

1989

## The Romanticism of *My Ántonia*: Every Reader's Story

Susan J. Rosowski

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Reading and Language Commons](#)

---

Rosowski, Susan J., "The Romanticism of *My Ántonia*: Every Reader's Story" (1989). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 155.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs/155>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications -- Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

## The Romanticism of *My Ántonia*: Every Reader's Story

Susan J. Rosowski

---

Romanticism is fundamental to *My Ántonia*, shaping the attitudes that control its structure, style, and narration, as well as its expectations of a reader. I immediately face a dilemma in teaching this romanticism, however, for most of my students haven't even the most rudimentary understanding of what romanticism is. They have negative associations of something emotional, irrelevant, and backward-looking; asked for details, they describe surface features that vaguely concern poets brooding about nature. Almost none understands romanticism as a way of knowing, by which individuals use their imaginations to create value in an otherwise meaningless world (Rosowski, *Voyage*).

Happily, Cather provided in her introduction a romantic poetics of fiction, a starting place for her readers—and our students. After explaining that the introduction exists in two forms (the original, 1918 version and the condensed but otherwise unaltered 1926 version that students have in their paperback editions), I distribute copies of the 1918 version, in which Cather makes an agreement with Jim Burden: “I would set down on paper all that I remembered of Ántonia, if he would do the same.” Cather emphasizes again the distinction between her story and Jim's in two sentences at the end of the original introduction. After Jim brought to Cather his manuscript, he said it hadn't any form or any title either: he wrote “Ántonia,” then “frowned at this a moment, then prefixed another word, making it ‘My Ántonia.’ That seemed to satisfy him.” Thus ends the 1926 version, but in 1918 Cather had included two additional sentences: “‘Read it as soon as you can,’ he said rising, ‘But don't let it influence your own story.’ My own story was never written, but the following narrative is Jim's manuscript, substantially as he brought it to me.”

After we have read the original introduction, we may note that it includes incidental features of romanticism: it announces its subject as childhood close to nature; it establishes its narrator's “romantic personality”; it specifies that “romantic” means Jim's imaginative capacity to love the country and to lose himself in an idea. We quickly move, however, to the more important stress Cather places on method. Indeed, the introduction resembles a contract, filled with stipulations about how the story was written and how it should be read, in both cases as the creation of an imagination, true to experience that is individual, unique, and ongoing.

In discussing method, we note that before Jim began to write of Ántonia, he stated his condition that he would do so from his unique experience of her: “Of course I should have to do it in a direct way, and say a great deal about myself. It's through myself that I knew and felt her.” I ask what he

is doing here, and we talk about the assumption that knowledge is individual and unique. (I may compare Jim's statement to Wordsworth's terms for *The Prelude*, "to describe what I had felt and thought.") We note that before giving his story to his reader, Jim warned her that it is accurate according to the way his memory worked, however fragmentary and incomplete by conventional notions of plot: he didn't "arrange or rearrange" but "simply wrote down what of herself and myself and other people Ántonia's name recalls to me." Again, I ask students to consider what the stipulation means in terms of the novel, and we talk about romantic concepts of form as true to individual experience rather than to theories of unity or expectations of genre.

We talk also about the relation of Jim Burden to Willa Cather, and here I resist the temptation to insist on critical distinctions between the "real" Cather and the invented one (the authorial pose) of the introduction. My students know that in her introduction Cather provided details from her "real" life sufficient for them to recognize her as a writer, and that's where we begin—with the flagrantly fictitious device of the character's giving to his creator a manuscript and calling it *his* story, then of Cather's reinforcing that idea with her last words of the original introduction: "My own story was never written, but the following narrative is Jim's manuscript, substantially as he brought it to me." It is as if Cather is playing a game with us, my students say with considerable irritation, and as we discuss the effect of this game it becomes clear that Cather has done something most unsettling: she has renounced the authority of text (by reminding us it is an artifact), author (by distancing herself from it), and narrator (by having a fictitious character tell the tale).

If we cannot trust the text, the author, or the narrator, what can we trust? To consider what is authentic here, we return to Jim Burden's charge to his reader (i.e., to Willa Cather, and by extension to each of us) when he gives to her the manuscript: "read it as soon as you can . . . but don't let it influence your own story." As we consider implications of the introduction and, particularly, of the title, someone will often say something such as, "I get it! *My Ántonia* becomes *our* Ántonia, as we read it here together," and another student might respond, "but your reading is different from mine," and we go on from there, until we are talking about each reader's making the story his or hers with each reading. Again without resorting to secondary definitions, what students are discussing is Cather's extension to the reader of the romantic premise that meaning in an epistemological sense is an individual creation. By renouncing conventional authority in the narrator/writer, she has validated it in each reader.

