

“He Made Me See Her Again”:

Jim Burden’s Perspective on the Female, Progressive and Immigrant in Willa Cather’s *My*

Ántonia

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Abstract

In *My Ántonia*, published in 1918, Willa Cather explores certain themes of modernist writing, namely the use of an unreliable narrator and the reunion of dichotomies created by the Victorian society. This thesis will attempt to explore, firstly, how Cather positions Jim Burden as an unreliable narrator by linking him to specific social, cultural and gender concepts, which is then contrasted to characters from the novel which embody the opposite concept, and, secondly, how she uses him as an unreliable narrator to unite these dichotomies, specifically the gendered private and public sphere, the ideas of whiteness among immigrants and Americans, and how both immigrants and non-immigrants can be connected through their desire to find a society to belong in. It will do so by connecting the historical context of the novel and the setting, which is a period in American history ranging from the 1880s to roughly the 1920s, and theories from scholars to sections of the text where gender and immigration are most prominent, which will show that Cather represents both sides of the dichotomy in these sections by contrasting Jim and his beliefs to other characters from the novel. Jim's narration of these characters shows that Cather, firstly, connects the public and the private sphere by showing Jim's respect and approval of Frances Harling stepping into the public sphere; secondly, that European immigrants are united in their treatment by the dominant American society, regardless of their 'whiteness'; and, thirdly, that immigrant and American are united in their desire for belonging.

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Introduction

“It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the over-tone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself” (Cather, “The Novel D meubl ” 325). With these words, from her essay “The Novel D meubl ”, Willa Cather stresses the importance of a focus on emotion and characterisation, rather than lengthy catalogues of the surroundings and material objects. This, and other ideas expressed in this essay, like a distinction between high and low forms of literature (324), are a few of the modernist ideas found in some of her work.

The connection between Willa Cather and modernism is further strengthened by her affiliation with a specific literary and intellectual circle of contemporary modernists, comprised of Elsie Clews Parsons, Randolph Bourne, Mabel Dodge Luhan and Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant (Stout 117-118). She was, through these intellectuals and their “conversational bridges”, also connected to other New York modernists she did not know directly (122). This affiliation is perhaps best illustrated by some of the ideas and ideals shared with members from the group. For example, both she and Parsons were “strongly supportive of a pluralistic vision of America” (125) and “were deeply involved in reconceiving and modelling new patterns for women’s lives that centered on careers” (131), and, like Bourne, she “championed an ‘ideology of youth’” (126) and was opposed to the Melting-Pot, or Americanization, of contemporary European immigrants (126-127).

Unlike the other members of this intellectual circle, however, Willa Cather’s position as a modernist author is still widely debated in the academic world surrounding her works. The academics, on one hand, claim that Cather is a traditionalist author, because her work, and especially *My  ntonia*, published in 1918, centres around an unfulfilled longing for the traditional idyllic prairie life of the past (Gray 316; Levine 33). This, according to Richard

Gray, is best exemplified Jim Burden's, the narrator of the text, longing for his childhood on the Nebraskan plains at a point when he is exposed to new knowledge and insight (316). He, moreover, claims that this "act of remembrance was vital to the restoration of personal and social health" (316) and that this dichotomises her from the modernist writers of her time (317-319). Other scholars, on the other hand, claim that *My Ántonia*, and Cather's other works, could be considered modernist because it engaged with semiotics, as illustrated, for example, in the moment where a tramp waves before jumping in a threshing machine or her description of the contents of his pockets (Cather 117-118). Richard H. Millington points out that Cather's work has an "emphasis on the *making* of meaning, on the gestures, like the tramp's wave, that produce significance in a world cut loose from overmastering explanatory narratives [and a] careful attention to ordinary life and work as the field in which such meaning emerges [and a] tolerance for the inconclusive, suggested by the resonant inconsequence of the contents of the tramp's pockets" (Millington 51). She, moreover, experiments with first-person, unreliable narration, a feature of modernism (Childs 6), which had been uncommon in America at that point (Reynolds 195-196). Unreliable narration is seen as a feature of modernism, because it shows that, as a contrast to realist novels, the world could not be expressed in a single, objective view, and that it, rather, was filled with ambiguity and flexibility (Childs 67). This thesis will, however, not take up a position in this debate, since there already has been extensive research into the topic. I will instead focus on Cather's engagement with specific features of modernist writing in her novel *My Ántonia*, namely the thematic reuniting of Victorian dichotomies (Singal 25) and the, earlier mentioned, use of unreliable narrators (Reynolds 195-196; Childs 6).

