





Rooting into the Earth, Branching into the Sky:  
Willa Cather's Vision for Life Among the Trees

by


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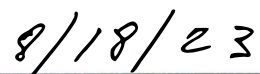
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## Abstract

In her introduction to *Willa Cather's Ecological Imagination*, a volume of *Cather Studies* devoted solely to ecocritical essays about Willa Cather's writing, Susan Rosowski asserts that the fundamental question driving debate in and around today's environmental movement—"What is the right relation between human beings and nature?"—is a question that interested Cather deeply, a question that Cather's stories frequently ask and occasionally, if incompletely, answer. This thesis aims to add to the ecocritical conversation surrounding Cather's work by drawing attention to the important, albeit largely overlooked, ways that Cather's beliefs about the relation between human beings and nature are encapsulated in the relationships between her human characters and the trees around them.

To illustrate the consistently-important, if not entirely consistent, role that trees play in Cather's writing, this paper offers an illustrative pairing of two of Cather's best-known novels: *My Ántonia* (1918) and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). This pairing is uniquely instructive because the two novels are at once very similar and very different from one another. Because both novels tell stories about characters who, when forced to adapt to new, unnervingly-bare environments, forge intimate connections with their new homes primarily through their attention to, and care for, trees, we come to understand that Cather sees trees as the primary mediators of humans' relationships with the places they inhabit. On the other hand, because of the essential differences between the Midwestern plains of *My Ántonia* and the Southwestern deserts of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and, even more importantly, the essential differences between the

personalities of the two novels' titular characters (Ántonia of *My Ántonia* and Archbishop Latour of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*), we come to understand that exactly *how* trees mediate the relationship between humans and nature can vary.

This thesis's central argument posits that the trees of *My Ántonia* draw Ántonia's spirit downwards into the Nebraska earth, rooting her more deeply in the immediate community, while the trees of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* draw Latour's spirit upwards, making the Southwest a place where Latour feels a unique, transcendent connection to all of creation. Thus, although trees in both stories play a vital role in helping characters find meaning, and a sense of belonging, in a new place, the meanings that Ántonia and Latour find in their new homes, and the types of belonging they feel, are very different from one another.

The paper concludes by examining Cather's own relationship with the landscapes of Mid- and Southwest America. The thesis ultimately contends that although Cather's own relationship with the natural world is likely to have been more similar to Latour's than to Ántonia's, the illustrative pairing of *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* reveals that Cather rejected the idea of a single "right" relation between human beings and nature. Instead, Cather's stories suggest that each individual must discover their own "right" relationship with the natural world around them—a seemingly long and difficult task, but a task that may be made a bit easier if one knows where to begin: beneath a tree.



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## Introduction

"A flat country like Nebraska," Willa Cather said in a 1921 interview with the *Lincoln State Journal*, "needs great forking trees." Of particular significance to Cather—who by 1921 had published both *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918) and had become, despite the fact that she had not lived in Nebraska for over two decades, one of Nebraska's most famous ambassadors—were the state's cottonwoods, "the only tree," according to Cather, "of beautiful form that grows easily and naturally in this state without any care." Her interest in the cottonwoods was not purely aesthetic, however, but also cultural and sentimental. She went on to tell the *Journal* reporter that the state's "pioneers feel that the cottonwoods are bound up with their lives," and remarked, "I gave a talk at Hastings not long ago and made a plea for the preservation of native trees. You should have seen the number of old people who stayed to talk to me and spoke of how it hurt when one of the big trees they loved was felled" (Interview in the *Lincoln State Journal* 40).

Although Cather, in the *Journal* interview, attributes feelings of injury at the cottonwoods' demise solely to the state's "old people," it is obvious that Cather, too, felt a measure of grief at the transformation of Nebraska's landscape. Like *My Ántonia*'s Jim Burden, who, upon his return to Nebraska at the novel's end, laments the changes (including the felling of a "mountain ash" and a "tall Lombardy poplar") that make his hometown nearly unrecognizable (194), Cather was surely disconcerted by changes that were transforming Nebraska into a place different from the Nebraska that lived in her memory and imagination—the Nebraska she wrote about and the Nebraska that when she



was a child “gripped [her] with a passion [she was] never...able to shake” (Interview in the *Omaha Bee* 32).

Noticing the changes in Nebraska’s landscape upon each of her successive visits home was probably made all the more painful for Cather by the fact that learning to love Nebraska’s flat, bare landscapes in the first place was no small feat. In 1883, when a nine-year-old Willa Cather moved with her family from Back Creek, Virginia to the plains surrounding Red Cloud, Nebraska, Cather’s initial reaction to Nebraska was one of apprehension and fear. In a 1913 newspaper interview, Cather remarks that upon reaching Nebraska’s plains she “felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything—it was a kind of erasure of personality” (Interview with F.H. 10). The flat, seemingly-endless Nebraskan plains were likely unimaginable to a child who had grown up in the hills and woods of Virginia. As Sharon O’Brien observes, “In moving from East to West Willa Cather was not merely exchanging one landscape for another: she was moving from an inscribed to an unwritten land” (61). Nebraska appeared forbidding to the nine-year-old Cather not simply because she did not know the land, but because the land seemed entirely unknowable. It probably seemed impossible that anyone—much less a nine-year-old—could ever “inscribe” anything of much significance upon a place so entirely devoid of (natural or man-made) landmarks.

Eventually, of course, Cather and the country “had it out together,” and the Nebraska landscape captured her heart and imagination (Interview in the *Omaha Bee* 32). Discovering that the land was not *entirely* unwritten, she came to know “every farm, every tree, every field” around her new home (Interview with *Eva Mahoney* 37). And

though we should be wary of reading Jim Burden's experiences and feelings as direct reflections of Cather's own, it seems likely, especially given her fierce defense of Nebraska's cottonwoods, that Cather, like Jim, found trees to be particularly important landmarks on the Nebraska plains. In the passage that follows, it is Jim in *My Ántonia* who is speaking, but it is not difficult to imagine a young Cather—the girl who would grow up to defend Nebraska's trees from destruction—traveling, like Jim, across the plains just to marvel at trees growing bravely out of the barren earth:

Sometimes I went south to visit our German neighbors and to admire their catalpa grove, or to see the big elm tree that grew up out of a deep crack in the earth and had a hawk's nest in its branches. Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons. It must have been the scarcity of detail in that tawny landscape that made detail so precious. (*My Ántonia* 22)

It is my contention that the “precious[ness]” of trees is an overlooked, yet important, theme not only in *My Ántonia*, but in many of Cather's stories. Cather scholars—including contemporary ecocritics as well as critics whose work predates the coinage of the word “ecocriticism”—have long written about the places that lie at the heart of Cather's art. Few authors, after all, are so closely identified with the settings of their stories as Cather is with the Midwest plains and, to a (slightly) lesser extent, the American Southwest. Nonetheless, scholars tend to write about the places in Cather's work in broad strokes without paying much sustained attention to the individual natural features that make up the settings of her stories. Devoting more careful consideration to

the animals, insects, mountains, valleys, rivers, streams, flowers, and, above all, trees, that fill the pages of Cather's writing can, I contend, yield fruitful insight into Cather's work.

In an effort to explicate the meaning and role of arboreal life in Cather's fiction, it seems necessary to examine the role that trees play in each of the two landscapes that dominate Cather's stories: the Midwest plains and the Southwest deserts. For while these two essential American landscapes share many similarities—they are, in short, both landscapes of emptiness and absence—they are also, in many ways, antithetical. Thus, to illuminate how the arboreal theme operates *across* Cather's fiction, I offer in this paper an illustrative pairing of the two novels that critics generally consider (and Cather herself considered) to be her best: *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927).

Unlike *My Ántonia*, a novel in which Cather reworked her childhood memories of Nebraska's places and people—like the immigrant “hired girl” Annie Pavelka, née Sadilek, who served as the model for Ántonia Shimerda—into fiction, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* took as its inspiration people Cather never knew, events that occurred (mostly) before she was born, and a landscape she did not encounter until well into adulthood. The novel was in large part inspired and informed by *The Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf* by William Joseph Howlett, a book Cather discovered and devoured during a 1925 visit to Santa Fe. From Howlett's book, Cather drew inspiration for her novel's two main characters. Father Joseph Machebeuf became Father Joseph Vaillant, and Machebeuf's friend, Father Jean-Baptiste Lamy, the first Archbishop of Santa Fe, became the archbishop of the novel's title: Archbishop Jean Marie Latour.

