
Life on the Prairie: depictions of landscape and identity in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Great Plains literature

Auteur : Servaty, Rémi

Promoteur(s) : Delville, Michel

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Université de Liège

Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres

Département de Langues modernes : linguistique, littérature et traduction

**Life on the Prairie: depictions of landscape and
identity in late nineteenth century and early
twentieth century Great Plains literature**

Mémoire présenté par Rémi SERVATY en vue de l'obtention du grade de
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Promoteur : Dr. Michel DELVILLE

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Introduction

Between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains, in the very heart of the North American continent, the Great Plains stretch across thousands of kilometers and at least ten American states and three Canadian provinces. The endless fields and spectacular vastness of this quintessentially north-american environment has remained a source of wonder and inspiration for many artists and writers... and boredom for many a contemporary spectator. Indeed, in spite of their essential role in the formation and development of American identity and culture, the Great Plains and their history tend to be disregarded in both public and academic discourse. The decline of the agrarian models of economic and social life which now, as in most developed countries, characterizes the United States' rural environment has severely affected the structure of the Great Plains' communities and how they are perceived within broader society. However, it was not always so. The Plains were once a still young and unknown Frontier, a place where many an immigrant's hopes were met with the harsh reality of this fertile yet arid and enormously vast space. It was a necessary trial in the great American westward expansion which fueled the imagination and fantasies of writers for several generations. This enthusiasm, however, was often left unrewarded. The settlers of the Great Plains experienced countless struggles in their attempts to build new lives in this isolated environment, from the natural hardships of poor weather and untamed land, to the frequent hostility of the existing inhabitants whose ways of life were faced with an unprecedented threat, or even the hostility of fellow settlers. These unique settings and trials have generated a boiling diversity of human experience that has fueled many a writer's creative impulses for decades, and still does to this day. From the touching yet often frustrating and always insightful slices of daily rural life of Hamlin Garland's Prairie stories, to the nostalgic and regretful reminiscence that permeates Willa Cather's many works, not to mention the epic immigrant sagas of Ole Edvart Rødvaag, or the thrilling adventures of Owen Wister's norm-breaking, daring Western protagonists, the

literature of the Great Plains displays an exceptional variety of tone, content, and purpose. This diversity is often overlooked in favor of a conventional perception of the Western genre as a single-minded, conventional brand of fiction designed for popular entertainment alone rather than artistic appreciation. Yet to think so is to neglect the diverse reality of Frontier life and the pioneer experience, and the way writers may have represented this diversity. Works belonging to the genre of Prairie literature do tend to have many similarities, but those are not restricted to the stereotypical tropes of Western fiction. These tropes often derive from an external romanticization of the Great Plains and the West. Writers who do originate from this environment tend to be less likely to indulge in these stereotypes. Under their quills, the pioneer spirit of Western adventure can be far more nuanced, sometimes bringing more sorrow than success. Their own experience of life on the Plains provides their stories with an air of authenticity. This quality is founded on a certain number of elements that help make the story seem more personal to the reader. For instance, the depictions of certain settlers' failure to adapt to their new environment, and the misery that derives from it, make these stories more believable to the reader, as it describes an unflattering side of reality.

Another key feature of these works is the representation of nature, and the inclusion of characters who strongly identify with their environment. The literary works of the Great Plains, particularly those written by authors who have a personal experience of life on the Plains, tend to give a central position to nature and its influence on human activity and sentiment. In the late nineteenth century, many inhabitants of the prairie, if not most, were either immigrants from all parts of Europe, or came from another part of the United States, usually the East. With such diversity, this population could not be characterized by some shared cultural ground, religion or worldview. Even the experience of migrating to the Plains could not necessarily be considered a unifying factor, as this experience could vary enormously from person to person. This variation is also a common theme of

local Great Plains literature.

The main element that could be said to have been a potential common ground for all these very diverse and isolated communities was the natural environment. As people from countless different cultures found themselves together in an environment that was completely new for most of them, they had to find a shared language. For many, at least for the writers who worked to share these experiences with a broader audience, that common language was the Prairie itself. Indeed, in these stories, the settler's experience is often imbued with a strong sense of belonging and identity that is unmistakably tied to the unique natural environment that characterizes these endless expanses of land. Human and nature, farmer and soil, settler and land are tied together by such an intimate and omnipresent relation that the two can hardly be discussed without the other.

This work will analyze this unique relation as it is depicted in certain literary works of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, on the basis that writers of the Great Plains, particularly those who have experienced the Great Plains themselves, have made the landscape irrevocably bound to those that inhabit it, creating a vast allegory between Man and Nature in which one's identity is profoundly tied to the natural environment in which one has grown. With the help of certain keystone works of Great Plains literature, this work will attempt to offer a detailed insight into the depictions of life in the American Midwest, with a particular emphasis on its connection to the aesthetics and symbolism of nature. Rather than a documentary work limited to informative depictions of historical lifestyles, this thesis will approach the subject of Great Plains stories with the assumption that landscape is the central element of these narratives, that it can be understood as a fully-fledged character in its own right, which under an artist's gaze can gain personality, history, or even agency. It is in constant interaction with its human inhabitants and shapes their identities, and is in turn explored and shaped by them.

The works that will be discussed to demonstrate this have been selected based on their capacity to illustrate the significance of landscape in the aesthetics of the Great Plains and its impact on daily life and human identity, as well as for their relevance in the literary context of the time. Two pieces of literature in particular will be subjected to an extensive analysis and form the core of this work:

- Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891)
- Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918)

The former is a collection of short stories set in the Midwest in the late nineteenth century. These stories revolve around the daily turmoil and frequent incidents that characterize life on the prairie, and give a voice to the hopes, aspirations and frustrations of its people. Far from idyllic depictions of rural life, these short stories provide essential insight into the harsh experiences of pioneers. Their appraisal of prairie life, however, is by no means wholly negative. Both naturalist and romantic in tone, *Main-Travelled Roads* is a complete, diverse, and touching testimony of lives both common and unique. These experiences are made under the constant presence of the natural world, which accompanies each page of the book and brings color and tone to the story.

The second chosen work, *My Ántonia*, is set in rural Nebraska in the later half of the nineteenth century, and offers an excellent example of this thesis' main argument through the allegorical representation of the Plains in the figure of Ántonia, the novel's eponymous central subject. *My Ántonia* illustrates brilliantly the peculiar blend of nostalgic remembrance for days past and the embittered, unforgiving depictions of these days' hardships. Its narrative structure, set from the perspective of a man who reflects upon the memories made in the Plains that he has abandoned for city life, illustrates both the typical idealization of the Prairie that was common at the time and the more realistic, harsher depictions of someone who has genuinely experienced the isolation of Midwestern life. *My Ántonia*, unlike *Main-Travelled Roads*, was written in a context where rural life in

the Plains was already in decline, where cities and industries had already conquered much of American life, and where the Plains had already lost a great deal of their near-mythical appeal to the American public. Cather's Plains are slowly becoming the past, with all its beauty and its sadness, and this realization, which is omnipresent in Cather's writings, colors the story with a distinctive nostalgic tone, where the main character's longing for the Plains of his youth is embodied by the figure of *Ántonia* herself. The setting of his childhood is quite literally personified in the figure of his past love interest. Both works contrast lively, youthful accents of pioneer spirit with grim material and moral realities. Both Garland's Prairie anecdotes and Cather's journey down memory lane offer a multitude of perspectives on prairie life. Both works represent two distinct ways in which the Plains encroach themselves unto the psyche of those the inhabit them: as an actual, ever-present reality, a daily factor which the settlers must learn to handle, or as a memory, a fantasized decor of reminiscence which continues to haunt the present in varying ways. Both works offer a very complete emotional and aesthetic journey, which will help the reader gain an understanding of the Great Plains and their inhabitants. Firstly, however, the Plains themselves must be introduced, as attempt to define their borders have often been contradictory.

Defining the Great Plains

For reference, we will largely rely on the definition of the Great Plains provided by Linda Ray Pratt's *Great Plains Literature*, published in 2018 by the University of Nebraska Press. In this landmark study, she begins with an attempt to define the limits of the Plains.

The Great Plains are a vast area of land located approximatively in the center of North America, from southern part of Canada's central provinces, all the way down to Texas. It is bordered to the West by the Rocky Mountains and to the East by the Missouri and Mississippi drainage rivers. The exact boundaries of the

Plains may vary according to various contexts, such as geopolitical, ecological, or cultural definitions. It is generally agreed that the Plains include the southern sections of Canada's Manitoba and Saskatchewan provinces as well as southwestern Alberta, while in the United States, the Plains are an essential landmark of what is known as the Midwestern United States. They include the entirety of North and South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas as well as large portions of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico. Other Midwestern States that are sometimes associated with the Plains are Minnesota, Iowa, or Missouri. The Great Plains, as their name suggests, are characterized by vast expanses of relatively flat territory containing few landmarks and sparse vegetation mainly comprised of grasslands. The climate, while very varied, has a common characteristic throughout the entire area: it is scorchingly hot in the summer and dangerously cold in the winter, with extreme temperature variations between the seasons that are typical of a highly continental territory, where there is little to no sea wind to bring some temperance. This relative absence of maritime influence this deep into the North American continent also induces the second main feature of the Prairie's unforgiving climate: its aridity. Rainfall is scarce, and when it does appear, it is often in sudden and violent thunderstorms.

Needless to say, such a landscape does not inspire images of great prosperity and comfort. And yet there was a time, when the Plains' true extent and nature was still the stuff of stories, tales of the Frontiers and its promises, where the impulse to explore and settle this central, unavoidable chapter of America's then seemingly boundless westward expansion still spurred much enthusiasm in the East's imagination.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century, the Prairie was still very much that: a near mythical Frontier, filled with unclear prospects and, hopefully, promises. Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, through which the young United States had acquired from France the central third of their current mainland

territory, there was much interest in the exploration of this new borderland. At this stage, however, there was still no real long-term settlement of this area – with the exception, of course, of Native Americans who had been roaming this land for thousands of years already, but who were at the time not seen as part of the burgeoning American nation; a view that would be exemplified in the case of *Worcester vs Georgia* of 1832, in which the Supreme Court ruled that “the relationship between the United States and Indian nations was that of one nation to another” (Pratt, 18). It would take several more decades for large-scale migration movements of white, eastern settlers to take place in the Plains, and it would not be until the last third of the nineteenth century that the rural communities of the Midwestern Prairie experienced a truly significant increase in population and activity. By then, however, the roots of these communities’ future decline were already in place. The settlers coming from the East were often unprepared for the great difference in environment between the humid, fertile lands east of the Mississippi and the arid, harsh desert west of it. By the 1930’s, the impact of human activity on the ecology of the Prairie had taken too great a toll. This notoriously culminated in the devastating Dust Bowl, a period of frequent natural disasters in the early 1930’s, which, in the form of great sandstorms, ravaged the Midwest, particularly the southern, drier sections of the Plains at the corner between Texas, Colorado, Oklahoma, Kansas and New Mexico. This catastrophe, spurred by a natural period of droughts, was made far worse by the ill-fitted, increasingly mechanized agricultural practices of the time. By then, the agrarian era of America’s history had already been largely marginalized.

Colonization of the Prairie thus had a rhythm, with lows and highs throughout its history. For this reason, it is relevant to consider literary works of different periods. Cather’s *My Ántonia* and Garland’s *Main-Travelled Roads* were written over twenty-five years apart. Although their contents are loosely situated during the same period, they were written under very different circumstances. *Main-*

Travelled Roads was among Garland's very first works and thus reflects a youthful enthusiasm for social critique and militantism. *My Ántonia* is the result of a much longer, more mature creative process, which is illustrated by its preference for reminiscence as a narrative structure and the past as both a subject and a setting. In order to establish these differences and similarities more clearly, the two books must be analyzed separately.

Hamlin Garland and *Main-Travelled Roads*

The author

A West Wisconsin native, Hannibal Hamlin Garland early life bears much in common with that of several of his stories' protagonists. He was born in 1860 in La Crosse County, Wisconsin, which serves as a setting for quite a few of his stories, or is at least mentioned in several of them, such as in "Up the Coolly". Raised a farmer, he travelled to Boston as a young adult in search of a prosperous alternative in the literary scene of the time. There, he experienced first-hand how removed and distant life could be in such a vastly different environment and developed a strong nostalgia for his rural home. Garland was a child during the period of American history that came to be known as the Gilded Age. In the Prairie, this was the golden age of American Homesteading practices, a set of policies designed to enable farmers to acquire and manage their own land from government property. These individual farms, called homesteads, were most common west of the Mississippi river and became the trademark form of settlement of the Prairie, a symbol of the spirit of individual freedom and self-reliance in the West. This development occurred simultaneously with several other changes that drastically altered the nature and significance of American farming. These changes included technical innovations which increased productivity and comfort for free farmers, as well as a major economic crisis originating from Europe, the crisis now known as the "Long Depression", which saw the Old Continent flooded with new, cheaper American agricultural products. American labor wages rose above those of Europe, which spurred an unprecedented wave of immigration to the New World, fueling the growth of the vast expanses of land recently opened by the authorities to settlement.

One of the major developments that played a key role in the rural history of the time is the increased density of the railroad network that connected the already

well developed Eastern United States to the burgeoning West. Trains became a trademark trait of the Western life, and remain to this day one of the most enduring symbols of this era. The generalization of railroad transportation and improved agricultural techniques, coupled with new policies of land management such as the Homesteading Acts and the rapid demographic growth of the country marked this era of American history as one of hope and opportunities. With these new possibilities of movement and business ventures, it was not rare for farmers and other laborers of the Midwest to resettle frequently throughout their lives, trying their luck in different environment, following the trail of prosperity wherever they could find it.

This trend of relocation, however, which is omnipresent in Garland's fiction, illustrates the ambivalent nature of life on the Prairie: far from being the utopian dream of social progress and prosperity it was hoped to be, it was often a hazardous endeavor marred with setbacks and disappointments, a constant struggle in search of an ideal life which brought individuals from place to place. A struggle, which, in Garland's time, was already beginning to weigh heavily on the backs of the millions of homesteaders and laborers of the Midwest. Indeed, starting with the Reconstruction Era that followed the Civil War, the economy of the United States experienced tremendous shifts as traditional agricultural products steadily lost worth in favor of other industrial products. In his analysis of the subject of money in Garland's writing, Quentin E. Martin provides a brief explanation regarding the financial changes that were operated in the United States starting with the Reconstruction Era and their impact in farming. He explains that, with the onset of the War, in order to finance the dire cost of the nation-wide crisis, the United States increased the amount of money circulating in the country by straying from the standard gold-based currency, and in particular by issuing paper currency, the "greenbacks" (Martin, 63). In the years following the War, financial leaders, and a large part of the upper-class, supported by the Republican Party, demanded that these emergency policies be terminated. They

felt that the major financial crisis of the times, such as the Panic of 1873, had been at least partly triggered by these new policies, and that the dollar would be strengthened from a reduction of the amount of money available in the country. These factions successfully led the government to backtrack from its previous policies and take measures to reduce the amount of money in use. However, during the decades of the Reconstruction Era and the Gilded Age, the population of the United States increased tremendously. More people for less money meant an increase in the worth of the currency, which led to higher interest rates. This, as Martin phrases it, “favors the creditor class and puts the debtor class at extreme risk” (Martin, 64). Indeed, in order to establish a settlement of their own, farmers usually had to rely on loans. Farmers in the West were particularly vulnerable, as most of them simply did not have the financial resources to build their own homestead from scratch, as opposed to eastern workers, who might have benefited from older, better-established structures and easier lands to farm. At the times, most of the American resources and capital was centered in the East, particularly the Northeast. This regional contrast highlighted a conflict of interest between Western laborers and their Eastern investors. A situation of economic dependency was born between East and West, which was detrimental to the West. Moreover, an increase in crop production that was not accompanied by an increase in money supply resulted in a depreciation of goods, a deflation (Martin, 64). Farmers were thus required to sell at lower prices, which made it even difficult for them to repay their loans and subjected them to the whims and interests of the financial upper-class, rather than their own.

