

THE LAND OF NEBRASKA AND ANTONIA SHIMERDA

by

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Setting is a necessary element of any novel, but only a few authors have made a Great Plains setting an integral part of their stories. The Great Plains setting of novels has served mainly as a backdrop. This backdrop is lowered into place in the first chapter of the book and remains there throughout the novel without becoming obtrusive or interfering with the plot. When used like this, the Great Plains setting never becomes a part of the novel. None of the features of the land are worked into the novel, so the reader is never aware of the changes in the land or the seasons' coming and going. Setting is as automatic as capitalizing the first letter of the first word of a sentence--it is done as a matter of course and then forgotten.

Not all authors are guilty of this sin of omission. Willa Cather, in her novel My Antonia, chooses the Nebraska territory as her setting. She does not stop with that choice. As the novel progresses, the land plays an important part, perhaps the most important part, of the story. The land is as important as any of the characters in the novel. To illustrate this point, land, images of the earth, plowing, harvesting, the cycle of the seasons are used in the novel My Antonia by Willa Cather to parallel the growth and development of Antonia Shimerda, one of the characters.

The land of Nebraska is revealed to us through the eyes of Jim Burden. He sees Nebraska after dark as he rides to his grandparents' home in a wagon. The only land to which Jim can compare this new territory is his old home, Virginia. Jim notices immediately that there are no mountains here--only land and sky. As a matter of fact, after more thought, Jim decides

There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. . . . I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction. . . . Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out.¹

When Jim goes to bed, he doesn't say his prayers because he is still awed by the magnitude of this new country. He's even a little frightened by its size.

The following morning, Jim's feelings completely change. The light of day helps to make this new country familiar and inviting. Jim now sees

. . . that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running (1.13).

Thus, the very things which bothered Jim the previous night in the dark on the way to his new home now delight him. He does not mind the absence of the mountains--he notices the grass and how it blows in the wind resembling waves. The waves of grass are moving so swiftly that they seem to run; they are free.² Jim describes other parts of the country as having this feeling of freedom. Once he says "The road ran like a wild thing . . ." (1.16). Later he feels that ". . . sunflower-bordered roads always seem to me the roads to freedom" (1.21). All of Jim's observations point to one thing. Human beings have not made much of a mark on the frontier of Nebraska. Jim does not include in his descriptions acre after acre of cultivated fields or wooden A-frame houses. The Burdens have the only wooden house. The other houses are made of sod. The roads are not paved; they're not even graveled. Dirt roads snake from one farm house to the next. The country seems almost as young as Jim.

Jim isn't the only newcomer to the country of Nebraska. Antonia Shimerda comes to Nebraska with her family. We first hear of Antonia while Jim is traveling on the train. The conductor tells Jim about a young girl who can not speak English. We assume that she is foreign. The conductor continues to kid Jim about the girl who is "as bright as a new dollar."

'Don't you want to go ahead a see her, Jimmy?
She's got the pretty brown eyes, too!'
This last remark made me bashful . . . (1.6)

When Jim first sees Antonia, she is "clutching an oilcloth bundle." Once again, Jim pushes this disturbing idea--a girl--into the back of his mind. He was not impressed after his first meeting with her. She was different from any other girl he had met.

The Burdens' paid a neighborly visit to the Shimerdas' where Jim meets Antonia formally this time. In the daytime, Jim notices that Antonia is actually pretty. She does have big eyes; they are also brown and full of light like the sun. Antonia runs up to Jim, coaxingly holds out her hand, and runs up the hill. Antonia laughs as her skirt blows in the wind. After she, Jim, and Yulka have their first English lesson there on the hill, Antonia impulsively gives Jim her ring (1.20).

It is easy to see, within the first few pages of the novel, how the country of Nebraska and Antonia are similarly described. Both instill a feeling of apprehension in Jim when he sees them for the first time in the dark. When seen in the sunlight, both Nebraska and Antonia have beautiful qualities. They are both free and uncontrolled. They are both impulsive and untamed, yet they are generous, also.

Nebraska is not always this inviting and friendly to people. In winter, the entire country freezes solid. It is barren of all forms of life. Snow is everywhere, and it often drifts up and around the houses; an act which necessitates tunneling out. Winter in Nebraska isn't cruel or mean, but it is hard and bitter.