Though Cather's 1925 visit to New Mexico supplied her with the subject matter of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, convincing her "that the story of the Catholic Church in that country was the most interesting of all its stories" ("On Death" 374), the Southwest had, by the time of Cather's 1925 visit, already figured prominently in her fiction, most notably in *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *The Professor's House* (1925). Cather first visited the Southwest in 1912 at her brother Douglass's urging. Douglass Cather was, at that time, working for the Santa Fe Railroad and living in Winslow, Arizona. Willa Cather stayed with her brother for two months. During her time in the Southwest, Cather explored the Grand Canyon, hunted for cliff dwellings along the Little Colorado River, visited Native American villages, and marveled at old Spanish Mission churches. When Cather finally returned to the East, she was, according to Elizabeth Sergeant, "suddenly in control of inner creative forces" that "made available a path in which a new artistic method could evolve" (85). Sergeant, in other words, believed that the transformation Cather experienced in the Southwestern deserts—a transformation that is echoed in Thea Kronberg's epiphanic experiences in Arizona in *The Song of the Lark*—precipitated Cather's artistic ascent. And indeed, in 1913, a year after Cather's first visit to Arizona, Cather published *O Pioneers!*, her first great novel.

In the years following her 1912 visit to the Southwest, Cather returned to the region several times. Edith Lewis, who accompanied Cather on several of Cather's return trips, describes Cather as being "intensely alive to the country," and observes that Cather "loved the Southwest for its own sake" (101). Cather's love for the region, a love born out her intense identification with the landscape that had "[toned] up her spirit" (Sergeant

85), may be why Cather stubbornly insisted that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was just as personal a novel as any of her novels written about Nebraska: “I spent a large part of fifteen years in the southwest, living the life of the southwestern people....I have related in the stories to which you refer are not based upon fancies or upon reading of that territory and those people, but upon my own life and experiences there” (Interview in the *Superior Express* 103). Taking Cather at her word that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is, like *My Ántonia*, written from “experience,” I believe that analyzing *Death Comes for the Archbishop* alongside of *My Ántonia* can provide valuable insight into not only Cather’s literary imagination but also valuable insight into Cather’s personal feelings about the trees, and larger environments, of Mid- and Southwest America.

At bottom, *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* are novels about characters who must learn how to survive and thrive in alien places. The novels’ diverse casts of characters show that there are many ways to survive in unfamiliar, and seemingly unfriendly, environments, but each novel’s titular character and hero shows that in order to *thrive*, people must reconcile with their environments by embracing a symbiotic, rather than hegemonic, relationship with the natural world. Ántonia and Latour fulfill their unique destinies only *after* becoming extensions of their environments and forging intimate connections with their adopted homes—connections mediated, in large part, by trees. The similarities between Ántonia’s approach to making a home in Nebraska and Latour’s approach to making a home in New Mexico make a comparative analysis of the two novels interesting and illuminating. But of even greater significance than the similarities are the differences between the ways that Ántonia and Latour find, or more

accurately *make*, their homes in their new environments—differences that are rooted in, and encapsulated by, the fundamental difference in the role that trees play in mediating the relationship between each protagonist and their respective place. As we will see, trees serve a different purpose for *Ántonia* than they serve for Latour, though the difference exists not because of the difference between trees in Nebraska and trees in New Mexico, but rather because of the difference between *Ántonia* and Latour.

Later, I will contend that Cather's personality resembled Latour's personality more closely than Cather's personality resembled *Ántonia*'s personality. It follows, then, that Cather's relationship with trees, and the natural world as a whole, was in all likelihood more similar to Latour's relationship with the trees of New Mexico than it was to *Ántonia*'s relationship with the trees of Nebraska. Even so, it is important to establish from the outset that Cather's writing firmly establishes *both* *Ántonia* and Latour as paragons of virtue and models for how a person might live a good, place-based life, a life in which one's surroundings are not a superfluous backdrop to, but rather an essential part of, one's existence. The qualities that *Ántonia* and Latour share remind us that regardless of our circumstances, living a good life necessitates engaging with, and finding meaning in, the natural world around us, while the qualities that make *Ántonia* and Latour distinct from one another reveal Cather's conviction that humans can enjoy many different kinds of relationships—each one as valid and life-giving as the next—with the natural world. Thus, in the end, examining how trees in *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* help fictional characters reconcile with their environments may help us to reach not only a deeper understanding of Cather's imagination and a deeper

understanding of Cather's life, but also, and perhaps most importantly, a deeper understanding of how we, too—regardless of how different our lives may be from the lives of *Ántonia* or *Latour*—might discover the wonder of a simple tree, reconcile with our environments, and find our place in the world.

### **Rooting into the Earth: Grounded Living in *My Ántonia***

At the beginning of *My Ántonia*, the recently-orphaned Jim Burden, who narrates the entirety of the story aside from its introduction, moves across the country, from Virginia to Nebraska, to live with his paternal grandparents. His journey begins on a train headed to Black Hawk, Nebraska. As the train crosses into Nebraska and carries Jim through the plains, Jim observes, “The only thing very noticeable about Nebraska was that it was still, all day long, Nebraska” (10). Even after he deboards the train and climbs into a wagon that takes him from the Black Hawk train station to his grandparents’ prairie house, Jim’s impression of Nebraska is unchanged. On the slow-moving wagon, Jim does not see any more details of the landscape than he did while on the fast-moving train. He maintains, “There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields.” And, like Cather, who felt an “erasure of personality” in the vast Nebraska plains, Jim reflects that “Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out” (11).

Despite his initial skepticism, Jim eventually learns, just as Cather did, to love his new home. He finds, in fact, that although Nebraska is devoid of anything like Virginia’s “familiar mountain ridge[s]” (11), the plains *do* contain (albeit in less abundance than Virginia) those landmarks—fences, creeks, trees, and fields—that he longingly looked for when he first arrived in Nebraska. And he feels that trees, “so rare in that country,” are

particularly “precious”—so precious, in fact, that he takes special trips across the plains just to visit them “as if they were persons” (22).

It is not difficult to understand the function of trees in Jim’s imagination, or to understand why they become so “precious” in a landscape defined by its “scarcity of detail.” In an otherwise flat landscape, where “as far as the eye could reach, there [is] nothing but rough, shaggy, red grass” (15), trees, owing mainly to their size and relative permanence, are conspicuous Others. Thus, they are precious in the plains in the same way that an island in the ocean or a lake in a desert are precious. In the plains, trees—whether grouped together as in Jim’s German neighbors’ catalpa grove or solitary like his German neighbors’ “big elm tree that grew out of a deep crack in the earth” (22)—become places distinct from the mostly homogeneous landscape they inhabit. They create a “somewhere” in the middle of “nowhere” (or “anywhere”). Because they are conspicuous, providing visual and physical boundaries in a land that is bound- and boundaryless, trees help to cordon off a “place” from a “space,” to differentiate “here” from “there.” Moreover, because they are distinct from the plains, trees provide Otherness against which *the plains* can be defined, turning a seemingly unknowable landscape into a knowable one.

Fences, barns, and houses, of course, serve a similar purpose to that of the plains’ trees. They, like trees, serve as small places of their own and serve as landmarks that delineate the contours of a larger place. Nevertheless, Jim alleges it is trees—not fences, barns, or houses—that provide “precious” detail in a landscape devoid of details. Why are trees so precious to Jim? The answer, I think, lies in the fact that Jim believes trees



occupy a liminal space between the human world and the natural world. Trees, as we have already established, are uncommon Others in Nebraska's plains. Notably, their differences from the surrounding environment are to some degree shared by the plains' human inhabitants. Like people, trees are "rare" on the plains and they must "make...a hard fight" in order to thrive. This inspires Jim to "feel anxious about [the trees], and visit them as if they were persons," in the same way that the Burdens worry about and visit the Shimerdas (22).