These dire circumstances were the core driving factor behind the creation of the Populist movement in the American Midwest during the 1890’s, represented by The People’s Party, for which Garland worked.

The People's Party and Hamlin Garland's political aesthetics

Hamlin Garland's involvement with politics remains an essential component of his work. It influenced the reception of his writings and is arguably one of the most frequently analyzed aspects of Garland's legacy. Garland put his poetic, often romantic interpretations of the Great Plains to good use in arguing for the cause of the common Midwestern farmer, of the free laborer and the adventurous pioneer. This connection between aesthetics and politics was a central characteristic of the Populist movement, as discussed by Jonathan Berliner:

“(…) much of the rhetorical thrust of Populism focused on practical issues, including such themes as plutocracy, monopoly, land speculation, the Panic of '73, high interest rates, and, of course, the gold standard. Thus far from simply espousing nostalgic rhetoric, the Populists articulated demands for concrete reforms. Nevertheless, to ignore the sentimental, utopian framework within which this critique was posed would also misread the logic of the movement.” (Berliner, 220)

According to Berliner, while the Populist Movement was decried as merely a reactionary trend based on nostalgia toward a supposedly brighter past, to reduce it as such ignores the genuine, practical demands made the Populists, whose concerns leaned not so much toward the preservation of the past, but the accomplishment of the past's promises, the harvest that follows the sow. The People's Party's view was that Nature was bountiful and that the American people would benefit freely from it if only they were allowed to do so. The Populist perceived the policies set by the American government as largely responsible for the difficulties faced by common laborers and farmers, and believed that those should be allowed a greater leeway to benefit from their own work. They were hostile to the growing significance of corporate capitalism and the financial hierarchy of power that derives from it, and favored reforms in tax policies and

property rights, amongst others. A popular brand of thought amongst land reformers of the time, including Hamlin Garland himself, was the thought of Henry George, Georgism. Amongst others, Henry George believed in the idea of a shared property of land, which did not mean that George opposed private property, but that he considered the judiciousness of a tax system based on the economic rent of land. In other words, the wealth generated by land should be at least partially public, unlike the personal income generated by one's own labor. George sought to diminish the monopoly on land and natural resources by a small, rich percentage of the population. Such an idea was naturally popular amongst those who, like Garland, deplored the vulnerability of the debtor to the creditor, of renters to landlords. Kelly Clasen summarized Garland's take on Henry George's views:

“During the 1890s, Garland was a vociferous supporter of American economist Henry George's single-tax program (often referred to as Georgism), which sought to reduce monopolies and the power of the landed aristocracy by replacing all taxes with a single land tax. The reformers suggested that the government levy this tax to people who occupied land and that those occupiers would keep the proceeds from their labor.” (Clasen, 107)

To promote their ideas and garner popular support, the People's Party built its rhetoric upon an idealization of the countryside as a place of freedom and potential prosperity. The beauty and resources of the American landscape was to be the setting for a great human endeavor that would bring forth an idyllic society of prosperous farming communities. As Berliner phrases it: “the romantic aspect of Populist rhetoric was a device to rally support for their economic cause” (Berliner, 221). The nostalgic aspect of this discourse is not based on a convenient idealization of the past but on the frustration that derives from the belief that the past could have led to a better present under a better governance.

Hamlin Garland's aesthetics are ideally suited to this rhetoric, hence his significant involvement with Populist politics of the time. Garland's worldview reflects his own life, that of someone who has witnessed both the greatness and decline of American Prairie life. His attitude toward his childhood environment reflects a hesitation between bitter frustration and passionate optimism, or as Berliner brilliantly puts it: "a counterpoint of Is and Ought" (Berliner, 223). This musical metaphor illustrates well the recurring motive of Garland's short stories, particularly the early ones, which is the close interaction, the counterpoint, of hopeful human attempts at prosperity ("Ought") and the disillusionment and bitterness of failure in the face of both natural and human obstacles ("Is"). Garland was however not a pessimist. His insistence on depicting the difficult, often pathetic circumstances which frequently befalls his Prairie protagonists does not originate from a negative attitude to these circumstances, quite the opposite: Garland's tone shows a determination to demonstrate the worth of Prairie life, or at least its potential under a more favorable management. It can be argued that Garland's attitude is an attempt to redeem characters and ways of living that were seen as miserable and obsolete by many of his contemporaries. Most of all, it is the hopes of these characters which Garland seeks to redeem and restore to what he perceives to be their original glory and appeal. To that end, he put his literary talents to good use, crafting a literary legacy made of a subtle blend of harsh Realism and wistful Romanticism, two trends that have accompanied him throughout his entire career, though not always in equal measures, as shown in the following chapter.

Overview of Hamlin Garland's work and its reception

Three periods are generally identified in Garland's career.

1. **First period: early writings and controversies.**

This initial period, centered in the early 1890's, is characterized mostly by the short stories that were praised for their relevance and literary quality and established Garland as a major contributor to the scene of the time, but also draw much controversy for their grim, realistic tone. Key works of this era are, among others, *Main-Travelled Roads*, *Crumbling Idols*, or *The Rose of Dutcher's Coolly*. Some of those works caused much conversation and debate in America's literary circles for their unusual and often critical take on literary traditions. Garland called for a renewal of American artistic production through the valorization of provincial elements and distanced himself from the established traditions of the East, which he viewed as lacking originality. The emphasis on Nature in his work, and Nature's potentially liberating effect on mankind may be reminiscent of the attitude once promoted by American Transcendentalists, who, not unlike Garland, sought a revitalization of American culture through contact with the country's landscapes and Nature.

Keith Newlin indicates that the controversies that arose from Garland's early writing did not simply come from the more prestigious Eastern establishment, but also from his own region of origin, as some Midwestern critics deplored what they viewed as a negative, depressing portrayal of their region (Newlin, 77). The very grim tone of his early stories did not garner unanimous approval, far from it, and it would take several more generations of literary critics before his unforgiving depictions of a traditionally romanticized lifestyle came to be seen as a one of the most relevant contributions to this era of literature.

2. Second period: shift toward a more popular style.

The second half of the 1890's and the first decade of the twentieth century marks a second, more romantic period, which was much more severely received by later critics and is now generally viewed as a period leaning toward greater conformity in Garland's work. Newlin writes "Critics have long chastised Hamlin Garland for abandoning realism about 1895 and writing a string of western romances that bore only mild resemblance to the stories that established his reputation" (Newlin, 70). Newlin, however, argues that this period of Garland's work does not stem from a decline on creativity, but a desire to gain commercial success by catering to the time's popular genres and trends as well as Garland's personal exploration of his artistic versatility (Newlin, 72). He argues that Garland's dedication to reformative politics is secondary compared to his drive to attain commercial success. The truth is most likely somewhere in-between: Garland did not define himself as a strictly political writer, nor only as a provider of popular entertainment, but may simply have sought to try his hand at a variety of styles and objectives throughout his career. Moreover, he was clearly influenced by the reception of his work and sought to improve his style in a way that would be better appreciated by his audience. Thus, this second period of his work was successful. It enabled Garland to establish himself as a prolific writer and to earn a decent living, something which his early work had largely failed to do. Newlin points out the significance of commercial demands in orienting Garland's artistic choices:

"As a writer dependent for his living upon the sales of his books, Garland obviously kept one eye on the sales potential of his craft. His career reveals that he was not the callow hack with an eye on the main chance that modern critics have portrayed him to be. Rather, he was a consummate professional who tried a number of genres, always seeking to earn a respectable living with work that gave him personal satisfaction, adapting to the changing marketplace as conditions

demanded. To do otherwise would mean consigning himself to literary oblivion.” (Newlin, 85)

3. Final period: return to realism and autobiographical writings.

A third period can be identified in his career with a return to a more personal style of writing, one less influenced by popular demand but nonetheless mindful of it, which is centered around his “Middle Border” series, a set of highly personal works starting with the autobiographical *A Son of the Middle Border*, published in 1917, and culminating with its sequel *A daughter of the Middle Border*, in 1921. Both works were critically acclaimed as well as commercial successes, and are seen as Garland’s most accomplished works (Newlin, 84). In these autobiographical novels, he reflects on the significance of his experiences as illustrations of the history and spirit of the Midwest, displaying the maturity and insight he acquired as now experienced writer, realizing an ideal synthesis of his Romantic leanings and Realistic aspirations.

Between Romanticism and Realism

As explained above, Garland’s artistic style lies at the junction between the two trends of Romanticism and Realism, an aesthetic Middle Border which grants him a particular relevance in the study of Prairie literature.

Garland is a Realist to the extent where he intends to enable readers to gain insight into the daily lives of characters whose lives are clearly meant to be accurate portrayals of real Prairie life, and who belong for the most part to an economically disadvantaged class of American society. What makes him a Romantic is the emotional and passionate take on the natural world and its significance to the human character, the grandiose depictions of landscapes as a canvas for human passions and dreams, and his strong emphasis on the defining strength of human will, unlike the established Realist and Naturalist traditions which tend to reduce humans to mere products of their circumstances. Garland,

much like other Prairie writers such Willa Cather or Ole Edvart Rølvaag, chooses to emphasize free will and the capacity of human protagonists to change their condition through hard work, spirit and cunning.

His realistic settings aim to create a better understanding of a settler's life. The "slice of life" aspect of his narratives provides an immersive environment for the reader, which is essential to identify the factors that most influence settlers' life and identities.

Moreover, Hamlin Garland occupies a peculiar place in the literary life of his time. The history and reception of his work by contemporary scholars provide relevant insight into the aesthetic considerations of the time, which helps situate the peculiar, somewhat marginal position that Prairie writers often occupied at the time in contrast with the more prestigious literary tradition of the East. This situation can be linked to the strong identitarian streak that those writers manifested in their writings. As stated above, Western writers such as Garland were keen to criticize Eastern establishment and called for a provincial literature drawing inspiration from local experiences and an affirmation of geographically marginal identities. Quintessential to the local experience of the Midwest is of course the Prairie. Thus, as illustrated by Garland, the identitarian element of Great Plains literature is inextricably bound to the natural element and its defining, culture-changing action on its inhabitants, hence the Romantic, nature-bound element of Prairie literature. It can be argued that in the case of "Prairie literature", the use of a geographical epithet is not merely a way to situate the corpus, but also its main protagonist: the Prairie itself. The natural holds such a significant position in these stories and plays such a role in defining the daily life of its human characters that it can be treated as a protagonist in its own right, or at least as the central element of the story in the way that a protagonist would be. The idea of geographical location as the central aesthetic and narrative element of a story, particularly in Garland's fiction, is referred to by Cara Kilgallen as the notion of "centrality of place" (Kilgallen, 176). With this term, she argues that the

picturesque element that permeates Garland's writings holds a dominant role in his artistic conceptions, unlike contemporary Realists and Naturalists who were often more concerned with the human element of their subject's environment than with the natural one (Kilgallen, 176). A contrast is established between the "pristine" (Kilgallen, 176), poetic Prairie landscape and its unforgiving treatment of its inhabitants. A contrast which, upon further reading, does not appear contradictory at all, let alone paradoxical. Indeed, in Garland's often melancholic, dreamy explorations of the Great Plains, the beauty of the land acts precisely as a mean to highlight and justify the toil of the laborer, like a physical manifestation of the farmer's goal. Quoting Keith Newlin, Kilgallen evokes *Main-Travelled Roads*, which, according to Newlin, illustrates "human lives that fail to measure up to the promise of the land" (Newlin, in Kilgallen, 177). An interesting phrasing which reverses the expected position of land and human. Rather than the land that fails to fulfill the settler's wish of prosperity, it is the humans who prove unworthy of the land's quality. The wild and untamed vastness that stretches before the eye of the hopeful, westbound American man is an unreachable Eden, a land that will only ever demand more of its subjects and only ever sparsely grant reward. This nuance approaches the idea that Prairie is a character, an active and driving element of the story, almost a genuine protagonist, capable of setting the tone and expectations which the other characters must fulfill in order to attain success in the Prairie.

These views contrast starkly with the predominant (Eastern) American depictions of the Plains at that time, which contained a more classically, old-fashioned Romantic element. For the more urban literary scene of the time, the Prairie was a rather distant, easily romanticized symbol of the West, of America's expansion. Depictions of Prairie life, such as those found in the Western fiction of Owen Wister, a Pennsylvania native, often rely more heavily on caricatures, portraying the West's inhabitants as archetypes that are both idealized as pioneers and forbearers of American civilization, and decried as wild, isolated, backwards

communities. These stereotypes have remained a persistent component of Western fiction throughout the ages. As described above, Hamlin Garland did partake in these types of Romantic Western narratives, but he differed from many other writers of such stories by his own experience in the West and his emphasis on its inhabitants' identity and culture rather than on adventurous tales, particularly in the first period of his career. Thus, since the focus of this work is the identitarian relationship between Man and Nature, it is Garland's early works that will provide more relevant material for in-depth analysis. One work stands out as particularly useful for this argument: *Main-Travelled Roads*, Garland's 1891 compilation of short stories of rural life on the Great Plains. This work will serve as the primary source material for our analysis of landscape allegories in Prairie literature.

Main-Travelled Roads

Main-Travelled Roads is a collection of eleven short stories which, although fictive, all contain an undeniable autobiographical element. By his own admission, the short stories were written "in a mood of bitterness" (Garland, *Foreword*). In his foreword to *Main-Travelled Roads*, Garland describes the circumstances that brought him to write these stories, and it is clear that many of his own personal experiences are contained within these pages. A few years before the publication of the book in 1891, Garland, returning from Boston, visited his parents on their South Dakota home and visited farms where he had lived. There, he witnessed firsthand the excessively harsh lives of many of his former peers, which he describes as an "endless drudgery" (Garland, *Foreword*).

