or bacon or sausage meat. She likes sewing and knitting”. She was cheerful and she saw that every one was kept warm comfortable and well fed she did all the household chores.
Grandmother felt sorry for Ántonia’s hard work in the farm, she said, ‘Heavy field work ‘spoil that girl. She’ll lose all her nice ways and get rough ones’. Her concern for poor Grandmother thought Ántonia needed shoes more than Mrs. Shimerda needed prayers. She unquestioningly supports her pious husband attend the ‘church suppers ‘ and ‘missionary societies’ During Christmas, she loved to prepare the delicacies along with Ántonia and her sister Yulka. Grandmother always “talked to herself or to the Lord, if there was no one else to listen” (111).

**Widow Steavens:**

Being a generous neighbor of Ántonia she lends a helping hand to the family at the time of Mr. Shimerda’s suicide. She is good speaker kind hearted and a fearless woman. Later on sherents the Burden farm and grows extremely fond of Antonia. She teaches Ántonia ‘hemstitching’ and helped her to cut and fit as she runs tailoring. She is a feminist in true sense who readily faces cruel Ambrosch’s disgrace to plead for Ántonia at her child birth. Steavens assists Ántonia at her delivery as she is the one who accepts the child with open arms and later attends to all her needs. Being a widow she had an open mindedness and was a highly resourceful person in her simple ways of living.

An independence of women prevailed in this novel. There were not many women with intelligent portrayals in this novel because it was written in the early years of the twentieth century. Three women’s successes are firmly noted. Lena Lingard, a childhood friend of Jim and Ántonia’s, left Black Hawk as a simple worker. She went to New England and eventually opened her own prosperous dress shop. James Woodress, wrote, “the softly alluring Lena, who so unaccountably failed to go wrong. “This is an example of independence and accomplishment.”32
Frances Harling, a neighbour of the Burdens is an accountant and handles her father’s business office more efficiently. She is highly appreciated by her neighbouring pioneer women for her sincere support to them at their prosperity and adversity. This was extremely unusual for the time. Tiny Soderball another unlikely candidate for success, struck gold out west after leaving Black Hawk a maid. These three women’s achievements add to the probability that Ántonia’s life was commendable. Frances shows responsibility skills, Molly shows leadership skills, and Lena shows the will to improve herself. While Lena, Tiny forgo marriage, Ántonia seems to have found a relationship based on equality and mutual respect. Although relegated to subordinate roles, these women are initially presented favorably but Cather simultaneously praises Ántonia’s role as mother and demeans the value of their independent lives. The minor women characters also possess multidimensional personality having good hearts and courage to struggle at different circumstances. Mostly they suffer at the hands of corrupt males but still they move forward and plead for the miserable women.

There was a lot of segregation and poverty as the newer immigrants from Europe arrive with little money or experience in farming. The immigrants were not wealthy and struggled to survive on what they had. They were tricked into buying expensive items and land and were treated as minors. The different amount of languages spoken also made it extremely difficult to communicate with others. When the immigrant daughters come to town as hired girls they are looked down on by some of the town families and were treated disrespectfully as well. As remarkably opined by John J. Murphy: ‘The Hired Girls’ section depicts social fragmentation rather than the tightening of the organic bonds of the frontier. A dubious but higher stage in the cultural evolution of the frontier is portrayed.33
My Ántonia is a celebration of the ‘Nebraska Pioneer’ as exemplified by Ántonia. From the Hired Girls to Tiny Soderball and Lena Lingard women are capable of self-sufficiency and happiness. The majority of the truly contented people are either alone or living without the opposite sex. Ántonia and Cuzak are the only example of a normal happy couple, all others have some problems that prevent a normal relationship. Jim bestows the praise on the immigrant girls. Jim realizes that people from his past in Black Hawk, the immigrant girls in particular, have the special qualities that inspire artists: ‘if there were no girls like them in the world there would be no poetry’.

Willa Cather focused on depicting ethnic values of the different cultures of the various immigrants who came to Nebraska. She wrote that Slavonic, Germanic, Scandinavian, Bohemian and Latin “spread across our bronze prairie like the splatter of colour upon, on a painter’s palette”. Ántonia is quick witted and opinionated. She eagerly learns by watching. Devoted to values as the importance of family and the need for human courage and dignity, she created strong female characters whose sort of strength and determination had previously been attributed only to men.

Characters in My Ántonia who represent the Old immigrants” from the northern and western Europe notably, the Harlings, Mrs. Gardener, and Mr. Jensen are presented as “upright and cosmopolitan”. As perceptively remarked by James E. Miller: My Ántonia is; “I believe, a community on the American experience, the American dream, and the American reality.” Living as we do in a rapidly changing world, in which prairies and pioneers have all but disappeared, Cather’s story, nearly a century old, possesses a chilling relevance: are we forever doomed to pine for that
which we once had, but lost! Elizabeth Sherpley Sergeant rightly observes: “I want my new heroine to be like this,” she said, “like a rare object in the middle of a table, which one may examine from all sides. I want her to stand out-like this—because she is the story.”

The Shimerdas reflect this change, arriving late, on the largest wave of Czech immigration. These more recent immigrants “bore the brunt of the economic insecurity of the period” as well as tensions surrounding World War I (25). Czechs are an impulsive people which might make them especially friendly or, possibly, especially violent. Cather portrays music as having an especially emotional and even nationalist resonance with her Czech characters. For instance, the mere chirp of a cricket changes Ántonia’s disposition from merry to melancholy by evoking memories of Old Hata, who “sang old songs to the children in a cracked voice” back in Bohemia (27). Before committing suicide, Mr. Shimerda reveals his despair by no longer playing his violin. “My papa sad for the old country.” Ántonia says, adding, “He never make music any more. At home he play violin all the time; for weddings and for dance. Here never. [...] He don’t like this kawn-tree” (59). Here, Cather illustrates a close relationship between music and Bohemia itself. Cather shows the Czech trait of musical talent surviving among a Czech family’s first American-born generation.

