

# A Realistic Approach to Willa Cather's My Antonia

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**Abstract.** My Antonia is a famous book of Willa Cather. The book tells a story about the frontier life in the 19th century America centered around the Bohemian female protagonist Antonia. The essay begins by discussing language style, then moves to cultural conflicts, and finally focus on the social critiques on gender discrimination and immigration issue, to analyze how Willa Cather applies various elements to achieve realist writing style in this work.

**Keywords:** Realism, Language style, Cultural conflict, Social critique.

## 1. Introduction

My Antonia is a popular American novel written by Willa Cather and published in 1918. Being told as a reminiscence of the male protagonist Jim's great past in western America, the book is also a reflection of the writer's childhood. It tells a story about the frontier life in the 19th century America centered around the Bohemian female protagonist Antonia. Willa Cather adopts the realistic writing style to unfold the whole story. Realistic writing style is a literary movement originating from France in the 19th and developed as an opposite against romanticism, to reproduce the real social life at certain time.

## 2. Realist techniques

### 2.1. Language style of this book

Instead of choosing complex and extravagant words and sentences, Willa Cather utilizes simple and direct language to deal with Jim's narrative, which is quite similar to oral English used in people's daily life. In this way, a sense of verisimilitude is successfully built, adding to realistic color as a whole. Besides, long and complicated sentences or figures of speech are rarely seen in the example, which remains unchanged throughout the novel, making it as readable and understandable as daily American talks. For example, in chapter 3 of Book 1, when Jim saw the Shimerda's house for the first time, the narrative unfolds as, 'As we approached the Shimerdas' dwelling, I could still see nothing but rough red hillocks, and draws with shelving banks and long roots hanging out where the earth had crumbled away. Presently, against one of those banks, I saw a sort of shed, thatched with the same wine-colored grass that grew everywhere. Near it tiled a shattered windmill-frame, that had no wheel'. Here 'nothing but', 'hanging out', 'crumbled away', 'a sort of', and 'shattered' are all very ordinary and frequently-used words and phrases among the Americans. What's more, this sentence consists of many short and small sentences as people use every day, strengthening the sense of realism of the novel.

Native languages of different social groups also play an important role in building the realistic style. As is known, the United States is a newly-built country in the 19th century, as a result, a large number of immigrants left their home countries to seek economic opportunities in America. As new settlers, these foreigners could only speak their mother languages or depend on body language for communication at the beginning. And this reality is greatly proved in the dialogues and conversations among different foreigners in this book. For example, in chapter 3 of Book 1, when Jim met the Shimerdas for the first time, the mother of the family was not able to speak English, so they had to communicate through the translator Krajiek. And also, when introducing Peter and Pavel, the two Russian friends of the Shimerda, Jim said, 'They went about making signs to people, and until the

Shimerdas came they had no friend. Krajiek could understand them a little'. It can be seen from these two examples that these immigrants could not speak or understand English when they just arrived in America, which was a barrier for their integration into the local communities. This plot reflects the real dilemma faced by immigrants.

Overall, Jim's straightforward and plain narrative, or in other words, Cather Willa's narrative and the demonstration of the fact that foreigners could not use English but only spoke their mother tongues when they newly arrived strengthen the realistic effect of the novel.

## 2.2. Cultural conflicts

Cultural conflicts can also be seen as a realistic element in this work. In the 19th century, the biggest source of American population is immigration. As a result of their multinational background, cultural norms with their hometowns' characteristics are also brought into the United States. The description of various beliefs and practices in this reading mirrors the true existence of cultural frictions and exchanges in that era. As Zhang Man said in her article, when entering a total strange environment, every person would face the crisis of cultural identity [2]. For example, in chapter 6 of Book 1, Jim says, 'There never were such people as Shimerdas for wanting to giving away everything they had, Even the mother was always offering me thins, though I knew she expected substantial in return'. According to Jim's narrative here, the Shimerdas' are very generous, but their generality is not selfless. As they observe their tradition of reciprocity, they desire to receive response from the native Americans, however, they mostly ended in disappointment because of cultural conflicts. This plot precisely reflects the different cultural values held by different ethnic groups at that time, giving the readers a real picture of what it was like among different cultural groups in the 19<sup>th</sup> America.