Already in his foreword, many of the leitmotifs that are present in his following stories can be found. The omnipresent mood of bitterness and hopelessness, of obstinate endurance and persistence, as well as the constant concern for money and the determination to succeed are all elements that Garland himself describes

experiencing upon his return to the Middle Border. He describes his frustration at being unable to provide financial support to his mother, whom he describes as withered and shriveled by the toil of the farm. The theme of a young man rescuing a hopeless woman from her condition is also a recurring theme of Garland's stories. Those are but examples to show that the autobiographical elements of his early fiction are undeniable.

It is interesting to note, therefore, that if Garland's fictive stories are in fact deeply autobiographical (which highlights their realist nature), then the aesthetic elements of his prose must not necessarily be seen as mere literary devices restricted to their role in the story, but can instead be interpreted as manifestations of a real worldview and experience. Romantic aesthetics, when applied to a Realist narrative grounded in personal experience, gain more substance and gravitas beyond the scope of the fictive, which may contribute to explain why these early stories were met with such reserve from critics who were distraught by the severity of their tone. Garland's writing illustrates how non-Realist elements can be used to make the reader more aware of Realist tropes. This correlates to the argument made earlier that Garland is distinguished from other Populist writers and orators, who resort to landscape symbolism and Romantic imagery mainly for rhetorical purposes, whereas Garland raises this imagery and symbolism to an existential level by inserting them in a near-biographical fiction.

For instance, the exacerbated symbolism of natural landscape against the backdrop of human misery in *Main-Travelled Roads* can be seen as more than a device intended to appeal to readers' artistic sensibilities: it illustrates a very real perception that landscape is not merely a setting but an active component of real identities, and not only fictive ones. It shows that, for Garland, the lives which he describes in *Main-Travelled Roads* are not only governed by human factors, such as class or gender, but also by natural ones, and cannot be envisioned outside of their natural environment. For its inhabitants, the Prairie is both a goal and an obstacle, a familiar home and a loathed jail. It is present in every moment and

colors every event and decision made by those who live in it.

Themes and Aesthetics

This representation of the Prairie as the ever-present, unescapable driving force of human existence in the West is central to the aesthetics of Garland's work. The role played by landscape in *Main-Travelled Roads* operates differently than what may be seen in more popular Western fiction, where the Great Plains and the lands beyond them are made exotic and alluring locations of remote adventure. In Garland's West, the Plains' presence is constant and expected and therefore included in daily life without elements of exoticism. For other Western writers, the beauty of the Plains lies in their uniqueness and the adventures that they might offer, while their ugliness lies in the unknown dangers and the isolation that the Plains bring. For Garland's protagonists, for whom the Prairie is a constant companion, its greatness is one of natural beauty and emotional attachment to a home, whereas its downsides are the practical difficulties that must be faced daily. This contrast between a daily contact with exalted beauty and the exacerbated suffering that accompanies it creates a dialogue of reciprocity between Man and Nature, a relationship where the human figure lies perpetually in awe and expectation toward an incomprehensibly vast entity. The ugliness of human toil and the sanctity of natural beauty highlight and mirror each other.

Illustrations of this can be found in the fourth short story of *Main-Travelled Roads*, which is called *The Return of a Private*. This story follows a young soldier returning home from the Civil War. He had departed from his family and his farm three years prior, leaving them to run the homestead and pay for the mortgage while he was at war. In Garland's words, he "went away to fight for an idea. It was foolish, but it was sublime for all that" (Garland, non-paginated). Here, Garland expresses directly a central idea of his fiction: the opposition between an

exalted, wondrous wish and the disappointing reality that follows. Moreover, he voices the sentiment that the failure of reality enhances the sublime aspect of the idea: “it was sublime *for all that*” (my emphasis). There is a parallel between the experience of the veteran and that of the pioneer: both endangered themselves and their loved ones for the sake of a distant idea and both have found reality disappointing. For both of them, the hardships of the real world grant their original dream an even more exalted beauty. The connection between the life of a farmer and that of a soldier is made clearer at the end of the story, where the young man, named Edward Smith, begins working in the fields again in spite of his degraded health. Garland refers to his “soul” as “heroic,” and makes the connection between war and farm life explicit: “With the same courage with which he had faced his Southern march he entered upon a still more hazardous future” (Garland, n. p.). He describes this scene with vivid natural imagery and grants personified traits to certain natural elements, referring for instance to the stars as “serene”, and describes the moment as “mystic” (Garland, n. p.). The use of this particular term highlights the connection with the sublime, the spiritual, almost religious quality granted to the scenery. When returning to his farm, Smith “was like a man lost in a dream. His wide, hungry eyes devoured the scene” (Garland, n. p.). Smith observes his farm and pays particular attention to the peaceful natural scenery rather than the human one. The two are undistinguishable in his mind. The human constructions cannot be removed from their setting, there are defined first and foremost by their surroundings, which are described as peaceful and “unmindful” of human presence. The language of the sublime is recurrent: “A little cabin in a Wisconsin coolly, but it was majestic in its peace” (Garland, n. p.).

Although he was criticized for the grim aspect of many of his stories, Garland does not necessarily place human misery at the center of his narration. Instead, he emphasizes human resilience and spirit and connects this spirit to the appeal of the land. Toil is a challenge to be overcome and nature’s beauty is the symbol of the

reward. *The Return of a Private* illustrates this as well. The narration alternates between description of painful challenges and contemplative evocations of nature, such as when Smith and his veteran companions step down from the train and search for a place to sleep. Smith's difficult health and pain is described and defines the dynamic between the men, as the sound soldiers must take Smith's condition into account when selecting a spot to sleep. Shortly after, in the morning, the men find a moment of respite from their struggle when contemplating the rivers and hills around them. The familiar landmarks are a visible sign of the impending end of their journey and provide them with a renewed vigor. Toil, even when caused by natural obstacles, is emphasized as a human condition to which Nature remains indifferent. Nature remains a pure ideal, unfazed by human failures, which, in Garland's writings, provides the protagonists with a stable, undisturbed dream to attain. The insistence in human's own responsibility for their own difficulties is expressed clearly with the last sentence of *The Return of a Private*: "His war with the South was over, and his fight, his daily running fight with nature and against *the injustice of his fellow-men*, was begun again" (Garland, n. p., my emphasis). A comment can be made about the choice of words in this sentence. Smith fights *against* his fellow men, but *with* Nature. Naturally, this does not mean that Nature and Man are allied in this fight, but *with* still evokes the idea of a partnership, albeit a conflictual one, as opposed to *against* which emphasizes the hostile nature of the relationship.

Indeed, both in his art and in his politics, Garland makes the point that it is first and foremost human choices that lead to catastrophe, rather than natural hazards. Relationship based on money, in particular, are a permanent source of worry for Hamlin's characters. In *The Return of a Private*, money is immediately a source of conversation among the veterans who must decide whether they can afford sleeping in a hotel rather than on a bench at the station, and Smith, despite being ill, prefers not to spend money on accommodation and sleeps in the open air. He is concerned that war has not paid much and that he has left his wife to handle the

mortgage on her own for the duration of his absence. When returning to the fields and expressing his determination to succeed, his primary source of concern comes from the human obstacles in his way. The natural ones are taken for granted and accepted as a necessary part of this lifestyle.

The topic of money is omnipresent in the stories of *Main-Travelled Roads*. A particular focus on financial matters can be found in the story that follows *The Return of a Private: Under the Lion's Paw*. In this story, a farming family falls prey to debt in a context of rising land prices, which increased the cost of their mortgage while they were already struggling to pay for it. It is noteworthy that in the description of the intense and painful labor that the whole family must bear, it is made clear that such labor is only necessary to provide the means to repay their loan. It is not any sort of natural obstacle that drives them to such exhaustion, but only human ones. Were they free of this mortgage, they would not need to produce as much as they do, and could reap the benefits of their work more freely. Garland makes a point to show that the primary threat that hangs over the family's shoulders is the financial one. The tone of the story differs completely from that of *The Return of a Private*. Unlike the latter, *Under the Lion's Paw* does not end on an optimistic note. The main characters, the Haskins, lost their previous farm to hoppers. They attempt to settle on a new farm, which they must purchase from a man called Jim Butler. Butler, under deceitful airs of generosity and modesty, has built a reputation for himself as a reliable land speculator. However, the Haskins lack the means to pay for the farm and must immediately begin to rely on the generosity of neighbors and friends, who provide them with tools and cattle. In other words, they contract debts. To ensure that they will have the means to remain on the farm, the whole family works much more than they would normally need to if they only had to provide for themselves. Garland focuses particularly on the labor performed by the eldest child of the family and points out that child labor is not subjected to any restrictive legislation on a farm. His phrasing is ambiguous. He writes: "An infinitely pathetic but common figure – this boy on

the American farm, where there is no law against child labor” (Garland, n. p.). He insists that it is on the American farm that laws against child labor do not exist, implying that they may in fact exist but fail to apply to the farm, where necessity prevails over lawfulness.

For Garland’s characters, this necessity to resort excessively to unfair methods of production and to involve people who in Garland’s opinion should not have to toil so hard, especially women and children, is symptomatic of the failure of the West to deliver its promised bounties. For the adult male protagonist, the fatherly figure, this necessity to make to whole family contribute beyond the scope of their regular responsibilities is source of particular frustration. This is illustrated by the following sentences, for instance: “Haskins worked like a fiend, and his wife, like the heroic woman that she was, bore also uncomplainingly the most terrible burdens”, or “The eldest boy drove a team all through the spring, ploughing and seeding, milked the cows, and did chores innumerable, in most ways taking the place of a man” (Garland, n. p.). These sentences express the view that there ought to be a limited amount of work necessary, a normal amount, and that the most straining tasks ought not to be handled by anyone but the head of the family, namely the father. The protagonist’s frustration is derived from the fact that the man’s work alone is not enough and that he fails to protect his family from the toil, as expressed here: “Yet Haskins loved his boy, and would have saved him from this if he could, but he could not” (Garland, n. p.).

When the creditor, Jim Butler, returns to demand payment, Haskin’s frustration boils over and he threatens to kill Butler, an outburst which leaves him ashamed and defeated. Indeed, Butler does not simply ask for the money he was originally due, but also for a tremendous amount resulting from the increase in the farm’s value. In other words, the Haskins are now punished for the heroic labor that they performed to restore the farm to a decent state. Now that it can be used again the farm’s worth has increased. This, coupled with an increase in interest rates, multiplies the cost of the farm. This situation has an almost Kafkaesque, absurd,

and frustrating element: the Haskins struggled under a stressful situation and, when they thought they would be free of it, they find themselves punished for their efforts and goodwill by an oppressive human system. Their efforts are made pointless by greed, dishonesty, and lack of empathy.

Here, the emphasis is strictly on human obstacles. It is interesting to note that references to nature are considerably less present in this story than in the previous one. The joyful, optimistic tone found at times in *The Return of a Private*, such as the colorful descriptions of playing children and the poetic contemplations of nature, is rather absent from *Under the Lion's Paw*. Whereas the former story revolves around a man leaving destructive human behaviors (the Civil War) to return to his peaceful home, *Under the Lion's Paw* find these behaviors harassing a family even into the sanctity of their own home. This contrast is illustrated by the reduced place granted to nature in *Under the Lion's Paw*. There is no time to admire the landscape, no time to reflect on the poetry and awe of the Plains, there is too much work to complete, and this absence weighs heavily on the shoulders of the protagonists who are left with nothing but their tasks. Thus, the aesthetics of nature serve as the background for human emotion, and its presence or absence defines whether human toil is worth its price or not. The human observer grants worth and lends ideas to natural scenery, viewing it as a physical illustration of immaterial concepts. This reciprocal identification of material and immaterial is centered around an observation and interaction with one's surroundings and establishes a connection between Prairie aesthetics and the notion of the Picturesque.

“The concealed allegory”: Elements of Symbolism and the Picturesque in *Main-Travelled Roads*

The Picturesque as aesthetic ideal emerged in the late eighteenth century in Britain, and is symptomatic of similar trends as the ones that later brought forth Romanticism, although the two cannot be assimilated to one another. British author William Gilpin argued in favor of an inclusion of the concept of “picturesque” as an alternative to the established categories of the “beautiful” and the “sublime.” The picturesque describes the quality of a subject that can be transposed into an artistic representation. It concerned at first the medium of painting, but has since expanded into other art forms. Unlike the beautiful, which gauges the degree to which a subject is pleasurable to behold, or the sublime, which exalts a subject beyond its original proportions to grant it a transcendent quality, the picturesque evaluates the natural capacity of a subject to be translated into an art form and thus potentially acquire the qualities of the previous two concepts. The picturesque, the beautiful and the sublime are by no means divorced from one another.

A potentially defining trait of the picturesque is its inclusion of human agency in the development of an aesthetic realization. Dabney Townsend describes the significance of human response to scenery in establishing picturesque quality:

“Nature in its direct effects is only possible when it ceases to be thought of primarily as a carrier of allegorical meaning. The shift to the picturesque, therefore, frees nature from the control of ideal forms. That freedom makes possible an aesthetics of nature and implicitly shifts the aesthetic paradigm from ideal beauty that is embodied in the lesser forms of actual nature available to the senses to natural feeling that is located in the response of the sensitive viewer. The basic move is from idealization to sensibility, and it signals a new priority of

sentiment as an end and arbiter of taste” (Townsend, 366-367).

The emphasis is thus on the personal response of the viewer, whose personal sensibility grants nature its aesthetic quality. In the context of Prairie literature, the relationship between the Plains and their human beholders is an equation of mutual exaltation: the sight of the Plains excites the sensibilities of the viewer, while the viewer’s gaze provides worth and appreciation to an otherwise fairly hostile environment. The Prairie serves as a setting for human emotions and ideals, while the presence and activities of human inhabitants grant the Plains its symbolic significance as the manifestation of a greater goal, an ideal.

In his study of the picturesque, Townsend refers to painting and poetry as “means to an ideational end” (Townsend, 366). As such, art’s purpose is to depict an ideal. Art realizes this through the use of allegories. Townsend writes that “ideas are represented allegorically, and nature is understood as a concealed allegory” (Townsend, 366).

Henceforth, he argues that the natural world, being in itself “a concealed allegory,” holds the potential to unveil idealized concepts that can be represented through artistic means.

“So, from the beginning, the concealed meaning and significance of nature as well as the familiarity with pictures that leads a person of taste to recognize qualities in natural scenes and constructed gardens and landscapes also implicitly appeals to elements common to nature, painting, and poetry” (Townsend, 366).

Townsend thus equates the natural world to art itself to the extent where both are means to attain exalted qualities.

