

# My antonia

Business



Destiny: Choice or Chance? What is the importance of the first choice? In *My Antonia* by Willa Carter, the characters' whole lives are dependent on the beginning that led them on that path in life. The question then arises whether or not destiny is binding. If it is not, then the beginning has no importance; but if it is, then a person can be defined by a singular action. People would not be their own entities, but slaves to their inevitable end. The author's focus on sequence demonstrates the permanence of destiny.

The permanence of destiny stands out when the author focuses on the first choice, disregards detail, and the inevitable end. Jim's early life demonstrates the permanence of destiny. From the beginning, Jim's family had the financial and social stability to secure Jim a respectable position in society. Jim cannot change the way his grandparents raise him because he is merely a recipient of his grandparents potential. Similar to Antonia with her children, Jim's grandparents sacrifice their own potential to give Jim the best possible life. Jim has no choice but to leave Antonia because she refuses to compromise his potential.

Antonia's selfless disposition and motherly affection for Jim are beyond his control. He does not realize before it is too late that becoming friends with Antonia is what barred him from ever ending up with her. In the end, Jim realizes that, "...this had been the road of Destiny, and had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be" (238). Jim understands that the instinctual bond that formed between Jim and Antonia as children forced them into the lives that the two end up living. In the beginning, Jim does not understand that his life is predetermined, but

as the book progresses he realizes the significance of the phrase, “ Optima dies...prima fugit” (174).

The phrase parallels the regret Jim feels when he realizes that his childish decisions limited his future life. Jim eventually realizes that the time to choose his own destiny is over. The legend’s disregard of detail demonstrates the permanence of destiny. Antonia distorts the details in the story about the snake to make Jim sound like a hero. The story illustrates how irrelevant reality is because it must succumb to destiny.

Jim’s lack of exceptionalism has no affect on the story’s legendary status. When Antonia’s children met Jim years later, one of the first memories they associate with him is his famous encounter with the snake. The destiny of his action is so enduring that it overcomes both the realities of the situation and the test of time. Jim notes after he kills the snake that, “...it was a mock adventure; the game was fixed for me by chance, as it probably was for many a dragon slayer” (34). Older Jim credits chance to having diluted the courage of not only his own actions, but also the actions of other so-called heroes.

This diverges from younger Jim, who Frances labels as a being “ romantic” (146) in his hope to overcome the bounds of destiny and be with a hired girl. The author demotes the importance of Jim’s shift into a deterministic mindset. This further emphasizes the irrelevance of Jim’s original hopes and desires that contrast his destiny, in that the disappearance of them is barely worth mentioning. When Jim kills the snake, he destines the story to become

a legend, despite the predetermined circumstances. Nature's the inevitable end demonstrates the permanence of destiny.

Throughout the book, the author details nature's relationship to human civilization. At first humans isolate the wild land, then they begin to work with the land, then they build over the land, and finally they completely overcome nature with the establishment of cities. In the opening of the book, nature is an isolated entity that is untouched by human rule. This description of nature has a temporary implication because the introduction lets the reader know that unbound nature does not last. When Jim gives the reader foresight about what will happen to Mr. Shimerda's grave, it conveys a hopelessly deterministic sentiment.

Even though Mr. Shimerda's death succeeds in preserving a small portion of the free land, the larger portion of it surrenders to human order. When Mr. Shimerda's grave transcends time, even strangers notice the magical quality of the land. This incident redefines the destiny of nature.

It is not that the land will succumb to order, but that the land will succumb to human control. Mr. Shimerda asserts that fate controls even after his death with his grave. This idea parallels Jim's connection with the hired girls. The girls' ability to preserve the past leads Jim to label them as the Muses of his hometown. Since the girls are limited by their pasts more than anyone else, the past thrives in them and continues to define them.

Jim notes of the plough, "...Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, [the plough] stood out against the sun ..." (156). Even in the quiet moment of reflection, nature reminds the characters of the inescapable

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future of the land. The uncontrollable arrival of civilization reveals the land's destiny is binding. Willa Cather highlights certain elements of stories to demonstrate the permanence of their resolution. Using that logic, the first choice should define each story, but, in fact, the first choice is not really a choice at all.

Jim's beginning derives from his grandparents' success; the legend's background is a series of lucky coincidences; and nature never had the ability to create any permanent defense against civilization. Therefore, what governs everyone's destiny is chance. Extending this argument to antebellum problems, the Civil War was inevitable from the moment that the founders of the United States excluded any word against slavery from their Constitution. After that, the tension that leads to eventual war was unavoidable. However, it is not the founders' fault because they had to choose between establishing the United States and defending their beliefs against slavery. The chance circumstance that slavery had already taken hold in the United States by the time that they rebelled against England is what destines the Civil War.

Lincoln realizes this and references this in his second inaugural address as he attempts to diffuse post Civil War sectional tension. The one thing that unites and defines all aspects of life is their submission to the chance circumstances that determine an inevitable end for all things.