This thesis will explore how Cather uses the male, non-immigrant, conservative Jim Burden as a narrator to experiment with how this form of unreliable narrator filters and

reflects female and immigrant voices, who represent his opposite in the dichotomies, and how this can reunite Victorian dichotomies represented by these characters.

The focus of the first chapter will be how Willa Cather positions Jim Burden as an unreliable narrator and its influence on how the story is presented and might be interpreted by the audience. I will do this by analysing sections of the novel, especially where gender and immigration are prominent, to expose, and discuss, how other voices and perspectives might come forward through this seemingly homogeneous narrative. I will do so by linking these passages to theories from other critics, like Laura Mulvey's *Male Gaze*, and to the historical context of the novel and its setting, specifically to both the contemporary and Victorian treatment of women and European immigrants.

In the second chapter, I plan on looking at how Jim Burden's narration interacts with female and immigrant voices and images to unite dichotomies created in the Victorian era, relating to gender and immigration. I will do so by investigating certain sections of the novel, for example, the introduction of Frances Harling (99-100), where Cather purposely exposes the reader to both these dichotomies, one end represented by Jim Burden and the other by another character.

I hope this thesis will prove that, firstly, Jim Burden is an unreliable narrator, because of his narration of the female and the immigrant, and, secondly, that Cather uses this unreliable narration, and a narrator linked to specific social, cultural, and gender concepts, to expose and reunite Victorian dichotomies.

Chapter One: The Jim Burden Gaze

First Person Narration of the Female, Immigrant and Progressive

“I expect I know the country girls better than you do. You always put some kind of glamour over them. The trouble with you, Jim, is that you’re a romantic” (Cather, *My Ántonia* 149). With these words, Frances Harding, a second-generation Norwegian immigrant and Jim’s next-door neighbour in Black Hawk (98), hints at Jim’s position as a potentially unreliable narrator. which is defined as “a narrator who does not properly comprehend the world and whose judgement the reader mistrusts” (Childs 212).

Jim Burden’s position as an unreliable narrator, and if he is one or not, has been a source for much debate in the critics surrounding the work. According to Yukman, who explains that Jim fears the immigrant girls’ bodies and the lust and sexuality they represent (97-100), and Gelfant, who claims that he romanticises the immigrants’ struggle on the frontier to retain and validate his childhood experiences (79), his narrative could be considered unreliable, because it is written out of fear of a loss of innocence. On the other hand, John L. Seltzer has argued that Jim is not an unreliable narrator, but rather a reliable narrator of an unreliable character, and that he attempts to advise the audience against making the mistakes he made as an adolescent (47). He argues this by outlining several crucial moments of decision between the adventurous and the cautious in Jim’s life, for example, the moment he has to choose between an entertaining life with Lena or continuing his studies at Harvard (53), and stating that, because of his background, he cannot make a different decision than choosing the cautious and patriarchal (54). Seltzer, moreover, adds to that, that by the end of the novel, Jim has realised his mistakes of the past, and, comforted by the warmth of the prairie surrounding him when he visits Ántonia Shimerda, his childhood friend and the main topic of the novel, he recognises the error of his judgement in his youth, which leads

him to appreciate the comforting and nurturing nature of the Nebraskan landscape over the depressing and calm little urban settlements (55).

I would like to add to this debate by expanding on the points earlier addressed by Yukman and Gelfant, namely by focussing on Jim's narration of gender and immigration status, and how this ties in with Laura Mulvey's theory on the Male Gaze. I will, moreover, add to this discussion about gender and migration status how Jim's position as an unreliable narrator is highlighted by his reaction to progressive movement within the social constraints of his hometown. The main statement of this chapter will be that, in *My Ántonia*, Cather exposes Jim Burden's position as an unreliable narrator through his descriptions of the female and the immigrant characters, and their respective progressive movements, through his inability to accurately interpret and describe them, which creates mistrust in the reader.