To discuss how Cather engages the reader in creating a story, we turn to the body of *My Ántonia* and read one episode closely. Because I wish to

discuss what is characteristic, I avoid the overtly dramatic scenes—Jim’s first morning in his grandmother’s garden, ending with his feeling “that is happiness, to be dissolved into something complete and great”; Jim’s picnic with the hired girls, ending with their seeing the plow magnified against the sun; and Jim’s return to *Ántonia*, seeing her children emerge from the fruit cellar and recognizing her as “a rich mine of life.” Instead, I select a less obvious episode—Jim Burden’s first visit with his grandmother to the Shimerdas’ dugout, for example (19–27).

I ask where Cather begins with us, then read the paragraph that starts, “One Sunday morning Otto Fuchs was to drive us over to make the acquaintance of our new Bohemian neighbours,” and includes details about provisions: they take with them “a sack of potatoes and a piece of cured pork from the cellar, . . . some loaves of Saturday’s bread, a jar of butter, and several pumpkin pies.” We discuss how Cather opens the episode as a factual account, placing it in historical time and geographical space, then recounting specifics.

Next we read the second paragraph, which begins with Jim’s anticipation of “what lay beyond that cornfield,” includes his disappointment on seeing “there was only red grass like ours, and nothing else,” and builds to his description:

The road ran about like a wild thing, avoiding the deep draws, crossing them where they were wide and shallow. And all along it, wherever it looped or ran, the sunflowers grew; some of them were as big as little trees, with great rough leaves and many branches which bore dozens of blossoms. They made a gold ribbon across the prairie. Occasionally one of the horses would tear off with his teeth a plant full of blossoms, and walk along munching it, the flowers nodding in time to his bites as he ate down toward them.

I ask where we are by the end of this second paragraph, and students respond with *Eden*, a fairy tale, a magical world, paradise. Whatever their term, they recognize that the narrative has extended the world of ordinary life to romance. We may note the change in sentence structure, from simple sentences to cumulative ones, and the repetition of Jim’s straining to see, of the refrain “I could see nothing” and “I could still see nothing,” followed by sequences of “I saw” and “I felt” as his imagination takes over.

As we move to the core of this episode and read the paragraph describing Jim’s approach to the Shimerdas’ dugout, we note again the recurring pattern: first the reason presents particulars as facts, then the imagination works on those facts, transforming them by feeling. Initially Jim describes things as they are. He sees “nothing but rough red hillocks, and draws with shelving

banks and long roots hanging out," then sees an object (a shattered windmill frame), which he calls a "skeleton" (no longer simply an object, but an object infused by feeling into a symbol of death). Finally, he describes a door and sunken window. What is Jim writing about? I ask. A dugout, yes, but also about a feeling of death and desolation. Some students note that the image of the windmill as a "skeleton" is strong enough to color the entire setting, and others say the dugout with its door and sunken window seems like a skull.

Next we read the description of the Shimerdas, as each emerges from the earth. First there appears a woman of indeterminate age wearing a shawl, "her face . . . alert and lively, with a sharp chin and shrewd little eyes." I ask who she is, and in every class I have taught students immediately identify her as a witch. Next, the oldest son, foxlike with little, shrewd hazel eyes that were "sly and suspicious" and "fairly snapped at the food"; then as if princesses, Ántonia, with eyes "big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood," and brown skin, her cheeks glowing with "rich, dark colour" and curly, wild-looking brown hair, followed by her younger sister, who was "fair . . . mild and obedient."

Just as we begin to predict other recognizable transformations of a fairy tale, the scene exceeds formulation when Marek appears, showing his webbed fingers, like a duck's foot, and crowing like a rooster. Finally, most unexpectedly of all, the father emerges, wearing a grey vest and "a silk scarf of a dark bronze-green, carefully crossed and held together by a red coral pin," and bending over Mrs. Burden's hand, as if he were in the most formal of drawing rooms rather than on an unbroken Nebraska prairie.

Once we have read the episode closely, we need only the briefest comment about how it works. Cather never leaves the prairie; throughout, we believe in the particular reality of a specific time and place. Yet the imagination transforms this most ordinary of scenes into something extraordinary. Anything at all might emerge next from the Shimerdas' dugout, for a desolate Nebraska country has become a place of miracles, created by the informing power of Jim's and our imaginations (see also Rosowski, "Fatality").

We turn next to ways in which Cather invokes the reader's imagination to join scenes that are apparently disparate. For example, Jim's battle with the snake is complete in itself, a childhood episode that the middle-aged narrator recalls as a mock adventure (43–50). In it Jim follows the familiar pattern: First, he describes the object as it is, a snake "lying with long loose waves, like a letter 'W.'" He then tells of feeling revulsion, implicitly associating the snake with threatening sexuality when he describes "his abominable muscularity, his loathsome, fluid movement, [that] somehow made me sick," compares it to "the ancient, eldest Evil," and extends the reference to "his kind [that] have left horrible unconscious memories in all warm-

blooded life.” As the incident unfolds we focus on the action of Jim’s killing the snake and returning triumphantly home with it, and we consider the episode closed when Jim reflects, “I had killed a big snake—I was now a big fellow.”

