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The Iconography of Vice in Willa Cather’s My Ántonia

by EVELYN H. HALLER

To read Willa Cather as one would read Woolf, Joyce, or Proust is to invite disappointment, for she is not a composer of inward voyages. Rather, to paraphrase a review she wrote for The Nebraska Journal as an undergraduate in 1894, she eschewed the ravishing beauty of “Mr. Whistler’s nocturnes in color” to emulate “the power and the greatness of the old faded frescoes” that tell “roughly of hell and heaven and death and judgment,” for, as she explained, “the supreme virtue in all art is soul, perhaps,” as she declared, “it is the only thing which gives art a right to be.” While several essays have alerted readers to medieval elements in Cather’s work, none has yet explored an iconography of vice as it is encountered in her masterpiece, My Ántonia.

What application has the text of Cather’s admiration for “faded frescoes” to our understanding of her work? As Bernice Slote points out, Willa Cather had “absorbed the Bible and Pilgrim’s Progress. Their presence in her writing is constant, insistent, pervasive. Indeed they made allegory familiar and natural to her, so that she thought allegorical (or symbolically).” Can the reader, then, always find one-to-one relationships between a Cather characterization and an allegorical source? No, as Slote states, Cather’s “technique was never to follow a myth or allegory thoroughly and consistently. She wished rather to touch lightly and pass on, letting the suggestions develop as the course of individual imagination might take them.”

In order to let suggestions develop, Cather relied on “the right detail” as Flaubert relied on “le mot juste.” When she quotes Mérimée on Gogol in her important essay, “The Novel Demeuble,” we may be sure she is reinforcing a standard for herself: “The art of choosing among the

1. Writings from Willa Cather’s Campus Years, ed. James R. Shively (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1950), March 4, 1894 (p. 34).
innumerable features which nature offers us is, after all, much more diffi­
cult than that of observing them carefully and rendering them exactly.” In
peopling My Antonia with strategic minor characters to evoke the
drama of the New Land, Cather secures their places in the reader’s visual
imagination through emblems. Those we shall examine draw on elements
from the medieval taxonomy of sin. For illustration I shall have recourse
to Chaucer’s “Parson’s Tale” because it is a convenient source for alternati­
tives to what Cather referred to as “all the meaningless reiterations con­
cerning physical sensations.” Cather’s respect for the tradition realized in
the medieval taxonomy of sin is suggested in Godfrey St. Peter’s lecture in
her novel The Professor’s House wherein he attributes to the Christian
theologians craftsmanlike excision of the Old Law, resetting “the stage
with more space and mystery, throwing all the light upon a few sins of
great dramatic value—only seven. . . .”7 Thus, when Cather declared that
“the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts” and identified her inter­
ests as on the side of the previous “seven thousand years,”8 we can assume
her agreement with Professor St. Peter’s contention that science has taken
away our old sins without giving us any new ones, for “there is not much
thrill about a physiological sin.”

To underscore the emblematic quality of her precise delineations of
minor characters in My Antonia, Cather also makes use of allusions to the
eemblematic portraits of the Canterbury pilgrims; indeed she referred to
Chaucer as one who had formed “the great tradition of English litera­
ture.”10 That Cather’s appreciation of Chaucer included his moral vision
is apparent in My Antonia as well as in other works of hers. We shall see,
then, that the minor characters in this novel are described not so much in
terms of personality as in terms of morality. The emblems themselves,
however, though recognizable in the schema of the vices they portray, are
of Willa Cather’s own making.