Claudia Yukman, in her paper "Frontier Relationships in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*", touches on something central to Jim's unreliable narration of the female, namely that the immigrant girls' identity and gender is not defined by their adherence to the social construct of femininity, but rather by how it is expressed by their bodies (97). This illustrates how Jim, as the narrator and, thus, observer, engages in, what Laura Mulvey might describe as, male gazing. She theorises that,

[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearances coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (11)

This theory clearly outlines how Jim, and his gaze, are drawn to young female bodies, which, due to a lack of Black Hawk girls, are all immigrant, because, to him and the other

men of Black Hawk, they “connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (11). Yukman, in her argument, focuses this gazing on how that positions the girls in the Black Hawk society (98), but Jim not only gazes out of desire, like Blanche H. Gelfant claims (63), but also out of fear, which, according to Mulvey, is also a crucial part of the Male Gaze (11). According to Mulvey, the male gazes out of fear of castration, which is symbolised by a woman's lack of a phallus (6).

This is best exemplified, in *My Ántonia*, by looking at Jim’s reaction to Ántonia after he sleeps at the Cutter’s house instead of her (Cather, *My Ántonia* 160-162), because it shows Jim’s focus on the physical aspects of Ántonia instead of, like other characters, the larger implications of Wick’s actions. After he is almost emasculated by Wick Cutter for sleeping in Ántonia’s bed (161), he blames the attack on Ántonia (162). He claims that “[she] had let me in for all this disgustingness” (162), which shows that he, although he is not directly talking to or gazing at Ántonia’s body, does identify it as the direct cause of the situation. This is, however, different from how the audience might interpret the situation, because they recognise the potential danger through Cutter's aggression and Jim' grandmother's relief, while Jim seems to be too caught up in his direct experience of it. Firstly, Cutter's interaction with Jim before he finds out that Jim is not, in fact, Ántonia in bed, shows that whatever sexual acts he was planning, he waited until he knew the person in the bed was asleep, as shown by him first coming to the bed before turning on the light (161), before committing to them. This illustrates that he was not planning on asking for permission, and was, effectively, planning on sexually assaulting her. His aggression after the reveal only highlights that, if that person in the bed had been Ántonia and she had resisted, he would not hesitate to use force to get what he wants. The use of the term “hussy” (161), which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means “a disreputable woman of improper behaviour, or of light or worthless character” (3), only underlines the Black Hawk men's assumption about Ántonia’s promiscuity, while the words “[wait] till I get at you” (Cather, *My Ántonia* 161) highlight his

believed entitlement at her body. The Grandmother repeatedly “[saying] how thankful we ought to be that [Jim] had been there instead of *Ántonia*” (162), moreover, shows that the, at that point, potential fear of sexual assault is grounded in a fictional reality. Jim, however, is not able to look at this situation from a more subjective perspective, and blames *Ántonia* for the harm caused.

In order to understand the progressive position of some of the female characters, especially in terms of their gender status, some context for the novel is needed. It was published in a period which saw great political and social change, not only in America, but worldwide. The first feminist wave, which started midway through the nineteenth century, was at its peak, and ended two years later with the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution which allowed women to vote (Levine, *Volume D* 4). This movement also provoked reformation of higher education and the workplace (Gray 223-224). *My Ántonia*, however, is set in the late nineteenth century, but the beginning of some of these reforms are still visible, like women being with the opportunity to move away from the private, or domestic, sphere and take up different jobs and positions in the public sphere (Van Slyck 221), which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. It should be noted, however, that these newly gained freedoms and privileges were only for white middle-class women, and the women of colour or working-class women had to struggle a while longer (Gray 313).