Nonetheless, although trees and humans are somewhat united in their Otherness, or their distinctness from the flat, forbidding Nebraska landscape, it is also true that trees are undeniably *a part of* the Nebraska landscape. Unlike human constructions (such as fences, barns, or houses), trees—whether planted by providence or by humans—are rooted in the earth and grow from it organically. However human Jim's German neighbors' big elm may seem, it is unavoidable that it grows "up out of a deep crack in the earth" (22). Thus, Jim considers trees such "precious" landmarks because they are part of both the human world and the natural world. They become, consequently, intermediaries between the two worlds, connecting humans to a place, and *rooting* humans in a place, far more deeply than an inorganic, human-constructed landmark could ever do.

To establish that trees in *My Ántonia* help to define a "place" and make a place knowable, we need not look any further than Jim's first conversation with Ántonia Shimerda. Shortly after arriving in Nebraska, Jim travels with his grandparents to visit the Shimerda homestead. The Shimerda family, who arrived in Nebraska on the same

train as Jim, are newly-arrived immigrants from Bohemia. As Jim's grandparents introduce themselves to Mr. and Mrs. Shimerda, Jim and the two young Shimerda girls, *Ántonia* and Yulka, run across the Shimerda farm together. Eventually *Ántonia* stops and asks Jim, "Name? What name?" Jim tells *Ántonia* his own name, and then, Jim reports, *Ántonia* "pointed into the gold cottonwood tree behind whose top we stood and said again, 'What name?'" (20).

That the second English word *Ántonia* wants to learn is "tree"—rather than, for example, the name of the omnipresent "red grass" of Nebraska's plains—is important and is no coincidence. *Ántonia* recognizes that her relationship to this new country will be defined by, and mediated through, its people and its trees.

As the novel proceeds and we learn more about the Shimerdas' past, *Ántonia*'s eagerness to learn the word for "tree" becomes more and more understandable, for it quickly becomes obvious that the Shimerda family's memories of Bohemia, their homeland, are dominated by visions of woods and forests. In such a setting, it would seem that trees might lose some of the power that they possess on the plains. On the plains, it is possible to "know" trees intimately because they, unlike the innumerable blades of "red grass," are rare. In a forest, the trees, in their profusion, might conceivably lose their preciousness. Nonetheless, shortly before Jim leaves to attend the University of Nebraska—long after the Shimerdas have arrived in the country—*Ántonia* insists that "My feet remember all the little paths through the woods, and where the big roots stick out to trip you. I ain't never forgot my own country" (129).

Ántonia surely does not remember, nor did she probably ever know, *every* tree in the Bohemian woods, but it seems clear that individual trees in the woods (and even *roots* of trees) *are* knowable and *can* hold significance. That Ántonia remembers every “big root” in the woods near the Shimerda’s house in Bohemia suggests that trees were just as important in constructing a relationship to the land in Bohemia as they are in Nebraska. It seems no coincidence, then, that both Ántonia and Anton Jelinek, a Bohemian immigrant unrelated to the Shimerdas, speak of Bohemia as their “kawntree.” Cather, of course, misspells “country” mainly to imitate Ántonia and Anton’s Bohemian accent, but the consequent implication—that a country functions, in effect, like a large tree, rooted in place, growing out of a larger world, with people and places nesting in its branches—is compelling.

Similarly, it seems significant that Anton Jelinek, following Mr. Shimerda’s suicide during the Shermidas’ first winter in Nebraska, calls Mr. Shimerda his “kawntree-man” (62). Mr. Shimerda, indeed, appears in Ántonia’s recollections as a “tree-man,” a man who lived among the trees of Bohemia and could not live without them. Reflecting on conversations Mr. Shimerda often held with his friend the trombone player, Ántonia, when asked what the pair discussed, replies, “Oh, I don’t know! About music, and the woods, and about God, and when they were young” (128). The *second* subject that Ántonia remembers her father and the trombone player discussing (which notably comes *before* “God”) is “the woods” of Bohemia. Only “music”—Mr. Shimerda, like the trombonist, was a musician—is listed before “the woods.” Music, a cultural activity that creates and defines human communities, was Mr. Shimerda’s primary

passion, but trees, which blur the boundaries between human communities and the non-human ecological communities around them, are a close second. Surely as a result of stories like these, Jim attests that whenever he imagined Mr. Shimerda, “I always thought of him as being among the woods” (129).

Although it is relatively easy to understand why trees are precious on the bare plains of Nebraska, it is more difficult to ascertain why trees are equally important to the Shimerdas’ relationship to Bohemia. The answer to this, I argue, lies, again, in the fact that trees occupy a liminal space between the human world and the natural world. In Bohemia, trees, although far more common than in Nebraska, are, nonetheless, Others in the natural world because of their size and relative permanence. This Otherness, as we have seen, humanizes trees and thereby ties them intimately to the affairs of actual humans. As a result, trees become bearers of human memories and human stories.

On Jim’s first Christmas Eve in Nebraska, Otto Fuchs, a farmhand on the Burden farm, brings a Christmas tree to the Burdens’ house. Otto and the Burdens proceed to decorate the tree, most notably with Otto’s “collection of brilliantly coloured paper figures” that, together, form a miniature nativity scene. After the tree is decorated, Jim maintains, “Our tree became the talking tree of the fairy tale; legends and stories nestled like birds in its branches. Grandmother said it reminded her of the Tree of Knowledge” (50).

The Christmas tree, of course, is the only tree in the novel that is literally decorated with human stories. Nonetheless, this scene provides a model of a metaphorical process—embedding human memories, legends, and stories within the branches of

trees—that occurs throughout the novel. *My Ántonia*'s trees become important physical landmarks, and, in turn, they are given voices. They become “talking tree[s].” They tell stories and become part of the human story. As Sharon O’Brien observes, “Whether constructed by nature or by people, landmarks are products of the human imagination, the visual equivalent of folktales and stories” (61).

Admittedly, the Burdens’ Christmas tree functions differently than most of the story’s trees. The majority of *My Ántonia*’s trees are rooted in the earth. Thus, by rooting their stories in the trees, the humans themselves, in turn, become rooted in the place where the trees grow. The Christmas tree, however, is decidedly *not* rooted in the earth. Instead, it is uprooted, taken out of the natural world, and brought into the human world. As trees, because of their long lives, tend to do, the Christmas tree subsequently “amalgamates the past and present heritage of the people around it” (Romines 63); however, because the Christmas tree is not rooted in a particular place, it tells universal “fairy tales” and “legends” rather than stories of Nebraska. This, perhaps, explains why Mr. Shermida is so enchanted by the tree when he visits the Burdens’ home. Upon seeing the Christmas tree, Mr. Shimerda, “crosse[s] himself, and quietly kne[els] down before the tree, his head sunk forward.” Jim suspects that Mr. Shimerda is worshiping the tree as an idol (as does Jim’s grandfather, who quietly “Protestantiz[es]” the atmosphere), and his suspicions may not be far off the mark (52). The uprooted tree, removed from its original context, has room in its branches to accommodate legends of Bohemia, the homeland that Mr. Shimerda so dearly misses.

Although the Christmas tree creates a temporary Eden in the Burdens’ house

(as Jim's grandmother acknowledges when she calls it the "Tree of Knowledge") it is ultimately, as Ann Romines observes, "symbolically ephemeral" (63). Uprooting the tree allows it to contain, for a short while, a kind of universal symbolism, but it also, of course, cuts the tree off from its lifeforce. The tree, like the "tree-man" Mr. Shimerda, is unable to survive after being removed from its homeland.

Like the Christmas tree, trees throughout *My Ántonia* carry memories and stories—though *unlike* the Christmas tree, the majority of *My Ántonia*'s trees connect people with specific and personal places and memories. It is no coincidence that the most memorable adventures of Jim's boyhood—racing "about the [Harlings'] orchard" (87), cavorting around the dancing pavilion "surrounded by tall, arched cottonwood trees" (107), (nearly) kissing Ántonia in the Cutters' grove of "dark cedars" (123), and, in the symbolic conclusion of Jim's adolescence, sitting beneath a "little oak" watching the sun descend behind a far-off plow (132)—occur near, among, or under trees. In each case, the physical presence of trees—even in Jim's memory, where they have no "physical" presence in any literal way—anchors Jim's stories, and thereby some part of Jim himself, to a specific place in both time and space.

