

3

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. The narrator can be a major or minor character within the novel. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into the telling of the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator (often not a character) does not participate in the events of the story and uses third person (he, she, they) to narrate the story. The distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all characters within the novel. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

Willa Cather begins *My Ántonia* with an “Introduction” from an unnamed female acquaintance of Jim Burden’s. After this, the novel functions as a manuscript by Jim Burden, which he titles “My Ántonia.” Jim records his childhood memories as an adult, reflecting more than twenty years later upon his past. In addition to Jim’s narration, there are several stories narrated by minor characters, and Book Four is told almost entirely from the perspective of Widow Stevens. The point of view often changes as Jim moves and grows.

Discussion Activities

Divide your class into four groups. Ask each group to answer one of the following questions, using evidence from the text to support its answers. Each group will then present its opinions to the class.

- As an adult, Jim Burden “is legal counsel for one of the great Western railways,” and he is unhappily—though prosperously—married to Genevieve Whitney. How do these adult experiences inform the point of view of the novel?
- Cather once said, “One’s strongest emotions and one’s most vivid pictures are acquired before one is fifteen.” How is this true for Jim Burden? Does Jim romanticize the past? Does he idealize Ántonia?
- Why does Jim title his manuscript “My Ántonia”? What does he mean when he says, “It’s through myself that I knew and felt her”?
- Do you feel the stories narrated by others—such as the story of the young bride and the wolves—are essential to the novel? Why or why not?

Writing Exercise

Try to imitate Jim Burden, and tell a story about yourself by focusing on a significant person from your childhood. Is this technique easy or difficult?

Homework

Read *My Ántonia*, Book One, Chapters 17-19 (pp. 92-106), and Book Two, Chapters 1-5 (pp. 109-130). How is the land a character in this novel?