It is through Jim Burden’s (mis)understanding of the work and situation of the hired girls, that Cather exposes him as an unreliable narrator, by the contrast between his criticism of Tiny Soderball’s progressive professional life choices in comparison to his praise of *Ántonia*’s more conservative happiness. Cather does this by exposing Jim’s subjective position to the progressive and traditional gender and occupation norms of the period, which becomes most apparent when comparing the physical descriptions of the progressive, urban women, in this case, embodied by Tiny, to the traditional, rural woman, embodied by

Ántonia. When the reader gets insight into what Tiny has done in her working life, namely becoming a real estate investor in Alaska during the goldrush (Cather, *My Ántonia* 195), Jim ends this section by drawing attention to the negative physical effects this life has had on her once “trim and slender [body], with lively little feet and pretty ankles” (125), which is now “thin and hard-faced” (196) and “[has] lost three toes from one of those pretty little feet” (197). He, with these words, focuses on what she has lost in Alaska, namely her physical beauty/appeal, and negates what she has gained, namely wealth and social independence (195). Jim, thus, marginalizes what she has gained, in favour of highlighting the negative, which shows that he focuses on what moving forward loses, instead of what it gains.

His reaction to how Ántonia looks at the end of the novel, when her body is also marked by the exploits of labour, however, is not focussed on what she potentially might have lost, but rather on what positive remained. Instead of, as he did with Tiny, ending the description on the negative effects on her appearance, he inverts it by first drawing attention to the negative. He states that she had become “a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled [but] the eyes that peered anxiously at me were—simply Ántonia’s eyes” (215), and it is that sight, of her eyes, that revives in him the positive associations he already had with her (215). The contrast between her physical change and Tiny’s is best exemplified by Jim describing her body as “battered, but not diminished” (215), in contrast to Tiny’s loss of “three toes from her pretty little feet” (197). It shows the audience that when it comes to physical changes by work and labour, Jim can appreciate it in relation to bodies changed by the rural domestic sphere, in this case, childbirth and farm work, as was normal for women in that time, but is dismissive of bodies that change by an urban public sphere, because it represents a change in society (Van Slyck 221) he is not yet ready to accept.

Jim Burden’s unreliable narration of the immigrant is, too, connected to the historical context of the novel, and of Willa Cather’s life. When Cather moved to Nebraska in the early

1880s, there was a large influx of European immigrants, which created a polyglot community united by their struggle to cultivate the land, which is a prominent theme in her writing (Quinn 192). This influx, however, was met with “a moral panic” (Gray 220), because their different customs and beliefs threatened “the Anglo-Saxon hegemony” in America (221). Immigrant communities, moreover, faced the dilemma of whether or not to assimilate to the dominant American culture (Gray 300). In Cather’s work, however, “[there] is no melting pot ethos [...] she sees the frontier as a shifting kaleidoscope of overlapping social groups and individuals” (32). The novel seems to confirm this belief, since it frequently concentrates on how the immigrant groups differ from the ‘Americans’, e.g. the Burdens’ reaction to the gift of dried mushrooms (Cather, *My Ántonia* 50-51).

Jim Burden’s unreliability as a narrator is highlighted by his narration of the changing social situation of the immigrants, because he focuses on the immigrants’ divergence from “the dominant American culture” (Gray 300), and their inability to understand English. When he recalls the moment he first visits the Shimerdas on the Nebraskan prairie as a child, the immediate attention is drawn to how they differ from the Anglo-Saxon norm, both physically and culturally, by both Jim and his grandmother. Even before they formally are introduced to the family, they and Otto Fuchs, within the span of three short paragraphs, construct an initial base of the Shimerdas’ foreignness through discussing how they are unaware of the price of objects, like a farm and cattle (14), how to make money in the new land, as illustrated by Jim commenting on that bringing a fiddle “wouldn’t be of much use here” (14) and the political tensions between two European countries (14). By clearly marking this discourse what it is, namely gossip (13), Cather creates a clear image of a subjective view on the immigrant characters, because the others are founding their observations on either assumptions or conflicts in the European society.