In *My Ántonia*, it is clear that trees, by acting as intermediaries between the human world and the natural world, help people to know and love their larger environment. Similarly, even *memories* of specific trees can help people to maintain intimacy with a place across time and space. *My Ántonia*, however, deeply questions whether memories alone can root a person in the present version of a place, or whether memories can root a person in only the place's past.

After graduating from Harvard and before entering law school, Jim returns to Black Hawk. He has been away for four years. Jim declares that “Everything seemed just as it used to be” (159), and of those changes he notices he asserts, “The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me” (164). Notably, Jim points out that during this visit, he “recognized every tree” (164). The four years Jim has been gone have not, it seems, severed his roots in the Nebraska plains.

Jim’s next visit to Black Hawk, occurring twenty years later, is significantly different. It is, in short, “disappointing.” Jim explains that “most of my old friends were dead or had moved away” and that “the mountain ash had been cut down, and only a sprouting stump was left of the tall Lombardy poplar that used to guard the [Harlings’] gate” (194). Jim, in other words, has nothing but memories to root him to Black Hawk, and Jim discovers that memories alone are insufficient. The two primary things that turn a space into a place, that provide visual and imaginative landmarks, that hold stories and memories—people and trees—are missing.

Despite the disappointment he finds in Black Hawk after his twenty-year absence, Jim is *not* disappointed by his visit to *Ántonia*’s farm, which she runs with her husband, Anton Cuzak, and her many children. Jim is particularly impressed by the Cuzaks’ apple orchard, and, through his description, it becomes obvious that the orchard is a source of great pride for *Ántonia*:

As we walked through the apple orchard, grown up in tall bluegrass, *Ántonia* kept stopping to tell me about one tree and another. “I love them as if they were people,” she said, rubbing her hand over the bark. “There wasn’t a tree here when

we first came. We planted every one, and used to carry water for them, too—after we'd been working in the fields all day. Anton, he was a city man, and he used to get discouraged. But I couldn't feel so tired that I wouldn't fret about these trees when there was a dry time. They were on my mind like children." (*My Ántonia* 179-180)

Nowhere, perhaps, is the divergence of Jim's life from Ántonia's life so pronounced and obvious as it is within this description of the orchard. Ántonia has rooted herself deeply in the Nebraska soil, imbuing its landmarks with stories and creating new landmarks—like each individual tree she takes time to tell Jim about—with stories all their own (“as if they were people”). Jim, meanwhile, lives in New York City and is an attorney for the western railroads. Although the anonymous narrator of the novel's introduction insists that Jim has “played an important part in [the West's] development” (6) the novel compels us to wonder whether Jim's idea of “development”—which, in its quest to accomplish “remarkable things in mines and timber and oil” involves the *uprooting* rather than *planting* of trees (6)—is synonymous with “improvement.”

Jim, it seems, does not belong anywhere. He lives in the city, but leaves frequently to travel across the West “for weeks together” (5). In the West, however, Jim finds that the western town he could conceivably call home is “disappointing” and pervaded with a “curious depression” (194-195). Even on the Cuzak farm, Jim soon begins “to feel the loneliness of the farm-boy at evening, when the chores seem everlastingly the same, and the world so far away” (183). Tellingly, the only place that the adult Jim feels “at home” is “the pastures where the land was so rough that it had



never been ploughed up, and the long red grass of early times still grew shaggy over the draws and hillocks” (195). Jim, I propose, is most “at home” in the unplowed, undeveloped country because it allows him, as the narrator says in the original 1918 version of the novel’s Introduction, to “lose himself in those big Western dreams” (6)—to contemplate “the material out of which countries are made” (11) and *imagine* a place that could be home. Reality disappoints Jim, but *ideas*—of places, of people, of the past—never do. Thus, Jim is never truly “rooted” anywhere because he lives almost entirely within his idealized fantasies of the future and memories of the past.

Unlike Jim, *Ántonia* leads a life that is rooted deeply in the physical world. She is rooted so deeply in the Nebraskan earth, in fact, that *Ántonia*, like the trees that she cherishes (whether Bohemian trees or Nebraskan), comes to occupy a liminal space between the human world and the natural world. By the novel’s end, *Ántonia* has assumed the physical qualities, as well as the functions, of the trees described throughout the novel. There are hints of this within the novel’s first few pages. The Introduction’s anonymous narrator claims that “More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood. To speak her name was to call up pictures of people and places, to set a quiet drama going in one’s brain” (6). Like a tree, *Ántonia* is a repository of stories. Consequently, she connects people to the past (“childhood”) and to a place (“the country”).

Another hint that points towards *Ántonia*’s tree-like qualities appears near the novel’s middle, when Jim, watching *Ántonia* plow the Shimerdas’ fields, remarks that *Ántonia*’s “neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the

turf” (70). For the most part, however, *Ántonia*’s similarity to trees is indiscernible until the novel’s conclusion. This makes sense, given that the middle-aged *Ántonia* at the story’s end has had plenty of time to root herself in Nebraska, to become part of the earth, whereas the youthful *Ántonia* at the story’s beginning has just recently been transplanted.

Describing the middle-aged *Ántonia*’s physical appearance, Jim asserts, “Her skin, so brown and hardened, had not that look of flabbiness, as if the sap beneath it had been secretly drawn away” (177). In other words, in the twenty years since Jim last saw *Ántonia*, she has transformed into a tree. Her skin, “browened and hardened” has become bark. “Sap,” rather than blood, runs in her veins. Moreover, *Ántonia* has become a mother to both trees and humans—and it is nearly impossible to differentiate the human children from the ligenous ones. Her “tall and straight” (186) human offspring emerge from the earth in “a veritable explosion of life” (179), and the trees she “love[s]...as if they were people” are constantly “on [her] mind like children” (179-180).

Most importantly, though, *Ántonia* chooses to live her adult life like a tree. Rooted in one place, *Ántonia* spends her days telling the stories of her place, quietly recording its history, linking one generation to another. When Jim arrives on the Cuzak farm, the Cuzak children already know the stories of Jim’s youth. They know about Jim’s childhood battle with a rattlesnake. They know about Jake and Otto. They know, too, stories of Nebraska that Jim does not know. *Ántonia*’s son Rudolph, for instance, tells Jim about the tragic demise of Mr. and Mrs. Cutter. By telling these stories, *Ántonia* binds people together and binds people to the land. In other words, she creates a community.

Although Jim is the novel's narrator, *Ántonia* is the novel's storyteller. Is it she who "bring[s] the Muse into [her] country" (142).

At the end of the novel, Jim reflects upon the road that he and *Ántonia* traversed when they first arrived on Nebraska's plains. He writes, "For *Ántonia* and for me, this had been the road of Destiny...which predetermined for us all that we can ever be" (196). Although Jim suggests that the disparate lives he and *Ántonia* lead were unavoidable, it is important, I think, to acknowledge that Jim, at one pivotal point in the novel, had a clear opportunity to choose a different life—to choose *Ántonia*'s life.

One night, after a dance at Black Hawk's Firemen's Hall, Jim walks *Ántonia* home to the Cutters' house (where she, at that point, is employed). In the Cutters' grove of cedar trees, Jim attempts to kiss *Ántonia*, but *Ántonia* stubbornly refuses his affection. She insists, "Now, don't you go and be a fool like some of these town boys. You're not going to sit around here and whittle store-boxes and tell stories all your life. You are going away to school and make something of yourself" (122). Jim listens carefully to *Ántonia* and ultimately agrees. He departs, reflecting, "If she was proud of me, I was so proud of her that I carried my head high as I emerged from the dark cedars and shut the Cutters' gate softly behind me" (123). In the Cutters' grove of "dark cedars"—which presumably contains trees of the same species as the Christmas tree Jim's grandmother dubbed the "Tree of Knowledge"—Jim faces a moment of temptation. But *Ántonia*, cast in the role of temptress, refuses to play her part; she, instead, acts as Jim's conscience and appeals to his ambition. She is victorious, and Jim emerges from the "dark cedars" carrying his "head high."

