September 1973

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 10, no.3, September 1973, p.149-156
THE RESPECTABLE ROMANTIC AND
THE UNWED MOTHER:
CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS IN MY ANTONIA

By John J. Murphy

Blanche H. Gelfant’s recent article, “The Forgotten Reaping Hook: Sex in My Antonia,”1 indicates an unfortunate trend in Cather criticism in which the novelist’s fiction is confused with her life in order to destroy her traditional, healthy image. For example, John H. Randall in his consideration of My Antonia confuses Willa Cather with Jim Burden to prove that the novel implies Cather’s fear of life, of explosive, spontaneous affections and her distrust of marriage.2 (The confusion of Cather with the narrator is so extensive that at one point Randall, in referring to Jake and Otto, writes, “Willa Cather says of them, ‘Jake and Otto served us to the last, etc.’”3) Another indication of this trend is the article on The Professor’s House by James Schroeter, who interprets the characterization of Louie Marsellus as an expression of the novelist’s jealousy of Jan Hambourg, the husband of her Pittsburgh roommate, Isabelle McClung.4 Gelfant’s criticism is in this vein. Her worthy attempts to establish Jim as the central concern of the novel, analyze his relationship to Antonia and to Lena, come to grips with Pavel’s story, the snake episode, the Cutter affair, the coming of Blind d’Arnault and the performance of Camille in Lincoln are marred by undue reliance on the Cather biography.5 Her critical basis becomes Cather’s avoidance of normal sex and too close identification with her narrator: “My Antonia emerges as a brilliantly torturous novel, its statements working contrapuntally against its meanings, its apparently random vignettes falling together to form a pattern of sexual aversion into which each detail fits.”6

While all three critics can be charged with ruining a good thing in their handling of Cather’s fiction, the two critics of

1 American Literature, XLIII (March 1971), 60-82.
2 John H. Randall III, The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather’s Search for Value (Boston, 1960), 105-149.
3 Ibid., 118.
5 Gelfant, 76-77.
6 Ibid., 64-65.
My Antonia at least manage to point us in a meaningful direction regarding that novel. Randall implies and Gelfant states that Jim Burden is of primary concern in any critical effort; he is “a more disingenuous and self-deluded narrator than we supposed.” In attempting, however distortingly, to come to grips with the seemingly disparate episodes of My Antonia mentioned above, Gelfant has come a long way from the earlier consideration by David Daiches, who concluded that in these episodes “Willa Cather occasionally lost sight of her main theme.” Gelfant must be credited with having focused on the two aspects of primary critical concern: one, the characterization of Jim, his inconsistencies, his relationship to Antonia and Lena; two, the integration of the episodes through a common theme.

Jim’s failure to actively participate in Antonia’s life, to fall in love and marry her, has always been a problem for critics of My Antonia. E. K. Brown detected that at the center of Jim’s relationship with Antonia there is “an emptiness where the strongest emotion might have been expected to gather.” Brown also found some fault in Jim’s not taking his chance to marry Lena, but he attributed this and the other failure to the “creaking of the novelists’ machinery” rather than to the aversion to sex theme which has since become fashionable. Factors other than that of sexual abnormality, yet deeper than mechanics, frustrate the Jim-Antonia relationship. Jim is three years younger than Antonia, a significant difference in age in the decade of his closest relationship to her, between his tenth and seventeenth years. Throughout most of the relationship Jim is regarded by Antonia as a child. She reveals this toward the end of the novel when, referring to the Harling children and Jim, she declares, “I loved you children almost as much as I loved my own.” The social aspect of the novel also contributes to the distance between Jim and Antonia. Jim is of old American stock, from a class which considers foreigners like Antonia “ignorant people who couldn’t speak English” (pp.

7 Ibid., 60.
10 Ibid., 203-204.
11 Willa Cather, My Antonia, Sentry Edition (Boston, 1961), 234. Subsequent references to the novel will be included in the text.
These social distinctions become obvious in “The Hired Girls” section of the novel. They are as thematically important in *My Antonia* as they are in *Main Street*, where Swedes and Norwegians are good for making a profit from and begrudgingly allowed the status of hired help. If there is irony in Cather’s novel, it is in Jim’s analysis of class distinctions in the light of his own blindness regarding himself; if there is anything that defeats Cather’s West it is the emergence of classes and the materialistic struggle accompanying it.

The lyricism of “The Shimerdas” section of *My Antonia* is due in part to the sublimation of class sense during the heroic struggle with Nature. As Miller points out, cultural development—class sense as well as artistic achievement—was minimized in the West as “comparatively sophisticated people [were] compelled literally to begin over again, on a primitive level, shedding their cultural attainment like an animal its skin, and, like animals, doing battle with the land and the elements for the meanest food and shelter.” 12 There is more equality, more democracy, if more savagery, manifest during this stage. While we are never allowed to forget the social superiority of the Burdens over the Shinlerdas, Grandmother and Grandfather Burden’s sense of Christian duty toward the unfortunate family minimizes the class separation. A suggestion of equality is achieved in Chapter 18, when Jake, the Burden hired hand, fights Ambrosch over a horse collar and Antonia hotly declares her independence from the Burdens: “I never like you no more Jake and Jim Burden . . . . No friends any more!” (p. 130).