One chapter ends and another begins with a quite different subject, that of Peter and Pavel. Yet as an aside in the third sentence of this new episode, Jim mentions “Wick Cutter, the merciless Black Hawk money-lender, a man of evil name throughout the country, of whom I shall have more to say later” (50). With the repetition of the letter W (now as “Wick”) associated with the idea of Evil (“a man of evil name”), it is as if the snake had reappeared, reincarnated in human form. The aside points ahead also, for Jim’s promise to say more of him anticipates Cutter’s attempted rape of *Ántonia*, when dark sexuality threatens to disrupt Black Hawk Eden.

Individual scenes are structured by movement of the mind as it transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary, and apparently disparate scenes are joined by movement of the mind as it recognizes echoes; the overall novel is structured by the way the mind formulates meaning. We recognize the circular movement of a romantic lyric when a middle-aged Jim returns to *Ántonia*, recognizing her as a rich mine of life. The physical return of Jim mirrors the circular imaginative process: in the end the speaker returns to the object he described at the beginning, an object now informed with memories.

While we talk about how each section relates to the whole, I may sketch their circularity on the chalkboard. In “The Shimerdas,” the child Jim describes direct experience of the physical world, his sensory descriptions reminiscent of Wordsworth’s “fair seedtime of the soul.” In “The Hired Girls” Jim’s youthful energy has become intensified by adolescent sexuality, presenting possibilities that culminate in one experience of ennobling creativity (awe at the plow magnified against the sun) and another of disillusioning excess (revulsion at Cutter’s attempted rape of *Ántonia*). In “Lena Lingard” Jim leaves physicality behind him to revel in a newly discovered world of ideas. With “The Pioneer Woman’s Story” he begins his return to that physical, natural world, though by imposing his ideas on it rather than recognizing ideals residing within it. Finally, in “Cuzak’s Boys” Jim closes the circle, fusing the idea with the particular. Jim’s revelation in the fruit-cellar scene is quintessentially romantic: he sees *Ántonia* in all her particularity, an aging woman with missing teeth and grizzled hair, and he recognizes the universal idea of an earth mother residing within that particularity.

Just as we earlier looked closely at the opening of *My Ántonia*, we now look closely at its ending. I read the last paragraph aloud, and students often reply by saying it is “perfect,” with everything resolved: Jim has returned

home to Ántonia and to himself. (My students here sometimes charge Cather with escapism, saying that such resolution is *too* perfect.) Then we look again at the last sentence. “Incommunicable,” a word students initially overlooked, stops them short on rereading, for they suddenly realize that with it Jim has excluded us from his resolution. If the past Jim possesses is “incommunicable,” what are we left with? Apparently we don’t get at Ántonia’s truth, or Jim Burden’s, or Willa Cather’s.

We explore this idea further in discussing other questions students have about the novel. Why didn’t Jim “get together” with Ántonia? The discussion ranges, but what is relevant for this essay is that it includes our role as readers. “What does ‘get together’ mean?” someone asks; someone else says, “But they do ‘get together,’ just not in the sense I meant,” and we begin to talk about our stories, fictions that we are creating about these characters. Students mean that Jim should marry Ántonia, an action that can only be described as wildly improbable when we consider characterization, theme, and plot as Cather gives them to us. Why do we expect him to do so? What are our conventions for characters (I cannot remember a student’s asking why Ántonia didn’t marry Jim; it’s always the reverse), and what are our expectations of a novel?

Such questions return us to the introduction, in which Cather laid down her poetics. I remind students that they had said the novel would have been better without it, and we talk about how that might be so. We could have rested easy in the illusion of receiving truth, in having entered into Jim’s skin, retraced his past, and discovered his self, as if it were our own. Instead, Cather framed her novel with reminders that Jim cannot give to us “his Ántonia.” In forcing us to create our own Ántonia and thus extending responsibility for her story to her reader, Cather reveals the forward-reaching tendencies of her romanticism. She has made her narrator an instrument of perception and a maker of meaning, but she has withheld from him the power of making the novel’s validity. Instead, she extends to the reader the romanticist’s premise that meaning is in an epistemological sense an individual, personal creation. Cather created a narrator through whom she imagined one story, which she in her introduction distinguishes from *her* story. In the novel’s conclusion, she reminds us that one person’s meaning is “incommunicable” to another, thereby charging each reader to create his or her own story.