



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A UGC Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol. 3 No.1, March, 2018

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A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.3, No.1, March, 2018

. Glimmer of hope in Willa Cather's My Antonia

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Abstract: Willa Cather is one of the prominent Western woman writers. She was born on December 7th 1873, where her family had farmed the land for generations. My Antonia is the fourth novel written by Willa Cather. In this novel she captures poignantly the life of Czech immigrants most notably the title character Antonia Shimerda who in real life was a close friend of Cather. Much of Cather's writing dealt with variations on themes of transplantation, adaptation and survival of how men and women would tackle these challenges. It was the study of the Europeans, Scandinavians, Germans and Bohemians who had emigrated to farm at Nebraska. After living in Pittsburgh and New York for seventeen years, Willa Cather discovered Nebraska as a prime subject for fiction and her memories of her youth there, came flooding back. It is the story of immigrants who tamed the wild land, the protagonist being Antonia Shimerda, a strong-willed and capable woman. The novel depicts Antonia as a strong pioneering woman who overcame hardships by establishing a place for herself and her family. After going through a period of barrenness, restlessness and frustration she emerged out of it and achieved fruitfulness, contentment and a sense of peace. She resisted the violence and destruction associated with her brothers' masculine approach to establish order. She insisted on awaiting the fruition of the land. She was always able to control her emotions and proceed with the business of every day life. When she suffered through disappointments and losses, her character always remained constant and predictable. The novel began in autumn, the season of memory and of death and of rebirth. Antonia became symbolic of the cyclic nature of life. Though a battered woman, she turned her crisis into triumph with her indefatigable spirit. But she had her weakness, the greatest of which was her strength too.



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Keywords: Cather, pioneering, tame, immigrants, crisis.

Antonia is the protagonist of Cather who survived crisis in her life. The story of **My Antonia** is based on Anna Pavelka whom Cather knew as a child. Much of Cather's writings dealt with variations on themes of transplantation, adaptation and survival of how men and women would tackle these challenges. It was the study of the Europeans, Scandinavians, Germans and Bohemians who had emigrated to farm at Nebraska. **My Antonia** shows fertility of both soil and human beings. Cather's characters go West to find and accept a role in the social order and to attempt to achieve one's fullest human potentiality.

The novel spans thirty one years. It opened in the fall of 1885 when Jim Burden was ten years old. He came from Virginia to Nebraska and met Antonia Shimerda who was fourteen and had emigrated with her family from Bohemia. The book closed with their reunion in the fall of 1916 when Antonia was established in Nebraska as the mother of a large family. Jim Burden the narrator arrived at his grand parents' farm in Nebraska, on the death of his parents. The Shimerdas from Bohemia also arrived at the same time to settle in the neighbouring farm. They could not speak English to ask for advice or even make their pressing wants known. They had four children. Their nineteen year old son Ambrosch, though hard working, was insensitive and cunning. Their next son was mentally retarded. The third child Antonia with her brown hair and golden brown eyes had a personality rich enough to make up for all the deficiencies in other members of the family. Antonia had a younger sister Yulka whose role was negligible.

The settlers initially had the feeling of spacelessness. The lands had empty darkness, mystery and monotony. They felt so lost and strange as they had moved to an entirely different universe. Infact they felt homeless. The Shimerdas bought land from Krajick and tried to make a home which was nothing but a cave like dugout in the side of a hill. Infact they had overpaid. They were exploited in every way and they did not know how to get rid of Krajick who was the first evil thing they had come across in the wild land.



Mrs. Shimerda had no talent. She was not a good house maker. Her house was in chaos. She did nothing to boost the morale of her gentle mild mannered husband, who felt home sick for his native Bohemia. Mr. Shimerda felt happy on visiting the Burdens where everything was regulated in a civilized manner. The friendship between the two families developed. The Burdens gave the Shimerdas neighbourly advice every now and then. Grandfather's hired men were the cowboy Otto and the field hand Jake. One day, trouble developed between the two families over the badly used piece of farming equipment the Shimerdas had borrowed. Jake, the field hand of the Burdens knocked down Ambrosch and it was due to grand father's intervention that the feud between the two families was finally resolved.

Antonia's artistic father who had been a skilled violinist took his own life unable to adjust himself to the harsh realities of the new land. Like John Bergson in **O'Pioneers** he was a man who had imagination enough to be pioneer but not the strength. Except his death every single important event in his life had been determined for him by others. He did not want to come to America but came because of his ambitious wife. He was not a man of action. He felt totally lost in the frontier. Unable to use force against the external world, he finally raised his hand against himself. Mr. Shimerda lay dead in the barn for four days and the pioneers had to chop his body loose from the pool of frozen blood. As the priest refused to conduct the service for a person who committed suicide, the Burden grandfather had to say the prayers and give a decent burial for Mr. Shimerda. Mr. Shimerda had always hoped to see his daughter Antonia get a good American education but after his death, her life changed completely. She had to become a farm hand and work along with her brothers. Dissatisfied with life in the farm, she rebelled against her brothers and mother. Much against their wishes she came to town to work as the Harling's hired girl. There she again met Jim Burden who had migrated much before her. Antonia had the best time of her life with Jim and the five Harling children, when the older people were away. Antonia became popular with her employers that they allowed her to continue her education along with the other children. In a way, her father's dream for her came partly true. But the idyllic happiness could not last long. Into her garden of Eden came the serpent in the form of a young man. This young man who escorted



