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## Preface and Introductory Materials to *Approaches to Teaching Cather's My Ántonia*

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**Approaches to  
Teaching Cather's  
*My Ántonia***

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Edited by

*Susan J. Rosowski*

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Cover illustration of the paperback edition: Photograph of a dugout used as a home by a pioneer family on the South Loup River, Custer County, Nebraska, 1892. Solomon D. Butcher Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society. Used with permission of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

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# PREFACE TO THE VOLUME

Unlike some other works represented in this series, such as *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Divine Comedy*, *My Ántonia* is familiar rather than foreign, accessible rather than difficult. Cather's novel is so clear, so apparently effortless, that it hardly seems art at all, and the challenge for instructors is to move their students beyond a surface reading to an understanding of its art and its place in literary history. *My Ántonia* also offers the joy of discovering universality, as students recognize in it voices from the past and themes for all times. In telling of Ántonia's place in American history, for example, Cather drew from Vergilian epic and pastoral. At the same time, the book reveals possibilities of native materials: Cather was the first author to write of the beauty of Nebraska, and *My Ántonia* the major book in which she did so. Particularly exciting for many students today, *My Ántonia* poses profound questions concerning gender conventions. Because it is accessible, because it brings together major literary traditions, and because its plot and narrative strategy pose questions of gender, *My Ántonia* is taught in a wide variety of contexts, including writing courses; introductory courses; and survey courses organized by period, genre (e.g., The American Novel), region (e.g., Plains Literature, Nebraska Writers), theme (e.g., The Immigrant Experience in Literature, Literature of Agriculture), and gender.

Yet while students appreciate and enjoy *My Ántonia*, instructors preparing for sessions on it are likely to feel frustrated. Other than the standard courses in American literature, few have had graduate training in fields related to Cather studies—plains literature, history, or geography—and still fewer have had training specifically in Cather studies. Ironically, a characteristic American college or university literature teacher is more familiar with the social and economic conditions of Chaucer's England than with those of Cather's Nebraska. The aim of this volume is to provide background and ideas others have found most helpful in teaching *My Ántonia*.

This book has two parts: "Materials" and "Approaches." Part 1 describes Cather's role in preparing the text and supervising the physical design of *My Ántonia*, and it reviews other writing by Cather relevant to *My Ántonia*, as well as biographical studies and criticism recommended most often by instructors who teach it. It includes also a selective introduction to materials recommended for instructors' libraries: reference works on Cather, general background, biographical studies, and critical commentary. Finally, it surveys aids to teaching: pedagogical articles and nonprint media.

In Part 2, "Approaches," twenty-five instructors explain ways in which

they translate their scholarship, criticism, and other experience into classroom approaches to *My Ántonia*. These essays provide an eloquent testimony to diversity: essays focus on teaching the history of Nebraska, the immigrant experience, and the writing and reception of the novel; the literary and philosophical traditions; specific courses; and, finally, specific aspects. This volume concludes with a list of survey participants, a list of works consulted, and an index.

One pleasure of editing this volume has been in corresponding with various persons about *My Ántonia*, Cather, and teaching in general. I am grateful to colleagues—those who responded to the questionnaire and offered advice in planning the volume as well as those who wrote the essays presented here—for so generously contributing their expertise to the project. I wish also to thank Joseph Gibaldi, general editor of this series, for his sound advice throughout; R. Neil Beshers for copyediting; Bernard Koloski for information about the Chopin volume in this series; and Kathryn A. Bellman and Emily Levine for research assistance.

