

“From an old country to a new:” Opposing Worlds and Narrative Traditions in Willa
Cather’s *My Ántonia*

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My project is a discussion of the differing styles of narrative found in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. My paper is founded on the premise that these differing styles of narrative are emblematic of larger, more fundamental cultural differences in the novel. Using George Dekker's *The American Historical Romance* as my framework, I identify two prevailing cultures in Cather's novel—progressive culture and traditional culture—and suggest that the narrative and the narrator wavers between them. As traditional culture is linked by Dekker with both the rural and the oral, and progressive culture is linked with the urban and the literate, I examine how the narrator's movement between the two locations creates a shift in narrative style. The differing narratives styles and the cultures of which they are representative have an uneasy relationship in *My Ántonia*, and this paper examines their presence and the possibility of their continued co-existence.

The older girls, who helped to break up the wild sod, learned so much from life, from poverty, from their mothers and grandmothers; they had all, like Ántonia, been awakened and made observant by coming at a tender age from an old country to a new.

-Willa Cather *My Ántonia*

In a society undergoing rapid transformation economically, institutionally, and educationally, conflict between the old and the new was inevitable...

-George Dekker *The American Historical Romance*

The two, orality and literacy, are sharpened and focused against each other, yet can be seen as still interwoven in our own society.

-Eric Havelock *Literacy and Orality*

Jim Burden, the narrator (and supposed composer) of *My Ántonia* recognises something special in girls like Ántonia who came from an old country, immigrants to the new, alien world of America. The old world that Ántonia represents in the tidy, young prairie town of Black Hawk and in Jim Burden's narrative is at the heart of Willa Cather's 1918 novel *My Ántonia*. Cather's novel examines the inevitable conflict between two worlds: the old world from which the Shimerda family comes and the new world represented by Jim Burden and the citizens of Black Hawk. George Dekker's *The American Historical Romance* is extremely useful for developing a framework in which to analyze the opposing worlds and worldviews that in Cather's novel. In this work, he discusses the influence of the model of fiction-writing that Sir Walter Scott employed in his novel *Waverley* and that Dekker recognizes as a pervasive influence on both European and American writing. The *Waverley*-model is concerned "not with the high intrigues and mighty battles of modern political history, but rather with the ways that these affected and were affected by ordinary people" (Dekker 46). It is the ordinary people

who, in the end, waver between the opposing social, cultural, and political forces and who attempt to reconcile these contradictory forces in their daily lives. The inevitable conflict that Dekker sees as central to the historical romance is observable not only through the narrative action of Cather's novel, but also in the narrative style that is employed therein.

My Ántonia purports to be Jim's version of his childhood and his relationship with a young Bohemian immigrant, yet he struggles for authorial control, a struggle that becomes apparent when one looks at the number of stories told in others' voices in his narrative. Though Jim aims for unity, structure, and the style of writing found in the novels he so enjoyed as a boy, one sees that work he creates is often episodic, especially in the section dealing with childhood, entitled "The Shimerdas." The reason for this, as I argue in this paper, is that Jim's written story often challenged by the presence of his non-literate, non-literary heroine Ántonia. Ántonia inhabits the world of oral storytelling which is at odds with the written culture of the novel. Richard Millington, an invaluable source for my discussion of Cather's novel, discusses the presence of both oral stories and written narratives, envisioning *My Ántonia* as "a contest between two kinds of narrative—an intergeneric combat, for the possession of Jim Burden and for the allegiance of the reader" (689). In keeping with the nature of the historical romance, the structure and style of *My Ántonia* wavers between two traditions or cultures, as does our narrator, Jim Burden. Using Dekker's analysis of the historical romance tradition and Millington's discussion of the conflict he sees in *My Ántonia* as my starting point, I will examine the cultural values of the two worlds present in the novel to suggest that the

differing styles of narrative are emblematic of larger, more fundamental cultural differences.

As it will be necessary to refer to and discuss the qualities that Dekker sees operating in the historical romance and in *My Antonia*, I will include a discussion of the lists of binary oppositions that he creates in *The American Historical Romance*. The historical romance is a tradition in which writers “tend to think of societies as ideally whole and unfragmented, but...often detach individuals with ‘heroic’ qualities from their proper community and make them do lonely battle with a radically new and alien civilization” (Dekker 41). Because the societies and civilizations are being discussed as simplified and idealized (“whole and unfragmented”), the historical romance becomes “a generic vehicle” (Dekker 48) that can be analysed using polarized and dichotomous descriptions of the participating cultures. Dekker provides lists of opposing cultural values, socio-cultural issues, and physical features of landscape associated with, as he puts it “declining aristocrats” on the one hand and “the conquering legions of progress on the other (47). Drawing on Edward Young’s *Conjectures on Original Composition* and the works of Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Dekker refines his opposing lists, which I will reproduce in part below:

feudalism	bourgeois society
country	town
oral	literate
natural	artificial
spontaneous	labored
liberty/ wildness	order/ boundaries
individual	mass
poetry/mystery	prose/ reason
	(225)

While I will not find the opportunity in this paper to discuss every dichotomous pair these lists, I include them in order to create a picture of the different cultures Dekker sees

operating in a novel abiding by the *Waverley*-model and that I see operating in Cather's novel. The left-hand column, which Dekker associates with "declining aristocrats," is more generically linked to the fading culture of tradition, while the right-hand column, associated earlier with "the conquering legions of progress," is linked with people, or groups of people, who embrace and implement change in the world. The culture of progress that Dekker outlines is associated in his work and in Cather's novel with men, while women are most often linked with tradition. Dekker notes that "the qualities associated with women in this scheme are the same as or at least similar to those associated in [his] earlier lists with subjugated heroic societies" (228), which, in the case of *My Ántonia*, associates Ántonia, most women Jim encounters, and the world that they inhabit with a subjugated, more traditional society. The relationship between progressive and traditional cultures is at the root of the historical romance, and is, therefore, at the heart of Cather's novel.