This relates well to the notion already explored earlier that, in Prairie literature, the landscape serves as a medium for ideas, a source of inspiration and motivation for toiling settlers. This sense of admiration for landscapes is a characteristic of

the picturesque. Moreover, as Townsend writes, “The shift to the picturesque, therefore, frees nature from the control of ideal forms.” Under a picturesque representation of landscape, nature can be appreciated regardless of its conformity to specific standards of beauty. This shift grants more room to the personal appreciation of the viewer and thus highlights the human contribution to the equation that gives birth to an exalted interpretation of Nature. This is clearly found in Garland’s writing, where Nature’s appreciation is born from its inhabitants’ emotional attachment. It is the settlers who grant symbolic meaning and emotional value to the Plains. The picture is not complete without its human elements, and the varying attitudes inspired by the Prairie shape the perception of the latter. Moments of emotion or contemplation, or simply moments designed to establish the setting of the story are all reinforced with vivid and poetic descriptions of nature and its impact on the viewer. In fact, Garland himself refers to this as picturesque, for instance in *A Branch Road*:

“The pale red-sun was shooting light through the leaves, and warming the boles of the great oaks that stood in the yard, and melting the frost off the gaudy, red and gold striped threshing machine standing between the stacks. The interest, picturesque-ness, all of it got a hold of Will Hannan, accustomed to it as he was” (Garland, n. p.).

Here we find again the reciprocal and inverted relation between Nature and Man. “Reciprocal,” because, the two mirror each other. Will’s view exalts the beauty of the land, which in turn inspires a sentiment in him. “Inverted,” because, as expressed in earlier chapters, in Garland’s work, Nature owns Man just as much as the he owns it, if not more, as illustrated by the use of the word “hold” in the aforementioned passage. The Prairie man belongs to the Prairie just as much as the other way around. The experience of life in the Midwest exerts an ambivalent influence made both of rejection and attraction. Hamlin Garland illustrates this through his treatment of interpersonal dynamics, particularly in family and gendered dynamics. His characters tend to abide by recurrent tropes and

personalities, which may help unveil Garland's understanding of his subject matter. For this reason, attention must be paid not just to characters' contemplation of nature, but also their reaction to their own circumstances. These reactions must be understood under the lens of personal characteristics, such as gender, age, or social class.

Gendered allegories, age, and family dynamics in *Main-Travelled Roads*

Throughout the various experiences described in *Main-Travelled Roads*, a pattern can be observed in the representation of family dynamics as well as interpersonal relations between men and women. Those patterns can be given an allegorical significance as symbols of different attitudes toward the Prairie and life in the Midwest, as well as a manifestation of Garland's ethos, politics, and aesthetics.

A very recurrent motive is the idea of rescuing someone who has been trapped by circumstances on the Prairie, particularly, a young man rescuing a woman whom he loves or at least cares about. In his foreword, Garland expresses his frustration at being unable to rescue his mother from her harsh condition. This attitude is repeated by many of his protagonists, often young men who have great ideas for the future or who have experienced a different life than that on the Prairie and wish to share it with a loved one, one who typically does not share the protagonist's optimism and often remain grounded in practical considerations. For instance, in *A Branch Road*, the protagonist, Will Hannan, runs away from home after a series of rather pathetic misunderstandings leading to a heartbreak, and moves across the States, particularly the Southwest. When he returns, years later, his childhood sweetheart has married a man who abuses her. She is worn out by hardship and seems depressed. When returning to his home, Will rejoices at the familiar nature of his surroundings, but notes the many changes in the layout of

the village and the farmlands. He refers to the scenery as “mournful” (Garland, n. p.), a discreet way of expressing the sense of loss that permeates his memories of his home. Again, the nature both illustrates and dictates the tone and emotional trepidations of the observer. Outward scenery reflects inward turmoil. Dismayed at the degraded state of his childhood sweetheart, Agnes, he spontaneously offers her to leave with him, both out of affection and pity.

It can be argued that the male and female figures in Garland’s stories embody two distinct attitudes toward Prairie life: the male protagonist typically represents a hopeful, driven, daring spirit, or at least a desire for change, whereas the female protagonist generally manifests a preference for stability and immobility rather than adventure and experimentation. Many of his female characters serve to embody the frustration and failure that is omnipresent in these narratives. As expressed earlier, in his fiction and politics, Hamlin Garland is chiefly concerned with what could have been achieved, and could still be achieved, had the right decisions been made. This consideration is made most visible by his female characters, whose lives frequently revolve around a man’s poor judgement or decisions.

Clasen refers to Garland’s take on the subject of women as a manifestation of “historically conservative feminism” (Clasen, 95). Clasen writes “. Bound to the soil by their husbands' or fathers' debts but oblivious to their responsibility toward the land and the emotive power of the land that stimulates men's attachment (which is thoroughly expressed throughout *Main-Travelled Roads*), Garland's farm women are primarily flat characters who appear to be drawn to elicit pathos from readers” (Clasen, 95). Here find expressed the gendered paradigm of rejection and attraction toward the land expressed earlier. The male character is enthralled by the Prairie’s beauty and possibilities, whereas the female one fails to view these possibilities and finds herself condemned to a passive life under someone else’s dominion. Clasen nonetheless refers to Garland as feminist, because of the author’s involvement with the socially progressist scene of his time

and his proclaimed desire to see an improvement in the condition of women. In his prose, however Garland does not particularly question the traditional view that a woman's financial and material stability, as well as her emotional fulfilment, depend on a man's presence and good intents.

This, however, pertains to his politics. From an aesthetic perspective, the women of *Main-Travelled Roads* can gain a new dimension when treated not as mere devices designed to "elicit pathos from readers," as Clasen phrases it, but as allegorical representations of the human frustration felt as a consequence of the failure to prosper on the Prairie. If the male characters represent optimism, the female ones serve as a reminder that this optimism is sometimes misplaced.

This paradigm is reminiscent of the dynamics found in Ole Rølvaag's immigrant epic *Giants in the Earth*, where Per Hansa, a Norwegian immigrant, convinces his family to follow him across the North America, while his wife Beret would prefer to settle down each step of the journey, wishing that they would go no further and find stability wherever they are. She did not want to immigrate in the first place, but her husband, like so many other pioneers, found himself seduced by the possibilities of Western settlement. This polarization of the pioneer experience is a recurrent theme in Great Plains literature, and in these cases, it maps onto a gender dynamic, which may serve as a narrative device to better draw attention to the close proximity between these two poles of experience, one positive and adventurous, the other reluctant and bitter. Indeed, the choice to have these two attitudes manifest within loving relationships highlights their intricate bound. On the Prairie, adventure and disappointment go hand in hand.

Another interesting female character is Nelly Sanford, from *A Good Fellow's Wife*. As the name suggests, the story is centered on its female protagonist, for once. Nelly Sanford is the wife of an aspiring banker who establishes his business in a new town, where he is quickly met with decent success and popularity. This success, however, is jeopardized when Mr. Sanford loses all the money of the

bank in misplaced speculation. Ruined and facing the hostility of the despoiled villagers, Mr. Sanford is convinced by his wife to remain and face his debtors. She takes matters in her own hands and opens a new shop as a means to repay the money lost.

Here again, we find Garland's usual depiction of an adventure gone wrong, and as usual in his stories, the male character is the risk-taking one, while the female character favors quiet stability and peace, which she originally trusts her husband to provide. Here, however, Garland interestingly depicts a situation where it is Mrs. Sanford who rescues her family from decline and experiences a great degree of personal fulfillment as she earns her own living in the shop. This story, unlike quite a few of the other ones found in the compilation, has a positive ending, where both partners eventually repay their debts and regain a stable place in the community. Nellie Sanford's newfound independence does not lead her to question her commitment to her family, quite the opposite: she feels as though her hard work will make her a better mother and wife. Thus, the story of her apparent emancipation remains fairly conventional in the context of this literature. Moreover, in this story as in most others in *Main-Travelled Roads*, the spontaneous and adventurous aspects of male and female relationships are intertwined, often with a degree of conflict, with the importance of mutually beneficial arrangements rather than only personal affinities. Naturally, this may be largely realistic given the time and place where these tales take place, but Garland's specificity lies in the connection that he establishes between the spontaneous aspect of romance and its calculated ones. More so than a loving relationship, it is often the prospect of a different, better life that draws characters to make sudden life-changing decisions in a very romantic fashion, such as Agnes' choice to give up her whole life and follow Will, in *A Branch Road*, a choice that she made in a matter of moments. Leaving with Will appeals to her, not simply because she is infatuated with him, but because he offers her a chance at a better life. The pioneer spirit of daring is reflected in the romantic aspects of the story.

Kelly Clasen writes:

“Isolation and dissatisfaction characterize the lives of Garland's farm women in this collection, and the only opportunities for social advancement occur with the help of male figures who are willing to remove them from their harsh living conditions” (Clasen, 96-97).

This dynamic reflects the worldview that permeates Garland's early writings, in which the failures of early endeavors has led to a bitter reality that must be escaped through a radical departure from the status quo, a spontaneous engagement toward incertitude and movement rather than stagnation. The attitude of his male characters toward the female ones reflects their attitude toward the Prairie itself, toward life on the Midwest and farm life in general: it is a life that they wish to change and reform to better bring to fruition the potential that it once held, much in the way that Garland's young protagonists wish to lead their feminine counterparts back to the serenity and prosperity that they were once supposed to attain. This connection between a woman's miserable circumstances and farm life's failed promises is expressed in way that Garland's description of nature changes when associated with a woman or a man. As explored before, men in *Main-Travelled Roads* typically find inspiration and comfort at the sight of familiar nature. Women generally do not. To illustrate her argument regarding Garland's treatment of female figures, Clasen quotes an excerpt from *Among the Corn-Rows*, where a young woman, whom the protagonist wishes to sway, is described as bitter and aching from the toil, and rather insensitive to nature's charm: “What matter to her that the kingbird pitched jovially from the maples..., that the robin was feeding its young, that the bobolink was singing?” (Garland, n. p.). This contrasts sharply with the usual attitude toward nature displayed by Garland's characters, which is one of awe, admiration, and reassurance. From the perspective of the male protagonist, this inability to appreciate natural beauty is symptomatic of the state of cultural and personal decay in which these characters stagnate. It is intended to make both the protagonist and the reader more

sympathetic to the cause of the miserable laborer, made all the more miserable because she is a woman and thus should not be toiling so. Thus, one's relation to nature, and the capacity to appreciate it, is a gauge of human quality in Garland's eye.

Still in *Among the Corn-Rows*, the main character, Rob, is the stereotypical protagonist of *Main-travelled Roads*. He is described as "confident, jovial, and full of plans for the future" (Garland, n. p.). Garland grants him a "manly and self-reliant nature," which "had the settler's typical buoyancy and hopefulness" (Garland, n. p.). He wants to get married and sets out to find someone who will agree to it. The story conveniently provides him with Julia, who, unlike him, shows little pioneer spirit. She is quite depressed and bitter and longs for an opportunity to leave her situation, which naturally makes her the ideal match for Rob. The contrasting attitudes of the two are illustrated by their different perception of the nature that surrounds them, one grim, the other serene, yet those attitudes are described as compatible and even complementary in the story, since the two decide to elope together.

As illustrated above, even in gender relations, the process of identification with nature is central to the aesthetics employed by the author. Each human action is juxtaposed with picturesque descriptions of nature, which serve to reflect the inner traits of the viewers as well as categorize their role in the story. While it may be argued that Garland's early writing may be lacking in psychological depth, the author compensates for this by providing literary substance to characters through extensive contemplations of nature and reflections on their relation with it. The Plains thus become a necessary component of their characterization. This thin boundary between human traits and natural ones explains why scenic descriptions in *Main-Travelled Roads* often contain elements of personification, namely that natural elements are granted described with epithets normally associated with humans, and it is not always clear whether descriptions of nature are fitted to suit the mood of the human interactions that they accompany, or whether it is the other

way around.

This strong identification with nature is a constant trait of Great Plains literature, but it does not manifest equally in each work. Hamlin Garland's prose provides the reader with great insight into the aesthetic and political considerations of his time and environment, halfway between Romanticism and Realism, between an intent to remain truthful to a reality often neglected and ignored, and a desire to express a youthful ideal of romance which often seems in direct contradiction with said reality.

Nonetheless, it has been argued that Garland's work, particularly his early prose, lacks a certain artistic quality and remains too often restricted to the descriptive and the picturesque. His relevance is largely based on the abundance and originality of his work as a Prairie writer who had genuine experience of the matters he described and a willingness to engage with the least appealing aspects of these matters. However, as a writer prone to include autobiographical elements in his fiction, Garland's early, more immature prose can also appear as a multitude of ways to express the same recurrent ideas closely based on the author's single own experience. As such, the scholarly interest in Garland's work is often based on the relevance of his testimonies to the study of both the history of the Great Plains and their literature, more so than his quality as an artist alone. For this reason, Garland's work alone does not suffice to draw a reliable picture of Great Plains literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Garland's persistent attachment to a certain number of archetypical characters and tropes in *Main-Travelled Roads* only offers a limited perspective on the topic discussed. Greater insight into both the matter of Great Plains literature and Garland's own specificities may be acquired through comparison with a vastly different contribution to the genre. To serve that purpose, I have chosen to explore the works of another, better-known Prairie author: Willa Cather.

Willa Cather's literary world shares an astonishing number of similarities with

Garland's, yet differ from it in significant ways. For this work, I will focus specifically on her fourth novel and final part of her so-called "Prairie Trilogy": *My Antonia*.

Willa Cather and *My Ántonia*

The author

Willa Cather was born in 1873 in Virginia, to a fairly successful and large family of farmers. In 1883, Cather's family relocated to Nebraska, where they initially established a homestead farm on the Prairie, but soon relocated to Red Cloud, still in Nebraska, where Cather was first introduced to literature and published her first works. In the 1890's, she studied at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she graduated in 1895 with a degree in English, after initially studying science.

Aside from her early contributions to local papers and student publications, Cather's career as an author began shortly after the end of her studies, when she moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to work for a local newspaper, and as a teacher and lecturer. There, she began publishing in earnest, writing short stories and poems. After moving to New York in 1906, she expanded the range of her work and published her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, in 1912.

Already at this stage of her career, her trademark themes and interests were visible, particularly her involvement with gender symbolism and its significance, unconventional gender interpretations, her interest for the representation of hard work, work ethics and success in the face of dire challenges, the immigrant experience in the Midwest and her attachment to the Prairie environment.

This latter trait is most famously manifested in her "Prairie Trilogy," a set of three novels taking place in the Great Plains and published from 1913 to 1918. These novels are *O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*. These three novels were critically acclaimed and continue to be seen as some of the most accomplished of Cather's works.