SJR

*Part One*

# MATERIALS

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*Susan J. Rosowski*

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## Editions

Because *My Ántonia* remains under copyright, teachers have no realistic alternative among editions: only one edition has been and is available in paperback. Until recently these copyright restrictions have ensured that students have read the novel roughly as Cather intended it, for Houghton Mifflin had honored Cather's wishes by printing its paperbacks from plates of the 1937 Autograph Edition (which incorporated changes Cather made for the second, 1926 edition) and including the Benda illustrations Cather asked for. In 1988, however, Houghton Mifflin reissued *My Ántonia* in reduced type, without illustrations and prefaced by an all-purpose foreword. Critical introductions erect a barrier between reader and fiction, Cather felt, and she adamantly refused them for her writing, wishing readers (and especially students) to enjoy a sense of independent discovery. So Houghton Mifflin's publishing decisions for a student edition are disappointing in themselves, but the resulting foreword by Doris Grumbach is especially so. It consists of facile biography, bland plot synopsis, and sweeping value judgments; it contains the most basic factual errors, such as the title of a Cather volume and the date that the French came to Quebec. Instructors should show students a copy of the book as Cather intended it (a first edition if possible or, at the least, a paperback based on the Autograph plates and including Benda illustrations), and they should advise students to postpone reading the foreword until after completing the novel.

Instructors may wish to provide information revealing how closely Cather supervised the physical design of *My Ántonia*, then to discuss with students how that design contributes to the effect of the novel. In letters to her editor at Houghton Mifflin, Ferris Greenslet (Oct. 1917 to Sept. 1918), Cather specified liberal page margins and heavy type on rough-finish, cream-tinted paper. She wanted her illustrations to have the effect of old woodcuts, explaining that her idea evolved from close study of western photographs. To achieve that effect she selected as its illustrator W. T. Benda, an artist who knew both Bohemia and the West. Moreover, she worked closely with him in planning the illustrations, approving ones he prepared, and instructing her editor on how they should be used: on right-hand pages, facing the text they illustrate, on text paper rather than coated paper, and with blank reverse (the first printing of three thousand included illustrations on coated paper; later printings switched to integral illustrations on text paper). She wanted the illustrations printed small on a liberal page, with the same black ink as for the text. She was particularly careful about the sizing and placement of the illustrations, wanting to provide an effect of a great space of sunlight and air overhead.

When the book appeared Cather was very pleased with its look and the printing of its illustrations, only wishing that the paper were a little more yellow. She was not so pleased, however, with Houghton Mifflin's promotion of it, and following *My Ántonia* she went to the young publisher Alfred Knopf, with whom she remained for the rest of her life.

Other editions of *My Ántonia* generally available to students are the Autograph Edition (1937), corrected and revised by Cather and now in major libraries, and the recent Library of America edition (*Early Novels and Stories*), edited by Sharon O'Brien (1987). The Library of America volume includes with *My Ántonia* other early novels and stories: *The Troll Garden*, *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *One of Ours*. It offers the convenience of a compact, standardized format, but that same format undermines the feeling of space and individuality that Cather wished for *My Ántonia*.



## Required and Recommended Student Reading

When asked what background and critical works they assign or recommend to students, almost all instructors emphasized that they focus on the primary text. Many assign only the novel, some saying simply that they prefer to stress it, others writing that for students in required, introductory classes who are not habitual readers, the primary objective is to enjoy the text. Many respondents explained that they present background material in lectures or where appropriate in class discussion. Not surprisingly, instructors are most likely to assign background reading to the more advanced students. When assigned or recommended, background reading falls into three categories: other writing by Cather, biographies, and criticism.

### *Other Writings by Cather*

Cather's interviews, essays, and short fiction may well provide the best introduction to *My Ántonia*. For autobiographical background, students will find useful Cather's 1913 interview for the *Special Correspondence of the [Philadelphia] Record (Kingdom 446–49)*. Recalling her own experience of coming with her family to an open country, feeling "an erasure of personality," suffering homesickness, and then finding comfort in visiting with immigrant neighbor women at their baking or butter making, Cather tells of emotions out of which *My Ántonia* sprang. For more general background about the frontier period, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" provides Cather's views of the geography, economy, history, and culture of the state.

For more extensive introduction to Cather's plains fiction, selected early stories depict harsh frontier conditions, all in a style to which students readily respond. "On the Divide" tells of a homesteader's desperate struggle against an alien land; "The Sculptor's Funeral" and "A Wagner Matinée" present cultural deprivation in small-town life; and "El Dorado: A Kansas Recessional" is a story of westering dreams shattered. All are included in *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction: 1892–1912*.