Dekker's lists provide a useful frame through which we can view Cather's work and understand the presence of, and relationships between, the two worlds described in it. I would propose, however, to add another set of terms to the dichotomous lists. Included with the terms associated with progressive cultures is the term "mass," which can be enhanced by the addition of the term "solitude," for "mass" suggests a gathering of people without the sense of community, erasing individuality and leaving every member of the crowd in solitude. Consequently, although there is no term analogous to it in the list of terms associated with traditional cultures, the addition of the term "community" aptly describes the values of the cultural groups to which the terms are applied. Although Jim attempts negotiate both the cultures of progress and of tradition in his life, it is as

important to note that the style of presentation in the book switches between the two worlds as well. *Ántonia*, her family, the other immigrants, and especially women in *My Ántonia* can be described using the terminology that is associated with tradition in Dekker's work and with illiteracy and oral storytelling in the novel. Jim's families (his wife and his grandparents) and the townspeople of Black Hawk, on the other hand, are part of the world encompassed of progress, a world that necessitates and privileges reading and literacy—evidenced by the focus placed throughout *My Ántonia* on Jim's formal education and his eventual choice of a career in law. Just as the columns run parallel on the page, so too do the two worlds run parallel in the text of *My Ántonia*.

In *My Ántonia*, the binary oppositions that Dekker sees as necessary components of a historical romance are focused on the dichotomous and fluid nature of gender. While it becomes obvious both from his generic discussion of gender and his use of Cather's novel as a specific example, that Dekker associates females and femininity with the traditional culture as it is represented in the historical romance, he notes that *My Ántonia* "is also a book about the plasticity of gender roles" (259). Though three of the secondary female characters "pursue careers which make them independent and...highly mobile" (Dekker 259), these figures are the exception, not the norm, and provoke gossip from the Black Hawk townspeople (Cather 224). Suggesting that "the gender polarities enshrined in the historical romance reinforce 'Earth-Mother' stereotypes of women as 'naturally' domestic and intellectual," Dekker concedes that "Cather clearly intends us to believe that *Ántonia*'s weaknesses are less serious than Jim's and that her human strengths are more valuable" (229). Despite the hard, manly work that *Ántonia* performed on the farm following her father's suicide, she is unequivocally aligned with the "Earth-Mother"

stereotype. Although the traditional cultural values associated with femininity are being ploughed under as quickly as the wild red grasses in *My Ántonia* by values associated with commerce and progress, Dekker suggests that Jim's version of Ántonia, which we get in this novel, is "timeless and universal—in a word mythic" (261). This suggests a permanence of tradition and the values associated with it. Just as "the high intrigues and mighty battles of modern political history" (46) that Dekker sees as typically associated with the historical romance are rarely decided in a clear, unambiguous way, the distinction between men and women and the values customarily associated with them is equally blurry. Dekker's presentation of *My Ántonia* suggests a relatively peaceful co-existence of tradition and progress through his female characters, allowing for the continuation of the traditional values despite the inevitable nature of progress. Millington also sees a sort of enduring permanence in tradition, through the form of the story and its repeated presence in Cather's novel.

While Dekker imagines the relationship between the two cultures in *My Ántonia* as one of dynamism and relative co-existence, Millington sets up a battle between oral storytelling and written narrative in his analysis of the novel. For Millington, Cather's novel is a battlefield where the two opposing styles fight for control of the text and each style has territory which it dominates—rural settings belong to orality, while written narratives are the controlling forces of urban life. While I refrain from declaring the presence of conflicting narrative styles a battle, *per se*, I do recognize the uneasy relationship between the two narrative styles and cultural systems in Cather's novel. Millington's article offers insightful commentary on how the differing styles of narrative (oral and written) are employed in conjunction with the different settings of the novel—

the sections set in town conform to novelistic standards about “masterplots” and “proper ending[s]” (702), while those sections set in the country are imbued with the essence of oral storytelling. The stories are described as not being “ornaments incidental to the country setting or neutral incidents of local color,” but rather as establishing oral storytelling “as the book’s model of meaning and matrix of ethical value” (693). Because Millington sets up his discussion of the dichotomous nature of narrative in *My Ántonia* as a battle, he sees the final section of the novel, in which Jim returns to Nebraska to visit Ántonia on her farm, as a decisive victory for orality. Millington uses Walter Benjamin’s influential essay “The Storyteller” as the basis for his argument, and seems much more reluctant than Benjamin to eulogise ‘the story’ as already lost. While I would agree that the story and its inherent values are far from dead in Cather’s novel, I am less optimistic about the ending than Millington, and see the ending as taking an appropriately ambiguous stance towards orality and literacy and their respective success. Benjamin and his presentation of the storyteller are relevant to this paper, not only because he is a key source for Millington, but also because of the many connections I see between Benjamin’s argument values and Dekker’s discussion of opposed cultural values.

As Willa Cather’s work involves much focus on the illiterate, yet profoundly insightful Ántonia, it is useful to look at the importance of the storyteller and the milieu in which he or she tends to be found. Benjamin’s description of the storyteller could very well stand in for a description of Ántonia: “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (79). Compare this with Jim’s description of Ántonia’s stories from their times in the Harling’s kitchen: “Nina used to coax Ántonia to

tell her stories—about the calf that broke its leg, or how Yulka saved her little turkeys from drowning in the freshet, or about old Christmases and weddings in Bohemia” (138). *Ántonia*’s stories all involve things that she herself has experienced and these experiences are transmitted to those around her through her; she merely acts as a filter. *Ántonia*, like the archetypal storyteller, does not claim her stories as her own intellectual property, but allows them to be taken and used freely by whoever has listened to it, for her stories are now a part of their experience. Benjamin suggests that “peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling” (78) and Jim’s description of *Ántonia* in the fields recall both these figures: “She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor’s. Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf. One sees that draft-horse neck among the peasant women in all old countries” (96). Although *Ántonia* is neither a peasant nor a sailor, the description of her appearance when she works in the fields links her to the social roles that promote and nourish the creation and proliferation of stories.