Much like Garland's work, Cather's combines elements of Realism with more romanticized traits. Her work has often been praised for helping share perspective

on real life on the Prairie, providing a more relatable insight into this experience. Much like Garland, Cather seems to retain both a great deal of love for the Plains and a great deal of resentment. Maynard Fox argues that Cather's early works contain a strong rejection of her childhood's West: "she rejected her West for its sordidness and hostility to the aesthetic capacity of the human being. The West she then saw as particularly destructive of the artist" (Fox, 187). This attitude, he writes, was characteristic of her publications during the first decade of the twentieth century. Fox argues that Cather's style and skill as an author were then still in their burgeoning stages, and that her maturity as an artist came to fruition with her Prairie trilogy, particularly with *My Ántonia* (Fox, 188). In this trilogy, the Plains are no longer simply antagonized, although they remain a source of conflict and tension for numerous characters. Particularly in *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather adopts a more nuanced position toward the Plains, raising them as the core source of symbolism and the driving force behind much of the character's emotional development. Unlike Garland, whose narratives typically revolve around practical issues rather than psychological ones, Cather grants a great deal of importance and complexity to interpersonal relations and emotions. In her characters' psyche, the Prairie becomes associated with specific individuals and experiences, emotions, and identities. This more nuanced approach indicates a shift in perception, from rejection to acceptance and remembrance. The Prairie becomes a symbol of one's own life, of childhood and past aspirations. Not unlike Garland's, Cather's Prairie can serve as a physical reminder of missed opportunities, of potential happiness frustrated by circumstances.

All of this is best exemplified in *My Ántonia*.

My Ántonia is arguably the highlight of her career. Although in the following decades, she continued to publish intensely and received the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 for her war novel, *One of Ours*, criticism of her work became increasingly severe, as her contemporaries felt that she was becoming less relevant to the younger audiences of the time. *My Ántonia* generally stands as her most accomplished

work. As Fox writes it, Cather's previous writings still showed an uncertainty regarding ideal style and form, whereas *My Ántonia* displays an artistic maturity and personality not seen previously (Fox, 188). *My Ántonia* binds together the two most essential paradigms of meaning found in Cather's aesthetics: nature and gender. In this novel, the natural world is intimately tied with human characters whose relationship to one another is symbolically equated with their relationship to the natural world itself. At least for the most central characters, this connection is made through the lens of gender and its implications. Interpersonal relations become catalysts for the development of a symbolic interpretation of nature.

To demonstrate this, I will argue that, in *My Ántonia*, the symbolism of the Prairie maintains such close proximity with that of human characters, particularly the character of Ántonia, that it can be treated as a character in its own right. In the narrator's psyche, childhood memories of the Prairie become undistinguishable from memories of Ántonia, to the extent where "My Ántonia" could be rephrased as "My Prairie."

My Ántonia

Context and contents

My Ántonia was written following two other fairly successful major attempts at the genre of Prairie literature, and is seen as most accomplished of the three. Written at the end of the 1910's, at a time where Cather had long been living in the city and away from her childhood home in the Nebraska Plains, the novel may strongly reflect the author's own memories and perception of her distant home, which is suggested by the fact that the story begins from the perspective of an unnamed narrator who is generally understood to be Cather herself, and who repeats a story told to her by a friend, Jim Burden, who in many ways can also be interpreted as a manifestation of the author's own presence. From the onset of the story, the author thus immediately closes the distance between herself and the subject matter by inserting herself in the story, then carefully restores it with the creation of an intermediary perspective, a second narrator who quickly becomes the main one. Cather is thus fully represented here, both as herself and as an allegory, articulated through the male protagonist of the story, Jim Burden. From the very first page, Cather's skill at imbuing characters with symbolic meaning, making them proxies for greater concepts, is made apparent. Moreover, the significance of gender is immediately suggested, since the figure that is used by the author as a replacement for herself is male, rather than female.

Willa Cather introduces both Jim Burden and Ántonia in the very first pages, but she does so differently for the two of them. Jim Burden is met in person. He is introduced as a childhood friend whom she meets on a train heading across the Plains. Ántonia, on the other hand, is immediately introduced as a memory. Cather and Burden discuss their shared memories of the Prairie, and the figure of Ántonia jumps to their minds. She is presented as a young Bohemian girl who, in Cather's own words "seemed to us to mean the country, the conditions, the whole

adventure of childhood” (Cather, 2). The symbolic significance of *Ántonia* is thus made explicit from the beginning. The two passengers agree that *Ántonia* is the centerpiece of their shared memories, and they decide to write down everything that they remember about her. They would then share these memoirs with each other in order to gain a better perspective on the person who had so much impact on their lives. However, Cather fails to do so, and the following story is thus introduced as Jim Burden’s version alone.

The novel is divided into five parts:

- Book I: The Shimerdas
- Book II: The Hired Girls
- Book III: Lena Lingard
- Book IV: The Pioneer Woman’s Story
- Book V: Cuzak’s Boys

The novel is presented as a memoir, based Jim Burden’s notes, and is thus not written in a way that aims to be fluid and well-structured. The narration is intentionally fragmented in order to make more apparent that this story is supposed to be a compilation of Jim Burden’s memories and notes, rather than a work of art. Cather thus uses narrative structure to establish the setting and better convey the nature of the story. Each section of the book deals with a different segment of Jim Burden’s life in relation to *Ántonia*, as if his life could be structured on the basis of his history with her. This, too, helps grant *Ántonia* a status which exceeds that of a simple character, and is instead that of the core driving force of the narrator’s life, particularly his experience of the Prairie. Each section establishes a new development in *Ántonia*’s and Jim’s lives, which triggers changes in the nature of their relationship.

Book I: The Shimerdas

This section introduces Jim Burden as a Virginian native relocating to the Nebraska Plains. The identification with Willa Cather herself is evident and can only be deliberate.

On the trains to Nebraska, Jim comes across an immigrant family heading to the same location, the Shimerdas. Jim's parents have passed away, and the boy must go to live with his grandparents, who own a farm on the Prairie. The farm is described as rather stable and prosperous. It is a fairly large wooden house, unlike the usual sod houses that predominate on the Prairie. This comfort contrasts with the situation of the Shimerdas, who have been scammed by an acquaintance into purchasing a desolate, miserable cave-like home on the Prairie.

From the first pages of the book, the reader is given a first glimpse into Cather's understanding of Pioneer spirit, and this spirit is immediately made indissociable from the Prairie landscape. The young Jim Burden is introduced to life on the West and builds his impressions of the land. He describes the Prairie in vivid terms and insists on its constant, overwhelming presence: "As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the color of wine-stains, or of certain seaweeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running" (Cather, 10).

The identification of the Prairie with the local identity is expressed with the idea that a natural element equates to a country. Moreover, the landscape is already given a living aspect with the use of the word "running" to describe the motion of the grass. The first hints of Pioneer spirit can already be found in the idea of a country that moves and runs, as if it shared the mindset of its settlers. The Prairie is granted a dreamlike quality, it is described by Burden as moving, undulating, and evokes vivid imagery in his mind. He ponders whether it is the end of the world, if there is anything beyond the Plains.

This initial contact with the Prairie sets the tone for the dominant aesthetics of the novel.

The Prairie stands at the center of a paradigm of life and death. The environment is described both as lively and lethargic. A contrast is rapidly established between the positive, artistic impulse of life that Jim draws from the landscape and its counterpart, an observation that the landscape inspires him with something reminiscent of death, a sense of both oblivion and greatness, of greatness found in oblivion:

“I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep” (Cather, 12).

With this single passage, Cather establishes a complex symbolism based on an interrelation of natural, earthly elements and human, non-material ones, namely sleep, death and contentment. Jim Burden compares himself to a plant, basking in the sun and the earth and deriving happiness from that anonymity, erasing himself in a greater whole. This happiness is likened to both death and sleep. These relations are reminiscent of Ancient Greek symbolism: Sleep (Hypnos) is the sibling of Death (Thanatos), and both belong to a category of deities referred to as ‘chthonic,’ from the Ancient Greek ‘khthon,’ which means the earth, the soil, and, in the context of Ancient Greek theology, characterizes deities and personified concepts associated with the Underworld, the Earth, the ground.

This Greek reference highlights the clearly pastoral elements found in Cather’s aesthetics, and in Prairie writing in general. Upon arriving at the farm and discovering the Plains, Jim Burden finds a sense of harmony and inner peace through a renewed contact with the natural world. He experiences a certain degree

of acceptance of death as he becomes aware of its significance to life. This idea of harmony with nature in a simpler lifestyle and acceptance of natural order evokes the pastoral. Humility in the face of Nature's greatness is a key component of the pastoral aesthetic. This atmosphere of humility and acceptance emanates from Cather's work in a various of ways, particularly through her depictions of memories. The past is granted a dreamlike quality made of bittersweet memories colored with a diffuse sense of contentment.

It is in the context of these discoveries that Jim Burden meets *Ántonia* for the first time. She is the first member of the family to be identified, although her name is not immediately given when she is first met on the train. The first genuine meeting occurs when Jim and his grandmother visit the Shimerdas to offer them supplies. *Ántonia* is described in a way that contrasts with her family members. She is depicted as exceptionally lively, wild, and unruly, unlike her little sister who said to be mild and obedient. The two sisters are physically contrasted as well: the wild *Ántonia* is brown and dark, while the mild little sister is fair. *Ántonia* immediately displays a welcoming and friendly attitude, while her mother and older brother are described as more shrewd and wary. Her father is dignified and maintains a good appearance out of principle, but is described as depressed and broken, whereas *Ántonia*, who, unlike her father, cares very little for appearances, is full of life and enthusiasm.

This welcoming attitude from *Ántonia* serves to highlight the connection between her and the country where Jim Burden suddenly finds himself thrown into. For Jim, the Prairie and *Ántonia* are both met and discovered together. The girl welcomes him and invites him on her exploration at the same time as Jim begins to find himself at home in his new environment.

Another significant connection between *Ántonia* and Nature can be found as the two children explore their surroundings, and the girl suddenly insists that Jim accepts her ring, seemingly her only possession. Jim remarks that it is "reckless

and extravagant” for her to want to give away her ring to someone she does not know, and observes that is no surprise that the Shimerdas were scammed if they were all this generous (Cather, 16). In the context of this work’s argument that the Prairie is likened to the characters that inhabit it, this scene can be seen as a symbolic reenacting of the Prairie’s settlement: the first half of the equation is the generous, lively, bountiful land ready to give its resources to people “she had never seen before”, and the second half of the equation is the human recipient of these attentions, who will either realize their true worth (as Jim does), or exploit it, as does the Shimerda’s acquaintance who scammed them, Krajiek. *Ántonia’s* spontaneous generosity and apparent lack of concern for notions of ownership and belonging is another trait that emphasize her connection with the land.

As stated above, *Ántonia’s* character is frequently built through contrast with others. One figure in particular which deserves more attention is *Ántonia’s* father, Mr. Shimerda. Tim Wenzell writes that “Willa Cather is emphasizing the courage that embodies the pioneer spirit with her portrait of the Shimerdas” (Wenzell, 196). However, not all the Shimerdas embody the same pioneer experience. If *Ántonia* incarnates the youthful enthusiasm of discovery, her father, on the other hand, represents the daily struggle of adaptation to a new environment and the crippling longing for the past. This longing proves too much for him to bear, and he commits suicide. Mr. Shimerda illustrates the failure that awaited many pioneers on the Midwest, but this failure is not caused strictly by natural setbacks, but by a lack of spirit, of pioneer spirit. This is reminiscent of Garland’s take on the economic difficulties faced by settlers, which in Garland’s view were more frequently caused by human wrongdoing than by natural obstacles. This division between settlers along the criterion of success or failure appears to be a recurrent motive of Western Pioneer literature. A fracture is born between those who, like *Ántonia* and Jim, are willing to view their new prospects with hope and daring, and those who remain unable to see the new possibilities.

As the story progresses, Jim and *Ántonia* continue to explore their new home. Jim

teaches English to *Ántonia*, which helps enhance the feeling of discovery, as each new thing on the Prairie receives its name as they encounter it. A major incident occurs when the two children face a rattlesnake, and Jim manages to kill it. This scene is a turning point where we begin to grasp more accurately *Ántonia*'s significance to Jim. Prior to the incident, Jim deplored that *Ántonia* seemed to treat him rather haughtily, owing to her older age and fiercer temper. After Jim kills the snake, *Ántonia* manifests more respect toward him. The imagery of this scene evokes Christian themes, which are directly acknowledged by the author. Describing the snake, Jim thinks: "He seemed like the ancient, eldest Evil. Certainly his kind have left horrible unconscious memories in all warm-blooded life" (Cather, 26). The dynamic of the scene also contains a sexual undertone, which turns it into a coming-of-age experience, as Jim fancies himself *Ántonia*'s protector who overcomes a trial to earn her approval. This entry into a form of maturity is hinted at when the children bring the snake back home and Otto, a hired hand on Jim's grandparents' farm, give Jim a conniving wink as *Ántonia* enthusiastically praises his prowess. The adult's amused approval signifies the change that occurred in Jim. The adult Jim, who narrates the story, refers to his younger self as a "dragon-slayer," albeit in a somewhat sarcastic tone as he acknowledges that the snake was not in fact a major threat, though it seemed that way then. Again, this episode illustrates the central position of Nature between the characters' interactions, and how it shapes their relationships. The use of children's voices to give shape, color and sound to this new world reinforces the sentiment of discovery, as if the Prairie's mysteries did not exist until they were unveiled by the protagonists. The process of children's discoveries and explorations is an act of storytelling, designed to build the settings anew, free of the preconceptions of adults.

As a fragmented collection of memories told in retrospective by the protagonist, Cather's *My Ántonia* places much importance in storytelling. As Keith Wilhite observes: "Storytelling, narrative viewpoint, and regional geography form a

popular and theoretically rich nexus in the critical debates surrounding Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*" (Wilhite, 269).

Numerous passages in the first book deal with storytelling. There is Otto, the rough Western man hired as help on the farm, who occasionally entertains Jim with tales of his experiences on the Frontier, or the two Russian neighbors, Pavel and Peter, who recount the frightening tale of an encounter with wolves in their native land. Since the novel itself is a recollection of memories, these past events shared by side characters are just as vivid and alive as the ones shared by Jim Burden himself. There is very little gap in Jim's mind between his own childhood tales and those of other characters, because all of them belong to the realm of remembrance.

This recurrent confusion regarding the perspective of the narrative voice leads Wilhite to observe that the different narrators of the story are unreliable (Wilhite, 270). The various perspectives layered on top of one another create a sense of mystique and uncertainty to the narration which enhances their nature as memories, giving them a confusing structure reminiscent of dreams. Wilhite extends this unreliability to the unnamed first narrator. He insists on the Cather's apparent attachment on the oral tradition and the act of perpetuating personal stories. The more volatile, uncertain nature of oral recollections can be used, as is the case in *My Ántonia*, to emphasize aspects of the story other than the factual ones grounded in reality. For instance, it can exacerbate more emotional and symbolic traits, which is after all Jim Burden's intent: to reflect on Ántonia's emotional importance to him, rather than only their shared history.

This interest in stories told as seemingly disparate recollections serves to emphasize the manner in which events are remembered by the narrator, rather than simply providing factual accounts of these events. The focus of the narration thus remains on the significance that the past has for the narrator. Lisa Marie Lucenti phrases it this way: "Throughout this novel, Cather is interested not

simply in *what* Jim remembers but also in *how* and *why* he does so” (Lucenti, 194).

