My Ántonia By Willa Cather: Book Report

Willa Cather's historical fiction novel, My Ántonia, takes place in Black Hawk, Nebraska, at the end of the 19th century. My Ántonia shares the story of James 'Jim' Burden, a ten-year-old orphan boy from Virginia, and Ántonia Shimerda, the daughter of immigrants from Bohemia who recently moved as neighbors. Most of the novel is written as a memory in Jim's eyes. While Jim reflects on his time in Nebraska, he narrates the severe difficulties of rural life at the turn of the century and remembers the deep friendship he made with Ántonia.

Narrated by protagonist Jim Burden, begins the story on a train leaving his home in Virginia to live with his grandparents in Blackhawk, Nebraska. When he arrives at Blackhawk, he meets 13-year-old Ántonia Shimerda, an immigrant from Bohemia whose family paid for a homestead on the same land as Jim's grandparents. The Shimerda family includes Ms. and Mr. Shimerda, their oldest daughter, Ántonia, and her younger siblings, Yulka, Ambrosch, and Marek.

The Burdens quickly befriend the Shimerda family, causing Jim and Ántonia to bond over their love of the land. This secure connection the two have created allows Jim to teach Ántonia to learn English. The first winter on this new land has a rough impact on Mr. Shimerda, leaving him to become ill. This becomes more distraught after his two friends Pavel and Peter passed away. After a few months of misery, Mr. Shimerda commits suicide, causing the Shimerda family to fall into a state of depression.

When spring arrives, Ántonia insists on working on the fields alongside her brother Ambrosch. This causes her relationship with Jim to be distant since he was now attending school, and non-citizens were unable to go to school. Months later, Jim's grandparents decide to move towns in order for Jim to be closer to his school. At the Burden's new home, they become close to their new neighbors, the Harlings. The Harlings need a housekeeper and later hire Ántonia. Ántonia being close revives their old friendship, especially by them attending dancing at Pavilion.

After being awarded valedictorian honors in high school, Jim is assigned a position at a university in Lincoln. Before departing, Jim enjoys one last venture in the countryside with Ántonia. They reminisce about the fun times they spent together and all the memories that they built. At his time in Lincoln, Jim spends his time studying to work for law. After two years, he decides to enroll at Harvard University. During this time, Ántonia becomes engaged to Larry Donovan but never ends up getting married since Larry had left her. Ántonia's only choice is to return to Blackhawk. After college, Jim returns to Black Hawk to visit his grandparents before attending law school. He learns that Ántonia has had a child but is not married and takes this time to admit his love for her. Ántonia disregards his confession leaving Jim to return to Boston.

Twenty years pass until he finally meets again with Ántonia. She remains to work on a farm with her new husband, Anton Cuzak, and lives with her eleven children. Reminiscences of the childhood he had with Ántonia overwhelm Jim, but he leaves Nebraska back to New York as a lawyer convinced that he and Ántonia will always be bound together by the past.

In this book, there is one main character and a strong supporting character, James 'Jim' Burden and Ántonia Shimerda. My Ántonia, it is narrated by protagonist Jim Burden and tells the story

from his own eyes. Jim Burden can be described as being a romantic. The primary person in Jim's romantic imagination is Ántonia. For example, when Ántonia finds out she's pregnant, she questions Jim's capability to love her. After learning about the abandonment of former husband, Larry Donovan. Jim immediately goes up to Ántonia and tells her much she means to him in every aspect of his moral life.

'Do you know, Ántonia, since I've been away, I think of you more often than of anyone else in the part of the world. I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife - or my mother or my sister- anything that a woman can be to a man. This idea of you is part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don't even realize me. you really are a part of' p 240

The second time Ántonia tests Jim's ability to love her is when she finally gets remarried with a house full of children. When he sees her, his romantic capacity is still alive. Jim begins to speak out about his love for the land and her. Ántonia will always remain in Jim's romantic moral universe.

Jim's trip from Virginia to Nebraska is a perfect example of how romanticism fits into the story. On the train, Jim can choose to look out the window and view the beautiful land. But, instead, he decides to read a book on the life of Jesse James. When Jim arrives in Black Hawk, he cannot see anything; the sky is dark, making everything else hard to see

'There was nothing but land, not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing by land- slightly undulating'. pg 12

Throughout the book, this view changes. Jim feels a wave of nostalgia for the loss of the vibrant red prairie grass which had been plowed. Jim later moves to New York City, making his living as a lawyer for railway companies. At the end of the novel, Jim takes a walk to the remaining land that he traveled that first night in Nebraska and re-experiences the same emotions he had that night. Jim's romanticism allows all the history of his experience of the land to pass in favor of a nebulous sense of adventure.

In My Ántonia, it seems that Willa Cather wanted us to interpret the issue of the immigrant experience. Around the time the book was published, in the 19th century, the United States urged the establishment of midwestern states. The Homestead act stated that any man who was a U.S. citizen could claim 150 acres of land under the condition of maintaining it for the next five years. In the story, Eastern Americans like Jim's grandparents moved west, while families like the Shimerdas came to live in the U.S. from Europe to try to improve their lives. The novel shows the real difficulties that immigrants face every day. For example, both families face extreme homesickness and are not accustomed to this new lifestyle. The Shimerda's face a greater struggle since they do not speak the English language and come from extreme poverty. The challenges that Shimerdas face, such as cultural and even religious differences, makes matters more difficult to get used to. Ántonia states, 'If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us' pg 111

My Ántonia by Willa Cather is an immersing book about the theme of growth on new land. It's a wonderful story of an immigrant family settling in Black Hawk Nebraska and the travails of the displacement change on midwestern winters and poverty during the turn of the century. This book encourages people throughout the world to grow, and to show them to do so; you must

step forward into the unknown.