

Off the beaten path



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *My Antonia*, the prairie, with its dogtowns, creeks, and grassy cliffs, is as prominent a force as Jim Burden or Antonia Shimerda, in that it becomes their home and playground in childhood and shapes their consciousness in adulthood. The portrayal of this landscape, and in particular the roads that Jim and Antonia use to navigate it, mirrors the state of mind and the maturation of both the two friends and of the pioneers as a group. Cather uses descriptions of the characteristics of these paths and how they change to represent the path Jim's life follows and to capture the idyllic nature of childhood, the vigor and independence of the pioneer experience, and how the conventional alternative seems to dull in comparison. In general, the features of the roads in the countryside correspond with the overall state of the land and the pioneers' relationship to it. Though the presence of roads on the prairie suggests habitation and civilization, in the early days the arrangement of the road haphazardly mimics the shape and features of the countryside, causing it to "[run] about like a wild thing," as if it has a will of its own (Cather 18). The initially untamed prairie and meandering roads seem to echo the fact that Jim and particularly Antonia have not yet been restricted by hardship and responsibility. In the days before Antonia must work and Jim must attend school, their activities are as subject to whimsy as the wanderings of the roads themselves. The inconvenient, pointless curves of the trails seem to suggest that the frontiersmen, though established on the land, do not have a firm hold on it. The terrain seems to define their routes, actions, and lives more than their attempts to establish roads or farms define the terrain. This situation shifts as Jim returns to the prairie in his late teens and observes that in addition to fields filled with successful harvests, the new roads are "confined to section lines" (Cather 71). Jim is

obviously delighted that his neighbors' toil has come to fruition. Though Jim likens his observation of these changes to " watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea," it becomes apparent in later passages that he also seems to harbor some sentimental regard for the old roads of the uncultivated prairie that was playground of his youth (Cather 184). Though Jim both comes to view the prairie as a crucial element of his identity and his childhood friendship with Antonia, both characters are initially strangers to it and each other. Though, he and Antonia travel to Nebraska on the same train, Jim has not yet made the Shimerdas' acquaintance, making it impossible to guess Antonia's thoughts during the journey from Jim's narration. Jim's own emotions, curiously, do not foretell the joys he will experience on the prairie. Instead, his sense of disorientation when he travels by wagon to Blackhawk is apparent when he notes that " if there [is] a road, [he can] not make it out" (Cather 11). The fact that Jim cannot see the road ahead, or even ascertain that a road is guiding him at all suggests a feeling of being lost and reflects the uncertain nature of his future. Taken figuratively, the roads Jim travel on seems to parallel his path in life. At this point he is indeed in between two lives: his former one with his late parents in Virginia (a time he can never return to) and the new one with his grandparents in Nebraska (which he presently knows nothing of). Antonia's displacement between Bohemia and America is presumably even more acute, though whether or not she feels it at the moment is unknown. The wild land and seeming lack of path to direct travelers through it, prompts Jim to feel that this place is so untamed and uninhabited that it is " outside man's jurisdiction" and is the " material out of which countries are made" (Cather 11). That he feels " blotted out" intimates that he is being reborn on

this journey as the road he travels takes him further and further away from what is familiar (Cather 11). This slightly eerie description of the trek towards his new home seems to hint at the potential of the land surrounding the road to form countries, to define rules, and to create new lives. Once Jim settles on the prairie, he and Antonia enjoy the freedom it offers, but also learn the cost of this freedom. The connection Jim draws between the concept of independence and the prairie roads is implicit in his physical descriptions of the paths. For example, the sunflowers that line the prairie paths during summer call to mind Fuch's story of how Mormons scattered sunflower seeds when passing through Nebraska to escape religious persecution. Though he knows that this tale is fictitious, Jim prefers it to a more botanical explanation. He reveals his romantic bent by declaring that "sunflower-bordered roads always seem to [him] the roads to freedom" (Cather 23). The period of time when Jim and Antonia ride along these trails is indeed relatively untroubled by cares and limitations, as they use the sunflower paths to embark on their snake-slaying, neighbor-visiting, and insect-rescuing adventures. However, when the sunflowers roads are "despoiled" and the flowers wither into "brown, rattling, burry stalks" at the end of the season, it portends a difficult winter ahead (Cather 32). The cold, desperate months that follow are instead reminders that the self-sufficiency of prairie life can also lead to the hardship and isolation that ultimately results in the Shimerdas' near-starvation and Mr. Shimerda's suicide. The roads on the prairie lead Jim and Antonia to times that are sometimes merry and sometimes brutal, but always rich in excitement and emotion. In contrast, when Jim gives up exploring prairie roads for a quiet life in the town of Blackhawk, he frequently feels trapped. His need for a sign of freedom is so

