

Stormy relations and developments in novel 'my antonia'

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



The novel *My Antonia* by Willa Cather has characters from different backgrounds and settings. The novel shows them trying to create social and economic identities for themselves as Americans while heavily influenced by their unique cultural backgrounds mostly from Europe. The novel's title is borrowed from one Bohemian girl, the friend and love interest of James Burden, the narrator, who we first meet as a 10 year old recently orphaned boy. The time period is after the American Civil War, even though years are not explicitly stated, Lutze presupposes that the time period of Willa Cather's novel is the 1880s.

Jim Burden grows to be a lawyer for a railroad company in the West, he marries another woman but he never forgets Antonia. In essence, all the characters in the novel, especially the young ones at the beginning such as Ambrosch Shimerda and Lena Lingard show people striving to create new identities and mingle with other people be it in business or social relations. Antonia is just a symbol for the struggle to create a personal identity while maintaining relevance culturally and economically in post-Civil War America. How Immigrants Strive to Build the Country Reading through the novel one asks himself, " Are immigrants useful members of 1880s American society?" Who deserves the most credit for building the country in *My Antonia* is the rhetorical question Cather invokes from the readers. Jim, when he meets the Shimerdas, is only a boy of ten years but he still has attitudes concerning immigrants especially when he meets the Shimerdas.

He focuses on what makes them different from him. Case in point the way Jim describes Antonia on meeting her, " Her skin was brown, too, and in her

cheeks, she had a glow of rich, dark colour". According to TUNÇ , there are racial undertones in *My Antonia* which accurately reflects American cultural attitudes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century accurately. For example, southeastern Europeans such as the Bohemians, the Shimerdas are treated as if they are less white. As of today, Bohemia is part of Austria, but in the novel, the Bohemians and the Russians Peter and Pavel are treated almost like outcasts.

The Russians and Bohemians do odd jobs, have the most difficulty learning the English language, but Cather wants the audience to understand that they are equally important to the story if not more. In the novel almost every character has to create their own identities. Even Jim Burden, who is the narrator in the story, has to adjust to life in the countryside of Nebraska and the small town of Black Hawk. Jim is originally from Virginia, and at ten years old he is already an orphan. When Jim meets Antonia as a ten-year-old, she is 13 years old but enthusiastic and curious about life: ' Antonia had opinions about everything, and she was soon able to make them known".

Jim admires Antonia and loves her romantically even though she sees him as a little brother. Jim is not an immigrant per se, but he provides an almost neutral point of view to show the readers how others live their lives. While some story arcs in the novel serve to teach that diligence pays off, that is not always the case. Antonia's father, Mr Shimerda, has the most tragic story. The title of the novel comes from his words to Jim Burden, " Te-e-ach, te-e-ach my Antonia". Krajiek, their fellow Bohemian is suspected by some people to have been involved somehow, Jim Burden being one of them. Mr Shimerda

was a musician in the ' old country", and he was depressed in the fact that making music could not fetch him money and respect in Nebraska. The Shimerdas have a very efficient work ethic. Ambrosch is a very hard-working farmer. Antonia too ploughs the land, and as fourteen and fifteen years old she has a muscular physique for a woman. Antonia's brother Marek, who Jim calls ' the crazy one' due to his mental problems, puts an effort in working the land.

Most of the adult immigrants in the novel work the farmland. There are also the " hired girls" called so because they are the cooks, maids, waitresses and other subordinate roles. The best two are Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderbell. Both of them start from rags to riches. They are the older girls in their families and so have to work in Black Hawk to send money for their parents and younger siblings. Lena Lingard, a Norwegian, as a nineteen-year-old girl has a reputation for being a temptress. She surprises everybody when she moves to Lincoln and becomes a fashion icon there; designing and making clothes for all kinds of clients. Tiny Soderbell manages a guesthouse and then gets lucky in the gold prospection business to the point that she is the wealthiest person by the end of the novel.

There is a section where Jim, Tiny and Lena Lingard meet in San Francisco , and the two women are good friends and take care of each other. The working immigrant women are essential to the immigration narrative as they show that hard work pays regardless of background. Otto Fuchs is another immigrant from Austria. He is a farm-hand and a sort of jack of all trades for the Burdens. Fuchs is a hard-worker who has held various jobs, and his life is

described to have been adventurous. Fuchs is a survivor. He has experienced life in the Far West and in that time honed in skills which are valuable practically. Fuchs assists in the farm, doing hard labour work, which considering that Nebraska is a farming country goes a long way in terms of building the nation.

When Antonia's father dies, Otto is the only carpenter who can make the coffin. He remarks, I sometimes wonder if there'll be anybody about to do it for me. Fuchs is concerned that he might not get a proper coffin when he dies. He is an excellent carpenter, and Jim Burden is sure that carpentry could make him more money. Later in the story, Fuchs goes farther west to prospect for gold, and that is the last thing we know about him. Otto Fuchs is that sort of immigrant who is highly under-rated but contributes a lot to society especially given his tremendous work ethic. Through reading the novel, one might remark how come the title is My Antonia.

In the story, Lena Lingard has more character presence than the eponymous Antonia. Comparing the stories of the two, Lena Lingard contributes more economically to society than Antonia. She gets into the fashion and clothing industry and becomes quite successful. She and Tiny Soderbell are strong women; men do not dictate how they live their lives. Their decisions are theirs mostly. Meanwhile, Antonia gets married, has lots of children and seems to be content with her humble life at the end. Antonia represents the "pioneering spirit". At the end of My Antonia, modernization and industrialization have changed how marriage is approached. It is not mentioned just how many children Antonia has, just that they are many and

that the particular trend is not fashionable any more. Nevertheless, with just a large and loving family and not much in terms of material wealth, Antonia is both satisfied and proud of her life.

The reader then notes that Antonia's nurturing spirit for other people is very important towards building a nation and empowering others even though it requires sacrifice. In conclusion, *My Antonia* manages to weave together many stories, and the main message is adapting to new conditions while upholding the useful components of culture and the past. The last two sentences of the novel, Jim Burden remarks, " Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past".

The two sentences show us a lot; they are personal and also symbolic. Jim reminisces over his life-long friendship with Antonia, a girl from the other half of the world, who came to the United States with her family. She has a family now; her children will grow up as Americans and not Bohemians. She was once a hired girl, but now is the mother of the next generation in the novel. The same can be said about all the other immigrants with young families such as Ambrosch and the Bohemian Marys adult Antonia tells Jim how Mary Svoboda is " the best butter-maker" in the whole Nebraska countryside. *My Antonia* is a story of how some immigrants with very little in terms of education, social status and wealth worked hard and made life decisions which ultimately turned their lives around and more importantly helped build America.