

Place, Palimpsest, and Memory in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*

Abstract:

Since its inception, ecocriticism has evolved into a multifaceted critical literary theory. Of those facets, place-studies has emerged as a unique critical lens with which to examine not only physical place but also intimate place in literature. Willa Cather's novel *My Ántonia* lends itself easily to ecocritical approaches of various kinds, and while a discussion of physical place in the novel is a viable examination in itself, I look at place in Cather's novel in a way that acknowledges geography but also looks beyond the physical into a more intimate aspect of place: memory.

Cather's Nebraska prairie remains firmly established among "canonical literature's [most] famous imagined countries," according to Lawrence Buell, but as one would expect in a novel very much invested in ideas of immigrant experience and migration, the novel hardly limits itself to Nebraska, recalling geographic places from many places in the U.S. and Europe. These varied places find connection here not only by way of physical mobility but also through shared stories and memories. Memory figures both prominently and pivotally in the novel, of course, as the frame introduction establishes the text as a collection of Jim Burden's memories. But as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Jim's memories are heavily augmented by others' memories and stories. Both memory and the physical landscape share similar layered and composite characteristics. In my thesis I show that just as the land holds layers of story (both readable and unreadable) there are similar layers of story within memory: two palimpsests, neither defining the other but both informing the other.

I begin with a discussion of the evolution of place studies and introduce the theorists Yi-Fu Tuan, Gaston Bachelard, and Lawrence Buell. From there I address the critical difference between common literary setting vs. place. And a discussion of memory in Cather's writing must acknowledge the strong connection of Cather's own memories with her writing. Though Jim indicates that "the thing about Antonia . . . hasn't any form," the novel's structure progressively reveals both layers of the natural world, layers of geography, layers of memory, and the significance of each. From here, I examine the novel's frame introduction that highlights memory as impetus for Jim's narrative and creates the earliest sense of a palimpsest of geography (Iowa, New York, and Nebraska) and a palimpsest of memory (the narrator's shared [but ultimately unwritten] memories of Antonia alongside Jim's). I discuss collective memory in the novel as Jim's memories are often augmented by many stories from other characters essentially becoming memories of experiences he never had (for example, Peter and Pavel's story of the wedding party). Remembering and forgetting figure notably in the novel and I discuss this binary as it relates to the larger nature vs. culture conflict. The struggle between the two informs much of the interior of the novel and also leads to an analysis of the spatial language used in the novel. I argue that Cather uses this spatial language to illustrate a literal, physical palimpsest of humans struggling to find an equilibrium between dominance and defeat from within the natural world. Jim's reunion with Antonia after twenty years recalls the novel's frame introduction and provides the novel with a satisfying denouement, but it also calls to the fore the significant gap in his memories regarding her. My discussion ends by addressing how Antonia's memories hold their own both against and among Jim's memories in these final chapters of the novel. As they do, they allow the reader to read

beyond (under) Jim's text to a more layered and less romanticized picture of *Ántonia*, while Jim's words indicate a turn away from this vital and dynamic *Ántonia* of the present in favor of the curated *Ántonia* of his memories.