For her views about writing, two of Cather's essays are particularly relevant: "My First Novels [There Were Two]" and "The Novel Demeublé." For a discussion of changes in Cather's themes and techniques, two stories are excellent: "Peter" (1892, in *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction*) and "Neighbour Rosicky" (1928, in *Obscure Destinies*). In "Peter" Cather wrote an early version of the suicide of Ántonia's father; in "Neighbour Rosicky," a late version of the contentment in Ántonia Cuzak's family, seen in the final section of *My Ántonia*. Anton Rosicky, the central character of the later story, is based on Leo Pavelka, husband of Annie Pavelka, the prototype

for *Antonia*; as a result, students enjoy “Neighbour Rosicky” as a sequel to *My Antonia*.

### ***Biographical Studies***

Many teachers summarize and some assign relevant portions of a biography. The most frequently cited was James Woodress’s *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art*; Mildred R. Bennett’s *The World of Willa Cather* and E. K. Brown’s *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (completed by Leon Edel) were also mentioned frequently. Two biographies appeared too recently to be included in instructor’s questionnaires, but they undoubtedly will be recommended or required reading for appropriate classes: Sharon O’Brien’s *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* (1987) will be particularly important for classes that focus on women’s literary traditions and gender identification; and James Woodress’s *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* promises to be the standard full-length biography of Cather. Finally, several instructors recommend Sharon O’Brien’s essay “‘The Thing Not Named’: Willa Cather as a Lesbian Writer” for a thoughtful argument that Cather was lesbian (defined as having a primary emotional attachment to other women), living in a time when cultural pressures resulted in her masking that lesbianism by various fictional strategies.

### ***Criticism***

For specialized and upper-level classes, instructors recommend David Stouck’s *Willa Cather’s Imagination*, praising its “clear, sensible interpretations that most undergraduates can understand.” Teachers continue to recommend Dorothy Van Ghent’s pamphlet *Willa Cather* and David Daiches’s *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction*; several mentioned also Philip Gerber’s Twayne volume, *Willa Cather*, as well as Edward Bloom and Lillian Bloom’s *Willa Cather’s Gift of Sympathy*. Among recent books of criticism, Judith Fryer’s *Felicitious Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* interprets *My Antonia* as the creation of a woman’s imagination, telling of knowledge of the earth, retrieved by sensations that trigger memory, and placed by story telling. In *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather’s Romanticism*, Susan Rosowski interprets *My Antonia* as a novel structured by feeling, its meaning (which is as personal as its form) revealing how the imagination comes to see the miraculous that resides within the ordinary.

The two essays most frequently recommended are Blanche H. Gelfant’s “The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Antonia*,” for complexities of point of view as affected by gender, and James E. Miller, Jr., “*My Antonia*: A Frontier Drama of Time,” for ways in which Cather structures Jim Burden’s

growing awareness that human destiny participates in cyclic patterns of the seasons, stages of civilization, and times of human life. Recommended also as particularly effective with undergraduates was Wallace Stegner's "Willa Cather: *My Ántonia*" (*American Novel* 144–53). One instructor wrote that he "frames" his teaching of *My Ántonia* with Stegner's essay, reading the first half to his students before they begin reading Cather's novel, then the second half after they have completed it. In so doing, he reinforces the oral quality of Cather's story telling and introduces the point of view of Stegner, "another Great Plains product."

## The Instructor's Library

Instructors indicated that they teach *My Ántonia* in a variety of courses and at all levels, from introductory genre or period surveys to advanced specialized courses. It appears most often in courses on American literature, women's literature, and regional literature (e.g., western, plains, and mid-western literature) but also in general courses (e.g., introductions to fiction, surveys of the novel, and composition classes).

When I compiled this listing of materials, my guiding principle was to include works recommended by at least two instructors in their responses to the questionnaire on teaching Cather's novel: exceptions are books and essays published since 1985, too recent to have been used by those instructors. Thus I have not attempted to provide an inclusive list of materials relevant to *My Ántonia*, or even of first-rate criticism on it. The amount of writing on Cather has reached staggering proportions, and one service provided by this volume is to offer the instructor of undergraduate students a guide through that writing.