Nonetheless, examples of all Seven Deadly Sins may be found among
the minor characters. Using the Parson’s ordering of these sins we find as
the most prominent examples the following: superbia or pride in Larry
Donovan, Antonia’s seducer; invidia or envy in Mrs. Shimerda and Lazy

5. The English translation appears in Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, Willa Cather’s Gift
of Sympathy, Crosscurrents: Modern Critiques, Harry T. Moore, ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois
choisir parmi les innombrable traits que nous offre la nature est, après tout, bien plus difficile que celui
de les observer avec attention et de les rendre avec exactitude.” Not Under Forty (New York: Alfred A.
9. The Professor’s House, p. 68.
University Library), Miss Cather expresses the wish that her book may be considered as part of the
great tradition of English literature formed by Chaucer, Shakespeare and the King James Bible. She goes on to
justify Chaucer’s place in this tradition by praising his unequalled humor and humanity . . .” (p. 532).
(Quoted by Mary-Ann Stouck, “Chaucer’s Pilgrims and Cather’s Priests,” Colby Library Quarterly IX
(1972), pp. 531–537.)
Mary; ira or anger in Pavel and Mrs. Cutter; accidia in Anton Shimerda; avaricia or greed in Wick Cutter; gula or gluttony in Russian Peter; and luxuria or lust in Wick Cutter, once again. Cather’s images of the bare room from which the furniture has been thrown out of the window and the bare house “into which the glory of Pentecost descended,” provide a stage to place these emblematic figures as they tell “roughly of hell and heaven and death and judgment”—the drama of the soul—as it surrounds the central figure of Antonia, who is herself emblematic. We shall begin with Ántonia’s parents, the Shimerdas. Because of Mrs. Shimerda’s greed which moves her to what Chaucer’s Parson calls “gruchochyng” and “murmuracioun” until she has prevailed upon her husband to emigrate from Bohemia, she becomes in the New World an embodiment of envy. We first see her at the train station with “a little tin trunk in her arms, hugging it as if it were a baby.” Thereafter, with her “sharp chin and shrewd little eyes” (p. 17), looking old before her time, she projects the dis-ease of one caught in the one sin that has no delight in itself, as the Parson glosses envy. In the Shimerda’s first crude dwelling—a cave dug out from a shelving draw, she shakes a coffee-pot at the Burdens “with a look positively vindictive” (p. 49). Then she drops “on the floor beside her crazy son,” hides her face on her knees, and cries bitterly (p. 49). Of her visit to the narrator’s family, Jim Burden says:

She ran about examining our carpets and curtains and furniture, all the while commenting upon them to her daughter in an envious, complaining tone. In the kitchen she caught up an iron pot that stood on the back of the stove and said: “You got too many, Shimerdas no got.” I thought it was weak-minded of grandmother to give the pot to her. (p. 60)

After dinner when she was helping to wash the dishes, she said, tossing her head: “You got many things for cook. If I got all things like you, I make much better.” (p. 61)

Jim sums up his distaste by remarking to Ántonia, “Your mama wants other people’s things” (p. 61).

After some years have passed and Mrs. Shimerda enjoys relative prosperity in a log house on her land, we see her indulging another species of envy, what the Parson calls “joy of other men’s harm” (l. 493). On this occasion the temptress figure of the novel, Lena Lingard, is chased by Crazy Mary, whose husband Ole has been following after Lena as she herds cattle to the neglect of his plowing. Mary—another victim of envy—brandishes a corn knife with the intention of trimming some of Lena’s shape off. Jim Burden, a visitor, describes how while Lena was hidden in Ántonia’s feather bed, “Mary came right up to the door and made us feel

12. Shively, p. 34.
how sharp her blade was, showing us very graphically just what she meant to do to Lena. Mrs. Shimerda, leaning out of the window, enjoyed the situation keenly, and was sorry when Antonia sent Mary away, mollified by an apronful of bottle-tomatoes” (p. 13). Mrs. Shimerda would have given Crazy Mary nothing; Antonia gives her the suggestively-shaped love-apples.

While Mrs. Shimerda provides spots of comic relief—making threatening gestures with kitchen utensils like a classic scold—her husband Anton is a tragic figure of that species of accidia called by Chaucer’s Parson tristica. Significantly, his skills are among the arts of the Old World which cannot support him in the New: tapestry and upholstery weaving, violin and horn playing, and reading of such scope and depth that, as Antonia remembers, “the priests in Bohemie come to talk to him” (p. 81). Much later, when she is a grandmother, Ántonia tells Jim of how Anton’s decision to marry her mother rather than give her money had caused an irreparable break with his family. The child born of that premature union was Ambrosch, Ántonia’s grasping older brother, who has inherited his mother’s invidious quality with the addition of ire: he fights dirty.