The persistence of national culture in Antonia’s family is also apparent in their using the Czech language. As Susie Thomas writes, “Ántonia’s household is a Bohemian one: Jim is offered coffee and kolaches, pictures of Prague hang on the parlour wall, the children cannot even speak English until they go to school.” The novel is about the transplanting of European culture in American soil and repeatedly affirms Old World values” in fact, “Cather’s ideal was an intermingling of Old and
New” (96-97). This intermingling is significant since Ántonia’s household is actually bicultural. Along with serving kolaches, Ántonia values the “nice ways” of cooing, housekeeping, and childrearing she learned from the Harlings. (221), and importantly, the Cuzaks are bilingual. For instance, Anton Cuzak easily switches from Czech to English so that Jim will not be excluded (229). Also, the older children speak proficient English instead of the telegraphic dialect the Shimerdas use in the early chapters. This bilingual proficiency helps to dramatize how, in becoming American; Antonia has remained connected to her cultural heritage.

Here, Cather uses sarcasm to denounce Americanization. In My Ántonia, she makes the same point by dramatizing the value of immigrants speaking two languages. Ántonia’s large, happy family has her own fortune and lives her own life. Antonia’s family is closely knit, and her children carry forward the knowledge of their mothers past. Antonia clearly values children and country life more than money. As Ántonia says: “It’s no wonder their poor papa can’t get rich, he has to buy so much sugar for us to preserve with” (217).

When Jim delves into European literature, associating the laughter of the immigrant girls he left behind with the poetry of Virgil (173). In addition, Lena- so altered by the assimilation process that she twice is barely recognized by her old friends (103,170) - becomes entranced by musical theatre alongside him. They enrich their lives through art while Ántonia who retains much of her Bohemian identity in the end, finds fulfillment in life itself. 39

As perceptively observed by Deborah G Lambert:

The image of Ántonia that Cather gives us at the novel’s conclusion is one that satisfies our national longings as well: coming to us from an age which gave us Mother’s Day, it is hardly surprising that My Ántonia has lived on
as a celebration of the pioneer woman's triumph and as a paean to the fecundity of the American woman and the American land. 40

Randolph Borune rightly acclaims that: Her purpose is neither to illustrate eternal truths nor to set before us the crowded gallery of a whole society. Yet in these simple pictures of the struggling pioneer life, of the comfortable middle classes of the bleak little towns, there is an understanding of what these people have to contend with and grope for that goes to the very heart of their lives. 41

Sally Petlter Harvey interpretes that Cather also stresses the impact that a lone individual can have on that larger community of human kind: “The history of every country beings in the heart of a man or a woman.” 42 Antonia's life is a triumph of innocence and vitality over hardship and evil. But Willa Cather does not celebrate this triumph; rather, she intones an elegy over the dying myth of the heroic innocent, over the days that are no more. 43

Antonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade—that grew stronger with time...there was a succession of such pictures, fixed there like the old wood cuts of one's first primer: Antonia kicking her bare legs against the sides of the pony when she came home in triumph,... Antonia in her black shawl and fur cap, as she stood by her father's grave in the snow-storm; Antonia coming in with her work-team along the evening skyline. she still had that something that could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things (353).

Ántonia, who, even as a grown woman somewhat downtrodden by circumstance and hard work, “had not lost the fire of life”, lies at the center of almost
every human condition that Cather's novel effortlessly untangles. *My Ántonia* is a perspective that takes into account Ántonia's status as immigrant and hence as "other" to the Midwest community in which she finds herself and Cather's own ambivalent relationship to her heroine's marginal status. She represents immigrant struggles with a foreign land and tongue, the restraints on women of the time with which Cather was very much concerned, the more general desires for 'love, family, and companionship, and the great capacity for forbearance that marked the earliest settlers on the frontier. She creates a sort of resourcefulness, a paradise of beauty and passes on to the next generation pure traditional values. She is the symbol of all immigrant women.44

**CHAPTER REFERENCES**

Page references in this chapter are to *My Ántonia* (Willa Cather, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, copyright, 1918, 1926, and 1946, by Willa Sibert Cather. Copyright, 1954, by Edith Lewis.)

1 James E. Miller, Jr, "'My Ántonia ': A Frontier Drama of Time", 


16 Wallace Stenger; *The West Authentic: Willa Cather*, (copyright c 1969 by Wallace Stegner; reprinted by permission of
Double day & Co., Inc. 1969) 167.


20 William J. Stuckey, “‘My Antonia’: A Rose for Miss Cather,” *Studies in the Novel, 4* . 3 (Fall 1972) : 480.


22 Terence Martin, “The Drama of Memory in ‘My Ántonia’, *PMLA* , 84 . 2 (March 1969) : 308.

23 Ibid., 311.


29 Terence Martin, “The Drama of Memory in ‘My Ántonia’, *MLA* , 84 . 2 (March 1969) : 310.
30 Ibid ....311.

31 Ibid., 310.


36 James E. Miller, Jr., “‘My Ántonia ’ and the American Dream,” in *Prairie Schooner*, (Summer, 1974) : 112.