In using this section, therefore, instructors should recognize the advantages and shortcomings that accompany such selectivity. The advantage is the selection favors undergraduate teaching, the context in which it will be used; the disadvantage is that much excellent criticism and scholarship, materials of interest to an instructor or student exploring a subject beyond classroom discussion, does not appear here. Fortunately, two inclusive bibliographies of works by and about Willa Cather are now available, a starting place for such exploration.

### Reference Works

*Willa Cather: A Bibliography*, by Joan Crane, provides a complete descriptive listing of all known writing by Cather, in all printings and editions. Moreover, it provides a list of personal letters, statements, and quotations printed or reproduced; translations of novels and stories into foreign languages; foreign editions in English and piracies; large-type books and books for the blind (in Braille and Moon type as well as recorded); and adaptations for film and theater. Crane's list of articles, reviews, and essays in newspapers and periodicals (sec. D) is particularly helpful to teachers who wish to guide students into original research. Because many articles that Crane cites here are available only in their original forms, the bibliography enables students to experience the excitement of working with archival materials, either in their institution's library or through interlibrary loan.

*Willa Cather: A Reference Guide*, by Marilyn Arnold, provides an excellent annotated bibliography of criticism on Cather from 1895 until 1984, including selected major reviews and a listing of works by Cather. Author and title indexes provide easy access to the bibliography; annotations describe but do not evaluate.

For a discussion of the history of Cather criticism, see Bernice Slote's review essay "Willa Cather"; James Woodress is preparing an update of that essay, to include criticism through 1983. These bibliographies should be further updated and supplemented by *American Literary Scholarship: An Annual*, by the annual bibliography included in the February issue of *Western American Literature*, and by the *MLA International Bibliography*. For information about Cather-related events (conferences, seminars, special sessions, etc.), see *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter*, available in major libraries or from the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation (326 N. Webster St., Red Cloud, NE 68970).

## General Background

Instructors overwhelmingly recommended Cather's own writing as essential background for *My Ántonia*. Two volumes present her early essays: *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893–1896*, edited by Bernice Slote, and *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893–1902*, edited by William M. Curtin. Early stories are available in *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, 1892–1912*, edited by Virginia Faulkner, with an introduction by Mildred R. Bennett; particularly relevant to *My Ántonia* is the section titled "On the Divide." Also relevant to *My Ántonia* are *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *A Lost Lady* (1923), which along with "Neighbour Rosicky" in *Obscure Destinies* tell Cather's more complete story of the frontier and America's westering dream. In "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," Cather wrote her version of Nebraska's history. (See section on recommended student reading for details.)

For the classical literary tradition in which Cather placed *My Ántonia*, instructors refer to Vergil's *Georgics* and *Aeneid*; for the popular western American tradition, Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. Several instructors recommended also other plains writing, most frequently Mari Sandoz's *Old Jules* and *Love Song to the Plains*, O. E. Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, and Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow*.

Unfortunately, background studies of the frontier period in American history and plains or western literature continue to be gender-specific: almost all general studies on the frontier novel or western literature focus (some-

times exclusively) on a male-dominated tradition, while most studies looking at the female tradition of the same era address solely women's experience and literature.

Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893) remains the starting point for discussion of the historical significance of the frontier. Defining the frontier as the meeting place between civilization and wilderness, Turner argued that this westward-moving line of demarcation shaped American identity and destiny by fostering characteristically American qualities: initiative, individual enterprise, ingenuity, industry, optimism, resourcefulness. In *The Frontier Thesis: Valid Interpretation of American History?* (a collection of essays by various hands, edited by Billington) and *America's Frontier Heritage*, Ray Allen Billington surveys, reappraises, and (finally) defends Turner's frontier hypothesis in the light of subsequent research.

For additional historical background, instructors recommended Gilbert Fite's *The Farmers' Frontier*; for literary-historical context, Roy Meyer's *The Middle Western Farm Novel*; and for political background, Norman Pollack's *The Populist Response to Industrial America*. For Nebraska history, instructors (particularly those in the Midwest) recommended James C. Olson's *A History of Nebraska* and Frederick Luebke's *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*. Robert W. Cherny's *Populism, Progressivism, and the Transformation of Nebraska Politics: 1885–1915* is excellent for political backgrounds specific to Cather's time and state.