The deprivation Anton Shimerda suffers from the loss of trees and aesthetic surroundings is signalled by his kneeling to pray by the Burdens’ Christmas tree. He is never without “a scarf of a dark bronze-green carefully crossed and held together by a red coral pin” (p. 19). Apart from this careful crossing of his scarf, there is little for his deft hands to do aside from making rabbit-skin hats for his daughters during the family’s first winter in their dug-out. When a severe January blizzard makes the loss of Bohemia utterly unbearable to him after a particularly long period of confinement in the dark cave-like dwelling, he commits suicide in the barn having carefully removed his boots which Antonia subsequently wears. The sight of Mr. Shimerda’s corpse after its preparation for burial affects Jim deeply. The placement of his hand is crucial, for it is emblematic of his blighted craftsman’s life: “His body was draped in a black shawl, and his head was bandaged in black muslin, like a mummy’s; one of his long shapely hands lay out on the black cloth; that was all one could see of him” (p. 76). The presence of this passage asserts Cather’s sensitivity to and provision for pictures in the reader’s mind, for without it one would be left with the aesthetically displeasing scene of his suicide as it is reconstructed by one of the Burdens’ hired men: Mr. Shimerda using his toe to pull the trigger on the hunting rifle he had placed in his mouth. In this we have an emblem of Cather’s own making, for a traditional emblem of despair is the man hanged by his own hand because of the singularly important precedent of Judas Iscariot. But in Anton Shimerda’s suicide the gun is appropriate, for it was one of his few possessions from the old country and had been given him by “a great man” at whose wedding he had played.

Jim’s observation, “I knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr.
Shimerda" (p. 68) recalls the Parson’s gloss on *tristitia*, “the sin of worldly sorrow . . . that slays men, as St. Paul says. For certainly, such sorrow works to the death of the soul and of the body also; for from it comes that a man is annoyed with his own life. Wherefore such sorrow shortens full often the life of a man, before his time by way of nature” (l. 726). Indeed Anton Shimerda’s suicide is anticipated by Jim’s first description of him, “His face was roughly formed, but it looked like ashes—like something from which all the warmth and light had died out” (p. 19) and is reinforced by Jim’s sight of him as “a figure moving on the edge of the upland” against the setting sun “a gun over his shoulder . . . walking slowly, dragging his feet along as if he had no purpose” (p. 30) as well as “the old man’s smile . . . so full of sadness, of pity for things” (p. 31) as he looks at the last grasshopper of the autumn which Antonia has given shelter in her hair. After the funeral Jim ponders on the repose of Mr. Shimerda’s soul and observes: “I remembered the account of Dives in torment and shuddered. But Mr. Shimerda had not been rich and selfish; he had only been so unhappy that he could not live any longer” (p. 69).

Among the few friends Anton Shimerda makes are Pavel and Peter, Russian immigrants “on whom misfortune seemed to settle like an evil bird on the roof of the house, and to flap its wings there, warning human beings away” (p. 36). Through financial transactions Peter did not understand, he became hopelessly in debt to Wick Cutter, “the merciless Black Hawk money-lender” (p. 36). Meanwhile Pavel strains himself “lifting timbers for a new barn.” This incident appears to exacerbate otherwise weakened health, for not long thereafter as Pavel fights for breath, he tells Anton Shimerda why he and Peter left Russia. They had been members of a wedding party that set out for the groom’s village after long hours of feasting during a winter in which the wolves were especially predatory. Pavel drove the lead sledge of the six which held the bride and groom. Before long, wolves who had overtaken the other five sledges—by making the horses lose control—were about to overtake theirs when Pavel “called to the groom that they must lighten—and pointed to the bride. . . . In the struggle the groom rose. Pavel knocked him over the side of the sledge and threw the bride after him. He said he never remembered exactly how he did it, or what happened afterward” (p. 41). Rejected by their village, including Peter’s mother though Peter, “crouching in the front seat, had seen nothing” (p. 41), the men had been alone ever since the incident. The story of the “two men who had fed the bride to the wolves” seemed to follow them wherever they went. Pavel, guilty of manslaughter which, according to the Parson, “comes of the cursed sin of ire” (l. 562), becomes in body “a hollow case. . . . His spine and shoulder-blades stood out like the bones under the hide of a dead steer left in the fields” (p. 38). Though Pavel’s body resembles a corpse, he treats Peter, who nurses him, with contempt. As Jim Burden remarks, Pavel “despised him for being so simple and docile” (p. 38). Ire, then, continues to dominate Pavel’s last
days after a lifetime of suffering which has not been that of consciously-willed retribution.

