

The Triumph of *Ántonia* Shimerda

“There was the material in [*My Ántonia*] for a lurid melodrama. But I decided that in writing it I would dwell very lightly on those things that a novelist would ordinarily emphasize, and make up my story of the little, every-day happenings and occurrences that form the greatest part of everyone’s life and happiness.” —Willa Cather

When Willa Cather wrote *O Pioneers!* (1913), she did not expect anyone to see greatness in a slow-moving Nebraskan novel that featured Swedish and Bohemian immigrants. Most American writers had perpetuated comic, negative stereotypes of these groups, yet in Alexandra Bergson (from *O Pioneers!*) and Thea Kronborg (from *The Song of the Lark*), Cather created strong Swedish women who triumphed in the midst of great adversity.

The character of *Ántonia* Shimerda especially embodied all Cather’s feelings about the early immigrants to the Great Divide. Cather told an interviewer in 1921 that one of the people who had interested her most as a child was Annie Sadilek, later Annie Pavelka, the Bohemian “hired girl” who worked for one of her neighbors: “She was one of the truest artists I ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, in her love of people and in her willingness to take pains. I did not realize all this as a child, but Annie fascinated me and I always had it in mind to write a story about her.”

Since most popular early-20th-century novels highlighted the lives of upper-class ladies and gentlemen, it was a radical choice in 1918 for

Cather to center *My Ántonia* on a lower-class immigrant “hired girl.” Cather always possessed great respect for her immigrant neighbors, and a great deal of her education derived from her German, English, and Jewish friends. She especially loved listening to the stories of the older immigrant women and later said, “I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of these old women at her baking or butter-making. . . I always felt. . . as if I had actually got inside another person’s skin.” In several letters and interviews, Cather claimed that housewives and farmers were true artists, once even saying that they contributed “more to art than all the culture clubs.”

With this definition in mind, *Ántonia* is certainly one of Cather’s greatest artists. While most women—in both history and literature—were ostracized, exiled, or killed as a result of an illegitimate pregnancy, Cather writes a different ending for her heroine. *Ántonia* returns to her mother’s home “crushed and quiet,” but she perseveres, never choosing the path of her father. She farms the land and is not ashamed of her first daughter. The real-life John Pavelka (the model for Anton Cuzak) also defied convention by marrying a “fallen” woman. With him, Annie bore thirteen children, and ten survived into adulthood. When Jim Burden finally returns to Nebraska, he finds his childhood friend “a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination.”