This initial impression is only further strengthened when the Burdens meet the family. Firstly, Jim highlights that Mrs Shimerda is foreign by stressing that she does not understand, what Kristeva calls, the *langue* of her new environment (Puckett 15). Kent Puckett defines *langue* as “a socially shared system of rules that govern an individual’s expression within a linguistic community” (228), and in this section, Mrs Shimerda does not follow the rules of expression by complaining about her house, as indicated by Mrs Burden almost condescending reaction to it (15), and by being overly enthusiastic about receiving food, which Cather shows by describing how she “wrung [Mrs Burden’s] hand” (15). Secondly, by noting the difference in physical appearance between him and, especially, *Ántonia*. From the start of the novel, attention is drawn to “her pretty brown eyes” (4), which Jim, in this chapter, expands on by adding that “[they] were big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood” (15). Although this description is positive, and maybe even a case of male gazing, the way *Ántonia* and Jim approach them, in comparison to Jim’s eyes, shows that this idea of foreignness is found in both sides of the comparison (17), which Cather does this by showing *Ántonia*’s eagerness to learn about, what to her is, foreign. The interaction, which starts with “*Ántonia* pointed up to the sky and questioned me with her glance” (17), moreover, exemplifies that there is a misunderstanding of the semiotics on both sides. On the one hand, the Shimerdas are unable to understand the language that is spoken, but Jim, on the other hand, is unable to understand what *Ántonia* is signalling for. This exposes to the audience that, at least in this case, the Anglo-Saxon majority and status as a native, is not the guarantee that the world is best understood or interpreted by their narration.

Jim Burden can, thus, be seen as an unreliable narrator on gender, immigration and progressive movements. Cather, in this narrative, uses Jim’s subjective descriptions of the moments and characters, but offers, by adding other character’s voices or exposing Jim’s hypocrisy, a new perspective on the situation, for example. This shows that Jim, because of

his subjectiveness cannot, or will not, offer a well-rounded evaluation of the situation, but rather stick to his own beliefs and views. It is hard to say, however, if Jim romanticises the hired girls and their families, but he does focus on his own subjective experience of them.

Chapter Two: Two in One

The Reunion of Victorian Dichotomies through Narration in *My Ántonia*

“The 1910s, then, might be thought of as a period when American fiction was exploring an expanding array of selves and ways of being, moving on from Victorian selves toward recognizable modern typologies of character” (Reynolds 200). This view on the shift in literature from the Victorian standard of stability of character (Singal 9) to the more modernist focus on authenticity and desire to know the reality, no matter how complex or incomplete (9;16) illustrates that, in modernism, the previous structures, that worked in Victorian society, were treated as “falsehoods or, at best, arbitrary and fragile human constructions” (Levine 14). According to Daniel Joseph Singal these falsehoods and human constructions, and the dichotomies they created, were addressed in modernist literature, and by reconnecting the Victorian dichotomies in text, as they tried “to heal the sharp divisions that the nineteenth century had established in areas such as class, race and gender” (12). This thematic feature of modernism works seamlessly with the feature of an unreliable narrator, because, as used by Cather, both draw on the tension between what the narrator is and the narrated are not, and vice versa.

For the discussion about which dichotomies are reunited in *My Ántonia*, some historical background about the Victorian era is needed, specifically about the separate gender spheres and the ideas about a native versus immigrant. Firstly, in the Victorian era, the world was divided into the feminine private sphere, and the masculine public sphere (Van Slyck 221). As Richard Gray points out in his work, people like Catharine Beecher, and her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, were firm believers in the separate spheres, because the focus on the domestic sphere would function as a balance to the “competitive, and frequently ruthless” (Gray 91) public sphere (91). On the other end of the spectrum were women like Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Cady Stanton who argued that this separation of spheres will always

work out negatively for women, because the division of what was included within the sphere was unequal (91). Fuller, however, did believe that, if a woman picked the domestic sphere over the public one, that that would be acceptable (120). This division, however, was not necessarily regarded as negative in contemporary culture, since it was in line with the cultural and economic trends (91).