We (and perhaps Jim, too) are forced to wonder, however, whether *Ántonia* was mistaken. *Ántonia* asserts that Jim should not “tell stories all [his] life.” She insists, “You are going away to school and make something of yourself.” And yet, although Jim *does* go away to school, the “something” he makes of himself seems somehow pathetic and deficient compared to the “something” that *Ántonia* makes of herself. Ironically, of course, *Ántonia* spends her life doing the very thing she instructs Jim to avoid: she tells stories. Thus, when Jim leaves the “dark cedars” and “shut[s] the Cutters’ gate softly behind [him]”—symbolically shutting the gateway to a different, more fulfilling future—I think we must take a moment to mourn the potential life that Jim is losing. We must wonder what Jim’s life could have been like if he had remained in the grove, if he had chosen, like *Ántonia*, to live a life rooted among the trees.

**Branching into the Sky: Transcendent Living in *Death Comes for the Archbishop***

When, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, readers meet Father Jean Marie Latour for the first time, he is, like Jim Burden at the beginning of *My Ántonia*, traveling through an unfamiliar and overwhelming landscape. The landscape of Jim’s new homeland—a Nebraskan plain where there is “nothing to see” aside from the ubiquitous “red grass” (*My Ántonia* 11, 15)—is echoed, not inconspicuously, in the landscape of Latour’s new homeland—a “featureless” New Mexican desert full of “monotonous red sand-hills” (*Death Comes* 16); however, whereas the environment Jim encounters in the Midwest is blithely indifferent to its human inhabitants—it is simply “the great fact, and men’s affairs [go] on underneath it” (100)—the environment Latour encounters in the Southwest is actively hostile. As Bishop Latour, suffering from a “feeling of illness,” a

“taste of fever,” and “seizures of vertigo” (19), lurches through the “geometrical nightmare” (17) that is the New Mexico desert, the landscape’s “conical hills” press “closer and closer” like a pack of wolves circling its prey (19).

Latour, of course, does not die at this point in the story (that would be a short book indeed!) but instead stumbles upon a tree in the shape of a cross that revives his spirit and focuses his mind “upon the anguish of his Lord” rather than on his own suffering (19). Imbued with renewed faith, courage, and strength, Latour, along with his bedraggled horse, presses on, and before long he finds himself, weary but alive, in Agua Secreta, an oasis brimming with “water, clover fields, cottonwoods, locust trees, [and] little adobe houses” (24).

Later that night, as Latour drifts off to sleep, he drolly muses that his friend Father Vaillant would surely deem Latour’s deliverance from the desert “a miracle” and “would almost be able to tell the color of the mantle Our Lady wore when She took the mare by the bridle back yonder among the junipers.” Latour concedes, a bit defensively, “And it was a miracle,” yet he obviously disagrees with his friend’s understanding of what a “miracle” entails (30). And indeed, later in the novel, we learn that whereas Vaillant “must always have the miracle very direct and spectacular, not with nature, but against it” (30), Latour believes that miracles occur in the brief periods when “our perceptions... [are] made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always” (54). Thus, although Latour never reveals his own interpretation of his miraculous encounter with the cruciform tree, he would likely claim that the cruciform tree *itself* provided the miracle by allowing him to perceive clearly, for a short

time, God's presence—a presence that manifests itself not in marvelous phenomena but in things as mundane and ordinary as trees—in a seemingly godless wilderness.

Throughout the novel, Latour endeavors to see, as he saw in the cruciform tree, the “miracles” that are “about [him] always”—to see, in other words, the interconnectedness of things holy and human, human and natural, past and present, far and near. Indeed, one could say that to discern the interrelation of all things is Latour's greatest ambition and main preoccupation. After all, “By Latour's own definition...this very discernment is a repeated miracle” (Dinn 40). Hence, in the smoke of burning piñon logs, Latour smells incense rising to heaven (37); in Vailliant's onion soup Latour tastes “not the work of one man” but “nearly a thousand years of history” (41); and in the “red sea” of the desert, Latour sees mesas “resembling vast cathedrals” (99). Even the desert's unintelligibility is, paradoxically, rendered intelligible by Latour's vision: the desert's “incompleteness” brings to Latour's mind the dawn of creation, though in this case, “with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together” (100).

Latour is *constantly* trying to see beyond the surface of things. Nearly everything he encounters, from bowls of soup to rocks sticking out of the ground, is fair game. But nothing sparks his imagination or triggers recollection and reflection quite like trees. The cruciform tree is only the first in a long line of trees that fix Latour's mind on thoughts of other places and other times: the junipers dotting the desert hills remind Latour of the juniper that sheltered Elijah during his forty-day journey through the wilderness (30) while acacias recall “a garden in the south of France where Latour used to visit young

cousins” (88). Even small *parts* of trees start Latour’s imagination buzzing. A “compote of dried plums” triggers a conversation about the “great yellow ones that grew in the old Latour garden at home” and, in turn, recollections of the grand plum trees draw Latour’s mind to the “tall horse-chestnuts” outside of his childhood home and the “grove of flat-cut plane trees” that stand in front of his hometown church (44). Trees, it seems clear, act as liminal spaces where Latour can transcend the boundaries of his own time and place and find himself, for a brief moment, in the midst of a memory or a legend in a faraway locale. Even Vaillant—whose relationship with the world around him is far more straightforward (i.e. less nostalgic and contemplative) than Latour’s<sup>1</sup>—demands of his friend, shortly before Latour is to leave for a visit to Europe, “[W]hen you leave Clermont, Jean, put a few chestnuts in your pocket for me!” (167)—a request suggesting that trees’ effect on Latour’s imagination, though uniquely powerful, is not, ultimately, unique.

Trees, perhaps more than any other landmark, come to define the places where they grow, so it seems natural that in his attempts to collapse the boundaries of time and space in order to see “what is about [him] always,” Latour repeatedly attempts to “see” the interconnections between different spaces (both temporal and physical) by considering their trees. Drawing such connections is an important part of Latour’s faith. For Latour, to notice “what is there about us always” is a spiritual act that holds what Carol Steinhagen, borrowing a term from Herman Melville, names the “‘all’ feeling” (79), or what Susan J. Rosowski calls a “cosmic view” (“The Comic Form” 121), as its

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<sup>1</sup> For example, by the time Latour finishes contemplating the “thousand years of history” in Vaillant’s soup, we find that Vaillant has already folded “a napkin over the front of his cassock” and, “losing no time in reflection,” eagerly tucked into his meal (40).

ultimate aim—a feeling not dissimilar from the feeling Jim Burden describes in a famed line that would later be engraved on Willa Cather's tombstone: “At any rate, that is happiness: to be dissolved into something complete and great” (*My Ántonia* 17).

If Latour does, indeed, experience the transcendent “all” feeling during the moments of contemplation I’ve mentioned hitherto, his experiences of the “all” feeling in such moments are partial and transitory. Indeed, despite Latour’s dogged pursuit of the “all” feeling, there are only three scenes in the novel—one in the beginning, one in the end, and one approximately three-fourths of the way through—in which Latour has an obvious, sustained, and intense transcendent experience. Examining these three scenes is worthwhile, for each of them helps to reveal *what*, exactly, Latour is hoping to feel when he peruses the branches of New Mexico’s junipers, acacias, tamarisks, and cottonwoods. And, even more importantly, one of the three scenes (the middle one) holds the key to unlocking the reason why trees play a particularly important role in Latour’s pursuit of the “all” feeling.