As my discussion of Benjamin’s “The Storyteller” suggests, *Ántonia* is linked to the “old world” and the more ancient style of storytelling throughout Cather’s novel. She is a part of the world of illiterate immigrants, one of the “girls [who] had grown up in the first bitter-hard time, and had got little schooling themselves” (153). Unable to go to school like Jim, *Ántonia* works the land and becomes a housekeeper when in town, baking cookies for and telling stories to Jim and the Harling children. Just as her history as a Bohemian immigrant is a part of her identity, so too is her position as a storyteller. Evelyn I. Funda notes that “for *Ántonia* storytelling is a basic human responsibility” (198), one that she rarely shirks. Her very voice seems to have been made for

storytelling, which Jim recognises when he remembers that “her voice had a peculiarly engaging quality; it was deep, a little husky, and one always heard the breath vibrating behind it. Everything she said seemed to come right out of her heart” (138). The world of storytelling, *Ántonia*’s world in Cather’s novel, can be said to represent the traditional culture described in Dekker’s dichotomous lists. The link between *Ántonia* and the old world of feudalistic Bohemia is again perceptible through her voice, which Jim describes thus: “*Ántonia* had never talked like the people around her. Even after she learned to speak English readily there was always something impulsive and foreign in her speech” (211-12). The spontaneity of her stories is linked to the country and to the old world from which she comes, both through her (the storyteller) and by the nature and the location of their telling. Through her marginalized position as both a woman and an immigrant, *Ántonia* represents the values associated with traditional cultures, most significantly, the orality and the liberty associated with storytelling.

Yet, despite the overwhelming presence of orality in *My Ántonia*, Jim attempts to mould his narrative of his childhood and his later reminiscences into a well-structured novel. Although he states in the introduction that he “did n’t [*sic*] arrange or rearrange. [He] simply wrote down what of herself and [himself] and other people *Ántonia*’s name recalls to” him (6), Mary Ryder notes that classical sources are “skillfully interwov[en]” into the book “in a search for the permanent and the enduring” (111)¹. *My Ántonia* is a framed narrative, which is set up in the introduction and it is an unnamed author, presumably Cather, and not Jim, who reports Jim’s recollections. Yet one could suggest

¹ Many other scholars have commented on Cather’s use of classical sources in *My Ántonia*, notably her use of Virgil’s *Georgics* and *The Aeneid*. See John J. Murphy’s book *My Ántonia: The Road Home*, Paul A. Olson’s article “The Epic and Great Plains Literature: Rølvaag, Cather, and Neihardt,” and Joseph Meeker’s article “Willa Cather: The Pen and the Plow” in addition to Ryder.

that this work and its organization are creations of Jim, who is attempting to “bring the Muse into [his] country” by creating an enduring, well-structured novel (199). James E. Miller suggests that “[i]t is Jim Burden’s sensibility which imposes form on *My Ántonia*” (248). Nevertheless, as Funda notes, Jim’s narrative is continually being affected by oral stories and his “written manuscript cannot escape the influence of Ántonia’s oral narratives...his episodic reminiscences told in colloquial language show evidence of the form he has learned from Ántonia’s oral storytelling” (212). In the first section of *My Ántonia*, one can recognize Jim’s attempts to structure these episodic reminiscences, reining them into a unified collection of thoughts through his use of foreshadowing and his creation of metaphors. In the second chapter of “The Shimerdas,” when describing his first day on the prairie, Jim presents the motif of snakes heavy-handedly, explaining how his grandmother carries “a stout hickory cane, tipped with copper...her snake cane” and telling us how “she had killed a good many rattlers” (18). These allusions to the presence of snakes and the discussion the snakes that reside in Grandmother Burden’s garden anticipate Jim and Ántonia’s encounter with the big rattlesnake later in the section (41). The image of the rattlesnake also works its way into Jim’s depiction of the shady dealer Krajiek, who sold the Shimerdas their farm: “He slept with the old man and the two boys in the dugout barn, along with the oxen. They kept him in their hole for the same reason that the prairie dogs and the brown owls housed the rattlesnakes—because they did not know how to get rid of him” (29). Although Ántonia’s influence is strong and Jim’s early narrative develops into an episodic plot, one can see that Jim’s enjoyment of and allegiance to the written texts as the dominant influence for how he composes his story.

The narrative allegiances of the two heroes of *My Ántonia* (Jim to the written, Ántonia to the oral) are determined not only by which set of cultural values to which they ascribe, but are also dependent on gender². The association in Cather's novel is of men and of maleness with literacy and the literary and, therefore, success and progress. Wick Cutter, Grandfather Burden, and Jim himself first come to mind, but when one looks at the text more closely, one can see how other characters come to be associated with literacy, progress, and maleness. There is Frances Harling, who is described as "dark, just like her father," with whom she discusses grain-cars and cattle like a man (119), and Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball, who both shirk the traditional immigrant woman's role of marrying and control successful business ventures, and of course, there is Mr. Shimerda, who will be discussed in more detail below. There are, of course, those characters who are associated with orality and who do not become assimilated into the world of progress. Ántonia and Mrs. Shimerda, partially as a result of their gender, are archetypal representatives of traditional culture and its inherent values. By looking first at the association of Jim with literary texts throughout *My Ántonia*, I hope to show how gendered associations work as yet another classifier of social position in the novel.

Jim Burden is linked to a written form of fiction-making, the novel, through his style of narrative, and he shows his affinity for books as opposed to oral tales throughout *My Ántonia*. In the first chapter of Book One, Jim recounts the experience of crossing through "the great midland plains of North America" and remembers not only hearing

² Both Blanche Gelfant ("The Forgotten Reaping Hook: Sex in *My Ántonia*") and Deborah G. Lambert ("The Defeat of a Hero: Autonomy and Sexuality in *My Ántonia*") discuss gender in their articles. However, in addition to their discussions of gender, Gelfant focuses on Jim's sexual repression and Ántonia's ambiguous sexuality, and Lambert concentrates on Cather's sexuality and the sexuality of her characters, making their arguments too complex to reconcile with the straightforward presentation of gender found in this essay and in Dekker's *The American Historical Romance*.

