

# Depiction of immigration in my antonia



**ASSIGN  
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My *Ántonia* by Willa Cather is a nostalgic look into the past that forces readers to feel as if they were a part of the story. Cather uses Jim Burdens voice to narrate how life during this time was viewed by someone who was a young innocent boy. This makes it an interesting perspective when evaluating what life was like for immigrants during this time especially because Jim gets to compare his life to his immigrant neighbors lives for years. Because Jim and *Ántonia* are similar ages it is important to note that Jim can easily compare his life to *Ántonia*'s life. In *My Ántonia*, Cather uses her platform as a way to educate people about what the immigrant experience was like in the United States during the nineteenth century, and how everyone's experience can be a different one.

The Shimerdas, a Bohemian immigrant family, were going through the process of adjusting to the new American way of life. Cather continues to depict a very vivid image of daily living for the immigrant family next door to the Burdens. The important part is that this immigrant experience was actually told from an outside perspective, looking in. Cather wanted readers to understand how the transition went for all different age groups and genders, telling exactly how each family member was doing with this change. The Shimerdas were all having different experiences adjusting to the " American Way", Mr. Shimerda, who we are told did not even want to come to the United States, was having a particularly hard time. *Ántonia* tells Jim that He not want to come, nev-er! My mamenka make him come. All the time she say: ' America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls' My papa, he cry for leave his old friends what make music with him. (Cather, 74). Cather uses this to help readers

understand what the mind set was during this time and the reason why a lot of people left their countries in hope of a better life with more opportunities in the United States. Many people during this time came to the United States in search of these same things.

Cather uses Jim's voice to explain how the Shimerda family looked physically. Instead of just narrating how the family looked Cather used Jim's sayings for example, when he calls Mrs. Shimerda a "stooping old woman" (Cather, 74) and Jim's grandmother corrects him by telling him that she is not old. Cather uses how Jim sees Mrs. Shimerda in his eyes as a way to depict how living a hard life as an immigrant has physically aged her. Jim does not see his grandmother who is quite a bit older than Mrs. Shimerda as being old, but he sees Antonia's younger mother as being old. Cather does a good job of giving us visual images of the family by little details such as this one, she does not just come out and say exactly what each character looks like directly. She often lets the dialogue or thoughts that Jim has to force readers to see or understand a character in a certain way. Mrs. Shimerda's transition has been hard, but she is trying to manage with what she has been given. Jim says, "We were willing to believe that Mrs. Shimerda was a good housewife in her own country, but she managed poorly under new conditions: the conditions were bad enough, certainly" (Cather, 29). Cather wants readers to know that just because immigrants may struggle in their new environments, it is not because they are not trying it could possibly just be that the new resources are much different, and it may take a while to get used to.

Now of course there is a tragedy early on in *My Ántonia* that shows how hard immigrant life can be in such a blunt way. The tragic death in this book of Pavel the Russian, who dies from a severe injury that could not heal which then causes his best friend Peter to leave the United States. Peter and Pavel were two men from Russia that were good friends with the Shimerdas and the Burdens. The Shimerdas shared such a strong bond with them because their foreign languages were close enough to each other to communicate in their native tongue. Cather again enforces the reason why most immigrants come to the United States, to have a better life. The reason why Peter and Pavel could not stay in Russia was because they did something horrible that defined them no matter where they moved to. Therefore, they came to the United States in hopes of starting completely over. Pavel eventually gets an injury that eventually kills him, which causes Peter to go into a depression. Peter then "... sold off everything, and left the country – went to be a cook in a railway construction camp where gangs of Russians were employed" (Cather, 50). This is such a deep message from Cather because it shows how hard life is for immigrants especially on their own. Once Peter and Pavel's lives did not work out in the United States it led Peter right back to a dark life in their " old country".

Mr. Shimerda was devastated by the loss of his two friends Peter and Pavel. A while later Mr. Shimerda ends up committing suicide, leaving his family questioning why. Again, Cather uses Jim's thoughts to understand why they think this happened. He narrates, I knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda, and I wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country. ... Surely, his exhausted

spirit, so tired of cold and crowding and the struggle with the ever-falling snow, was resting now in this quite house. (Cather, 81) This is a powerful quote Cather uses to talk about immigrants and the painful transition that can ensue after someone comes to the United States especially because Mr. Shimerda is older and had to leave a whole life behind in Bohemia. For the kids, they are able to start over in a new life when they come to the United States however, as an adult Cather shows how hard changing everything that you know, and love can be deadly to your mental health. This is a common theme in everyday life for many people, not just immigrants, getting used to a different place at any age, especially an older age, can be so difficult that often the solution that people come up with is to just give up. Cather relates to this personally, making sure that she really explained this suicide thoroughly. In an article called “ The Americanisation Debate” by Guy Reynolds, he explained that “ Cather recalled that when she arrived in Nebraska as a girl the first thing she heard about was the suicide of Mr. Sadalaak, even though he had died several years earlier.” (Reynolds, 265). This is something that stuck strongly with that community especially with the close-knit immigrant group.