For women's experiences on the plains, instructors referred most often to recently published books that provide frontier women's voices, often through journals, letters, and diaries: Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience*; Joanna Stratton, *Pioneer Women: Voices from the Kansas Frontier*; Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880–1910*; and Lillian Schissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey. Women and Western American Literature*, a collection of essays edited by Helen Winter Stauffer and Susan J. Rosowski, includes John J. Murphy's essay "The Virginian and Antonia Shimerda: Different Sides of the Western Coin."

Though its text is often simplistic, the Time-Life volume *The Pioneers* (particularly the chapter titled "Sodbusters in the Heartland") contains photographs, advertisements, and paintings contemporary to *My Antonia*: railroad advertisements; photographs of immigrant families; documents of the Homestead Act; photographs of a Nebraska dugout, sod house, and planted field. In "On the Last Frontier: Women Together, Women Divided," a chapter of *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land*, Joan M. Jensen presents a useful overview of women's settlement on the land from 1865 to

1910, followed by excerpts from *My Ántonia* and from other writing by and about women.

For plains, prairie, and western literature classes, as well as for some American literature courses, instructors most frequently mentioned Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, often along with two books by Annette Kolodny: in *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*, Kolodny interprets gender implications of men's writings about the American land, and in *The Land before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1860*, she attempts "to chart women's private responses to the successive American frontiers and to trace a tradition of women's public statements about the West," arguing that "women claimed the frontiers as a potential sanctuary for an idealized domesticity" (xi, xiii).

Among discussions of the frontier in literature, instructors mentioned most often Edwin Fussell's *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (1965), as useful for interpreting one frontier tradition (that of Cooper, Hawthorne, Poe, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman), and Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*, as provocative in extending the frontier hypothesis of Turner to argue that "the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (5). In *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800–1915*, Sandra L. Myres, beginning also with Turner, provides an important corrective to previous studies of the American frontier experience, which have either ignored or isolated women.

Other background studies on the plains include Everett Dick's *The Sod-House Frontier, 1854–1890: A Social History of the Northern Plains from the Creation of Kansas and Nebraska to the Admission of the Dakotas*. Particularly applicable to Cather, Walter Prescott Webb's classic *The Great Plains* (1931) argues "that the Great Plains environment . . . constitutes a geographic unity whose influences have been so powerful as to put a characteristic mark upon everything that survives within its borders" (vi). For immigrant experience, instructors recommended Oscar Handlin, *The Up-rooted*; for the American mythology of innocence versus progress, R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*, and Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, who frequently uses literary texts to interpret the conflict of industrial and pastoral.

For broad interpretations of women's traditions, two studies are especially important. Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* places Cather in a context of women's literary tradition and is particularly suggestive concerning Cather's treatment of motherhood and her creation of female landscapes. In *The*

*Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas argues that the genesis of modern American mass culture lies in sentimental literature of Victorian women and clerics. While she does not mention Cather, Douglas provides a sound basis for discussing certain elements of *My Ántonia*: Cather's treatment of gender roles, particularly as imposed by Jim Burden and contradicted by both Ántonia and Lena Lingard, and the novel's nostalgia, particularly as a form of protest against modern notions of progress. For feminist theory, *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, edited by Elaine Showalter, provides a useful starting place, with an especially helpful bibliography divided into fifteen topics ranging from "Feminist Critical Theory, English and American" to "Bibliographies of Feminist Criticism" and "Current Journals Publishing Feminist Criticism." Finally, several instructors recommend Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* and Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* for theories of female development.

### ***Biographical Studies***

Because Cather drew so heavily on her own life in writing *My Ántonia*, most instructors spend some time with autobiography and biography. The instructor may wish to begin with a 1913 interview in which Cather spoke of her feelings on entering Nebraska; the brief description anticipates her fictional depiction of Jim Burden's similar entry (*Kingdom* 446–49).