great that he marks a nearby river as “ compensation for the lost freedom of the farming country” (Cather 90). Though the river does periodically offer some entertaining hunting and fishing, Jim mostly finds himself restlessly wandering the “ long, cold streets” of Blackhawk (Cather 132). These streets are not lined with sunflowers, but rather with houses that only serve to evoke in him a sense of disgust at the “ jealousy and envy and unhappiness” and “ guarded mode of existence” of the people who inhabit the town (Cather 132). These petty people are very different from the earnest and open people with whom Jim grew up. Jim can appreciate the reason and effort of constraining the country roads into more direct routes, but still is fond of the more serpentine ones for the memories they evoke. In the same way, Jim must forsake the romantic locales and characters of his childhood for a more practical route in adulthood. Though Jim’s path in life leads him to cities and towns where he can attend school and establish himself as a successful lawyer, he never stops loving the paths he traversed with Antonia above all others. A particular landmark on these remembered roads that acts as a connection to the past is Mr. Shimerda’s grave, located at a crossroads in accordance with superstition. While all other land has been cultivated, this plot becomes a “ little island” as roads curve to accommodate the grave instead of building over it (Cather 74). Jim admires the romantic superstition that placed the grave in such an odd location, and commends the “ error in the surveyed lines” that is a lapse in efficiency in favor of sympathy and respect (Cather 74). The gravesite was not mown down with the rest of the land, and therefore seems to be a small part of the past that has been preserved. It is a souvenir of the days when the prairie was being broken in and the roads were still rudimentary, a time that is stamped into the minds

of those who were involved. This crossroads serves as common ground for Jim and Antonia to talk after his long absence in college. After so much has changed in both of their lives, they “instinctively” gravitate towards it as a symbol of the times they once shared, while the nature of the crossroads itself suggests that their paths in life have permanently diverged (Cather 191). It is the intimacy and nostalgia that this place summons that allows Jim to come the closest to directly confessing his love for Antonia when he states that to him she is “anything that a woman can be to a man” (Cather 192). Finally, after a twenty-year absence the on Jim’s part, the roads complete his physical and spiritual journey by awakening a dormant part of him that is resembles Jim as a child (or Antonia as she always has been) more than the unhappily married, financially successful, spiritually mediocre man that he becomes. Jim is overwhelmed with emotion upon encountering the familiar old paths, saying that he has “the sense of coming home to [himself],” of regaining the sense of possibility and exploration he had as a boy on the same roads (Cather 222). He declares the old road that first brought him and Antonia from the train station to the open land is a “road of Destiny,” in that it first introduces them, then serves as a vehicle for the adventures that their friendship and love for the frontier is created upon, and finally and joyfully reunites them after two decades (Cather 222). The road, in Jim’s view, “predetermined for us all that we can ever be,” reaffirming that the foundation of their identities are defined by the roads they traveled so long ago (Cather 222). The roads in *My Antonia* represent the conflict between practicality and romanticism, the changing face of the American frontier, the pioneer spirit, and Jim’s path in life and how it intertwines with Antonia’s. Though the roads of Jim’s childhood are eventually changed, though the land

they once traveled through is tamed, though Jim and Antonia's idealism and innocence suffer from deceit and dullness, the memories of these roads and the escapades they held are forever memorialized in their minds. Works Cited
Cather, Willa. *My Antonia*. 2nd ed. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003.