Winter comes down savagely over a little town on the prairie. The wind that sweeps in from the open country strips away all the leafy screens that hide one yard from another in summer, and the houses seem to draw closer together. . . . The pale, cold light of the winter sunset did not beautify--it was like the light of truth itself. When the smoky clouds hung low in the west and the red sun went down behind them, leaving a pink flush on the snowy roofs and the blue drifts, then the wind sprang up afresh, with a kind of bitter song, as if it said: 'This is reality, whether you like it or not. All those frivolities of summer, the light and shadow, the living mask of green that trembled over everything, they were lies, and this is what was underneath. This is the truth.' It was as if we were being punished for loving the loveliness of summer (1.115-116).

Many times families were cut off from town or from neighbors for months. Individual families must manage on their own. They must be resourceful enough to keep morale high and to make the best of the situation. The Shimerda family does not have this resourcefulness necessary to survive intact through the winter. Mr. Shimerda, Antonia's beloved father, commits suicide shortly after Christmas. Following her father's death and subsequent funeral, Antonia could, herself, turn bitter toward life. As signs of spring appear on the Nebraska prairie, Antonia becomes more reconciled to her father's death.

Spring bounces in like a new puppy (1.79). The Shimerdas "spring clean" and alleviate many of their uncomfortable problems. They have a new four-room cabin, a windmill, a hen house, and chickens. They even have a milk cow. Their fields are ready to be planted. Antonia still retains her tendency to respond to questions in a sharp and biting manner. She puns Jim for information about planting corn and then very rudely insults his grandfather. She very haughtily remarks that Jim's grandfather is not Jesus. He

doesn't know everything (1.80). As winter finally melts into spring, most of these cutting remarks melt from Antonia's mind and another season approaches.

As spring advances into summer, Antonia and the land of Nebraska become even closer together. Antonia has accepted her father's death, but she knows that he killed himself partially because the country was too inhospitable to him. It was not cultivated as he was. Antonia begins to work the land with a vengeance. She does not go to school like the other children in the territory do. She stays home and works "like mans" (1.81). She runs her own team of oxen and works just as long and hard as her brother does to cultivate this wild, free land. She does regret her inability to go to school because Jim catches her crying on the way to the barn one day (1.81). Even though her father has instilled in her a strong desire for education, she somehow knows that the land must be tamed before time can be spent with trivialities and extras like school. The death of Antonia's father also killed the civilized, educated facet of the Shimerda family. When Antonia begins to work in the fields like a man, her "civilized attributes wither away."³ Her genteel manners and social veneer are stripped away, leaving a woman just as coarse and crude as any male field hand. Thus, as the land of Nebraska is being stripped of the red grass by the plow, Antonia is also being stripped of her initial attributes as she works in the fields.

When Antonia moves to town as a hired girl, she loses much of her contact with the land. Of all the seasons discussed during Antonia's stay in town, winter is most predominant. Even Jim notices that winter in town is different than winter on the farm.

Winter lies too long in country towns; hangs on until it is stale and shabby, old and sullen. On the farm the weather was the great fact, and men's affairs went on underneath it, as the streams creep under the ice. But in Black Hawk the scene of human life was spread out shrunken and pinched, frozen down to the bare stalk (1.120).

The winter drags in town. There is nothing to do to relieve the monotony as there was on the farm. All the young people of Black Hawk become involved with music and dancing at the dancing pavilion. Antonia especially enjoys dancing and tries to go to the pavilion as often as she can. She has "relearned" her civilized social manners while she works at the Harlings.⁴ Her intense joy of dancing helps her to lose her job with the Harling family. Her ability to enjoy herself in the dancing pavilion also begins to change her reputation slightly. In the winter in a city, people need diversion. Antonia becomes a diversion. All of the city boys like to dance with her, yet they know and she knows that no serious relationship will develop (1.133).