about *Ántonia*, but Jake's buying him a book entitled "Life of Jesse James," which he remembers "as one of the most satisfactory books [he had] ever read" and which he chooses to read in favour of meeting *Ántonia* (9). He reads *The Swiss Family Robinson* aloud to his grandmother, comparing himself to the characters in the book: "I felt that the Swiss family had no advantages over us in the way of an adventurous life" (54). After adopting the role of schoolteacher to *Ántonia* and her younger sister Yulka, Jim wants to give them "picture-books" for Christmas, for "even Yulka was able to read a little now" (66). When a blizzard keeps the Burden family from going into town for Christmas gifts, he and his grandmother sew "squares of cotton...into a book" (66) for Yulka, filling it with "Sunday-School cards and advertising cards which [Jim] had brought from [his] 'old country'" (67). While he jokingly refers to Virginia as his "old country," the scare quotes in which he places the term show that Jim recognises that his old world and its values are not traditional in the same way as those he associates with the Bohemian immigrants, but rather are in line with the values of the culture of progress. It seems appropriate, then, that Jim gives books to Yulka and *Ántonia*, who, by their position as immigrants and young women, represent a traditional culture that Jim, as a representative of progressive culture, tries to assimilate into his own familiar worldview. Later in life, as a young man on the verge of entering university, we are given glimpses of Jim enjoying a solitary summer "studying in earnest" and beginning "Virgil alone" (177). It is significant to note that the Classical works for which Jim shows affinity, and that critics such as Ryder see as the pattern for his reminiscences, are those of Virgil, the Roman poet known of his written epics, and not Homer, composer of the oral epics of ancient Greece. The lonely

enterprises of reading and book-making provide structure not only for Jim's reminiscence of *Ántonia*, but also of his life, which proves to be well ordered, and quite lonely.

Mr. Shimerda, whom I will show as indeed more closely aligned with the world of progress than that of tradition, recognizes the importance of the written containment of knowledge, which is evident when he asks the Burdens to tutor his eldest daughter:

Before I got to the wagon, he took a book out of his pocket, opened it, and showed me a page with two alphabets, on English and the other Bohemian. He placed the book in my grandmother's hands, looked at her entreatingly, and said with an earnestness which I shall never forgets, "Te-e-ach my *Án-tonia*!" (26)

Mr. Shimerda's connection with the world of written ideals is important, for it links him with the other educated males of the novel, such as Wick Cutter, Grandfather Burden, and Jim himself. He can be described using the terms that Dekker associates with male cultural values—terms such as "sentimental", "intellectual", "learning", and "art" (228)³. Dekker sees these "male cultural values" as a refinement of or augmentation to the cultural values of a progressive society (228). It is through *Ántonia* that the readers come to understand Mr. Shimerda's alliance with the values of progressive society. We learn from her that "at home he play [*sic.*] violin all the time; for weddings and for dance" (73). *Ántonia* reveals that, unlike in America, the Shimerda family had lived in town in Bohemia, and that Mr. Shimerda was from a well-to-do family (180-181) and "went much to school...and he read so many books that the priests in Bohemie [*sic*] come to talk to him" (98-9). While *Ántonia*'s stories clearly situate her father in the world of progressive

³ Dekker's association of sentimentality with masculinity stems from the positioning of masculinity in the tradition of progress and, therefore, at a distance from nature: "[M]ost modern writers are Sentimental: estranged from their own relationship with nature, they lack the harmonious, spontaneous relationship between feeling and thought, thought and words, which is...the birthright of all mankind" (226).

cultural values, Jim continues to see him as part of the traditional world. It is significant that it is *Ántonia's* storytelling that place Mr. Shimerda in the world of men, for, as I will discuss later, her stories offer an alternative to Jim's version of things.

The society in which Jim lives teaches him to think of people who do not speak English as their first language as somehow inferior to those associated with progress, himself included. He learns this attitude from those around him: Jake, the farmboy who cares for Jim on the train ride to Nebraska believes that "was likely to get diseases from foreigners" (10) and his grandmother throws the Bohemian's gift of dried wild mushrooms into the fire, commenting that "they might be dried meat from some queer beast...[and that she's] afraid of 'em"(64). Jim's tendency to imagine his immigrant neighbours as less refined than himself is most obvious when one looks at how he discusses and imagines Mr. Shimerda and his life in Bohemia. After Mr. Shimerda's suicide Jim thinks about "all that *Ántonia* had ever told [him] about his life" (81), which he recounts to *Ántonia* much later on in their lives. Jim tells her that "even now, when [he] pass[es] [Mr. Shimerda's] grave...[he] always [thinks] of him as being among the *woods* and *fields* that were so dear to him" (180, italics added). *Ántonia* has already told Jim that the Shimerdas lived in town and that her father enjoyed sitting in their "yard... [where] [he] had a green bench and a table," and would sit and make music with his old friends (180). Jim is the one who *assumes* that since Mr. Shimerda lived in the country in America, he must have enjoyed a rural lifestyle in Bohemia. Jim must place Mr. Shimerda's spirit in the country, because, for Jim, Mr. Shimerda is representative of a traditional culture, a culture most often associated with rural settings in this novel. Throughout *My Ántonia*, Mr. Shimerda is also associated with spoken knowledge, or

“beautiful talk” as *Ántonia* would call it. After Mrs. Harling compliments Jim on his Commencement speech and tells him that she he “did not get that speech out of books” (175), he tells *Ántonia* that he “thought of [her] papa when [he] wrote [his] speech” (176), thus aligning his powerful spoken commencement address with the orality he sees inherent in all immigrants. Dekker recognises this association of Mr. Shimerda with the immigrants of the pioneer generation, noting that the red prairie grass, which Jim sentimentally associates with an Old World that no longer exists, remains on Mr. Shimerda’s grave “long after it has been plowed under everywhere else,” effectively making it “the community’s principal memorial to the sacrifices exacted by the pioneer generation” (258). In the novel, this red grass, sentimentalized by Jim and associated now with Mr. Shimerda, physically links the old man for eternity with the country and the values that are seen to dominate there.