Fortunately, it is a friendlier equality that dominates the Jim-Antonia relationship in this section. The discovery of the wonders of the new country do much to make these pages memorable; memorable also is the struggle with Nature. An aspect of this struggle is dramatized in the snake episode, in which man combats the beast for survival. Although this is reduced to a mock adventure, it looks forward to a more noteworthy struggle with the beast in the story of the wolves. Peter and Pavel were reduced to savagery in this episode, which, while it took place in a far-off land, epitomizes the shedding of civilization now occurring on the Nebraska plains. The Russians’ story contains another aspect of the reduction to

primitivism evident in this section, the struggle with cold. This struggle commences in the marvelous episode where Antonia rescues a half frozen insect from the grass and places it in her hair, is developed in the story of the wolves, and reaches a ghastly climax in the discovery of the frozen body of Mr. Shimerda. The outcome of this struggle with the cold is not primarily savagery, however, but a sense of brotherhood. After Mr. Shimerda's suicide the pioneers become more talkative: "It releases speech in the people who hear about it, thus unites the living into a closer knit group than they had formed before. Since their talk is mostly about the deaths of others they have known or heard about, it serves to tighten the organic bonds of the little frontier community."13

"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; the small town comes to the wilderness and in it there is a stratification of society largely suppressed on the virgin prairie.14 This change is not abrupt. Indications of social fragmentation come to the surface at various points in "The Shimerdas" section. From the very beginning Jake warns Jim that foreigners are disease ridden (p. 5). Later on Mrs. Burden throws away Mrs. Shimerda’s gift of mushrooms as unfit to eat (p. 79). Near the end of this first section Otto tells Jim not to expect much from a Czech (p. 131). Social prejudice and class pride appear most significantly after Mr. Shimerda takes his life. Neither the Catholics nor the Norwegians will allow Shimerda’s body to be buried in their cemeteries. Grandmother Burden reveals her own class feeling in her indignation at these refusals: "If these foreigners are so clannish . . . we’ll have to have an American graveyard that will be more liberal-minded" (p. 112).

Black Hawk is “American” but hardly liberal-minded. The Bohemians, the Norwegians, the Danes, etc. are considered inferior by the so-called respectable classes. The foreign girls who are hired out are “considered a menace to the social order” (p. 201). Embittered by class consciousness, Jim insists that the hired girls are superior to the daughters of Pennsylvania

13 Randall, 125-126.
14 Miller, 482.
and Virginia immigrants. The guarded smugness of the "respectable" classes leads Jim to his most extensive condemnation of the values symbolized by the Western town:

On starlight nights I used to pace up and down those long, cold streets, scowling at the little, sleeping houses on either side, with their storm-windows and covered back porches. They were flimsy shelters, most of them poorly built of light wood, with spindle porch-posts horribly mutilated by the turning-lathe. Yet for all their frailness, how much jealousy and envy and unhappiness some of them managed to contain! 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 (pp. 219-220).

Black Hawk class consciousness has its effect on the relationship of Jim and Antonia. Jinl reveals himself as one of the respectable young men who will risk nothing more than general disapproval for the excitement of a waltz with the hired girls. He fails to recognize the similarity between himself and Sylvester Lovett, who after his fling with Lena, a girl of "inferior" class, protected himself from her by running away with an acceptable widow six years older than himself. An irate Jim concludes that anxious mothers of Black Hawk "need have felt no alarm. They mistook the mettle of their sons, for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth" (p. 202). When Jim agrees to give up dancing with the hired girls to satisfy his grandparents he is doing no less than bowing to respectability. Perhaps his irritation with Black Hawk is in part self-condemnation. Antonia is certainly conscious of her social position, which, when added to her natural maternalism and age, causes her to reject Jim's advances. She wants Jim to have the schooling she is not able to have; she sets her heart on his becoming a doctor. Her aspirations for Jim are far above any she would entertain for a member of her own class. All this must be considered when she warns Jim against his passionate advance: "You know
you ain't right to kiss me like that. I'll tell your grandmother on you" (p. 224). She would also protect Jim from the advances of Lena, whom she considers a threat to the aspirations of his class: "If she's up to any of her nonsense with you, I'll scratch her eyes out . . . . You are going away to school and make something of yourself. I'm just awful proud of you. You won't go and get mixed up with the Swedes, will you?" (p. 224). It can be argued that Jim is hardly sexually aggressive, but it must also be recognized that Antonia gives him no encouragement. The social structure more than any other factor defeats a normal male-female relationship; it also encourages Jim to make a symbol out of the woman he never possesses.