Antonia home from the dance tried to kiss her. When she protested , he used strong armed tactics but she slapped him. On hearing this, Mr.Harling issued an ultimatum that either she has to stay away from Saturday dances or else find a new place. Antonia's free spirit rebelled against such unjust treatment. Her revolt against the Harlings was only one extension of the rebellion , she had begun against her own family. It was the rebellion in favour of the good thing of life. Her years of drudgery on a remote farm with an unpleasant mother and brother for company had begotten in her this fierce desire to enjoy the sweetness of life.

Most of the immigrant girls were young and physically attractive and hence they took part in the revelry with great nerve and vigour. Antonia, Lena Lingard, Tiny Soderball and other Bohemian, Norwegian and Swedish immigrant girls who worked as servants in the houses of the so called "better-families" though they were snubbed by the town girls, used to visit Mrs Gardner's hotel on Saturdays without fail. These girls were deprived of school and were forced to do menial jobs, sending their wages to help their families back in the farm. Yet,they threw themselves whole heartedly into the town dances and into any pleasure and excitement their world could afford.

Lena is another young girl like Antonia who migrated to the city. She was one of the Swedish farm girls whose aim was to become a dressmaker. At Lincoln, Jim Ordinsky and old Colonel Raleigh were in love with Lena. Lena made no demands on her lovers except to be loving. When they had to leave she sent them away without regrets. Jim and the brothers of the town girls, respectable young men flirted with the hired girls and walked in the fields with them after dark. But when the time came for marriage, they married within their own class. Tiny Soderball made a fortune in the Klondike gold rush and eventually settled in San Francisco but she never married nor had a family. She had numerous exciting adventures in the Klondike but the thrill of them had gone. She admitted frankly that nothing interested her than making money .Lena also did well financially and lived near Tiny in San Francisco. Though she had not married either, she was considered a success by the people of Black Hawk because she profited at dress making. Though both of them



achieved material success in the world, neither of them were really fulfilled or made happy by it. Both remained solitary and rootless till the end.

While the other immigrant girls went after material success, the rebellious Antonia went through varied experiences including desertion and faced many crises in her life. Bent upon enjoying life, Antonia often used to visit the dancing pavilion set up by the Italian, Mr Vanni near by. On hearing the music, Antonia would hurry with her work at the Harlings dropping and breaking the dishes in her excitement. If she did not have time to change her dress she merely flung off her apron and went out of the kitchen door. Due to her behaviour, she had to leave the Harlings and move in to the household of Wick Cutter. The dances did not stop, when the Vanni's dismantled the tent and moved away. The same people who attended it flocked to the Fireman's hall on Saturday. Jim also tried to attend it crawling from his grand father's window on Saturday nights.

Jim went for a picnic by the river side with Antonia, Lena and two other immigrant girls. They spent an idyllic day celebrating the joy of country living and boasted of the things they were going to get for their families. They sat under a little oak and talked of their childhood memories. Antonia also in a reminiscent mood talked about her father's youthful adventure, his sexual exploits, his artistic impulses and his death.

While Jim and Lena were drawn closer to each other Antonia fell in love with a railroad conductor Larry and she went off to Denver to marry him. As he had lost his job he could not marry her. Antonia found herself deserted and pregnant when he ran away to Mexico. So Antonia was forced by the circumstance to go back to her brother's farm. She was not cowed down easily by her predicament. In spite of her unwed status, she was determined to give birth to the baby and bring it up on her own. Her resistance showed itself in her determination to work in the farm and start her life anew. Jim was going home from Harvard in the summer vacation learnt of Antonia's fate and the birth of her baby, from Mrs. Steavens who rents the Burden's old farm. He went to see her and found her in the fields. She looked thinner and worn out. She felt that she would have been



miserable in the city. The Nebraska fields where she and Jim had run about as children were now the means of her salvation.

Now she had rooted herself in the American soil. This process had been hastened by her misfortune. At last in Antonia, new world and old world, nature and nurture had met. Antonia made two attempts at marriage and the founding of a family. The first was unsuccessful but the second succeeded. Antonia had married Cuzak a Bohemian and had a large family. She had settled down in domesticity with a brood of healthy boys. She was no longer an eager girl but a sober woman buffeted by misfortunes. But the same spirit glowed in her. Though her life had been half wrecked, she had put it back together. In most ways hers was an American family, though they spoke Czech within the family. It is clear that love bound them together and they were very happy in one another's affection, though there was slight suggestion of tension between Cuzak, the city bred man and Antonia the country girl. To Cuzak, Antonia was a woman with a warm heart who made life good for him.

