Class Issues in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*

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Class issues clearly assert themselves in a number of Cather texts. One easy example is in *Alexander's Bridge*; there is a pivotal scene where a drowning, swimming Alexander pushes drowning manual railroad laborers off his floating arms and legs. This literally shows the upper class kicking off the worker. *A Lost Lady* depicts Marion Forrester as hopelessly married to a hopelessly dated nineteenth-century sense of aristocracy.

How class functions in *My Antonia* is harder to get a handle on. At heart, the book is about Cather's Bohemian immigrant woman. But despite what Virginia Woolf observes in *A Room of One's Own*, that "Women do not write books about men" (27), *My Antonia* both exemplifies and refutes this allegation.

Between author and subject lies Jim Burden, Cather's narrator that tells Antonia's story. Not only does Jim have a gender privilege that Cather uses as a literary device to make some observations about the female world, she also invokes Jim's class privilege as a son of the bourgeoisie; but whether this provides an opportunity to critique the social situation in Black Hawk, Nebraska is never really clear.

Cather's politics are slippery at best; while Josephine Lurie Jessup writes that "Willa Cather testif[ies] to an engrossing feminism" (13), Deborah Carlin notes that one needs to "acknowledge just how frustratingly feminist and potentially antifeminist [the texts] are simultaneously" (24).

As we will see, this is true of class issue in Cather as well. As early as 1933, Granville Hicks alluded to "what appeared to him to be 'the political conservatism' evident in all Cather's work" (Carlin 13), and this certainly would jibe with Carlin's observation of nascent antifeminism.

Political liberalism, not to even approach radicalism, tends to run in clumps; if antifeminism is observed, can classism be far behind? This is problematized by the warmth of Cather's picture of her Bohemian immigrant. If one scans biographi-

cal notes of Cather's life, her personal eccentricities belie an embrace of traditionalist behavior patterns. This would seem to point away from the conservative position. However, one ought to factor in that, as Sharon O'Brien demonstrates, Cather "was betraying her adherence to conventional wisdom [by] . . . condemning what others praised" (124).

Her years of calling herself William Cather Jr., or simply "Billy," and dressing in male clothing only support the idea that Cather rejected, for herself, socially approved modes of behavior. Yet she refused to ally herself with the political left, as symbolized by, but not limited to, feminism. Sally Allen McNall observes that "one of [Cather's] greatest strengths is her ambivalence about the cultural myths of her time" (22), and an unclear relationship to political liberalism may only reflect that ambivalence. But the fact remains that *My Antonia* is a classed text; whether that state of being classed amounts to classism is up for grabs.

The significance of Antonia's story told through Jim's eyes begin with Cather's title. Antonia Shimerda is not simply Antonia Shimerda; she is Jim Burden's Antonia Shimerda. Tony, in a major section of the novel, is a "Hired Girl" at a city house; Jim is being groomed for college, and, eventually, law school. His grandfather runs a successful farm, and becomes a church deacon. Tony's educated father, a musician, can't stand the squalor of the family's dugout home, and kills himself their first winter in Nebraska.

While the class differences immediately assert themselves, Tony's story, the story of the immigrant woman in Nebraska, is told by Jim, the son of privilege, as if his recalling her tale somehow lends Antonia's story value and credibility. Right off in the introduction, we see Jim making notes for an Antonia memoir. In middle age, a railroad lawyer friend of Jim's convinces him to write down his Antonia stories. Once they're ready, Jim hands them to his friend, saying:

> "Here is the thing about Antonia. . . . I suppose it hasn't any form. It hasn't any title either." He went into the next room, sat down at my desk and wrote across the face of the port folio the word "Antonia." He frowned at this a moment, then prefixed another word, making it "My Antonia." That seemed to satisfy him. (introduction)

Please note that Jim is not content with his title until he takes possession of Tony. Again, he's not happy until she's his Antonia.

Class distinctions make themselves felt between members of the immigrant working class as well. While few other hired girls seem like likely possible friends for Antonia, Lena Lingard offers a strong possibility for social connection.

> ***. . . the properly bourgeois Mrs. Harling certainly would not want young women who were "talked about" around her proper bourgeois home.***

But Cather defuses this possible relationship once she brings Lena off the farm and into Black Hawk. Tony receives the other immigrant woman with a less-than-warm welcome when Lena visits Antonia at the Harling residence.

Proud of her new situation, Lena informs Tony that "'I've got a room of my own at Mrs. Thomas's, with a carpet'" (106). Although such luxury and privacy designate class mobility, and would allow Lingard to graciously receive guests that could evolve into friends, Antonia rejects this overture: "'I'll come sometime, but Mrs. Harling don't like to have me run much,' she said evasively" (106).