Secondly, there was, as mentioned in the previous chapter, a tension in late nineteenth-century America between immigrant groups and the, what might be called, native Anglo-Saxon population (221). The modernist authors, however, did not view these immigrant influxes as negative and used these populations as thematic inspiration for their works, because they offered a new view on the theme of exile, because they were strangers in a more familiar and mundane setting than that were often used by modernist authors before this (Gray 313). There was still a question in the wider American population about how to approach the 'Americanization', the creation of a homogeneous American identity, of these groups and about who gets to become American (Levine, *Volume C* 1139). There is, thus, a societal view of the immigrant class as fundamentally different, e.g. in language or culture (Gray 221), than the dominant American culture, which creates a binary view of people, i.e. immigrant and native.

This discussion of dichotomies has a strong link to the previous chapter, because, through Willa Cather's positioning of Jim as an unreliable narrator, she invites the audience to reinterpret scenes from the novel in which he interacts with characters on the other end of the dichotomies, and this is how she reunites the Victorian dichotomies of the public and the private sphere, and the native and the immigrant.

In the chapter where Jim first describes the Harlings, his Norwegian neighbours, the dichotomies of the public and the private sphere are united by the interaction between Frances Harling, her father and the wider community. She is described as being a "very important

person in our world” (Cather, *My Ántonia* 99). This phrase draws attention to two facts, firstly that, within the Black Hawk and surrounding land, there is a community, and, secondly, that she holds an important position even though she is a woman. Jim later elaborates on this by listing the activities she does to deserve that recognition, which are all linked to gender and profession. He links the masculine public sphere of profession, e.g. banker or farmer, to the general. This he contrasts to the private sphere of farmers’ wives and daughters, where he mentions the specific. For example, Frances knew “every farmer for miles about; how much land he had under cultivation, how many cattle he was feeding, what his liabilities were” (99), but this is contrasted to “[a] farmer’s daughter who was to be married could count on a wedding present from Frances Harling” (100). Since the audience is aware that Jim favours the women in this society to be linked to their domestic sphere or farm work, they can see that there are similar ideas at play here.

This, however, offers a clear contrast to how Jim describes Frances Harling, in which he does not focus on the positivity of the domestic sphere, but rather on her contributions and strength in the public sphere, the same thing he condemned in Tiny Soderball. Firstly, his appreciation of her is motivated by his grandfather’s. As Seltzer points out, “Jim adopts the values of the male teachers around him, especially [...] his grandfather” (51), so when the grandfather is openly positive about her, and her occupational skill (Cather 99), he seems to adopt it too. He, for example, expands on his grandfather’s example of their treatment of Wick Cutter, by drawing attention to other men she has outwitted in her work (99). This illustrates that she is capable of handling herself within the, what the Beecher sisters called, the “frequently ruthless, principles of the marketplace” (Gray 91).

Willa Cather, moreover, unites the dichotomies of native and immigrant, by discussing the ranges of whiteness in immigrants of European descent and the shared hopes of belonging in the Black Hawk community. In contemporary American culture, there was a distinction

made between European immigrants based on how white they were, with descendants, and immigrants, from Northern and Western Europe, and it was believed that only immigrants from those areas could properly assimilate to the American culture (Levine 1139). This is a belief and tension also seen in *My Ántonia*, in the larger social structures, like the contrast between the Northern and Western European hired girls in Black Hawk. The fairer Northern girls, like Lena Lingard, the Harling girls and Tiny Soderball, all enjoy more public and well-regarded positions, like tailor's apprentice (Cather 106) and help in a hotel (107), than the more menial jobs of the Bohemian girls, e.g. Ántonia and the Bohemian Marys, like working in the housekeeping (102) or kitchen (132). This tension between different levels of whiteness, however, is reunited by the perception of the people of Black Hawk, who do not differentiate, firstly, between different hired girls from the same cultural background (131), and, secondly, consider all hired girls, no matter how fair, as improper to marry (131). This dichotomy is, moreover, united, on a smaller level, by the Shimerda-family, through Yulka and Ántonia's differing skin tones (15), despite their same national heritage.