For a biography of Cather, instructors most frequently recommend James Woodress's *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art*, long the best single introduction to Cather's life and writing. Woodress's much expanded, full-length *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* appeared in 1987. Scholarly, sound, and eminently readable, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* will be invaluable to instructors and their students. Mildred R. Bennett's *The World of Willa Cather* focuses on Cather's years in Webster County and, particularly, Red Cloud, providing important background to *My Ántonia*. Finally, Sharon O'Brien's *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* is richly informative about feminist psychological theories, as well as about Cather's development through *O Pioneers!*, the pioneer novel preceding *My Ántonia*.

Early biographies continue to be valuable, particularly three published in 1953: Edith Lewis's *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*, is a respectful account of Cather's personality and working habits provided by the woman with whom Cather lived for almost forty years. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's *Willa Cather: A Memoir* draws heavily on letters from Cather, with phrases that come close to quotations. Because Cather's will prohibits quoting from those letters, the Sergeant biography is especially interesting for including echoes, at least, of Cather's voice. Finally, E. K. Brown's *Willa*



*Cather: A Critical Biography*, completed by Leon Edel, combines biography with criticism; Brown's was the semiofficial scholarly biography, written with the full cooperation of Edith Lewis and Cather's publishers.

A recent volume provides additional biographical background that should be particularly useful for teaching: L. Brent Bohlke's *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters* collects all known published letters, speeches, and interviews; a forthcoming second volume, *Willa Cather Remembered* (also edited by Bohlke), will include reminiscences of Cather by persons who knew her.

### ***Critical Commentary***

David Daiches's *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* and Dorothy Van Ghent's gracefully written pamphlet *Willa Cather* remain useful for initial reading on Cather's major fiction: both provide clear, sensible critical surveys of her works. Following the Twayne format, Philip Gerber in *Willa Cather* provides an alternative general introduction to Cather's life and writing. David Stouck in *Willa Cather's Imagination* argues that the range of Cather's artistry is reflected in the range of modes, themes, and forms she employed in her fiction.

Two recent books provide additional criticism. Judith Fryer's *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather*, draws on interdisciplinary sources (philosophy, sociology, anthropology, architecture, psychology, literature, and the visual arts) to examine the ways in which Wharton and Cather imagine space; Fryer argues that *My Ántonia* imaginatively structures a landscape from female experiences. Susan J. Rosowski's *The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism* interprets Cather's fiction in terms of her lifelong commitment to vindicating imaginative thought. A chapter on *My Ántonia* argues that the novel invests traditional Romantic patterns and assumptions with new tension, by infusing them with gender assumptions. A later chapter discusses the gothicism that runs through Cather's works, in *My Ántonia* with such incidents as Wick Cutter's attempted rape and the Peter and Pavel story of throwing the wedding couple to the wolves.

Instructors classify the subject matter and form of *My Ántonia* as variously in their teaching as do critics in their writing. Those approaching it as pastoral recommend John H. Randall III's "Willa Cather and the Pastoral Tradition," Richard C. Harris's "Renaissance Pastoral Conventions and the Ending of *My Ántonia*," and David Stouck's "Pastoral" in *Willa Cather's Imagination* (35–72). Others who consider *My Ántonia* as epic refer to Paul A. Olson's "The Epic and Great Plains Literature."

Narrative method, a central subject for criticism on *My Ántonia*, is also

central to teaching the novel. In an early essay on Jim Burden's narration as a structuring device, James E. Miller, Jr. ("*My Ántonia*: A Frontier Drama of Time") argues that the unified effect of the book comes from the cyclic patterns that structure it—the seasons, human life, and civilization—and its drama from Jim Burden's growing awareness that it is human destiny to participate in those cycles. In "The Drama of Memory in *My Ántonia*," Terence Martin relates stages of frontier settlement to *My Ántonia* and argues that the book presents not Ántonia's story but "the drama of memory" in Jim Burden, who retrospectively comes "to see Ántonia as the epitome of all he has valued" (304, 308).