Peter, on the other hand, is a glutton with the appearance of Chaucer's Franklin as well as that of a lamb: "His hair and beard were of such a pale flaxen color that they seemed white in the sun. They were as thick and curly as carded wool. His rosy face, with its snub nose, set in the fleece was like a melon among its leaves" (pp. 24–25). Again, like the Franklin, Peter has the social qualities of a glutton: "He was very hospitable and jolly" (p. 26). When Peter is not nursing Pavel, he is seen digging his potatoes—an action not unlike a pig's rooting. Most significantly, after Pavel's death and the auction of their property to settle Peter's debts to Wick Cutter and immediately before he leaves "to be a cook in a railway construction camp" (p. 41), Peter improbably consumes an entire winter's supply of melons at one sitting thereby evoking an emblem of gluttony: "they found him with a dripping beard, surrounded by heaps of melon rinds" (p. 42).

Having escaped the wolves that devoured the wedding party through Pavel's sacrifice of the bride and groom, the Russians themselves are in effect thrown to a ravenous wolf in the person of Wick Cutter, "a man of evil name throughout the country" (p. 36). Indeed—note Cather's choice of verb—Cutter "had fleeced poor Russian Peter" (p. 137). Through her characterization of Wick Cutter, whose name suggests "agent of darkness" which he in fact is, Cather's moral indignation parallels that of Ezra Pound in his denunciation of Usura. Moreover, like Chaucer's Reeve, Cutter lives in a house shadowed with green trees. Not only is Cutter repeatedly branded as a usurer—a sin which Chaucer's Parson places under homicide in the train of ire (l. 563)—but also as a lecher: "He was notoriously dissolute with women. Two Swedish girls who had lived in his house were the worse for the experience. One of them he had taken to Omaha and established in the business for which he had fitted her. He still visited her" (p. 138). The Parson's eloquence is especially virulent concerning one who robs "a maiden of her maidenhead" for he "is the cause of many damages and shameful injuries, more than any man can reckon" for "he destroys that which may not be restored" (ll. 869–870).

Cutter's vices of avarice and lust are made additionally repulsive by an implied—though sustained—comparison of him to a pig. As Jim Burden expresses it: "I detested his pink, bald head, and his yellow whiskers, always soft and glistening. . . . His skin was red and rough, as if from perpetual sunburn; he often went away to hot springs to take mud baths" (p. 138). As Boethius phrased such matters, Cutter is one who, because of the poisons that within him swarm" is entangled in the pleasures of a stinking sow" as well as lupine in his role as a "violent extorter of other men's goods carried away by covetous desires."

Mrs. Cutter is an embodiment of ire. Not only is she given a martial style of dress—plumed headgear and brocades the color and texture of armour, but she also has characteristics of the animal primarily associated with war—the horse:

She was a terrifying-looking person; almost a giantess in height, raw-boned, with iron-grey hair, a face always flushed, and prominent, hysterical eyes. When she meant to be entertaining and agreeable, she nodded her head incessantly and snapped her eyes at one. Her teeth were long and curved, like a horse's. . . . Her face had a kind of fascination for me: it was the very color and shape of anger. There was a gleam of something akin to insanity in her full, intense eyes. She was formal in manner, and made calls in rustling, steel-grey brocades and a tall bonnet with bristling aigrettes. (p. 139)

An additional motif of anger Cather employs is an allusion to Chaucer's Summoner whose face, like that of Mrs. Cutter, frightens children when he is not quivering with rage.