Lucenti interprets the episode of the snake as a manifestation of Jim’s confrontation with his own difficult memories, and with the persistent, resilient nature of these memories, as well as a symbol of *Ántonia*’s untamed character in Jim’s eyes. Jim’s exaggerated depictions of the snake’s monstrous nature, which he later dismantles himself by pointing out that the snake was, in fact, old and weakened, are a manifestation of his trauma and the permanent imprint that these memories have left on him, which he later downplays in an attempt to strip this childhood monster of his traumatic power (see Lucenti, 198). Lucenti contends that the snake embodies Jim’s conquest of *Antoni*’s approval, and his interpretation of this event betrays his desire to conquer the memories that he has of *Ántonia*, the impact that she had on him. The snake’s resilience illustrates the uncontrollable nature of these memories, their haunting persistence, and the adult Jim’s way of rationalizing the encounter by suggesting it must have been weaker than it seemed is a way of protecting himself from the hold of the past (see Lucenti, 198). Lucenti perceives a direct connection between Jim’s recollection of these misadventures and the Russian men’s story of wolves. Here, the trauma is far more severe. The two men were pursued by a pack of wolves, and Pavel threw other passengers of their sledge to save themselves from the animals. The story followed them wherever they went, and it was only after sharing it with the *Shimerdas* that Pavel, who had been made sick and haunted by it, was able to break free of the memories and die at last. Pavel cannot clearly remember what happened, and Peter did not see him throw the passengers to the wolves, but the holes in their memory only enhance the horror of it. Lucenti writes: “Although he is perpetually unable to reconstruct the details of his actions – “how he did it” – Pavel is nevertheless pursued, endlessly, by these wolves. They are the horror that he cannot forget. And even though Peter “saw nothing,” he too must continue to “crouch” under the weight of that horror” (Lucenti, 199).

It can be argued that the multiplication of intermediate narrators further expresses

the haunting nature of these memories. Jim does not learn of Pavel and Peter's misfortunes directly, as he does not understand Russian, but must wait to hear it from *Ántonia*. Thus, for the reader, there is a juxtaposition of multiple intermediaries: Pavel, who shares the story with the Shimerdas and Jim, *Ántonia*, who explains it to Jim, and then Jim himself. One could even add two perspectives for Jim: his adult self who shares the story and his young self who experiences it.

This superposition of narrators and the frequent use of oral storytelling to explain a character's circumstances contribute to a sense of community between otherwise isolated individuals. Each of them has vastly different backgrounds and may at first appear as isolated spots of life on the flat Prairie, but by entertaining others with their tales and experiences and sharing with them what has driven them to the West, they recreate a sense of belonging which brings them existential stability. They choose to set aside their differences out of the wish to find solace and companionship in this harsh environment.

Thus, the act of sharing past memories plays a social role and cements the relationship between settlers. For Jim, however, these bounds are not necessarily a liberating agent. As Lucenti points out with her analysis of the snake incident, memories of *Ántonia* act as a resilient, unescapable presence for Jim (Lucenti, 198). The idea of sharing these memories with the reader may thus have a liberating effect on Jim, much like Pavel was liberated after telling his story of wolves. Perhaps the choice of the surname "Burden" for the main character hints at this interpretation: reflecting on Jim's later life and disappointments, John Selzer writes: "...his life is lonely and empty and sterile – the "burden" his name suggests" (Selzer, 54).

Conflict between *Ántonia* and Jim is a recurrent incidence in the novel. The first major drift between the two occurs when Jake, a member of the Burden household, has a fight with *Ántonia*'s brother Ambrosch. Prior to the incident, Jim and

Ántonia had seen much less of each other, as both were slowly being set on the paths that eventually drive them apart: Jim attends the local school, while Ántonia must begin to work the fields. This creates a wedge between the two friends. Cather relies on a shift in the gendered interactions between Jim and Ántonia to illustrate this growing distance. After beginning to work in the fields, Ántonia is described as manly and muscular. She grows stronger, and the traits that initially drew Jim's attention, such as her brown complexion, are exacerbated. Lucenti considers that Ántonia's masculinization is perceived by Jim as threatening and potentially emasculating (Lucenti, 198). Unlike Garland's fiction, where having to perform "a man's work" is depicted as alienating for a woman, Cather's take on the subject is empowering. Ántonia treats her work in the fields as a source of pride and validation, and she enjoys competing with other laborers. With this, we begin to see the source of the difference in mindset that would ultimately lead to the two friend's separation. Moreover, this narrative also serves to tie Ántonia further to the Nebraska Plains and thus to Jim's past. There, she may thrive, while he will have to leave for the city in order to find emancipation. The difference that drives them apart is the contrast between Ántonia's attachment to her land and family, a loyalty born from shared hardship and necessity, as opposed to Jim's more pampered attitude to life and possessions. However, we see that Ántonia is aware of this difference and suffers from it, for instance when she cries after initially deriding Jim's wish that she goes to school, saying that "school is alright for little boys" and boasts that she must stay and work as much as men do (Cather, 61). A few moments later, she cries and asks Jim to let her know of "all those nice things you learn at the school" (Cather, 61). She remarks that her father was well-educated, and seems to regret that she cannot follow in his footsteps. Ántonia, too, has her own haunting memories.

Nature colors every one of these moments, and, keeping in mind that these are memories, it can be argued that descriptions of nature are always suited to the events they accompany, as Jim certainly pays more attention to elements of nature

that support his perception of the events, or that his perception may have been altered by atmosphere of the surrounding nature. For instance, when *Ántonia* cries, she turns her head away from Jim, toward “the red streak of dying light, over the dark prairie” (Cather 61).

After the fight with her brother, *Ántonia* and Jim reject each other’s friendship, and it is not until the intervention of Jim’s grandfather that the issue is settled. These events close the first book. This section has established core concepts evoked in *My Ántonia*, such as memory and discovery, childhood and gender. Nature has remained both in the background and at the center of the events unfolding. As the setting of the narrator’s memories, it is imbued with a particularly strong tone of sentimentality which exacerbates the narrator’s perception of events and people. In this regard, the narrator’s perspective is made even less reliable, while the reported perspectives of characters other than the narrator, particularly *Ántonia*’s, are made comparatively more reliable, at least at first glance, because they are less affected by the narrator’s subjectiveness, they are more factual. For this reason, *Ántonia* has frequently been treated by critics as a more reliable voice than Jim. Wilhite writes:

“A number of scholars [...] have pointed out Cather's insistent return to the oral tradition in the novel, and most read the emphasis on storytelling as Cather's way of endorsing *Ántonia* Shimerda's perspective and privileging her experiences as more authentic than those of the novel’s narrator, Jim Burden” (Wilhite, 269).

The first book, with its constant insertion of additional tales told by both main and secondary characters, sets the tone for Cather’s approach to narration in *My Ántonia*. The second book opens with a more concrete realization of the growing distance between *Ántonia* and Jim, as the latter moves with his grandparents to a nearby town, while *Ántonia* must remain in the farm.

Book II: The Hired Girls

The second book sees Jim move to the town of Black Hawk, near their farm, as his grandparents begin to tire of farm life. There, he meets his new neighbors, the Harlings. To help *Ántonia*, Jim's grandmother arranges for her to be hired as a maid in the Harling household. This sets in motion the events that will bring to completion the rift between *Ántonia* and Jim, but will also solidify the meaning of their friendship.

As a hired girl in an urban household, *Ántonia* is suddenly exposed to a world vastly different from her own. She discovers a variety of new experiences that help shape her character and tastes. She meets other boys, which spurns Jim's jealousy. She dresses differently and seems intent on giving more priority to her own desires and enjoyment, as opposed to the hardened behavior that she displayed while trapped in farm labor.

Several major changes occur in *Ántonia* during this period. One is her exposure to a very different family dynamic at the Harlings'. There, she finds herself a longing to build a family of her own, as well as a talent for storytelling, which she uses to keep the children of the family entertained. Under the influence of this new environment, Jim's and *Ántonia*'s friendship matures further, as they both discover the possibilities of urban life. However, their ultimate separation becomes clearer as this upgrade in lifestyle leads both protagonists to discover what they each want and expect from life, and those wishes are not compatible. *Ántonia* is thrilled to discover new pleasures and seeks to enjoy herself as a break from a life of too many frustrations. For Jim, the experience of life in Black Hawk strengthens the conviction that his future lies elsewhere, and that he is destined for greater things than to stay on the Prairie. To him, this feeling is confirmed by *Ántonia*'s behavior, as it becomes clear that the girl's wishes are not compatible with his own.

In this book, character development follows the rhythm of seasons. When Jim and

Ántonia arrive in Black Hawk, the weather is still favorable, which to them highlights the excitement of the discovery. During this initial period, the two remain frequently together; they experience this new life largely together. Winter arrives, however, and with it human activity slows down and turns rather inwards. This period is more contemplative. The narration in this period is notably characterized by an interest in the stories of new characters, such as the Black pianist Blind d'Arnault, whose arrival provides a much needed distraction in the dull Nebraska winter. Memories and characters are like islands seen one by one. Some new characters receive a backstory, which is always introduced rather suddenly and ends just as suddenly, while others do not. Stories are unveiled one by one in a fragmented manner which reminds the reader of the subjective nature of Jim's impressions and memories. The act of storytelling itself is the central structure that leads the novel, and the characters' surroundings are like the stage of a play consisting of individual contributions, like a human patchwork. The movement between different settings, such as from the farm to the town, feels like a transition between two different acts of the play, and the world never seems to extend far beyond the stage. Time periods, too, form a transition between sequences of the story. With the winter in Black Hawk and the return of the good season, the characters spring into new life. Soon, the main attraction of the summer arrives: a pavilion is set up where evening dances will be organized, providing the local youth with the most exotic sort of entertainment seen so far.

The evening dances will prove to be the turning point in Jim and Ántonia's relationship. Both enjoy them, but Ántonia far more than Jim. Jim notes that the dances and the opportunities for socialization that come with them change the dynamic of social classes in Black Hawk. Farm girls, particularly immigrant girls, are usually frowned upon by the richer urban society for their lack of knowledge of English and local ways, but during these evening in the tent, those boundaries are less prominent. Ántonia is enthralled and devotes herself considerably to this entertainment, which rapidly becomes a problem for the Harlings, who do not

wish to be associated with the reputation that *Ántonia* is rapidly developing. Eventually, she is told to leave and find work elsewhere, which she does. She begins to work for the Cutters, a couple described by Jim as detestable. The Cutters illustrate Cather's use of visual impressions to assign personality and character to persons. The Cutters are among the few characters in the novel who can be said to be fundamentally bad, and accordingly, Jim remembers them as ugly people. The decision to go work there restores the previously attenuated distance between *Ántonia* and Jim. Jim seeks distractions from his daily boredom, but grows increasingly frustrated by the lack of diverse occupations in Black Hawk, by the smallness of the town. He scowls at the forced proximity between neighbors which forces them to be overly cautious and concerned with appearances and respectability. He longs to escape this daily "tyranny," as he phrases it (Cather, 106). Here again, his descriptions of the landscape reflect his impressions of human life and vice versa. He describes the town in negative terms, calling its houses frail, flimsy, and mutilated, its streets cold and its people unhappy and jealous (Cather 106). He feels oppressed by his environment, whereas *Ántonia* thrives in them. *Ántonia* herself notes that Jim is not meant to remain in Black Hawk, that he will inevitably leave and accomplish greater things (Cather 109).

During these passages, the interest in landscapes is more subdued, and greater attention is placed on the psychological developments of the characters. Scenery regains significance when Jim's departure from Black Hawk grows nearer, as he prepares to leave to go to university. The return to picturesque descriptions of landscape as Jim ponders his imminent departure creates the nostalgic tone that permeates Jim's recollections of these events by reestablishing a link with the past events of the novel, when the focus was on Jim's youthful enthusiasm for new things manifested in nature, as a contrast with currently grim outlook.

Jim's attitude toward the town and its people contains irony, because he resents the townsfolk for the gossiping, vanity, and superficiality when he himself

perpetuates some of those traits in his worldview, particularly in his treatment of *Ántonia*, who, unlike him, cares very little about reputation and gossip. She is much more grounded and pragmatical than he is. It is perhaps for this reason that she does not reciprocate his feelings, which he fails to act upon. She is unconcerned by the judgement of her peers, and, unwittingly, Jim himself is part of that group, though he does not wish to. *Ántonia* was robbed of much of her childhood and attempts to compensate by enjoying herself to the fullest. Jim, on the other hand has never toiled remotely as hard as she has and is thus less inclined to share her perspective.

Even though *Ántonia* is introduced as the more candid and naïve of the two, Jim is actually the most gullible and easily influenced. His judgmental attitude toward *Ántonia* is inspired by others around him, such as the time where he assures Jake that he will never be friends with *Ántonia* again after the incident between Jake and *Ántonia*'s brother. He blatantly adopts the behavior that Jake expects of him without ever questioning his poor judgment. It would be wrong to argue that Jim blindly conforms to expectations. He does behave subversively at times, such as when he sneaks out of his grandparents' home to attend the dances, and he does appreciate *Ántonia* and the other hired-girls for their exotism and unconventional charm. However, he himself generally does not share this unconventionality. This may be why *Ántonia* is unable to relate to him in a way that would make any union between the two attainable.

John Selzer examines the conventionality of Jim Burden's personality and observes that: "the prejudice and tradition of society hold Jim firmly" and "Jim adopts the values of the male teachers around him" (Selzer, 51). Selzer points out that Jim is particularly influenced by the figure of Mr. Shimerda, *Ántonia*'s father. Mr. Shimerda maintains a dignified demeanor in all circumstances, as a protection against a reality he wishes to escape. He is a brilliant and educated man, possessing both an education and artistic talent. For him, the sheer vastness of the indifferent plains only exacerbates a sentiment of exiguity symbolized by his

attachment to his cave-like home on the Prairie. He dies before the Shimerdas can move into a more spacious home, and most of all before the tent is set up in Black Hawk for the evening dances. Jim reflects on the fact that Mr. Shimerda's musical talents could have brought him success and fulfillment if only he had stayed in a big city. With both a desire for conventional respectability and personal aspirations that are superior to those of his peers, Mr. Shimerda is a very relatable figure for Jim, which does not mean that Jim wishes to emulate Mr. Shimerda's ways. It is in fact often the opposite: Jim sees in Mr. Shimerda an example not to follow. He relates to him and thus intends to learn from his elder's mistakes. One such mistake, in Jim's eyes, was marrying *Ántonia's* mother. Selzer writes: "...from Mr. Shimerda Jim learns not to marry below his station" (Selzer, 52). *Ántonia's* mother was a maid whom Mr. Shimerda had to marry after he got her pregnant. This situation reflects that of the hired-girls, as Selzer points out.