Only once during her stay in Black Hawk does *Ántonia* ever revert back to the feelings and thoughts she had when she was young. *Ántonia* and two other girls are in the country picking wild flowers. They meet Jim there. Jim notices that *Ántonia* has been crying. The flowers have made her homesick; her homesickness has made her miss her father. She reminisces for a few minutes and then asks Jim about her father's spirit once more. Jim reassures her that her father's spirit is happy. Then, amid the spring blossoms, the new green leaves, the butterflies, bees, and singing birds, Jim reflects that "*Ántonia* seemed to me that day exactly like the little girl who used to come to our house with Mr. Shimerda" (1.154). In this springtime setting, "*Ántonia* had the most trusting, responsive eyes in the world; love and credulousness seemed to look out of them with open faces" (1.154). When Lena Lingard interrupts *Ántonia*'s solitude and reminiscing, *Ántonia* returns once again to the gay, carefree hired girl on an outing picking wild flowers. The weather subtly changes, too. It becomes hot; almost unocably hot. The heat was so great "that the dogwoods and scrub oaks began to turn up the silvery underside of their leaves, and all the foliage looked soft and wilted" (1.555). The attitudes of both *Ántonia* and the weather have changed, however subtly, when reminded of the present.

The very last thing that *Ántonia*, Jim, and their friends see that day is an ordinary plough standing alone in a field. The vision is beautiful. The plough entirely fills the red-orange circle of the sun. Jim describes the picture.

Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the red disk; the handles, the tongue, the share--black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun (1.159).

The plough stands for more than the material object it represents. It is a symbol of a whole way of life; it stands for a settled agricultural civilization.⁵ Human beings are beginning to conquer and tame the country of Nebraska. Seeing ploughs and cultivated fields is more common than seeing the red grass which grew on the prairie. The cultivation process is not nearly complete at this point, though, just as *Ántonia*'s new-found manners do not do her any good until she begins to use them in her favor.

A large break in time separates us from *Ántonia* and Jim. Jim leaves Nebraska, finds a job in the East, and marries. When he returns to Black Hawk years later, he comes during a hot summer. He has been somewhat disillusioned by life, and he has returned to Nebraska to revive and to relive memories of things he thought were important. He hears the story of *Ántonia*'s child from Mrs. Steavens. *Ántonia* packed to leave Nebraska for Denver one day in March. It was a raw, cold day, and it was raining. *Ántonia* herself fluctuated between being happy at the news and sad about leaving the country for good

(1.201). When *Antonia* returns to her family disgraced, the weather once again foreshadows her future. When she arrived, "It was one of them lovely warm May days, and the wind was blowing and the colts jumping around in the pastures . . ."

(1.203). For the remainder of the summer and the fall, *Antonia* works in the fields, plows, and tends livestock. The weather remains mild and calm just as *Antonia* remains quiet and steady. *Antonia* no longer "puts on airs" or brags about anything. She suffers through pain quietly by herself. She only goes to town when it is unavoidable. Summer and fall are placid times.

Antonia's next incident is also foreshadowed by the weather. A heavy snowstorm falls as *Antonia* struggles to drive her cattle home. This is the third heavy snow in the book. During the first, Mr. Shimerda shot himself. During the second heavy snow when Jim and *Antonia* lived in Black Hawk, *Antonia* begins dancing with the young men in town and creates a reputation different from the one she maintained while living on the farm. During this third snow, *Antonia's* child is born. Mrs. Steavens stops her story at this point, and the next morning, Jim meets *Antonia* once again out in the fields on the farm. The season is summer. The day is hot. As the sun sets, the moon vies for brilliancy in the sky.

In that singular light every little tree and shock of wheat, every sunflower stalk and clump of snow-on-the-mountain, drew itself up high and pointed; the very clods and furrows in the fields seemed to stand up sharply. I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall (1.209).

Antonia and the land of Nebraska are once again paralleled. After having her child, *Antonia* decides to stay on the farm and work the land. As she plants corn, plows, tends livestock, etc., she begins to regain her self-esteem and self-confidence. She's ready to pick up where she left off years ago and make the best of her life. In this respect, the land is doing the same thing. The plants are standing tall and straight, high and pointed. Regardless of the size of the plant, each is striving to reach as high as it can. With an atmosphere like this created at the end of Book Four, the reader feels optimistic about Book Five. He hopes that *Antonia* will remain content and stable since she has returned to a life she loves and knows well.