Although Jim may falsely connect Mr. Shimerda to the country and the traditional culture associated with it, he is right to situate Mr. Shimerda’s wife and eldest daughter there. *Ántonia* is her mother’s daughter in many ways, mainly in her affinity for and alliance to the countryside and its value system. When, following Mr. Shimerda’s suicide, Jim reminisces about all the stories *Ántonia* told him about her family, he recalls her telling him about “the great forests full of game...from which she and her mother used to steal wood on moonlight [*sic*] nights” (82). We have already learned that Mr. Shimerda did not have to marry his wife, but “could have paid [*Ántonia*’s] mother money and not married her...she was a poor girl who came in [to Mr. Shimerda’s mother’s house] to do the work” (180). Mr. and Mrs. Shimerda’s marriage was an intermingling of the two worlds that Dekker outlines in *The American Historical Romance* and just as

Mrs. Shimerda and her opinions are dominant in the marriage, her cultural values are shown to be the ones that are passed down to their children, the next generation.

Although Mr. Shimerda wants his daughter to learn the written form of English, *Ántonia* prefers oral forms of communication. One can observe this early in the novel, when Jim recalls how she transforms a reading lesson into an opportunity for a story:

One afternoon we were having our reading lesson on the warm, grassy bank where the badger lived....Tony was barefooted...and was only comfortable when we were tucked down on the baked earth, in the full blaze of the sun. She could talk to me about almost anything by this time. That afternoon she was telling me how highly esteemed our friend the badger was in her part of the world and how men kept a special kind of dog with very short legs to hunt him. (34).

She continues her story of the badger and the badger dogs further, but what is important to note is that even with her slight grasp of spoken English *Ántonia* desires nothing more than to tell stories.

Throughout *My Ántonia*, it is not only the stories told by *Ántonia*, but those of many of the immigrant characters that find a place in Jim's written narrative. As Millington suggests, there are many oral cues incorporated into the written narrative of Cather's novel:

[*My Ántonia*] begins with hearing and speaking: 'The first I heard of *Ántonia*' is accompanied by a footnote that tells us how to pronounce her name, as though this book will contain things that we ourselves will need to tell. We are frequently alerted to specific qualities of voices—Jim's grandfather's

pronunciation of ‘Selah’ from the psalms... [the] flurry of stories that is a relief to Jim [following Mr. Shimerda’s suicide].” (696-97)

The emphasis on the importance of pronunciation immediately alerts the reader to the importance oral recitation will have in the book. This oral recitation is continually linked with the country and its marginalised inhabitants. When one looks at the first section of *My Ántonia*, one notices the abundance of stories told not only by our archetypal storyteller Ántonia, but by many of the other foreign people, as well. It is significant to note that this section is the only one to take place exclusively in the country—which in *My Ántonia* is associated with orality. Otto Fuchs, the farmhand, could challenge Ántonia’s position as most prolific storyteller; he tells the humorous tale of his crossing from Austria (56-7), recounts “story after story” to Jim while building the coffin for Mr. Shimerda (88), creates a myth about the sunflower bordered roads (27), and tells Jim everything he wants to know about his time in the mountains or as a cowboy (17), to name a few. Anton Jelinek, another Bohemian who appears in the novel following Mr. Shimerda’s suicide, offers his tale of his experience of helping a priest administer the Holy Sacrament during a cholera epidemic (85-6). Pavel and Peter, of course, offer what is arguably most memorable story in the novel—the story of throwing the Russian bride to the wolves (47-50). As is to be expected, the next section of the novel, which is set almost entirely in the town of Black Hawk, contains few stories; the only part full of stories is the penultimate chapter, when Jim and the girls go on a picnic in the country and share stories of their childhoods on the prairie. Although there are many storytellers in the opening section of the novel, Ántonia stands as the archetype storyteller and comes to exemplify the link between the land and the stories when we see

her at the end, sharing her versions of the stories of her and Jim's childhoods with her own children.

As Dekker suggests, the urban world is the literate world. In *My Ántonia*, this translates to the town (or Jim's world) being more readily rendered in a novelistic narrative. Millington believes that it is in Black Hawk that the "battle between the story and the novel begins in earnest" (701). Noting that "town culture...is the inverse of the culture of the story" (702), he describes how the section "The Hired Girls" is written as a short story, with a distinct focus (Jim and Ántonia's lives in Black Hawk), a central conflict (the issues surrounding the dancing tent), and a conclusive resolution (Jim leaving for university in Lincoln). David Daiches echoes Millington's sentiments when he writes that "The Hired Girls" "is *in itself* a brilliantly written section. Life in the small prairie town is described with a cunning eye for the significant detail, and a fine emotional rhythm runs through the whole" (50, italics added). Wick Cutter, whose presence Jim foreshadows in "The Shimerdas" by describing him as "a man of evil name throughout the county, of whom [he] will have more to say later" (44), becomes a vital character, driving the plot in "The Hired Girls," and is of central importance at the climax. The story of the Cutter and his wife has very distinct novelistic tones, with Millington suggesting that Wick Cutter "is a plotter, working, in the manner of Benjamin's version of the novelist, to create the greatest possible suspense in the implied reader of his various episodes" and describes the arrangements he makes in an attempt to rape Ántonia as "*Clarissa-like*" (703). Oral storytelling can still be found in Black Hawk, but it is nearly always linked to the marginalised, illiterate characters who can be described by the terms associated with traditional cultures. Storytelling is all but

obliterated with Jim's move to a larger urban centre in "Lena Lingard," replaced by the books and poems of Virgil that he studies at university and by the theatrical plays that he attends. It is quite apt that Jim refers to his time Lincoln as a "chapter," describing his life in literary terms (219).

The dichotomy between town and country becomes quite apparent when the Burdens move to Black Hawk and Jim describes his new surroundings:

Black Hawk, the new world in which we had come to live, was a clean, well-planted little prairie town...In the center of town there were two rows of new brick 'store' buildings, a brick schoolhouse, the courthouse, and four white churches. Our own house looked down over the town, and from our upstairs windows we could see the winding line of the river bluffs, two miles south of us.

That river was to be my compensation for the lost freedom of farming country.