Another example can be found in Mr. Shimerda's death. In chapter 14 of Book 1, when hearing the death of his father, Ambrosch 'was chiefly concerned about getting a priest, and about his father's soul, which he believed was in a place of torment and would remain there until his family and the priest had prayed a great deal for him. "As I understand it," Jake concluded, "it will be a matter of years to pray his soul out of Purgatory and right now he's in torment'. It can be seen that Ambrosch as a Bohemian believes that the more he prays, the sooner his father could be saved from the hell. However, Jake as an American thinks that prayers are useless for a man who commits suicide. The contrast between Jake and Ambrosch's response to prayers for died people illustrates their totally different views on death belief, presenting a true reflection of relief conflicts among different nationalities.

All in all, from the reciprocal practice to the death belief, the presence of cultural conflicts between the local Americans and foreign immigrants achieves great loyalty to real life and increases the authenticity of in the book. Realist features are well established in this way.

## 2.3. Social critiques

Willa Cather realizes the realistic writing style through the application of social critiques on gender discrimination and immigration issue. In the 19th century, female rights are not valued and secured and women are severely oppressed physically and mentally in the male-dominated society, which is an undeniable fact in that era. Willa Cather successfully reflects the real situation of females by objectively writing down the experiences of women at that time. For example, in chapter 2 of Book 2 *The Hired Girls*, when the Harlings were planning to hire Antonia, "They had a long argument with Ambrosch about Antonia's allowance for clothes and pocket money. It was his plan that every cent of his sister's wages should be paid over to him each month, and he would provide her with such clothing as he thought necessary. When Mrs. Harling told him firmly that she would keep fifty dollars a year for Antonia's own use, he declared they wanted to take his sister to town and make a fool of her'. The argument between Mrs. Harling and Antonia's brother Ambrosch demonstrates that Antonia as a girl in his family has no economic freedom, including the freedom to earn money and to spend it. As Zhendan said in her article, Antonia was severely suppressed by her brother and was controlled to be a working machine, losing her right to be a free human [3]. Antonia's suffering is not exclusive

to herself, because the same situation is faced by all girls in this novel more or less. Through the stories and experiences of women characters in this book, Willa Cather reveals the issue of gender inequality, unfolding a picture of women's predicament in the 19<sup>th</sup> era for readers.

Apart from that, Willa Cather also brings about another social issue in this book-immigration-to build a sense of realism. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, immigration did bring opportunities to people, but it also caused adverse implications to them. Many people experience severe nostalgia and loss as they settled in America, a total strange country to them. Mr. Shimerda is a good example. In chapter 10 of Book 1, when Jim's grandmother witnessed their poor living conditions, 'Mr. Shimerda made grandmother sit down on the only chair and pointed his wife to a stool beside her. Standing before them with his hands on Antonia's shoulder, he talked in a low tone, and his daughter translated. He wanted us to know that they were not beggars in the old country; he made good wages, and his family were respected there'. Mr. Shimerda here intends to rebuild his self-esteem by telling his great past to the native Americans. As he cannot find any solace from his new life which is rather difficult and miserable, he always recalls his happy and decent life in Bohemia and indulges himself in these past memories. His poor adaptation to the new living environment finally leads to his tragic ending. Like many real-life immigrants reaching America, the disparity between their new and past life increases their sense of helplessness and anxiety, at last becoming the main cause of their death.

To conclude, realism is successfully established by Willa Cather through the critiques on real social problems related to gender discrimination and immigration issue.

### 3. Conclusion

In summary, Willa Cather applies various elements such as languages, cultural norms and social critiques to establish the realistic writing style in *My Antonia*. In her peaceful and plain writing, pictures of the survival of immigrants in western America and the endeavors made by female characters to win a well-off life in that era are presented to readers vividly and objectively. Even though there is a sense of bitterness at the beginning, the great pioneering spirit is conveyed from the resilience of immigrants and especially from the hardworking of the female characters as the story unfolds. Based on her own early experiences in Nebraska, Willa Cather is able to create such a powerful realist work and build her reputation as a female realist writer. It is her detailed and objective presentation of the frontier life in America—the fidelity to the reality—that enables the readers to have a unique experience and deep understanding of the real social life in the nineteenth-century America.

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