We don't see *Antonia* again for twenty years. As Jim walks through her yard to the house, this is the view he sees.

. . . the forest of tall hollyhocks . . . The front yard was enclosed by a thorny locust hedge, and at the gate grew two silvery, moth like trees of the mimosa family. From here one looked down over the cattle-yards, with their two long ponds, and over a wide stretch of stubble which they

told me was a ryefield in summer behind the houses were an ash grove and two orchards: a cherry orchard, with gooseberry and currant bushes between the rows, and an apple orchard, sheltered by a high hedge from the hot winds . . . (1.220).

Jim seems slightly surprised at finding so much cultivation of the land. He is also mildly surprised at the number of children Antonia has had. Both the land and Antonia have been bountiful and produced well after they were "tamed." Neither the land nor Antonia's spirit will ever be truly conquered, but both have been tamed enough to be malleable. Antonia and the land are so much a part of each other now that it would not be inappropriate to classify Antonia as an earth mother. Everything she does becomes fruitful and multiplies. Jim even says

She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or a gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last (1.228-229).

Antonia herself has realized how important the land is to her. She commented on this occasionally throughout the book, but only after the birth of her first child does she really feel a close bond to the land. She comments that she could never live in a city because "I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly" (1.208). "I belong on a farm. I'm never lonesome here like I used to be in town. You remember what sad spells I used to have, when I didn't know what was the matter with me? I've never had them here" (1.223). Antonia is content with her life; she no longer fights against it or tries to find pleasure elsewhere. She has helped to cultivate and tame the land so that her children may now engage in the frivolities of education, music, and other fields in the humanities.

The reader should never believe that the spirits of the land or of Antonia have been dampened or destroyed. The indomitable, wild, free spirits both exist at the end of the novel. There is one spot of land that has never been cultivated and never will be. The red grass of Nebraska still grows there, wild and free. Mr. Shimerda's grave is this spot. Jim described it well.

. . . instinctively we walked toward that unploughed path at the crossing of the roads as the fittest place to talk to each other.
. . . The tall red grass had never been cut there. It had died down in winter and come up

again in the spring until it was as thick and shrubby as some tropical garden-grass (1.207-208).

Antonia also has preserved her wild and free spirit, but she has done so in a slightly different manner. Leo, her twelve year old son, represents this freedom of mind and spirit. Leo is as Antonia was when she first came to Nebraska. Antonia says of him "That Leo; he's the worst of all And I love him the best . . ." (1.208). He is a mischievous little boy who enjoys almost everything-- especially being alive. Leo is also the one child of Antonia's who represents Mr. Shimerda's artistry. Leo is the person who plays his grandfather's old violin. Even Leo's description is one conducive to wild freedom. Jim says

. . . he really was faun-like. He hadn't much head behind his ears, and his tawny fleece grew down thick to the back of his neck. His eyes were not frank and wide apart like those of the other boys, but were deep-set, gold-green in colour, and seemed sensitive to the light (1.226).

Jim's description goes even farther, though, and tells us of Leo's innermost thoughts. When Leo wakes up before the rest of the family, Jim thinks,

He seemed conscious of possessing a keener power of enjoyment than other people; his quick recognition made him frantically impatient of deliberate judgments. He always knew what he wanted without thinking (1.223).

Leo, then, typifies the person Antonia was as a child. He will have the opportunities Antonia did not have. Leo can pursue any desire he wishes.

The novel ends at this point, after having securely tied the ends of the story together. Antonia is finally seen as an earth mother; she and the earth become synonymous with each other. They eventually compliment each other and serve the same function. Although both the land and Antonia are "tamed" by their experiences with life, neither has lost a strong sense of freedom. The novel ends on this note. The feeling of wildness and freedom will never be taken away from either the land or from Antonia's family. They are too much a part of each other.

NOTES

1. Willa Sibert Cather, My Ántonia (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company: Riverside Press Cambridge, 1918), p. 7. Subsequent references to this work will be given within the text of the paper in parentheses.
2. David Stouck, Willa Cather's Imagination (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 48.
3. John Herman Randall III, The Landscape and the Looking Glass (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company: Riverside Press Cambridge, 1960), p. 149.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 135.