Latour’s first great transcendent experience in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* occurs immediately upon his return to Santa Fe from Durango, where he had traveled in order to retrieve the documents that grant him authority over the new vicarate of New Mexico. Latour arrives in Santa Fe late at night and promptly goes to bed. The next morning, as he groggily regains consciousness, Latour hears the ringing of the Angelus bell and experiences “a pleasant delusion that he [is] in Rome.” Then, “before the nine strokes [are] done, Rome fade[s], and behind it he sense[s] something eastern, with palm trees—Jerusalem, perhaps, though he [has] never been there. Keeping his eyes closed, he



cherishe[s] for a moment this sudden, pervasive sense of the East” (45-46). In the brief moments that it takes for the Angelus bell to chime nine times, Latour occupies three different places: Santa Fe, Rome, and Jerusalem (or at least somewhere “Eastern, with palm trees”). And although Latour’s imagination appears to travel to each place in temporal succession, the description of Rome “fading” to reveal something “*behind* it” suggests that Latour’s mind is not traveling across a temporal horizontal plane so much as it is traveling vertically through different layers of places and times that, by fading in and out of Latour’s consciousness, blur together and coalesce.<sup>2</sup>

At the other end of the novel, shortly before his death, Archbishop Latour, once again lying in bed, has a very similar experience to the transcendent, out-of-body experience that marked the beginning of his life as Apostolic Vicar to New Mexico all those years ago. As his health deteriorates, Latour finds that time and space have collapsed:

He observed also that there was no longer any perspective in his memories. He remembered his winters with his cousins on the Mediterranean when he was a little boy, his student days in the Holy City, as clearly as he remembered the arrival of M. Molny and the building of his Cathedral. He was soon to have done

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<sup>2</sup> We soon learn that Latour “had been carried out of the body thus to a place far away” only once before. While walking down the street in New Orleans, “[h]e had turned a corner and come upon an old woman with a basket of yellow flowers; sprays of yellow sending out a honey-sweet perfume: mimosa—but before he could think of the name he was overcome by a feeling of place, was dropped, cassock and all, into a garden in the south of France” (46). John J. Murphy suggests that the “mimosa” flowers that carried Latour “out of the body” are clusters of flowers from either *Acacia decurrens* or *Acacia dealbata*—species of acacia commonly known as wattle (409). It is not insignificant that the first time Latour had such an “out of body” experience, his imagination was ferried away by tree branches. Trees (and their various parts) repeatedly collapse time and space for Latour, and they do so more often than any other element (whether natural or man-made) of Latour’s physical surroundings. It is also important that the appearance of the mimosa flowers took Latour by surprise. As we will see, Latour’s deepest experiences of the “all” feeling occur in moments when he is not in full control of his consciousness.

with calendared time, and it had already ceased to count for him. He sat in the middle of his own consciousness; none of his former states of mind were lost or outgrown. They were all within reach of his hand, and all comprehensible. (*Death Comes* 305)

Nearly finished with the physical world, Latour no longer requires sensory stimulants, like the peals of a bell, to take him “out of the body.” Sitting “in the middle of his own consciousness,” Latour loses all perspective and thereby gains *every* perspective. There is no longer a “here” or “there,” a “before” or “after.” Everything exists and occurs simultaneously.

The transcendent experiences that mark the beginning and end of Latour’s mission in New Mexico reveal much about Latour’s character and faith. Nonetheless, it is the novel’s third moment of deep and significant transcendence for Latour, which occurs three-fourths of the way through the novel (yet occurs less than ten years after Latour’s arrival in New Mexico—much closer to the beginning of Latour’s time in the Southwest than to the end of it), that is the most illuminating of the three scenes.

The scene to which I am referring occurs in the section of the novel titled “Spring in the Navajo Country.” As the section begins, Latour remains locked in a struggle with feelings of “coldness and doubt” (220) that first started to afflict him in the preceding section of the novel, titled “December Night.” Latour misses his friend Vaillant, who is evangelizing in Arizona, and Latour is dismayed by the conviction that his own work is “superficial, a house built upon the sands” (221). In need of respite and reflection, Latour visits the Navajo village of his friend Eusabio, who furnishes the bishop with a “a solitary

hogan, a little apart from the settlement” (232). As a desert dust storm whirls around him, Latour spends the next three days in contemplation, alternately sitting in his hogan listening to the wind and walking beneath a “grove of tall, naked cottonwoods” (233).

During his three-day(!) visit to Navajo country (which for Latour culminates, of course, in feelings of renewal and rebirth—the metaphors here are less-than-subtle), Latour’s mind roams across time and space. His thoughts are filled with memories of Vaillant. Latour reflects on experiences that he and Vaillant have shared—their days in seminary in France, their life together in Sandusky, Ohio, their new mission in the Southwest—as well as stories of Vaillant that Latour knows only by second- and third-hand reports—stories of a young Vaillant being swept up in patriotic fervor at the sight of a military parade in Clermont, and stories of Vaillant’s friendly meeting with Pope Gregory XVI in Rome.

The walls of the Navajo hogan in which Latour sits and thinks during his visit to the village offer relatively little shelter from the world outside: “All day long the sand came in through the cracks in the walls and formed little ridges on the earth floor. It rattled like sleet upon the dead leaves of the tree-branch roof. This house was so frail a shelter that one seemed to be sitting at the heart of a world made of dusty earth and moving air” (242). The hogan serves as a revealing metaphor for Latour’s mind in this section of the novel, for as Sarah Mahurin Mutter observes, “Latour’s consciousness becomes as perfect in its permeability as a Navajo hogan. . . Like the hogan, Latour’s mind rests ‘at the heart’ of a world outside itself, but it is also completely unified with that world, with its ‘dusty earth and moving air’” (91-92).

When he is not resting in his hogan, Latour spends his time in the Navajo country walking in a cottonwood grove that sits on the banks of the Colorado Chiquito:

Beside the river was a grove of tall, naked cottonwoods—trees of great antiquity and enormous size, so large that they seemed to belong to a bygone age. They grew far apart, and their strange twisted shapes must have come about from the ceaseless winds that bent them to the east and scoured them with sand, and from the fact that they lived with very little water—the river was nearly dry here for them most of the year. The trees rose out of the ground at a slant, and forty or fifty feet above the earth all these white, dry trunks changed their direction, and grew back over their base line. Some split into great forks which arched down almost to the ground, some did not fork at all, but the main trunk dipped downward in a strong curve, as if drawn by a bow-string; and some terminated in a thick coruscation of growth, like a crooked palm tree. They were all living trees, yet they seemed to be of old, dead, dry wood, and had very scant foliage. High up in the forks, or at the end of a preposterous length of twisted bough, would burst a faint bouquet of delicate green leaves—out of all keeping with the great lengths of seasoned white trunk and branches. The grove looked like a winter wood of giant trees, with clusters of mistletoe growing among the bare boughs. (*Death Comes* 233-234)

Although the cottonwood grove rarely attracts as much scholarly attention as the hogan, the cottonwood grove is equally rich in symbolism, and its trees, which receive more of

Latour's attention than any other in the novel, are undoubtedly the trees that most clearly and fully illuminate Latour's relationship with trees in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

From the moment Latour spots the cruciform tree at the novel's beginning, it is obvious that trees move Latour's imagination away from New Mexico. Initially, we may attribute trees' effect on Latour's mind solely to the fact that trees—ubiquitous in legend and in humans' everyday lives, rich in symbolic and literal importance to humans throughout the ages—are easy places for Latour to find analogues and echoes. And to be sure, trees' ubiquity, their importance to human life, and their role in human culture *are* reasons why trees in New Mexico spark Latour's thoughts of trees in other times and places, from trees with deep allegorical significance like Elijah's juniper tree to trees with deep personal significance like the chestnut trees growing outside of Latour's childhood home. Nonetheless, the novel's extended description of Latour's eyes determinedly tracing the “bends,” “slants,” “forks,” “dips,” “curves,” and “twists” of the cottonwoods' ascension out of the ground and into the sky draws attention to the one, fundamental quality that, more than any other factor, grants trees their unique power over Latour's imagination: trees, in short, are taller than humans.

Because trees branch into the sky, they move Latour's vision quite literally *away* from New Mexico. They guide Latour's eyes up and away from the landscape; the spreading branches carry his line of sight in disparate directions. And as Latour's vision leaves New Mexico, his thoughts follow close behind until they, like “a faint bouquet of delicate green leaves” or “a thick coruscation of growth” (233-234) at the end of a tree branch, euphorically burst into the open air, escaping the confines of time and place.

For Latour, trees act as a liminal space between distant times and places because trees *are*, in a much more literal and immediate sense, liminal spaces between the earth and sky. Up until Latour's time beneath the Navajo cottonwoods, it is difficult to recognize the importance of trees' literal, physical liminality—their position as simultaneously in, and between, earth and sky—because Latour has spent relatively little time thinking about the physical position or properties of the trees around him. Up until his time beneath the Navajo cottonwoods, the physical act of looking at a tree has been secondary to the imaginative act of finding its cousin in memory or legend. Up until his time beneath the Navajo cottonwoods, the physical world around Latour has been secondary to the world in Latour's head.