(116)

The town into which the Burdens have moved is associated with order (the courthouse, the schoolhouse, the matching brick building arranged around a centre square) and correctness (the four white churches). Jim does not immediately feel comfortable with the customs of life in town, describing the rituals associated with being a schoolboy ("play[ing] 'keeps,' teas[ing] the little girls, and us[ing] forbidden words") as "utter savagery" (116). Even while in town, Jim often shows preference for the "hired girls" and the Harlings, a family that effectively treads the line between the old world and the new:

They [the Harlings] were Norwegians, and Mrs. Harling had lived in Christiania until she was ten years old. Her husband was born in Minnesota. He was a grain

merchant and a cattle buyer, and was generally considered the most enterprising business man in our county. (118)

Though the Harlings are foreigners and “their place was like a little farm, with a big barn, and a garden, and an orchard, and grazing lots” (118), they have managed to transgress the rigid structures that are seen to operate in the small town of Black Hawk and are a respected family of business. The Harlings do not waver, as we can see Jim does; they are shown to be able to comfortably occupy and embody values that are both traditional and progressive. The merging of the cultural values of tradition and progress is rarely as seamless as the Harlings’ case suggests, however, and Jim’s early discomfort in town shows the difficulty he has in navigating the different worldviews presented to him.

While Jim shows allegiance to written knowledge and to the values of progressive culture, he wavers in his commitment, and at times is lured by the seductive qualities and the instinctive familiarity of the Old World that he associates with the Shimerdas. John Selzer confirms this wavering by examining Jim’s complex relationship with the members of the Shimerda family in the first section of *My Ántonia*:

Throughout Book I...Jim remains torn between the attractions of the foreigners and his own wariness of them. On the one hand, Jim luxuriates in his adventurous new life, epitomized by Ántonia and the open prairie...On the other hand, though, Jim is also repelled by the Shimerda family and their ways. Perhaps understandably the boy prefers the safer, more comfortable, more conventional ways of his guardians. (47-8)

Jim’s attitude towards the Shimerdas suggests his discomfort and unease with the spontaneity and wildness that he associates with Ántonia, and that Dekker links with

traditional cultures. As has already been noted, the section entitled “The Shimerdas” is imbued with orality and the cultural values associated with it, whereas the physical move to Black Hawk at the beginning of “The Hired Girls” creates a shift in the narrative, with the overwhelming influence over Jim being the values associated with a progressive culture—a culture epitomized by a young, upstart prairie town.

The world of Black Hawk has a set of cultural values that does not accept individuality and that strives for conformity and compliance, epitomized by the uniformity of the architecture in the centre of town. Millington suggests that Jim wavers between the world of Black Hawk and the one in which *Ántonia* finds herself because his education in the values of the story is not entirely without conflict. Jim’s worst moments—his suspicion of the Bohemians’ gift-giving, his liability to xenophobic resentments, his loyalty to conventional notions of gender—are all conditioned by his temporary acceptance, even at so young an age, of powerful *narratives*--- about thrift, propriety, self-discipline, the danger of otherness—that oppose the *story* in his community. (700, italics added)

Jim himself notes “the respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth,” when discussing the role of the hired girls in town (155). While he is entrenched in the progressive culture of Black Hawk, respect for respectability is for him as well the strongest desire, explaining why he stops attending the Fireman’s Dances and starts studying Virgil. Orality and storytelling disappear from Jim’s life and from his book when he is in town, a fate that at the same time seems unnatural *and* unavoidable. In Black Hawk “the oral story is displaced by a very different set of narratives: the purposeful, prudential stories---never told but already written into the mind—that

together construct the overarching normative narrative of maturity that constitutes middle-class culture” (Millington 701). As the brief introduction to *My Ántonia* shows, it is in this middle-class world that Jim lives his lonely and unhappy life, married to a woman who, “for some reason...wishes to remain Mrs. James Burden” (4).

The sterile and self-contained narrative of town is contrasted with the lively and interesting storytelling that occurs in the country in *My Ántonia*. Jim seems to never experience any of the boring doldrums in the country that he does in town (167). It is the presence of and the interaction with many people from many different backgrounds that creates for Jim the sense of vitality and excitement on the prairie. When Jim first introduces Ántonia and her family, he notes that “[t]hey could not speak enough English to ask advice, or even to make their most pressing wants known” (22). Jim and Ántonia are almost immediately snuggled in a hollow in the red grass and she is eagerly pressing him for English words, offering him “a little chased silver ring [that] she wore on her middle finger” in return (26). Paula Woolley suggests that Jim finds this exchange extravagant “because he does not realize the value words have for her” (157). Once Ántonia has acquired enough skill in English, she begins practicing her art as a storyteller. As has been noted, the stories in *My Ántonia* “are consistently tied to agricultural or artisanal [*sic*] work” (Millington 697). Ántonia’s stories in “The Hired Girls” section reflect this trend, with her telling the Harlings “about the calf that broke its leg, or how Yulka saved her little turkeys from drowning in the freshet” (138). Revolving around country life and the tribulations associated with it, Ántonia’s stories can be seen as edifying histories that provide a link to the struggles of early pioneer life.

Solitude, the term I feel is essential to the discussion of progressive cultures initiated by Dekker's work, is crucial to the representation of the literary/ literate world in Cather's novel. For Jim, life in town is lonely. Upon first arriving in Black Hawk, he loses the two farm hands who "had been like older brothers" to him (116). It is significant that Jim's attempt at communication with them, a written letter, is returned unclaimed. Otto, by virtue of his role as storyteller, and Jake, as a result of his illiteracy, belong to the oral world; even if a letter in reply from either were possible, such a letter would certainly not be able to capture one of Otto's stories. After being forbidden from attending the Fireman's dances where he would socialize with and enjoy the company of the country girls, Jim reminisces that "as the spring wore on, [he] became more and more lonely" (174) and Woolley notes, "when he first studies the *Aeneid*, Jim isolates himself for the summer in 'an empty room where [he] should not be disturbed'" (174). Upon first arriving in Lincoln, Jim has no companionship besides his Classics professor, Gaston Cleric, until a remnant of his life in the country, Lena, comes to visit him, and entices him away from his solitary studies. Although the two of them spend a lot of time together, many of their outings are to the theatre. The theatre becomes a place for the communal telling of a literary work, in this case a theatrical adaptation of *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas *fils*, but such a telling that offers none of the intimacy of the storyteller's art. All the people in the theatre are isolated—they are solitary beings in the crowd. Jim's lonely lifestyle of crisscrossing America in a rail car, itself an emblem of progress, can be seen as a final manifestation of the solitary nature of his world.