The relationship of the Cutters is a perverted marriage: “Cutter lived in a state of perpetual warfare with his wife, and yet, apparently, they never thought of separating” (p. 138). A major subject for dispute between them was “the question of inheritance.” To prevent her outliving him “to share his property with her ‘people,’ whom he detested,” Cutter took exercise by driving a trotting horse about a track. Since he could not control his wife, Cutter drives an animal which closely resembles her.

Jim's childhood fight with a giant rattlesnake, thick as his leg which "looked as if millstones couldn't crush the disgusting vitality out of him" (p. 32) foreshadows his fight with Wick Cutter as lecher. In this episode Cutter had designed an elaborate plot both to humiliate his wife and to rob Antonia, then their hired girl, of her maidenhead. The scheme is foiled by Jim's grandmother who, anticipating foul play, arranges for Jim to sleep in Antonia's bed over a box of papers and a basket of silver in the Cutter's empty house. Jim writes:

A hand closed softly on my shoulder, and at the same moment I felt something hairy and cologne-scented brushing my face. If the room had suddenly been flooded with electric light, I couldn't have seen more clearly the detestable bearded countenance that I knew was bending over me. I caught a handful of whiskers and pulled, shouting something. The hand that held my shoulder was instantly at my throat. The man became insane; he stood over me, choking me with one fist and beating me in the face with the other, hissing and chuckling and letting out a flood of abuse. (p. 161)

Jim wins, as he had with the aged rattlesnake, and in repetition of the earlier battle, he protects Antonia and wins her admiration.

The violent deaths of the Cutters follow a decided course of retribution in which Cutter, shrivelled to a “little old yellow monkey” shoots his wife and one hour later shoots himself, having summoned witnesses to attest to his triumph over a recently passed law “securing the surviving wife a third of her husband's estate under all conditions” (p. 234). Cutter thus exemplifies both avarice—to withhold and keep such things as thou hast without rightful need—as well as his perennial covetousness—to covet such
things as thou hast not (ll. 743–744), according to the distinctions made by the Parson. When Jim Burden as an experienced lawyer, admits that he had never heard of anyone else who had killed himself for spite, the reader recalls Jim’s childhood shudders at “the account of Dives in torment,” for here surely is one who was both rich and selfish.

A final emblem for Cutter is that of his death scene: he “was lying on a sofa in his upstairs bedroom, with his throat torn open, bleeding on a roll of sheets he had placed beside his head” (p. 234). His provision for absorption of his death’s blood so that it will not damage valuable property attests to Cutter’s prudent management of the things of the world. Here indeed we have a variation on Hieronymus Bosch’s theme of “Death of the Miser.”

Reversing the usual progress of the Seven Deadly Sins, I have placed the example of superbia or pride at the end. Larry Donovan, a passenger conductor, is a man who deceives Antonia with promises of marriage, persuades her to join him in Denver, and, having been nursed by her after an illness, leaves when her money runs out to “get rich . . . collecting half-fares off the natives” of Mexico (p. 202). His failing is pride—not only does he assume that the world owes him a living, but a prestigious one at that. His character is concisely expressed as that of “one of those train-crew aristocrats who are always afraid that someone may ask them to put up a car-window, and who, if requested to perform such a menial service, silently points to the button that calls the porter. Larry wore this air of official aloofness even on the street, where there were no car windows to compromise his dignity” (p. 197). Donovan ceaselessly lamented his unsuitable position, comparing himself with the man who was General Passenger Agent in Denver, for example. “His unappreciated worth was the tender secret Larry shared with his sweethearts, and he was always able to make some foolish heart ache over it” (p. 198). From the Parson’s point of view, Donovan is at least arrogant, for “he thinks that he has virtues in himself that he hath not, or expects that he should have them by his deserts, or else he deems that he be what he is not” (l. 394). While everyone else saw Donovan for what he was, Antonia to her sorrow took him at his own value and, according to Lena Lingard, talked “about him like he was president of the railroad” (p. 173).