Latour, in short, lives a life of the mind. As we have already seen, he relentlessly intellectualizes every aspect of his surroundings, searching with deliberate and conscious effort for spiritual significance in everything from French soup to the desert sands. A deep and careful thinker, Latour deliberately steers his mind to the places he wants it to go. For example, after encountering the cruciform tree, Latour “blot[s] himself out of his own consciousness and meditate[s] upon the anguish of his Lord” because he has been “empowered by long training” (19). The tree itself is valuable only insofar as it can precipitate thoughts of something, sometime, or somewhere else. Latour does not spend time examining or contemplating the tree itself, nor does he passively allow the cruciform tree to dominate his consciousness and *carry* his thoughts across the oceans and centuries. Instead, Latour actively *forces* his thoughts across the oceans and centuries,

firmly “blotting” out his consciousness (including any thoughts of the cruciform tree, the original subject of his contemplation) and forcibly “meditating” on Christ’s suffering.

I think it is fair to say that if Latour had lived a different life somewhere else—whether in Ohio, France, or the North Pole—his character would remain essentially the same. No matter where he lived, his physical surroundings would remain secondary to his mental world. Even so, it is my contention that Latour is *especially* determined to see *beyond* the physical world of the Southwest because actually *seeing* the Southwest itself—that “dry, prickly, and sharp” country “calculated to try the endurance of giants” (290-291)—terrifies him. For Latour, refusing to see the Southwest landscape for what it is, seeing instead only what it resembles and represents, is a type of coping mechanism, a means of escaping (in mind if not in body) an environment that is (in his view) actively hostile.

Nowhere is the seemingly-hostile nature of New Mexico’s environment more obvious than in the novel’s “Cruciform Tree” section—featuring oppressive, predatory, red desert hills—and in the “Stone Lips” section—featuring a suffocating cave with an opening like “two great stone lips, slightly parted” (134). In both instances, it is notable that the novel portrays the *earth itself* as Latour’s primary antagonist despite the fact that in both instances it is really the weather—the searing heat in the “Cruciform Tree” section and the freezing snow in the “Stone Lips” section—that poses the greatest threat to Latour’s survival. During the moments when Latour must endure the trials of the desert and the cave, the land reveals itself to be a sentient creature that is eager, as Bishop Ferrand, the missionary who recommends Latour for the position of Apostolic Vicar of

New Mexico, foretells in the novel's prologue, to swallow a man whole, to "drink up his youth and strength" (11). So afraid is Latour of the carnivorous ground, that even in moments when Latour is in no danger, he displays an aversion to the earth. During a visit to Laguna, the governor invites Latour to spend the night in the sacristy, but there is "a damp, earthy smell about that chamber," so Latour resolves to sleep in the open desert "under the junipers" (94). The "thick clay walls" of Latour's own adobe house in Santa Fe do not seem to have any ill effect on him, yet one must wonder whether he keeps "a perpetual odor of incense" about the house by maintaining a piñon log fire (37) for the same reason he desperately urges his Indian guide Jacinto to start a piñon fire in the Stone Lips cave: to "purify the rank air" of its musty earthiness (137).

The turning point of Latour's relationship with the Southwest occurs during his time in the Navajo village. There, he yields his body and mind to the vagaries of his environment, living "for three days in an almost perpetual sand-storm—cut off from even this remote little Indian camp by moving walls and tapestries of sand" (234). And while he stands beneath the cottonwoods, Latour truly *sees* his physical surroundings for the first time. His eyes follow the tortuous curves of the trees. His (inner and outer) vision submits itself to the natural shape of the earth and allows itself to be carried wherever the trees may take it. He does not *force* his mind to meditate on anything in particular. Instead, he relaxes the inflexibly firm grip that he typically holds on his consciousness. And of course it is no coincidence that in this state of vulnerability, surrender, and partial-consciousness, Latour finally achieves the same feeling of transcendence that he



achieves in the Angelus bell scene, when he drifts between sleep and wakefulness, and at the end of the novel, when he drifts between life and death.

We can recognize Latour's experience of the "all" feeling in the Navajo country by its similarities to the other moments Latour experiences the "all" feeling—by the characteristic way that Latour's memories of Vaillant swim fluidly before Latour's (inner) eyes and by Latour's impression that he is sitting "in the heart of [the] world." But we can also see evidence of Latour's "all" feeling in the way that Latour perceives the cottonwoods. For although the cottonwoods are rooted firmly in Navajo country, they are not *simply* cottonwoods and they do not belong *solely* to the southwestern landscape. In the cottonwoods, Latour sees "palm trees," evoking, like the other appearance of palm trees in the novel (during the Angelus bell scene), the palm-lined streets of Jerusalem. Yet the mostly-bare branches of the cottonwoods also evoke the setting of "a winter wood"—a landscape that Latour likely associates with the deciduous woods of his native France. Meanwhile, the "mistletoe" that hangs in the cottonwood boughs evokes the Christmas season, but the "delicate green leaves" that bloom from the tips of the cottonwood branches evoke the fresh growth and new life of Easter. In other words, as Latour walks under the cottonwoods, he does not feel a special connection to *one* time or *one* place, but rather to *all* times and *all* places; he walks, simultaneously, in New Mexico, in Jerusalem, and in France; he feels, simultaneously, the chill of a cold Christmas morning and the warmth of a sunny Easter day.

It is important to note, however, that Latour never *explicitly* or *consciously* reads the trees as I do. And in fact, it is even unclear whether it is, indeed, *Latour* who equates

the cottonwoods with “palm trees” or “a winter wood” or whether the novel’s anonymous narrator is drawing these comparisons. Latour’s propensity to find echoes of disparate times and places within his own time and place makes it safe to assume that he, on some level, perceives in the trees what *I* perceive in the trees. But it remains unclear how *consciously* Latour perceives the echoes of New Mexico, Jerusalem, France, Christmas, and Easter. The echoes of other times and places are clearly present, but they are vague and ill-defined, secondary to the powerful presence of the gnarled trees themselves. And that, I think, is the point. Rather than thinking, Latour is *feeling*. After all, the “all” feeling is just that—a feeling, not an intellectual exercise. Thus, because Latour surrenders his attention to the trees—granting, for the first time, the physical world power over his mental world—the Navajo cottonwoods carry his mind further afield than any other trees have carried him in the novel thus far. Instead of carrying his thoughts to one time or one place, the trees carry his thoughts to multiple times and places all at once. Instead of achieving the “all” feeling for a transitory moment, he experiences it for three consecutive days.

During his stay in the nearly-diaphanous hogan under the cottonwoods, Latour discovers that even though the dusty earth itself envelops and swirls around him, neither his body nor his mind is consumed. In fact, rather than dragging his spirit downwards, Latour finds that the landscape—including not only the trees but also the very dust from the ground—literally rises upwards. Moreover, he discovers that the landscape’s *physical* upwards movement engenders his own, personal, imaginative and spiritual upwards movement. Hence, during the return trip to Santa Fe after his three-day visit in the

Navajo village, Latour, in an ecstatic, epiphanic moment, realizes that he has misinterpreted the landscape; the dominant feature of the Southwest is not the carnivorous ground but the open sky:

The plain was there, under one's feet, but what one saw when one looked about was that brilliant blue world of stinging air and moving cloud. Even the mountains were mere ant-hills under it. Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world; but here the earth was the floor of the sky. The landscape one longed for when one was far away, the thing all about one, the world one actually lived in, was the sky—the sky! (*Death Comes* 245)

Thus, somewhat ironically, Latour learns to love the landscape of his adopted home not because it is a special place in and of itself, but rather because it provides an open channel to other special places—which, of course, paradoxically makes the Southwest a very special place, in and of itself, after all. And in an equally-ironic twist, Latour discovers the Southwest's unique influence on his imagination not through his constant, desperate efforts to read the Southwest as anything *but* the Southwest, but rather through *abandoning* those efforts. By surrendering to his physical environment, by giving it his full attention, by existing *within* it rather than *apart* from it, Latour finds that it is far easier to see the universal and holy in the ordinary things that lie “about [him] always.” He cannot, in other words, see what is universal and holy without first appreciating what is ordinary. Thus, when Latour finally takes note of the ordinary, physical aspects of his new home, he experiences transcendence. And in the process, Latour discovers that embracing the physical world, becoming fully present within it, does not necessitate that

he sacrifice any part of his spiritual or intellectual life. Latour finds that instead of tying his imagination down, his roots in the physical world nurture his imagination, allowing it to branch further afield than he thought possible.