Antonia was the best at the transition in my opinion, her family relied on her to be the one to learn English even though she was only about 14 years old. She was a strong willed and hardworking young girl and was determined to learn about American culture from Jim and be outside all day even if that work was supposed to be meant for the men. “ Almost every day she came running across the prairie to have her reading lesson with me” (Cather, 28). Cather uses this relationship to show how the relationship between an

immigrant and their local neighbor could be despite all of the cultural and language differences and barriers. Mrs. Shimerda knows how important it is that at least one of her family members learns English which is why Cather constantly enforces how eager and motivated *Ántonia* is to learn from Jim. Another reason why Cather continues to talk about how strong willed *Ántonia* is, is so that readers can see how for immigrants, or for people in general, hard work and dedication can pay off.

Briefly we get to see Jake, Jim's brother's opinion on the Shimerda family after a fight breaks out between him and Ambrosch over a collar that the Burdens grandfather had let Ambrosch borrow. When Jake confronted Ambrosch about getting the collar back he brought a different old collar back, this enraged Jake. Jake gets off of his horse in rage and they begin to fight, Cather uses this scene to see a different side of both groups and to hear some Americans real opinions on the immigrant people. After the fight Jake says, "'They ain't the same, Jimmy,' he kept saying in a hurt tone. 'These foreigners ain't the same. You can't trust 'em to be fair.'" (Cather 103). As a reader you can see the stereotyping and even racism that Jake connects Ambrosch's behavior to all immigrants, claiming that they are all that way. *Ántonia* is so upset with both boys that she vows that she is no longer friends with Jake or Jim. Cather made sure that this scene was used to see how even though Ambrosch's actions were wrong, it was somehow his immigration status that caused him to act inappropriately.

Throughout the novel the relationship between Jim and *Ántonia* changes, there is a scene where their gender and social status begins to separate them. Jim has gone off to school and *Ántonia* has been forced to stay home

and work on the farm so that her family can continue to survive. “ She put her arms under her head and lay back, looking up at the sky, ‘ If I live here like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us” (Cather, 111). In this scene Jim is seeing the *Antonia* that he used to know instead of the new *Antonia* that Jim believes is a replica of her harsh and tough older brother Ambrosch. Cather uses this scene to tell readers that immigrants have it much harder than Americans, if Jim and *Antonia* were in the same situation Jim would be okay and *Antonia* would have to work much harder to achieve the same things that Jim does.

*Antonia* finally gets out of the farm and goes to work for a couple that really puts her in a really uncomfortable situation. The couple leaves for a few days and tells her that there are valuables under the bed and that she is not allowed to have anyone stay with her while they are gone. Cather is strategic with how this scene unfolds and the lead up because it is clear that the Cutters are taking advantage of *Antonia* possibly because she is an uneducated immigrant that they know is loyal to working to make money for her family. This means that they think that they can treat her however they want to because they think that there is nothing that they can do that will make her quit. When Mr. Cutter comes home early, he immediately assumes that the reason why Jim was there was because *Antonia* and him were in bed together. Mr. Cutter then starts beating up Jim for being there. Cather wants readers to see the unhealthy employment situation that *Antonia* is in possibly because of her inability to get an education.

Fast forwarding many years, when Jim finally works up enough courage to go back to visit *Antonia* who is married with several kids on the farm. Her life

ended up being almost exactly as her mothers did, she got married to a Bohemian man that did not seem to want the same things that *Ántonia* did. Jim explains the difference in her appearance which Cather uses to describe how the tough world has broken her down as a person. “ I was thinking, as I watched her, how little it mattered- about her teeth, for instance. I know so many women who have kept all the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, *Antonia* had not lost the fire of life.” (Cather, 250). Cather uses this final book to explain that although Jim was scared that the lovely girl he once knew would be turned into a hardened matron, he sees that her inner qualities are still the same. In Reynolds break down he explains this scene perfectly saying, “ Cather describes the physical ‘ breaking’ of her heroine, who now has hair ‘ a little grizzled’ and many teeth missing.” (Reynolds, 264). This rejects the idea that *Ántonia* has been Americanized because she is continuing on the decent of her people by marrying a countryman of Bohemia and having little Bohemian speaking children. However, even though the world has abused and over worked *Ántonia*, nothing will ever be able to make her lose that inner amazing personality.

Everyone’s experience with anything is going to be different, that’s just how the world works because everyone is so different. By Willa Cather using Jim to tell a nostalgic story she gives a detailed image of how different experiences can shape different people. Jim and *Ántonia* transform from these young curious people to these very different adults. The ability to compare their lives is crucial to Willa Cather’s main themes working so well.



Cather uses this book to compare the stories of lives of an 19th century immigrant family and a family who is local to the United States.

## **Works Cited**

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