In "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Ántonia*," Blanche H. Gelfant addresses questions of gender and sexuality posed by the novel, arguing that Jim Burden's narration reveals an evasion of adult male sexuality characteristic of American literature. In "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space," Robert Kroetsch describes the long literary tradition in prairie fiction that presents overwhelming space as antithetical to human communication and, particularly, sexual relationships. More recent critics have viewed Jim Burden's narration as a strategy used by Willa Cather to subvert gender conventions. Susan J. Rosowski's "Willa Cather's Women" and Jennifer Bailey's "The Dangers of Femininity in Willa Cather's Fiction" present two interpretations of the recurrent tension in Cather's fiction between gender conventions restrictive to women and strong female characters capable of defying those conventions. In "The Lost Brother, the Twin: Women Novelists and the Male-Female Double *Bildungsroman*," Charlotte Goodman argues that Cather, like certain other women novelists, dramatized culturally imposed gender roles by splitting experience between two protagonists, one male and the other female.

For plains or frontier experience as depicted in *My Ántonia*, Roy W. Meyer's "The Scandinavian Immigrant in American Farm Fiction" provides general background, focusing particularly on *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*. For background about Peter and Pavel's story of the wedding party and the wolves, Paul Schach's "Russian Wolves in Folktales and Literature of the Plains: A Question of Origins" demonstrates the resemblance of Cather's story to German and Russian folk stories and suggests possible sources for her version.

For political background and Cather's position relevant to it, Robert W. Cherny's "Willa Cather and the Populists" provides information on the populism in Webster County and the antipopulism of Charles Gere, editor of the *Nebraska State Journal* while Cather worked there. For tensions between Old World and New as depicted in *My Ántonia*, Wallace Stegner writes extensively of the novel in one chapter of *The American Novel*.

## Aids to Teaching

Surprisingly few publications specifically address the subject of teaching *My Ántonia*. John J. Murphy's introductory pamphlet written for Houghton Mifflin, *A Teacher's Guide to Willa Cather's O Pioneers! and My Ántonia*, is now out of print. In a brief essay, "Discovering Symbolic Meaning: Teaching with Willa Cather," Susan J. Rosowski focuses on *My Ántonia* as a text that teaches students "patterned in habits of radical depthlessness" to read by "an accumulation of meaning, as in poetry" (15–16).

The situation is happier concerning nonprint media to supplement teaching Cather's novel. Instructors often recommend a judicious use of visual materials illustrating the sites and people on whom Cather drew for *My Ántonia*. For a superb photographic history of first-stage settlement on the frontier, see John Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream*. The volume includes 105 photographs representing the years 1885–1911, all selected from Butcher's nearly four thousand prints and negatives depicting the generation that settled Nebraska. For illustrations specifically keyed to Cather's life and fiction, Bernice Slote's *Willa Cather: A Pictorial Memoir* is very good; it includes photographs by Lucia Woods and others, with text by Slote. For a dramatic photograph of Annie Pavelka (the prototype for Ántonia Shimerda Cuzak), as well as other photographs relevant to Cather, see "Willa Cather Country."

Webster County itself is accessible to many instructors; almost half of those responding to the questionnaire reported that they have visited Red Cloud and its environs, where they took photographs and slides for use in their teaching. Those in the Midwest frequently take their students to Webster County, where they can visit the Pavelka farm, walk on an expanse of unbroken prairie, and see in Red Cloud (the prototype for Black Hawk) various sites Cather included in her novel—most important, her childhood home and the nearby Miner house (the prototypes for the Burden and Harling homes in Black Hawk). All are administered by the Willa Cather Historical Center, Nebraska State Historical Society. Finally, instructors may purchase slides of sites relevant to *My Ántonia* by writing to the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation (326 N. Webster St., Red Cloud, NE 68970).

The film *Willa Cather's America* is a sometimes awkwardly dramatic but generally satisfactory introduction to Cather's life and fiction. Produced for WNET-TV, it is available from Films for the Humanities (PO Box 2053, Princeton, NJ 08450). Several instructors mentioned that when they did use this film, they found it more effective following rather than preceding discussion of Cather and *My Ántonia*.

Of all Cather's novels, only *A Lost Lady* has been adapted for film; after her disappointment in the 1924 version by Warner Brothers and her anger over the same studio's 1934 version, filmed without her knowledge, Cather took legal action to prohibit subsequent adaptations of her work in any form. There is, therefore, no film of *My Ántonia*, and presumably there will be none so long as copyright protection is in effect.