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A Mediating Presence in Cather’s MY ANTONIA

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Willa Cather wrote that an artist “should be able to lift himself into the clear firmament of creation where the world is not. He should be among men but not of them, in the world but not of the world” (qtd. in Randall 5). Cather’s self-imposed obligation to her craft made her an intermediary between where the world is and is not. Cather, herself an intermediary, infused My Antonia with a varied and recurring mediating presence.

On the Nebraska prairie, landscape serves as a conciliator between the material self and the spiritual self. Laura Winters, in Willa Cather: Landscape and Exile, observes that Cather “transforms secular space into sacred places” (3). Winters notes that a sacred place is not always one of “peace and contentment” but may be one of “transformation” (8–9). Unlike Mr. Shimerda, who couldn’t reconcile his old country with his new, Antonia learned to make the harsh land habitable, and eventually home, only when she mitigated it. Joseph W. Meeker, in “Willa Cather: The Plow and the Pen,” states that Cather “generally [felt] that a person cannot know who they are without also knowing where they are and what dynamics govern the natural world around them” (77). In transforming the once-foreign

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land into something familiar, Antonia transformed herself from an immigrant girl to a pioneer woman.

Nature is often a source for sacred or transcendental experience, as Grandmother’s garden was for Jim: “A sacred place reconciles opposites” (Winters 9). The garden was a mediator; it prompted Jim’s early epiphany that all things are interconnected. Jim initially thought there was “nothing to see” in Nebraska (Cather 11). In his new place—“not a country at all”—Jim felt “erased, blotted out” (Cather 11). However, on his second day on the farm, Jim went to the garden, where he began to see the details of the prairie: pumpkins, berries, grasshoppers, gophers, wind, and earth. The sun shone on Jim as it had all the details of the garden, replacing Jim’s feeling of nothingness with a feeling of oneness. Jim interpreted the moment, saying, “[T]hat is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great” (Cather 17).

The sky also serves as a mediator of sorts. The Nebraska sky—“the complete dome of heaven” (Cather 11)—was the sacred mediating bridge that spanned and reconciled opposites—the one who left and the one who stayed, the American and the immigrant, the city lawyer and the country mother, the man and the woman. Upon Jim’s return, as Jim and Antonia “walked homeward across the fields,” the sun fell in the west as the moon rose in the east (192). “[T]he two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world. In that singular light every little tree and shock of wheat, every sunflower stalk and clump of snow-on-the-mountain, drew itself up high and pointed” (192). The sky over Black Hawk that night was the same sky that was overhead when Jim and Antonia were kids.

In *My Antonia*, the land is also a mediator between the present and the past, as though all the organic and inorganic features of a place preserve and prompt a person’s memory. Smelling a flower, Antonia says, “We have this flower very much at home, in the old country. It always grew in our yard and my papa had a green bench and a table under the bushes. In summer, when they were in bloom, he used to sit there with his friend that played the trombone” (Cather
The details—shapes, colors, smells—of one’s environment can be a catalyst for dense memory. Jim’s memories of Antonia are inextricably linked to the Nebraska sky, the copper prairie, and the winding rivers and paths of Black Hawk.

Just as the land is a mediator, so are its stewards. Throughout My Antonia, the reader learns that dissolving into one’s environment requires action. Jim was not idle in the garden; he was observant, even studious. Jim later reported that he was “never happier, never felt more contented and secure, than in the weeks [. . . he was] out all day in the thin sunshine, helping Mrs. Harling and Tony break the ground and plant the garden, dig around the orchard trees, tie up vines and clip the hedges” (Cather 117). Anthony R. Magagna, in his dissertation Placing the West: Landscape, Literature, and Identity in the American West, calls the practice of “transforming those obliterating spaces into familiar places” in My Antonia an “arduous process” (12). Mr. Shimerda might have experienced a spiritual transformation had he learned to work the Nebraska soil, had he done what Turner’s frontier thesis identified as a requirement for settlers on the frontier: tame the wild. My Antonia promotes the Turnerian frontier. Jim says, “[A]ll the human effort that had gone into [the flat tableland] was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me” (Cather 184).

As the fictional author, Jim is an intermediary between the reader and everything we know of Antonia. He admitted, “It’s through myself that I knew and felt her” (Cather 5). Jim is also the medium by which Antonia first learned the new language of her environment; among the first English he taught her were the words for his name and a cottonwood tree. Antonia later picked up English quickly in Mrs. Harling’s home. Jim acted as a mediator, but also found one in his grandfather Burden, who facilitated the sacred through language and intonation as he read from Psalms. Jim was spiritually moved by Grandfather’s reading, saying, “I had no idea what the word [Selah] meant. [. . . ] But, as he uttered it, it became oracular, the most sacred of words” (Cather 15).
The places and people of Black Hawk are not the sum of the mediating presence in *My Antonia*—Mr. Burden introduced another intermediary. In a conversation with Anton Jelinek about Mr. Shimerda’s eternal fate, Mr. Burden was unusually explicit about his religious beliefs. The Bohemians believed Mr. Shimerda’s suicide was a great sin, and they hoped that a priest would travel to the country. Explaining that Mr. Shimerda’s soul wasn’t dependent on the priest, Mr. Burden said to Jelinek, “We believe Christ is our only intercessor” (Cather 66).

**Works Cited**