The isolation and solitary nature of Jim's literary world is all the more apparent when it is contrasted with the world of storytelling in the novel. *Ántonia's* stories invite

an intimacy and a sense of community that is not found in the written world in which Jim most often finds himself. Funda addresses this aspect of *Ántonia's* role as a storyteller when she writes, “storytelling becomes, then, an effort to create intimacy, one relationship at a time” (197) — an intimacy that is linked to this traditional way of relating experience. As Benjamin suggests, the very nature of storytelling demands an audience of at least one person: “a man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller” (88). In *My Ántonia*, Jim is always a part of the audience of the recited stories, namely because the book is written as his memoirs. In “The Shimerdas” it is the telling of stories by others who are newly arrived in Nebraska that provides Jim with the comfort and acceptance he needs upon arriving, orphaned, in a strange land. Jim’s retelling of *Ántonia's* stories in his book, especially in the first section, attest to the power her stories had to make him feel welcome in a world that was as new to her as it was to him: “*Ántonia* demonstrates the power of storytelling to offer its participants a sense of belonging...to the community of *humanity*” (Funda 200). This community of humanity that becomes focused around the storyteller can be seen throughout the novel. Jim and *Ántonia* create “the tiny community of two...as they tell and retell the story” of Pavel and Peter’s experience with the wolves (Millington 695), Jim and the Harling children huddle around the fireplace (and around *Ántonia*) to hear the tale of the tramp in the threshing machine (Cather 138), and in the final section, *Ántonia's* children gather around their mother and her photographs to hear the stories of her youth (258-59). *Ántonia* raises a family that is still very much rooted to the old world from which she comes; they gather together so close—form such a tight community— that Jim marvels at the fact that they “were not afraid to touch each other” (259).

The “spontaneity” and “liberty” that Dekker associates with the old world and that I see operating in the oral tradition can be seen in the reaction audiences in the novel have towards the stories told therein. Dekker addresses how the stories affect Jim, noting that

nearly every notable visitor to Black Hawk and every immigrant group on the nearby prairies comes with a story redolent of another *patria*: of Bohemian forests, of a Louisiana plantation, of a Colorado silver mine—of a host of strange ways and places that become part of narrator Jim Burden’s well-remembered Nebraska. (258)

It is the art of the storytellers that makes these exotic and strange places seem familiar to Jim. This phenomenon is easily observed when Jim reminisces about the Pavel and Peter’s story of the wolves. After having listened to *Ántonia*’s rendition of the gruesome tale, Jim incorporates elements of the story into his own existence, noting that “at night, before [he] went to seep, [he] often found [himself] in a sledge drawn by three horses, dashing thought a country that looked something like Nebraska and something like Virginia” (51). Jim’s incorporation of elements of story into his world signals the freedom with which stories are told and the effect they are designed to have. The free associations that the listeners are invited to create are facilitated by *Ántonia*, but are neither forced, nor discouraged. Many have commented on *Ántonia*’s skill as a storyteller, but Benjamin sums up best why stories told in the manner of *Ántonia*’s are so memorable: “The most extraordinary things, marvellous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connections of the events are not forced upon the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks” (81). The same compulsion to

make the stories one's own that one sees Jim practicing whilst composing this novel can be observed when one looks at Nina Harling's understanding of *Ántonia's* stories: "Nina interpreted the stories about [Christmas and Bohemian weddings] fancifully, and in spite of our derision she cherished a belief that Christ was born in Bohemia a short time before the Shimerdas left that country" (138). As Funda suggests (and as her audiences' reactions prove) *Ántonia's* "goals have been to entertain and...to create the story...of the new country, which shapes and reflects the development of individual relationships and community affiliations" (201). What makes her stories so potent and what allows Jim to incorporate them into his narrative is the fact that "*Ántonia* is not concerned with authorial authority. She usually tells stories without manipulating the meaning, presenting people's acts in all their gruesome detail and offering her own reaction, if at all, as only one way of thinking about the story" (Woolley 157). It is the freedom with which the stories are told that allow them to touch different people in different ways, fostering the sense of community that is so entrenched in the world of storytelling, and so absent from the literary world as it is represented in *My Ántonia*.

In contrast to the spontaneity and freedom of storytelling is the control that Jim wishes to exert over his text and his narrative, which is resultant of the world in which he has lived the majority of his life. The "normative narrative of maturity that constitutes middle-class culture" has been written over his life (Millington 701), and he attempts to create a work of literature that will conform to this standard. The novelistic world (the world of progress) insists upon order and control over both life and text. Jim attempts to make his recollections structured, using foreshadowing and offering unifying and conclusive final thoughts that cannot exist in the world of the story. As Benjamin

suggests, “there is no story for which the question of how it continues would not be legitimate” whereas “the novelist...cannot hope to take the smallest step beyond the limit at which he invites the reader to a divinatory realization of the meaning of life by writing ‘finis’” (87). *My Ántonia* ends with just such a realization of the meaning of life; the final scene consists of Jim discovering a last remaining bit of the old cart road that he and Ántonia had traversed as children and declaring “[f]or Ántonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny. ... Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. ... We possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past. THE END” (273). The creation of a definitive meaning out of the coincidental occurrence of Ántonia and Jim traversing the same dirt road as children can be seen as Jim’s attempt to assign meaning and exert control over the events of his life, to make them fit into the overarching narrative that he is attempting to write. Woolley suggests that Jim’s need for authority manifests itself in “his desire to harness and control Ántonia’s ‘meaning’ in his text” (166). By naming *his* book “My” Ántonia, Jim suggests that it is *his* representation of her that will be both authoritative and permanent.