Selzer interprets the incident with Cutter, *Ántonia's* employer, as a sign of Jim's attachment to prejudice and an anticipation of his future choices regarding *Ántonia*. In this incident, Wick Cutter intends to rape *Ántonia*. The young woman confides in Jim's grandmother, who sees the threat and asks Jim to replace *Ántonia* in the Cutter's household for the night. Cutter does not immediately realize this and attacks Jim. Upon seeing that it is not *Ántonia* in the bed, he goes into a rage and beats Jim. Instead of being relieved that *Ántonia* was spared, Jim blames her for his misfortune. Selzer interprets this as a sign that Jim remains firmly attached to the norms of his upbringing:

"The Wick Cutter incident thus underscores Jim's respect for respectability, despite himself. It reconfirms his commitment to patriarchy. It confirms in him an attitude toward *Ántonia* that makes it impossible for Jim to marry *Ántonia* or any woman other than the sterile, upper-class heiress and patroness of the arts whom he eventually weds" (Selzer, 52).

Selzer also draws attention to the sexual nature of the incident and how it symbolizes Jim's attitude to sexuality in general, and in particular regarding his attraction for *Ántonia*. He indicates that "Jim tends to repress or redirect his feelings toward the hired girls" and that he is unable to confront sexuality (Selzer, 52).

In connection with the allegorical symbolism that elevates *Ántonia* as a personification of Jim's Prairie, Jim's rejection of *Ántonia*'s way to bring sexuality into his life can be equated with his rejection of his small-town life on the Prairie. His "civilized" aspirations clash with his baser instincts. *Ántonia*, like the Prairie, enralls him, but he resents this subservience to a more powerful attraction than those that his upbringing has taught him to value. In other words, he develops an inferiority complex toward *Ántonia*, which naturally manifests as a superiority complex. His friendship with *Ántonia* places him in even greater vulnerability to her influence, because he cannot comfortably express his resentment toward her without risking their bond. Moreover, he himself does not fully acknowledge the origins of this resentment.

The matter of sexuality also brings to mind the question of the influence of gender on the mechanism of Jim's and *Ántonia*'s relationship. Throughout the story, an emphasis is regularly made on *Ántonia*'s supposedly masculine traits, which heightens Jim's insecurity toward her. The Wick Cutter incident brings this conflict to a boiling point, as Jim is mistaken for *Ántonia* by a man who intended to molest her. Jim's refusal to see *Ántonia* after the incident betrays his sense of shame and humiliation, more so than any kind of genuine hatred for her. He worries what the other men in town would say of this, displaying again the self-consciousness that sets him apart from *Ántonia* and shows his care for respectability. This insecurity toward his gender expression in connection with his friendships with older women is also suggested earlier in the second book, when Jim notes: "...the whisper was going about that I was a sly one. People said there must be something queer about a boy who showed no interest in girls of his own

age, but who could be lively enough when he was with Tony and Lena or the three Marys” (Cather, 105). The origin of his friendships with these older girls naturally derives from the fact that *Ántonia*, who is older and much more mature than him, was originally his only friend on the Prairie. For that reason, in her eyes, Jim remains the immature young boy of her childhood. The first clear exploration of this dynamic occurs during the snake incident in Book One, but while this episode suggests that the conflict is settled after Jim’s triumph over the rattle snake, its underlying dynamic of insecurity remains throughout the story, only in a more subdued way. It resurfaces whenever Jim and *Ántonia*’s relationship is faced with a challenge, such as the Cutter incident.

The origin of this conflictual situation can be diagnosed as one rooted in the opposition between Nature and Nurture. Jim’s upbringing clashes with desires spurned by the contact with natural forces that are beyond him. To him, *Ántonia* is the personification of these forces, which are also contained in the Prairie. The connection between the two, between *Ántonia* and the Prairie, is the key to grasp the underlying allegory of *My Ántonia*. *Ántonia*’s relation to the Prairie is one that illustrates the pioneer spirit. She is faced with countless harsh challenges throughout her life on the Plains, but she eventually reaches a sense of harmony with her environment. She accepts the impulses that inhabit her and learns to live with them in such a way that does not cause her misery. She learns this lesson the hard way, as her impulsivity frequently brings her in trouble.

Jim, on the other hand, is alienated from these instincts which he associates with the frustrations of his unsatisfactory life in rural Nebraska. He opts for a more conventional understanding of success. This choice is not depicted as inherently negative, but it does bring him into conflict with *Ántonia* and eventually becomes the source of Jim’s regrets.

All of these developments occur against the backdrop of Nature’s rhythms and symbols. Human and natural elements are so closely intertwined that it becomes

impossible to decide which derives from which. In the second book, one scene in particular ought to be mentioned here as an example of this argument. The scene occurs toward the end of the book, in chapter fourteen (see Cather, 118). Here, Jim sits with the girls, *Ántonia*, Lena and Tiny, and shares with them the story of the conquistador Coronado and his exploration of the West. The four young people discuss what might have led the conquistador to remain in the New World rather than return to his more comfortable home in Spain. They mentioned that he “died in the wilderness, of a broken heart” (Cather, 118). *Ántonia* implicitly draws a comparison with her father, observing Coronado is not the only man to die like this. The other agree, suggesting that they can relate to the experience of early explorers of the American continent. This common point is the pioneer spirit, with all its ambivalence and contradictory traits, which leads some to success and others to demise. This connection between the early conquistadors and the current pioneer settlers of the Prairie is then made much more apparent through an intervention of nature. As if to echo their thoughts, a spectacular sunset takes place in front of them. The very vivid description of the scene intertwines both the natural and the position of its observers, creating a full picture where both Nature and Human are necessary and complementary pieces of a great work of art. The human viewers are not merely passive observers. Their presence is necessary to provide meaning to the spectacle before them, and they interact directly with it: “In the ravine a ringdove mourned plaintively, and somewhere off in the bushes an owl hooted. The girls sat listless, leaning against each other. The long fingers of the sun touched their foreheads” (Cather, 118). This last sentence ends the paragraph, giving it a sense of finality which heightens its importance. The girls’ interaction with the sun carries meaning in relation to their previous interrogation on the subject of Coronado’s purpose to remain in the West. As if to answer their question, the sun, which is going down and therefore illuminates them from the West, points at their heads. This could be interpreted as way of expressing that the answer to their question lies in their spirit, in their pioneer spirit. Another element of symbolism can be found in the light shining on their foreheads: “Coronado”

means “crowned” in Spanish. The sunlight on their head can be reminiscent of a crown, which thus cements the connection with their conquistador predecessor. It is noteworthy that Jim does not include himself in this interaction. Presumably, he is in the same position as the girls, watching the sunset, but he excludes himself from the beauty he describes. This provides several hints. Firstly, it may hint at his imminent departure, suggesting that he has already ceased to consider himself part of the picture and that the Prairie and the girls have already become a memory to him. The scene symbolizes Jim’s distance with the Prairie and its pioneer society. Secondly, the picture cements the connection in Jim’s mind between the girls he likes and the Prairie. To him, they are an integral part of the landscape, as much as the grass or the sun. He observes them from afar and they become indissociable in his mind. It should always be kept in mind that these events are memories and thus always reflect Jim’s own perceptions rather than an objective reality.

Yet the most important symbol contained in this chapter has yet to come. As the sun reaches the horizon, a figure suddenly appears in its disk. It is a plough, left out in the field and made into a distinct and intriguing silhouette by the fading light of the sun which frames it perfectly. “There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun” (Cather, 118). Again, the westward sun provides a symbolic answer to the characters’ existential interrogations. After their conversation about great conquistadors, and the sun’s light resting on their forehead, a new symbol is given for the pioneer spirit of the Prairie farmers: the plough, made “heroic in size” by the West-bound sun. But the sun swiftly falls under the horizon, and with it the glorious image of the plough disappears from their sight and even memory: “...and that forgotten plough had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie” (Cather, 118). The choice of words is telling. The plough’s “littleness” is said to be *its own*, whereas its “heroic” size was only made possible by the presence of the ephemeral Western sunset: “Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light” (Cather, 118). The plough’s location, made noteworthy by its coincidental alignment with the sun, has become a simple “somewhere on the

prairie.” The plough can clearly be understood as an allegory for the prairie farmer and his pioneer spirit. It can also be seen as a narrative landmark, signaling the imminent end of the period of Jim’s life that took place on the Prairie.

Indeed, in order to explore Jim’s personality in further detail, Willa Cather moves the setting to Lincoln, Nebraska, in the third section of the novel, *Lena Lingard*. Here, Jim’s worldview, dilemmas, and choices are further developed as the protagonist finds himself away from his home and from *Ántonia*.

Book III: Lena Lingard

In this section, Jim has moved to the bigger Nebraskan city of Lincoln in order to study, much like Willa Cather herself did. *Ántonia* had once commented that Jim would make a great physician, which is the field that Cather initially began studying. However, Jim, like Cather, opts for literary studies.

The section is named after the character of Lena Lingard, one of Jim’s friends from Black Hawk. She, too, has moved to Lincoln, and aims to be fully independent and freed from farm work. She is described as an intelligent, exceptionally beautiful, and headstrong young woman who represents an ideal of independence and self-reliance. Although, like Jim, she rejects farm work and the prairie, she can be said to manifest a pioneer spirit as well, in her own fashion, as she works her way to the freedom she seeks, away from the constraints of family life and marriage. Her ambitions are the exact opposite of *Ántonia*’s. Whereas *Ántonia* craves a family of her own and delights in the prospect of childrearing, Lena wishes to remain single. While *Ántonia* will spend the remainder of her life dedicated to the success of her family on the farm, Lena seeks prosperity in the city.

Cather relies once again on physical attributes and impressions to express her characters’ role in the story. While *Ántonia* is dark of hair, eyes and skin, Lena is

described as fair. *Ántonia*'s character is more tomboyish and wilder, while Lena is described as more stereotypically feminine. This particular contrast has a paradoxical quality, as the more feminine Lena is the one who adopts a lifestyle then deemed ill-suited to a woman, namely celibacy, while *Ántonia*, who is frequently associated with masculine traits, finds a sense of fulfilment in such traits as motherhood, which is traditionally viewed as an essential quality of femininity.

Lena also contrasts with *Ántonia* in her relationship with Jim. Jim interacts with Lena more smoothly, and notes that she appears more assimilated than *Ántonia*, notably in the way she uses English:

“*Ántonia* had never talked like the people about her. Even after she learned to speak English readily there was always something impulsive and foreign in her speech. But Lena had picked up all the conventional expressions she heard at Mrs. Thomas' dressmaking shop” (Cather, 134).

Jim notes that the expressions that had seemed hypocritical to him when used by their native speakers, gained a naïve quality when used by Lena, whom he describes as “almost as candid as Nature” (Cather, 134). Jim once again associates a woman he likes to Nature itself, as he did with *Ántonia*, and in both cases, it is a sense of honesty, of candid naivete that leads Jim to perceive this association with Nature. Although Lena and *Ántonia* differ strongly in character, both represent different applications of the same symbolism.

Lena's and Jim's friendship in this section helps build the transition between Jim's childhood years and his adult life. His connection with *Ántonia* is examined from a more distant perspective, which allows for more mature reflection. The use of Lena as an intermediary narrator to provide Jim and the reader with information about *Ántonia* and the people of the past helps cement these people as increasingly removed yet ever-present memories. The lens of oral storytelling

remains present as the preferred mode of narration.

Another major character of this section is Gaston Cleric, Jim's teacher in Lincoln. Cleric introduces Jim to the academic world, where Jim finds a surprising resemblance with pioneer spirit: "There was an atmosphere of endeavor, of expectancy and bright hopefulness about the young college that had lifted its head from the prairie only a few years before" (Cather, 123).

Cleric plays a similar role for Jim to Mr. Shimerda, or the other fatherly figures in Jim's life. Much like Mr. Shimerda, Cleric has an artistic talent, but has chosen a path that does not allow his art to become his main activity. In the same way that Mr. Shimerda showed Jim an example to steer away from, Jim understands from observing Cleric that he is not built for the life of a scholar, as he prefers the stories of his youth to those of books.

Book IV: The Pioneer Woman's Story

This chapter takes place when Jim Burden is twenty-one years old and returning home after his studies in Harvard, Boston. Like its name suggests, this section focuses on pioneer stories. As discussed earlier, the narrative structure of the novel uses oral storytelling to provide accounts of events and individual stories. These moments where characters share their experiences or those of others with the narrators are construed as windows that open onto a multitude of perspectives. Those perspectives are juxtaposed by the narrator to build his own understanding of the events at play. The narrator's particular interest in certain details and stories rather than others betrays the subjective nature of his account. For this reason, particular attention must be paid to which stories the narrator chooses to share and what these choices imply about his own perspective.

Here, as the name suggests, the focus lies on various examples of the pioneer experience as lived by the "hired-girls" from the previous chapters. The diversity

of these experiences is deliberate, and the choice to place *Ántonia's* story after the others' also serve a purpose. The intent is to highlight the contrast between the adventures of the other hired-girls and *Ántonia's*. The other hired-girls, namely Tiny and Lena, have been met with tremendous success. Lena has become the independent, financially free woman she aspired to be, while Lena has made a true fortune in the West, through a combination of luck and reckless daring, which is typical of the pioneer narrative. *Antonia*, on the other hand, has been cheated by a man she intended to marry, and who left her, poor and pregnant, to return to her small town on the Prairie.

Jim Burden's first return to his hometown and his disenchantment upon learning of *Ántonia's* situation are the final straw that will lead him away from the Prairie for the decades to come. His conviction that his future cannot possibly lie in the dull country life of a Nebraska farm is reaffirmed by the exacerbated difference of status that has developed between him and his childhood friends, particularly *Ántonia*. This personal growth is ambiguous. On one hand, Jim grows in maturity and develops less childish attitudes toward women, which was shown in the previous book, *Lena Lingard*. He grows more comfortable with his own choices and develops a confidence in his future. The fourth book is the final stage of this development. Here, Jim gives up on *Ántonia* and, through her, on the Prairie itself. The association between the Prairie and *Ántonia* is made clearer in this chapter, because Jim makes the same decision regarding both his friend and his home: to leave them for good. *Ántonia's* persisting misery, in his mind, is a fatality. It confirms his sentiment that the Prairie will not bear anything fruitful, and that the answer to his wishes lies elsewhere. This newfound confidence heightens the self-centered tendencies that Jim has frequently shown in the past, most prominently after the Cutter incident, where he was more concerned about the approval of the town's other men and was worried about gossip rather than reuniting with *Ántonia*. This is made very clear again in this chapter: "I tried to shut *Ántonia* out of my mind. I was bitterly disappointed in her. I could not forgive her for becoming an

object of pity” (Cather, 141). Here, again, instead of being worried for his friend, he is frustrated that she fails to meet his expectations. This attitude is the source of the mistake that he makes in leaving her, as he will later realize.

Another example of this is found when Jim finds a photograph of *Ántonia*’s baby that she had framed rather expensively. Jim, being judgmental again, notes that “Another girl would have kept her baby out of sight, but Tony, of course, must have its picture on exhibition” (Cather, 144).