The large inflow of immigrants from various parts of the world, not only Europe, but also China (Levine, *Volume C* 1139; Gray 221), and their attempts at assimilation or not, forced or voluntary (Gray 221), shows that there was a desire in the immigrant community to find a place within the American society where they belonged. This is a sentiment also found in *My Ántonia*, not only from the perspective of the immigrants and hired girls, for example, the Russians Pavel and Peter who are trying to find a home (Cather, *My Ántonia* 39) or Ántonia who admits she did not belong in town (222), but also in Jim Burden who tries to fit into Black Hawk society (142-144). These characters, however, are always drawn back to the land of their past, either by Russian wolves (39), the Bohemian landscape (155), or the Nebraskan plains (239). Although Jim's narration, and the frequent descriptions of the Nebraskan plains (5;76-77;208-209), might draw more attention to Jim's desire, Cather

invites the audience to engage and empathise with the immigrant characters to determine for themselves whose desire is more important, instead of explicitly placing one over the other.

“The voices of other Americans, describing other visions of America, were demanding to be heard” (Gray 293). These words accurately summarise how, even through Jim Burden’s subjective narration, certain perspectives and ideas still come to the forefront in the story. Ranging from women stepping into the public sphere to immigrants finding a place to belong, Cather reunites the public and private sphere, and immigrant and non-immigrant through shared occupational skills, respect and desires in connection to the narrator, illustrating that the “expanding arrays of selves” (Reynolds 200) can still be united in one, subjective narrative.

Conclusion:

With his promise to the unnamed narrator of the Introduction to let them read the account of “what [he remembers] about *Ántonia*” (Cather, *My Ántonia* viii), Jim Burden gives insight to them, and to the readers, about how he, not only perceives *Ántonia*, but also the world of his childhood. In this account, he attempts to describe immigrants from Northern and Western Europe, through his subjective lens. These people embody several things Jim is not. *Ántonia* Shimerda, for example, who the novel is named after, embodies the female to contrast his male; Frances Harling and Tiny Soderball, among others, represent a progressive ideal in his conservative vision; and the large group of immigrants, like the Russians Peter and Pavel or the Shimerdas, are in opposition to his Anglo-Saxon American identity. In *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather, moreover, experiments with Jim Burden as an unreliable narrator, to unite dichotomies created by the Victorian society. She does this by, firstly, exposing Jim as unreliable to the reader, and, secondly, by inviting them to reinterpret scenes from the novel where his unreliability unites the dichotomies.

She positions Jim as unreliable in his narration about the female and the immigrant by including other character’s voices, and undermining his perspectives, which lead to new insights for the audience. It exposes Jim’s inability to offer an objective view of the situations when it comes to female or immigrant characters, since Cather confronts the audience with character’s and actions that contradict their expectations.

Cather, then, uses the audience’s insight into Jim’s unreliability and subjectiveness to invite the audience to reinterpret certain sections of the novel, in which she reunites the Victorian dichotomies of the public and private sphere, and immigrant and native. She does this by connecting aspects of Jim’s life, like respect or desire, to characters that either deserve or share them, and by placing the dichotomies together in one, subjective, narrative.

This, thus, shows that Cather, by exposing Jim as an unreliable narrator to the audience, unites Victorian gender and immigration dichotomies by creating, on one hand, union in a narrative, but also by giving separate attention to where characters differ from the narrator. In this, she remains to her ideals from “The Novel D meubl ”, she unites and heals the thing not named without trying to explain it (Cather 325).

Due to a limited scope, I have not been able to discuss certain potentially relevant points in this thesis. For example, as Richard Gray pointed out, this is a novel focussed on the past, and attempts to expose how the past can still live on in the present (334-335). I believe that another Victorian dichotomy, the one of past and present, or even future, could be discussed in terms of how Cather links the past to the present, by constantly reminding the reader of the character’s past, for example in Mr Shimerda’s white hands (Cather 16).

I, moreover, hope this shows that a sole focus on  ntonia or Lena Lingard only offers a small perspective on the overall characters in the novel. If this thesis were only focussed on either of those characters, certain arguments, especially about immigration, would have been incomplete, because it would only show the female immigrant perspective, instead of a wider view on immigration as a larger phenomenon.

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