The uneasy relationship that exists between the old world and the new and, thus, between the novel and the story, can be observed all through *My Ántonia*, but becomes most obvious when one looks at the dichotomy Cather creates between the town girls and the immigrant girls who have come in to town to “work out.” Jim, our wavering narrator, addresses the contrasting characteristics of the two groups when he discusses the “curious social situation in Black Hawk” (153). The country girls are said to be “almost a race apart, and out-of-doors work had given them a vigor which...made them conspicuous among the Black Hawk women” (153). Conversely, Jim notes that “when one danced

with [the Black Hawk women] their bodies never moved inside their clothes” (154). The country girls are described as more interesting than those who had been educated, a fact that Jim attributes to them having been “early awakened and made observant by coming at a tender age from an old country to new” (153). The stories that the girls tell about their lives back in Europe, and the hardships they experienced when they arrived in America far outstrip the dull, polite conversations that one can engage in with “the daughters of well-to-do families” (153). Millington extrapolates the clash between social groups into a contest between styles of narrative presentation, suggesting that “Cather renders the contrast between Jim’s life in the country and his life in town as a contest between their characteristic narrative forms” (702). Although he admits that the novelistic style of writing takes precedence throughout the middle section of *My Ántonia*, taking the final word in the section “The Hired Girls” and dominating “Lena Lingard”, Millington suggests that “story...had not been killed off...it is only napping” (706) and envisions the section “Cuzak’s Boys” as its triumphant return..

The presence of two modes of narrative representation and the different cultural values that they represent becomes apparent when one looks at the story (or stories) of Jim and Ántonia and the rattlesnake, and it is through the differing versions of this single event that one can judge the relative success of the narratives. It has been suggested that “Ántonia represents life as she remembers it, and she thus offers an alternative to Jim’s narrative” (Wooley 158). Although Jim includes Antonia’s flattering version of the event, he interrupts his account of it with his adult voice, countering her story with his own authoritative version:

Subsequent experiences with rattlesnakes taught me that my first encounter was fortunate in circumstance. My big rattler was old, and had led too easy a life; there was not fight in him...so in reality it was a mock adventure; the game had been fixed for me by chance, as it probably was for many a dragon slayer. I had been adequately armed by Russian Peter; the snake was old and lazy; and I had *Ántonia* beside me, to appreciate and admire. (43)

Annette Bennington McElhiney suggests that, for Jim, “this experience needs to be placed in time and explained in the tradition of romance as an encounter of a hero with the enemy or of good with evil” (68), evidenced by his description of the snake as the ancient, eldest Evil. It is interesting that even when attempting to disprove the heroism in his actions, Jim feels the need to refer to the Romance tradition, fashioning himself as the lucky dragon slayer and *Ántonia* as the adoring maiden. This adult version shows Jim’s indebtedness to *Ántonia*, whose “spontaneous response reveals not only her concern for Jim’s physical safety, but also her culturally induced sensitivity to his pride or vanity as a hero to be admired” (McElhiney 68). It is significant that *Ántonia*, whose exultation of Jim’s heroism is described as “contagious” (42), returns first to the Burdens’ farmhouse. *Ántonia* is described as already “standing in the middle of the floor, telling the story with a great deal of color” when the “dragon slayer” arrives (43). Even while Jim’s description suggests something untrue about her version (“a great deal of color”), it is *Ántonia*’s version that becomes part of the narrative of Jim’s life and is the version that perseveres—all her children know the story of Jim Burden and the “rattler [he] killed at the dog town” (260).

The uncomfortable coexistence of orality and literacy seen throughout *My Ántonia* remains at the end of the novel. Both Funda and Woolley (152) suggest that Ántonia's style of presentation gains primacy over Jim's representation of the world; Funda notes that "Ántonia emerges as an active force in shaping the raw material of her own life experience, and in a process analogous to Jim's, she too must create her own sense of 'My Ántonia' as she actively 'writes' the manuscript of her own life in the texts of her oral stories" (197). The ending of the novel, with Jim's imprinting of meaning, and the structure of these reminiscences in the form of a novel suggest, however, a more ambiguous stance. Millington is prepared to declare oral culture victorious when, as he suggests, the story "steals the book's most novelistic moment—Ántonia's 'fall,'" (706). The representation of Ántonia's extramarital pregnancy is indeed an instance when storytelling, and the values associated with it, is shown to be more powerful than those of the novel and its inherent progressive cultural values. Had *My Ántonia* developed in and ended in a truly novelistic fashion, Ántonia's pregnancy would have put an end to any chance of having a happy and successful life. But *My Ántonia* does not follow the conventions of the novel here, and her "fall" is distanced from the reader of the book three-fold—we are provided with Jim's written transcription of the Widow Steavens's story concerning Ántonia's time in Denver. Ántonia's indiscretion is filtered and distilled through the world of the story twice before Jim has a chance to tell it, and thus loses some of its novelistic potency along the way. That Jim believes the worst of Ántonia and is "bitterly disappointed in her" (223) before hearing the Widow Steaven's tale attests to his reliance on and familiarity with cultural rules associated with literacy, and

ultimately exemplifies his ambiguous relationship with both the culture of progress and that of tradition.

Thus, the fundamental cultural differences that exist between the world of progress and that of tradition find representation in the differing narrative techniques of Jim and *Ántonia*. These differing narrative styles and the cultures of which they are representative have an uneasy relationship in *My Ántonia* and one can see that, despite Millington's positive view of the ending, Dekker's "conquering legions of progress" (47) have left their mark on the novel and on the traditional cultures represented therein. For all the representation that oral culture receives in *My Ántonia*, one cannot ignore that it is a novel which has been written down, printed, and published. Just as Jim's "bulging legal portfolio" (6) of his thoughts about *Ántonia* grows out of "talk" (5), so too have "literate societies...emerged out of oralist ones" (Havelock 11). Jim's inscribing of his thoughts and recollections about "the girl who seems to mean...the country, the conditions, and the whole adventure of childhood" (5) effectively eclipses the world of her stories, forcing them into the tight confines of a novel which the recognizable plot of a *Bildungsroman*. Though *Ántonia* reverts to her native language and speaks it at home, her children learn English when they go to school. Her children will become comparable to "the younger brothers and sisters [of the hired girls], for whom [the girls] had made such sacrifices" and who never seem "half as interesting or as well educated" (153). The cultures of progress and of tradition are both represented in this new generation, but the narrative technique of the former, literacy, is shown to gain primacy and is exemplified by Jim's ability to incorporate oral stories into his written text.

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