As *Ántonia* and Jim meet and prepare to bid each other farewell in a more definite way, *Ántonia* shows greater self-awareness than Jim. She knows that she has disappointed him, and she understands that he should be elsewhere. On the other hand, unlike Jim, she already begins to lean toward the state she will be in at the end of the novel. She knows what she wants: to raise a family on the Prairie and provide her children with better opportunities than she herself had. Her words strengthen Jim’s determination to leave, as if they were chosen to fit his needs. Considering that he is the storyteller and that these are his memories, his reliability as a narrator comes into question. It is possible that nuances or details were missed because they simply did not attract Jim’s attention or fit his perspective. David Laird writes: “Jim’s construction of events, [...], must remind the reader of what gets lost in easy, self-congratulatory, single-minded narrative solutions” (Laird, 248).

Jim’s and *Ántonia*’s farewells are once again accompanied by Nature. Like the second book, this one ends with a sunset, signifying closure, but this time a new element is added: the moon rising in the east. “For five, perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world” (Cather, 152). The sun and the moon clearly represent *Ántonia* and Jim, respectively. They represent the two different forces of attraction in Jim’s life, his home land in the West, where *Ántonia* remains, and his destination in the East. The contrast between colors foreshadows the conclusion:

the moon is described as pale silver and given a ghostly nature, which evokes sadness and melancholy. The sun, on the other hand, is warmer, more welcoming, “a great golden globe in the low west” (Cather, 152). The surrounding nature seems to react to the shifting light and colors. Jim expresses the importance of this moment and emphasizes the effect of nature on him: “I felt the odd pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished that I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there” (Cather, 152). The “odd pull of the earth” in his mind is the same attraction that he feels for *Ántonia*. *Ántonia* is no longer referred to by name in this chapter. The scene transitions from Jim’s contemplation of nature to his final interaction with *Ántonia*. The silent exchange with nature is followed by a vocal one with *Ántonia*, but she is not explicitly identified again, which creates continuity between nature and her.

They part at “the edge of the field”, and Jim’s memories seem to spring from the grass itself: “I could almost believe that a boy and a girl ran along beside me, as our shadows used to do, laughing and whispering to each other in the grass” (Cather, 153).

This closes the fourth book, and with it Jim’s youth. The first four segments formed a continuum tracing the evolution of the relationship between Jim and *Ántonia* as they reached adulthood. The fifth and final section is set much later and serves to reflect on the previous four and provide sentimental closure to the narrator. Although the first four books appear to narrate Jim’s coming-of-age and build his burgeoning maturity, the fifth will question this narrative and force Jim to confront the result of the choices he made up until then.

Book V: Cuzak’s Boys

This final chapter takes place twenty years after the previous one. Jim has not seen *Ántonia* during this period, something which he admits may be due to his “cowardice” (Cather, 156). Cather perpetuates her use of intermediary agents to

lead the plot: Jim indicates that it is Lena who convinced him to go see *Ántonia* again. This is similar to the previous chapter, where Jim first learns about *Ántonia*'s condition through the words of others and only then decides to meet with her again.

Jim has learned from a letter and the words of her friends Lena and Tiny that *Ántonia* is now married to a Czech man named Cuzak, and has at least ten children. She is said to thrive in these new circumstances.

Jim thus decides to go see her again, and reconnect with their shared past. At that time, he was in San Francisco and must thus travel toward the East to return to his roots, instead of toward the West.

As he arrives at the Cuzak's farm, Jim is immediately met with signs of prosperity, vitality, and abundance. He first meets some of *Ántonia*'s children, and is brought to a yard filled with animals and vegetables. The building is given generous proportions, suggesting prosperity and a certain level of comfort. This impression of livelihood reaches its peak in *Ántonia*. Jim notes that, although she has aged under the weight of labor, she retains her original vitality and youthfulness: "Whatever else was gone, *Ántonia* had not lost the fire of life" (Cather, 159). *Ántonia*'s resilience is embodied by her children. She finds fulfilment in her role as the mother of a large and prosperous family. Her children coming down a flight of stairs appear to Jim as "a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight" (Cather, 160). The dark cave may be a reference to the dugout in which the Shimerdas first lived after arriving on the prairie, and the burst of life that comes out of it is *Ántonia* herself, here represented by her children. Willa Cather perpetuates this pattern of using characters and scenery as replacements for other people. These allegories are merely suggested, playing on the imagination of the reader like fleeting images born from the narrator's subconscious.

Ántonia is associated with an imagery of fertility, which connects her to the fruitful land that she nurtures and maintains. Her children are to her like the fruits

of the land. This is further exemplified by *Ántonia's* orchard. There, she keeps a group of apple and cherry trees, which is highly unusual on the Prairie. The trees are personified as *Ántonia* who loves them “as if they were people” (Cather 161). *Ántonia* later observes that, ever since she has had children, she has found the act of killing animals increasingly unpleasant. Her mentality leans entirely toward the rearing of new life, not its extinction.

The vivid, colorful, and precise language used to describe the settings of this scene contrasts with Jim's early perceptions of the Prairie, as he initially migrated there. Those early descriptions have an impressionist quality; they are intimately tied to Jim's emotional state as he is relocated across the United States. Wilhite writes:

“Jim's initial description of the ephemeral Midwestern landscape articulates the disconcerting absence of the yet-to-be-formed connections between the subject and the space he occupies” (Wilhite, 276).

In this last section, those connections are now fully formed, and in Jim's mind, they are articulated through *Ántonia*. The burrow-like home of the Shimerdas, lost on the vast plains, has become a large, colorful, abundant home. The lonesome, overworked young woman has reached the fulfilment that she once only dreamed of. In his analysis of the importance of place in *My Ántonia*, Wilhite emphasizes the geographical transitions and movements of characters as the cause of their displacement and alienation (see Wilhite 274-281). He relates physical displacement to temporal one, connecting Jim's experience of migrating from the South to the West to his transition from past to present. The physical migration triggers the temporal one. In this situation, however, it can be argued that it is the opposite: temporal distance induces displacement and replacement. As Jim and *Ántonia* meet again after twenty years, though they are still on the Nebraska Plains, the place has changed so much that Jim's perception of it has been replaced by something completely different, much more positive and satisfying.

The Prairie of Jim's past has been replaced with that of his present, and the two leave him with very different impressions though not incompatible ones.

Jim then meets *Ántonia's* husband, and similarities between the two of them are quickly established. Cuzak, like Jim, would have preferred to live in the city. They both have more worldly interests, but unlike Jim, Cuzak chose to remain with *Ántonia* and build a life in a very different world than what he originally wanted. A similarity is also drawn with *Ántonia's* father, Mr. Shimerda. Like Jim and Cuzak, he longed for a more affluent, urban life. Where Mr. Shimerda failed, however, Cuzak succeeded. Jim says of him that he "has been made the instrument of *Ántonia's* special mission" (Cather, 173). This notion of special mission refers to the realization of *Ántonia's* pioneer spirit, which for her meant building a family on a successful prairie homestead.

Jim finds a sense of fulfilment of his own, through *Ántonia's* accomplishments, symbolized by his friendship with her children. Toward the end of the novel, he reflects on his journey through life, and how it brought him back to the place he once sought to leave. Here is when Jim's progress toward maturity reaches its completion: as he visits the road that first brought him and *Ántonia* on the Prairie, he associates the memory of the journey's "obliterating strangeness" (Cather, 175) to the warmth of home, showing that he accepts the feelings of alienation that the Prairie inspired him. Wilhite writes: "In this retrospective moment, an original uncertainty and loss remain central to Jim's conception of home" (Wilhite, 284).

He comes to terms with the frustration he once felt regarding his difficulties to find where he belonged. Though he is exactly in the same place as where the novel started, he claims that he "escaped from the curious depression that hangs over little towns" (Cather, 175). He learns to dissociate these places from his past impressions of them. Namely, the town and places that once depressed him may now seem homely to him. Here Jim regains his reliability as a narrator, as he shows that he is no longer trapped by his own perceptions of his past. He has

learned to enjoy these things fully regardless of their shortcomings.

As in all major moments of reflection and introspection in the novel, Nature once again accompanies and colors the scene. Throughout Jim's long reminiscence, landscape has remained a constant presence that colored his every perception, and this landscape, to him, holds the same meaning as *Ántonia* herself. *Ántonia*'s life contains all the trials and promises of the Prairie. Jim ran away from these trials and promises, and thus from *Ántonia*. As he returns and witnesses the harmony that she has established with the unforgiving surroundings of their shared childhood, he finds his own peace.

Catherine Holmes notes that as Jim's journey back to Nebraska is "both the physical journey back to a cherished landscape and the journey in memory to childhood" (Holmes, 344). Since his memories of childhood are indissociable from *Ántonia*, it is possible to rephrase this, and suggest that his journey back to a landscape equates with his journey back to *Ántonia*.

Ántonia's allegorical significance in Jim's eyes is made abundantly clear by his recurrent way of relating her to his childhood, and the two to the prairie. Throughout the entire novel, Cather resorts to clear physical associations to bind *Ántonia* to the prairie in Jim's mind. Her physique is given earth-like traits, such as the color brown that characterizes her appearance. Her vitality and fecundity, her enthusiasm and firm belief that her conditions can improve are symbols of her pioneer spirit. For Jim, she is not just the recipient but also the source of this spirit: it is in her presence that he is exposed to the call of the West, of the Plains, and his relationship with her reflects his attitude toward this call. When he abandons her and leave, it is from the Nebraska Plains and his past lying there that he symbolically attempts to break free. When he returns and reconciles with her, he develops a newfound respect and reverence for the land of his childhood. Physical displacement is mirrored with emotional and social displacement.

This remarkably dense network of allegories and symbolism form the basis of an

elaborate literary and aesthetic design where people's identities are made indissociable from the landscape. Nature is personified and granted an influence so strong it becomes comparable to genuine agency. Indeed, if *Ántonia* symbolizes the Prairie in Jim's mind, then the opposite can also be true, and *Ántonia* may be seen as the vector of the Prairie's power over Jim. This power, this influence, is none other than the spirit of the pioneers, the reckless search for a better life which drives even characters who want to reject it, such as Jim. The Prairie is a world of its own, and the pioneer's spirit is the air that all who cross it must breathe.

This concludes our discussion on *My Ántonia*. Having outlined and analyzed the main constituents of both selected works, it is now possible to draw a conclusion which brings together both the resemblance and similarities between the two works.

Conclusion

As explored above, one of the first noticeable characteristics of Prairie literature is its emphasis on the omnipresent landscape. After all, this genre defines itself first and foremost by its geographical and ecological setting. As such, theoretically speaking, the presence of the Prairie is the only trait required to qualify as “Prairie literature.” However, a number of shared characteristics can be identified between the vastly different works that are classified within this genre. Once these characteristics are established, a clearer picture of what constitutes Prairie literature becomes apparent. The common point of Prairie narratives lies in the depiction of the Prairie’s influence on human existence. The Great Plains of the Midwest constitute Garland’s “Middle Border”, as he called it, a border between East and West, but also between success and failure, life and death, past and present, between stagnation and movement. The practical necessities and constraints of life on the plains generates recurrent motives in its literature, such as the concern for money and material success or failure, the alternation between hope and hopelessness. In Garland’s work, *Main-Travelled Roads*, money is a constant worry and a determining factor in human life. The consequences of poverty make people vulnerable to nature’s dangers, but the causes of this poverty are human: policies, crime, etc. With this first point already, we may observe the ambiguous interaction of human and natural agents, and the way in which nature enacts its influence through humans. In Garland’s eyes, this enables the prairie to retain its appeal and its potential for success, its “innocence,” so to speak. Prairie literature thus contains a strong realist element in its interest for social class, politics, and economics. In Cather’s *My Ántonia*, this interest is also found, but it manifests differently. In this work, poverty is eventually overcome and the land begins to yield its fruits at last. The struggles of social class derive firstly from the geographic isolation and cultural displacement induced by the plains, which leads communities to maintain rigid social structures defended through judgment and

class-based biases. Prairie settlers hesitate between respectability and freedom, between social acceptance and independence, and this ambivalence is brought to them by the constraints of nature and the context of their arrival on the plains. *My Ántonia*'s conclusion, where Jim reconciles with his past, the Prairie, and Ántonia, illustrates the idea that, while the plains may be a factor of alienation, it may also be a factor of fulfilment. In the same way that Garland retains his belief in the righteousness of the pioneer's endeavor, his belief that the prairie may still become a blessing, Cather's prairie is restored to its former glory by Jim who realizes that he will never be free of it regardless of his life choices. The Prairie holds agency over its inhabitants, but they too can influence the Prairie and make it their own. This relationship is mutual, and therefore the Prairie can be said to be more than a geographical location or ecological space. It is also a cultural one, a concept with two faces: the natural one, which exists regardless of human presence, and the construed one, the prairie as it exists only in human minds. There is the physical "prairie" and the cultural "Prairie". It possesses a symbolic meaning in each person's mind. For most of the protagonists of Garland's short stories, the prairie's meaning is the future, the hopeful promise of success. For Cather's Jim Burden, it is the past, the promise of reconciliation and closure.

In these works, nature always echoes people's inner thoughts and feelings, and in turn these impressions produce a particular interpretation of nature. The prairie embodies a connection between romanticism and realism: the history of its settlement is a "realist" attempt to reach a "romantic" ideal. It is adventure itself brought to life. Settlers attempt to reach an ideal that contains the aesthetics of Romanticism: a great, utopic life in the West, where Nature liberates Man and his passions. In their failure to attain this ideal, they create the circumstances that bear the aesthetics of Realism, those of drudgery, of material loss and moral decay.

For Jim Burden, the unescapable truth of the land is personified by Ántonia, whose every trait designates her as a recipient of a vast allegory, a literary scheme to help cement into the reader's mind the significance of the Prairie in the

narrator's eyes. *Ántonia's* appearance, her social class, her gender and sexuality, all of these traits contribute to build her allegoric nature. Cather's choice to rely on multiple layers of perspective to narrate her story, from intermediary narrators to the omnipresence of reminiscence and storytelling, contributes to give events and people a dreamlike quality, which exacerbates their symbolic role, as if each person that Jim Burden meets, and each story that he hears, were but products of his subconscious. Perhaps that is why the title of the novel, *My Ántonia*, suggests that *Ántonia* belongs to Jim: because it is not her true self that we meet, but only her as she exists in Jim's mind, and in his mind she is equivalent to the Prairie.

From these observations, it is possible to conclude that nature in the literature of the Great Plains plays such a strong symbolic role that it can be equated to a character in its own right. The Prairie is the pivotal element around which every other aspect of the story revolves: social class, romance, past and present...The Prairie as a mean to identify a particular genre of literature must not necessarily be strictly understood as a geographical location alone, but also as a social one, or a political one, a cultural one... in other words as a very human place.

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