Tony's reaction is so cool, that once Lena leaves, Frances Harling questions Antonia's treatment of the other immigrant: "Frances asked Antonia why she hadn't been a little more cordial to her [Lena]" (106). Tony replies that Lena "'was kind of talked about, out there'" (106); the properly bourgeois Mrs. Harling certainly would not want young women who were "talked about" around her proper bourgeois home.

But Frances refutes this assumption: "'But mother won't hold it against her if she behaves well here. . .'" (106).

Clearly, from this passage, the possibility of a friendly connection adversely affecting all-important work stability, earning potential, and the class mobility those two issues imply, frightens Antonia.

This interjects a caste taboo against a potential social connection. If Lena is "talked about," then Tony can be guilty by association.

Not only is Antonia unwilling to make close friends with Lena, a genuine rivalry springs up between them. Jim, that symbol of the bourgeoisie, is a key element in this competition; Tony is quite worried about friendship between he and Lena: "'if I see you hanging around with Lena much, I'll go to your grandmother, as sure as your name's Jim Burden!'" (143).

The implication of undesirability in Lingard's association can-

not be missed. But Lena and Antonia vie for Jim's attention in each other's presence as well; for example, the hired girls and Jim spend an afternoon picnicking together. Jim gets sand in his hair, and Lena volunteers to brush it away: "She began to draw her fingers slowly through my hair" (153).

Tony breaks up this intimacy: "Antonia pushed her away. 'You'll never get it out like that,' she said sharply" (153). The moment passes, and Lena changes the subject, but the rivalry between the two women is clearly established, and the jockeying for a favored position with regard to the representative of the overclass is unmistakable.

At novel's end, Lena continues to behave kindly towards Antonia, despite Tony's history of avoidance. When she first visits Jim at his Lincoln rooms, their brief conversation includes Antonia:

> "Is she still going with Larry Donovan?"
>
> "Oh, that's on, worse than ever! I guess they're engaged. . ." I said I didn't like Larry, and never would. . . .
>
> "I think I'd better go home and look after Antonia," I said.
>
> "I think you had." (172)

Although there is clear competition between the two immigrant women, Lena still encourages Jim to "look after" her rival. There is no similar scene of Antonia suggesting that Jim use his class privilege in any way to take care of Lena.

A psychological reading of Jim's role in the depictions of these female-female, immigrant class-immigrant class relationships would seem to emphasize the primacy of Jim's bourgeois ego. Whenever Jim is present, and the Hired Girls are gathered, the conversation centers on Jim, and his potential for social mobility.

It cannot be forgotten that this story is told from Jim's point of view; that is to say, Jim is often only sufficiently interested in what the immigrant class Hired Girls have to say to remember their statements in retrospect when the conversation has revolved around him. The scene noted above, where Lena and Antonia fight over the right to brush sand from Jim's hair, is a fine example of this.

McNall notes how "[s]exuality . . . threatens both the 'racial purity' and the respectability of old Black Hawk residents" (25), and the presumed availability of immigrant class women illustrates this problem. Jim tries to take liberties with Antonia and Lena that he would never think of with girls of his own class. In the scene where Tony warns him off her rival, she and Jim have just become physically involved; there has been a kiss. Jim wants a lot of intensity.

> . . . When we were in the Cutters' yard, sheltered by the evergreens, I told her she must kiss me good night.
>
> "Why, sure Jim." A moment later she drew her face away and whispered indignantly, "Why, Jim! You know you ain't right to kiss me like that. I'll tell your grandmother on you!"
>
> "Lena Lingard lets me kiss her," I retorted, "and I'm not half as fond of her as I am of you!"
>
> "Lena does?" Tony gasped. "If she's up to any of her nonsense with you, I'll scratch her eyes out!" (143)

Jim's presumption of Lena's availability evolves once they are both in Lincoln, possibly away from Antonia's protection. Lena plays into Jim's class assumptions, and makes her intentions obvious:

> "Come and see me sometimes when you're lonesome. But maybe you have all the friends you want. Have you?" She turned her soft cheek to me. "Have you?" she whispered teasingly in my ear. (173)

Jim's assumptions about immigrants are ingrained early in the novel. An altercation between Ambrose, Antonia's brother, and Jake, an employee of Jim's grandfather, underscores the xenophobia at the root of Jim's classism. Jim and Jake pay the Shmirdas a Sunday visit, and, to the dismay of their WASP sensibilities, they find the Catholic Shimerdas 'working just as if it were a weekday.' Jim's grandfather has loaned Ambrose a horse collar. The collar turns up badly worn; Jake is offended; Ambrose is indifferent, and a fistfight ensues. Ambrose winds up with a bloody nose, but, somehow, the whole disagreement, from Jim and Jake's point of view, comes to be Ambrose's fault.