Jim's symbol-making ability is the result of the cultural evolution of the frontier. The cultural evolution contains two elements: class consciousness and artistic achievement. In Cather's system of values, the former is an evil and the latter a good. The development of art, especially the performing arts, on the prairie is an important aspect of *My Antonia*. The harmonica, which provides musical expression during the first days of prairie life, gives way to the piano in "The Hired Girls" section, first the Harling piano and then the playing of Blind d'Arnault. The dance is also introduced in this section. Music develops in direct opposition to class consciousness. Richard Giannone has noted that the Shimerda violin, which was silenced during the first section of the novel, is played again in the last. When Jim submits to his grandparents' wishes to stop going to dances with the hired girls, he turns to literature: "I sat at home with the old people in the evenings now, reading Latin that was not in our high-school course" (p. 227). Through the classics, especially Virgil, Jim is able to bridge imaginatively the distance society has opened up between himself and Antonia and, at the same time, escape self-condemnation for his own inability to bridge realistically that distance.

As a real person, Antonia now begins to retreat from Jim. This becomes obvious as he makes his way to the picnic with the hired girls. He sees Antonia seated alone under the pagoda-like elders. She is becoming for him the symbol of his first

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experience in the new country. (There is an element of narcissism in this, evident, perhaps, when he admits being reluctant to leave the green enclosure in which he dries himself after a swim (pp. 234-235).) By making Antonia the romantic image of his own initiation into the prairie country, he can possess her without crossing class lines. The Cutter episode represents a challenge to this romancing, however. As in the snake episode, which it parallels, Antonia is the damsel in distress and Jim comes to her aid. The results are different, however. Jim's relationship with Antonia was simple when he "rescued" her from the sluggish snake; his feelings are ambivalent when he "rescues" her from the wiles of Wick Cutter. Because Antonia is the object of Cutter's desire and because her social class makes her vulnerable, the reality Jim has tried to sublimate in his romantic image comes back to him in a flash. His reaction is harsh: "I felt that I never wanted to see her again. I hated her almost as much as I hated Cutter. She had let me in for all this disgustingness" (p. 250).

Jim's relationship with Lena Lingard represents another challenge to his image of Antonia. Lena reflects Jim's retreat from reality and invades the romantic realm in which Antonia has become enshrined. This is obvious during the above-mentioned picnic scene when Lena interrupts Jim's tête-a-tête with Antonia and demolishes their flowery pagoda (p. 238). Lena, through her acceptance of the class structure and her determination to rise in it by leaving the farm and not marrying or having a family, exposes both the worldliness and unnaturalness of Jim's position. This "violation" of Nature is suggested in Jim's dream of Lena carrying a reaping hook and emerging from a field of stubble (p. 225). The Lincoln setting of the "Lena Lingard" section has an unreality appropriate to the Jim-Lena relationship; it is dominated by music, poetry and especially the theatre. Thrilled now by make-believe people and situations rather than by Nature, Jim has changed the position he had in the first section, where, as Martin has noted, he surrendered to Nature among the ripe pumpkins in his grandmother's garden. Jim and Lena can play at make-believe for only a brief time, however. Any permanent rela-

16 Terence Martin, "The Drama of Memory in *My Antonia*," *PMLA.* LXXXIV (March 1969), 307.
tionship between them would challenge Lena's vows against marriage and family and also the privileges cherished by Jim's social class. They renounce each other for the sake of worldly position in a scene as indirect as the artificial world they inhabit. During a performance of Camille they give vent to their feelings of parting; the actual parting is a rather pallid affair sometime later, after which Jim continues his studies at Harvard and Lena goes on to become a successful dressmaker in San Francisco.

Having survived the threat of Lena, Jim's Lincoln experiences only strengthen the romance of his lost childhood and Antonia. They become one in his mind. The "My" with which Jim prefixed "Antonia," when he supposedly gave the manuscript to Willa Cather, pertains to Book IV, "The Pioneer Woman's Story," and Book V, "Cuzak's Boys." Jim's imaginative powers are indeed formidable when, after she has borne her child, he meets Antonia in the fields at sunset. The beauty of this scene obscures the extent to which Jim has lost touch with reality. He tells Antonia, "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 a part of my mind . . . . You really are a part of me" (p. 321). Jim has become so self-centered that he feels no embarrassment in his use of the past tense to an abandoned young woman no longer significantly different from him in age.

*My Antonia* is a hauntingly sad testimony to the unfulfilled potential of Jim Burden and the American West. The image of the plough, briefly magnified into epic proportions by the setting sun, symbolizes the short-lived potential of the early years, a potential destroyed by social habit and small-minded, materialistic values.