By playing down motivation with its suggestion that to understand precludes judgment in the instances of these minor characters: the Shimerdas; the Russians, Pavel and Peter; the Cutters and Larry Donovan—Cather’s highly objectified and precisely detailed emblematic characterizations are sharply etched in a pattern that renders the eschatology, to which she had earlier declared allegiance, close at hand.

There remains a final matter: Antonia’s place in the pattern. While she was planning the novel, Cather had said to a friend as she placed a jar filled with orange-brown flowers in the center of a round table: “I want my new heroine to be like this—like a rare object in the middle of a table,
which one may examine from all sides." She then moved a lamp "so that light streamed brightly down" on the jar.\textsuperscript{16} Cather's inspiration for the novel had occurred not long before when she saw a friend of her childhood and youth, Anna Sadilek Pavelka, surrounded by her thirteen children on her farm outside Red Cloud, Nebraska. Of this woman, Willa Cather told an interviewer in 1921: "She was one of the truest artists I ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, in her love of people and in her willingness to take pains."\textsuperscript{17}

In the brief introduction to the novel by a Willa Cather-like narrator to whom the fictional Jim Burden has delivered the manuscript, there occurs a passage which provides a structural thrust toward the culminating scene of Antonia as Charity. It is an opinion of Jim Burden's nameless wife who is a New Yorker: "I do not like his wife. She is handsome, energetic, executive, but to me she seems unimpressionable and temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm. Her husband's quiet tastes irritate her, I think, and she finds it worthwhile to play the patroness to a group of young poets and painters of advanced ideas and mediocre ability" (pp. 1-2). Despite this brief characterization, Mrs. Burden's role is an important one, for she acts as a repellent force, driving her husband to a metaphorical pilgrimage to the Nebraska prairie to visit Antonia in whom "the precious, the incommunicable past" (p. 240) which she shares with him is enshrined.

Burden—he who has the story to tell, as his name recalling the message of an Old Testament prophet suggests—comes to a place of spiritual rest and refreshment when Antonia speaks of their lives as they sit in her triple-enclosed apple orchard—a \textit{hortus conclusus} under a sky of "that indescribable blue of autumn; bright and shadowless, hard as enamel" (p. 239). Such a sky is the sky of the Brothers Limbourg illuminations, especially when we are told that "the orchard seemed full of sun, like a cup" (p. 222). The autumnally fruitful Antonia—like Spenser's Charissa or other emblems of Charity—is the mother of many children in contrast to Burden's barren wife. Antonia is, however, flat-chested, brown-skinned, and grizzled, in keeping with Cather's comparative realism. Antonia's role is unlike those of the minor characters with respect to vice: for example, her first pregnancy when she was unwed is presented in terms of misdirected Caritas as well as lack of prudence for, as Lena Lingard says of her, "That's Antonia's failing . . . if she once likes people, she won't hear anything against them" (p. 174). Or as Antonia herself puts it, "the trouble with me was . . . I never could believe harm of anybody I loved" (p. 223). Unlike virtues and vices frozen in stone on cathedrals, Antonia develops. But the development is one which makes the sculpturally rich ending with its eschatological dimension particularly satisfying. As Jim


Burden avers: "Ántonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade" (p. 228). Moreover, the metaphorical table on which she stands is like unto the table top on which Hieronymus Bosch painted the Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things. And just as Bosch presents the sins against Dutch landscape or in Dutch interiors, so Cather has presented them against the prairies or in Nebraska dwellings.

_In Doane College_  
Crete, Nebraska

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18. A reproduction of Bosch's "Tabletop of the Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things" as well as a discussion may be found in Walter S. Gibson's _Hieronymus Bosch_, A Praeger World of Art Profile (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), fig. 27 and pp. 33–47. Another source for both reproduction and discussion is Carl Linfert's _Hieronymus Bosch_, The Library of Great Painters (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., n. d.), figs. 1–3; and pp. 42–44.