> "They ain't the same, Jimmy," [Jake] kept saying. . . . "These foreigners aren't the same. You can't trust 'em to be fair. It's dirty to kick a feller. . . They ain't to be trusted. I don't want to see you get too thick with any of 'em."
>
> "I'll never be friends with them again, Jake," [Jim]replied hotly. (148-149)

Another example of this distrust comes from Jim's grandmother's doubt that Antonia's mother, as an immigrant woman, can have any hope of being apractical housekeeper. The Shimerdas have a rough time of it their first winter, and this passage suggests that Mrs. Burden thinks a bit of the Shimerda's poverty is their own fault:

> "There's no good reason why Mrs. Shimerda couldn't have got hens from her neighbors last fall and had a henhouse going by now. I reckon she was confused and didn't know where to begin. I've come strange to a new country myself, but I never forgot hens are a good thing to have, no matter what you don't have. . . Where's a body to begin with these people? They're wanting in everything, and most of all in horse-sense. Nobody can give 'em that, I guess." (81-82, 89)

This distrust runs both ways, and probably has a class dimension to it. The Burdens lend a lot of "neighborly" help to the Shimerdas, but it's clear that Antonia's mother feels patronized to a degree. Once in a while in a the novel, she'll snap at her neighbors, and give indication that she knows she's not equal in their eyes.

> She asked me very craftily when grandfather expected to plant corn. I told her, adding that he thought we should have a dry spring and that the corn would not be held back by too much rain, as it had been last year. She gave me a shrewd glance.
>
> "He not Jesus," she blustered, "he not know about the wet and the dry." (138-139)

There are other instances of this awareness. One night, Jim sits at dinner at the Shimerdas, and talk turns to a cow his grandfather has sold the Bohemian family.

> Mrs. Shimerda turned quickly to me. "That cow not give so much milk like what your grandpa say. If he make talk about fifteen dollars, I send him back the cow."

Although Jim eventually toys sexually with Antonia, her underclassness is a clear turn-off in some regards. Although there is no allowance in American society for a peasant class, that's who Antonia is.

And sometimes peasant girls have to work in the fields, and get tired, and get sore. But Jim just doesn't get it. At that same dinner, he watches her, and is not attracted by what he sees:

> I began to wish I had not stayed for supper. Everything was disagreeable to me. Antonia ate so noisily now, like a man, and she yawned often at the table and kept stretching her arms over her head, as if they ached. Grandmother had said, "Heavy field work'll spoil that girl. She'll lose all her nice ways and get rough ones." She had lost them already. (143)

. . . a strain of conservatism certainly colors Cather.

It's pretty obvious that class is an important dimension of *My Antonia*. The bourgeois and the peasantry rub elbows, but basically don't trust each other. The empowered class actually fears the Other; a young bourgeois man who ogles Lena. Lingard begins to get himself a reputation, and solves his little problem by marrying an older woman with money and land.

This sounds eerily like British historical tales of young nobles running off with women of the landed, moneyed gentry to elude crushes on milkmaids and country girls.

One thing that really makes my blood boil about this novel is Jim's sense of ownership of this other class. About halfway through the novel, he brags that he has lived to see "[his] country girls come into their own" (228) as wives and working women. And again, there's that title. There's no doubt that Jim and those around him of his caste are classist. It's harder to decide if the novel itself is classist. Clearly the text points out classist notions, which would suggest a knowledge of class tension.

Yet the text doesn't really question Jim's classism; it merely presents it. Some of this may be an offshoot of first person narration; it is perhaps unlikely that Jim will evaluate his own class attitudes, but we do see him in later life, so some reflection on personal behavior is possible. But it never comes. Given biographical details of Cather's life, despite her lesbianism, which implied a radical lifestyle choice in the early twentieth century, a strain of conservatism certainly colors Cather. O'Brien addresses this issue in her biography:

> Cather's [political] ambivalence did not fully dissipate in later years. . . .

> Becoming more conservative and private as her fame increased, Cather shunned overt political activity. (136-37)

This would seem to indicate that class critique was not intended, and the class biases evident in *My Antonia* could well reflect classism on the author's part.

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