The human fertility of the Cuzak homestead matched with the fertility of the soil. The years of back breaking labour spent on tending the crops had at last yielded the rich fruit. Every tree had to be watered by hand after a hard day's labour in the fields. The result was a yearly apple crop that far surpassed than any of the neighbours. At the centre of all those fertility was the symbol of civilization. Antonia triumphed over the adversity of nature. She had wrestled with life and imposed an order to it by converting a part of it into a fruitful farm with the garden as its centre. The critic Randell comments as :

The mortal who struggles with the adverse powers of nature and conquers them becomes the type of all successful human endeavor and passes over into the realm of myth. She lent herself to immemorial human attitude which we recognize by instinct as universal and truth. (Randell 143).



The novel began and ended in autumn, the season of memory and of death and of rebirth. Antonia became symbolic of the cyclic nature of life. She retained the ‘fire of life’ and ‘inner glow’ (M.A. 336) that assured renewal of life. Though a battered woman she turned her crisis into triumph with her indefatigable spirit. But she had her weakness, the greatness of which was her strength too. She was too emotional. When she liked doing a thing she had no control over herself. She loved to go to the dances. Since they interfered with her work her mistress tried to persuade her to give up. But adamantly she refused to comply with her wishes. Later because of her warm emotions she was deceived and abandoned by her lover. Saddled with an illegitimate daughter she worked steadily in the farm facing criticism. Any other girl under similar circumstances would have hidden the child. Antonia however loved the child too much for that. She had the child’s picture enlarged and hung on the wall with the gilded frame. Antonia vowed to protect her daughter from the masculine forces. She retained her youthful vigour, love for life and land although hardships aged her quickly. Antonia was an outstanding representative of American pioneer women.

Antonia was involved in an intense project of self development she was shaped by the positive as well as the negative pull of the family, her Bohemian tradition and the community of Black Hawk. Antonia shaped a new American dream that did not rely on material success yet, celebrated the wealth of opportunity in America for each individual to achieve personal goals. Despite the difficulties she faced, she apparently had found what was needed for the fulfillment. We see in Antonia similar traits – fiery imagination, the will never to say ‘die’, steely determination, resilience, dedication to soil and involvement with people. Critic Harvey put these qualities in a nutshell “Cather in these early novels move past such ‘despair and disillusion’ by focussing on heroines who creatively shape and courageously realize their own unique dreams” (Harvey 60).

While Cather pictures the female protagonist as a strong figure, the male character Jim, though he is the narrator of the story is sketched vaguely. He becomes shadowy and falls into insignificance by the side of the heroic Antonia. She had found a way to possess the past by living it, although this did not impose limitations. whereas Jim could claim the past only marginally. He could make nothing out of his present also. Hence his future appeared to be bleak. Antonia and



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Jim's different perspectives of the past, made their lives what it is today - a success or a failure. The novel reveals the common usage of the past as a romance and refuge from the present. Critic Bloom aptly puts it : Much as we would like to ignore the past for they bring painful confrontations, we must see what they would show us about ourselves-how we betray our past when we forget it disquieting realities, how we begin to redeem it when we remember (Bloom 97). Though Jim figures prominently in Antonia's life like the conventional, hero, he did not fall in love with her or marry her. A young man who feels that a young woman is the most important thing in his life would be expected to fall in love with her. Jim was curious of Antonia, interested in her, charmed by her but he did not fall in love with her. In the later years when he visited her at the farm, he feels that he ought to have married her. Only now he realized that he had been unconsciously in love with her from his younger days. Jim had keenly watched Antonia's every move. Though absent every now and then he kept in touch with her. He always gleaned information from others about Antonia, as he was genuinely interested in her welfare. But at that time he was romantically inclined towards Lena. He had never realized that his affection for Antonia has gone too deep into his heart. His realization had come too late. So all that he could do now is to admire her from at a distance and wish her happiness whole heartedly. But it is a sad fact that Jim who was fascinated by Antonia as only a man could be, had to remain a detached observer and appreciate rather than take part in her life.

Thus the novel was of the immigrant woman who struggled to establish farm and a new way of life on the plains. The novel focussed on the strong pioneering woman who overcame hardship by establishing a place for herself and her family Through Antonia, Cather celebrates the pioneering values: determination, love for the land, human rather than materialistic concern. Antonia faced crisis brought on by circumstances and her own temperament and behaviour. She underwent tension and conflict After going through a period of barrenness, restlessness and frustration she emerged out of it and achieved fruitfulness, contentment and a sense of peace. She shared an optimistic spirit and saw a glimmer of hope through the dark tunnel of her life. With a perseverance and a sense of purpose she went after it and brought brightness into her life.



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