After Latour's visit to the Navajo village, and after his epiphanic realization that he has misread the landscape, the world in the novel, and, importantly, the world of the novel, becomes what Susan Rosowski describes as "a magical world in which correspondences link heaven and earth, past and present, history and legend" (*The Voyage* 167). In the final fourth of the novel, Cather begins to recycle images and events from the novel's early pages so that the experience of reading *Death Comes for the Archbishop* becomes an experience characterized by a persistent sense of déjà vu, or what we might consider to be a lesser, facsimile version of the "all" feeling. As the reader runs across scene after familiar scene, the times, spaces, and people that fill the novel's pages begin to overlap, blur together, and become indistinguishable.

Many scholars have acknowledged the "doubleness of space" (Winters 65), the "formal correspondences of doubling" (Rosowski, *The Voyage* 166), and the "recurring visual images" (Stouck 134) that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* contains, but scholars have thus far failed to point out that Cather's system of doubling does not truly come into play, and any noteworthy feelings of déjà vu do not strike the reader, until *after* Latour surrenders himself to the environment and realizes that such a surrender releases his spirit into the sky. The timing here is meaningful, for it is surely no coincidence that the *novel* opens up and becomes "a magical world...[of] correspondences" as soon as Latour realizes that the New Mexico *landscape* can, if he will let it, be "a magical world...[of]

correspondences.” Moreover, and more importantly, I also contend that critics have thus far failed to acknowledge the essential, common element that lies at the heart of every set of parallel images. For indeed, every doubled image contains a doubled tree, and by the story’s end, trees ultimately affect the readers in the same way that they affect Latour: they carry our minds upward and outward and send our thoughts hurtling across the time and space of the novel.

The repeated image in the novel that draws the most critical attention is the image of a garden. More specifically, critics tend to compare and contrast three of the novel’s gardens: the garden Latour plants in retirement on a hillside near Tesuque, the garden that Fray Baltazar plants atop the Ácoma Mesa, and the garden of the novel’s prologue, a garden in the Sabine hills overlooking Rome where three cardinals and Bishop Ferrand meet to discuss Latour’s appointment as Vicar Apostolic of New Mexico. The resemblance of Fray Baltazar’s garden to the garden in Rome is one of the few instances of doubling that occurs prior to Latour’s experience under the Navajo cottonwoods. Still, this set of repeated images is not a duo but a trio, so the system of correspondences remains incomplete—and therefore impossible to fully interpret—until Latour plants his garden near Tesuque in the novel’s final section (well after Latour’s transcendence under the cottonwoods). When noting the similarities between these three gardens, critics generally comment on the fact that each of these gardens is planted on a hill or a mesa that overlooks some other landscape. Excepting that, critics leave it unsaid as to why these three gardens seem to be members of a system of repeated images while other gardens in the novel—gardens in France, in Ohio, and in Santa Fe—do not. I agree that

the elevation of the three gardens in question undeniably helps to forge a unique relationship between them, but what I think plays an equally important role in forging this relationship is the presence of a fruit tree at the heart of each of these gardens: Latour's garden is shaded "by an apricot tree of such great size as he had never seen before" (277); Baltazar's garden is defined by his beloved peach trees; and the garden in Rome holds potted orange trees.

As we will see, Cather often constructs the duplicated scenes of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* by building them around a tree of certain species and then placing a tree of the same species in each scene's partner(s). Yet to draw a connection between the garden in the Sabine hills, the garden on the Ácoma mesa, and the garden near the Tesuque pueblo, Cather relies not on the reappearance of a specific species, but rather on the family resemblance of each tree's brilliant orange fruit.<sup>3</sup> That Cather does not employ trees of the same species in these parallel images is no accident, for at the same time that the trees' similarities *collapse* the distance and distinction between the gardens, the trees' differences also serve to *sharpen* the distinction between the three gardens and the men within them. In this way, Cather compels us to interpret each garden in light of the other two. Hence, when we compare the potted orange trees in Rome to the peach and apricot trees growing out of the New Mexico soil, we more clearly recognize the cardinals' detachment from the earth and its people. When we consider Fray Baltazar's imprudent attempt to make peach trees take root atop the hard stone floor of the Ácoma mesa, we

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<sup>3</sup> Taxonomically speaking, orange trees are not members of the same "family" as peach or apricot trees. Peach and apricot trees belong to the family Rosaceae and to the genus *Prunus*. Orange trees, on the other hand, belong to the family Rutaceae to the genus *Citrus*. But in terms of the metaphorical workings of the novel, these distinctions are irrelevant.

must wonder whether the cardinals' life of detachment is better than a life spent abusing the earth and its people. And when we finally turn our full attention to Latour's garden, laid out beneath a two-hundred-year-old apricot tree that has been bearing "large, beautifully colored" fruit "of superb flavor" (277) since before Latour's arrival in America, we more fully understand why Latour—who accommodates himself to the environment, "planting where prosperity has a natural chance" (Facknitz 302)—has made his mission in New Mexico a success. Yet even as these distinctions between the gardens come to the fore, it is impossible to completely ignore the gardens' similarities. Like Carol Steinhagen, we sense that Latour's garden, "being reminiscent of the garden of the evil sybarite Fray Baltazar," is tainted with a "malign aspect" (79), while, at the same time, in the gardens of the cardinals and Fray Baltazar—however perverted and misguided those gardens may be—we sense a very human desire for a connection to the natural world and the faint echoes of the belief that, in the words of Father Vaillant, we live "to plant where another shall reap" (41).

In addition to serving as a counterpart, and as a counterpoint, to the orange trees in Rome and to the peach trees on the Ácoma mesa, the enormous apricot tree in Latour's garden serves as both counterpart and counterpoint to another one of the novel's famous trees: the cruciform tree of the novel's opening pages. In this case, there is little resemblance, in appearance or in genetics, between the two trees, and, alone, the apricot tree would probably not conjure up memories of the cross-shaped juniper. But, of course, neither tree *is* alone; they both stand tall amongst a sea of squatting, cone-shaped junipers that spot the red hills of the New Mexico desert. Hence, it is the reappearance of the

distinctive junipers, not the appearance of the peach tree, that carries the reader's mind back to the cruciform tree.<sup>4</sup>

When we find ourselves, near the novel's conclusion, in the same juniper-dotted landscape where we began our journey with Latour, it is impossible not to reflect on how far Latour has come, and how much he has changed, in the intervening years. For indeed, it is Latour, not New Mexico, that has changed; the red, juniper-spotted hills, after all, remain red and juniper-spotted. The only difference between the desert in the novel's beginning and the desert in the novel's conclusion is the tree that Latour discovers *amongst* the junipers. And of course, in each moment, Latour discovers exactly the tree that he requires. Upon his arrival as a new missionary in New Mexico, Latour finds himself beneath a cross-shaped tree with a "naked, twisted trunk" out of which there miraculously bursts "a little crest of green...just above the cleavage" (18). The tree symbolizes what life as a missionary in New Mexico will demand: hardiness, sacrifice, and salvific grace. Near the end of his life, Latour once again finds himself beneath a miraculous tree in the desert, yet here he finds that the cruciform tree has been transformed into towering fruit tree—a symbol of, and reward for, Latour's fruitful life as the temporary (the tree is, after all, two-hundred years old) caretaker of New Mexico's people.

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<sup>4</sup> Aside from the moment when Latour discovers the cruciform tree at the novel's beginning and the moment he discovers the apricot tree at the novel's end, the "red sand-hills spotted with juniper" (267) appear at one other important juncture in the novel: Vaillant's departure from Santa Fe for his new life as a missionary in Colorado. Although I see little connection between Vaillant's departure through the juniper-spotted hills and Latour's discovery of the apricot tree, I do think that the resemblance between Latour's arrival in New Mexico and Vaillant's departure from New Mexico is significant. As Vaillant passes through the desert hills, the image of his departure seems to signal the beginning of Vaillant's own, true mission in life, just as Latour's journey through the juniper-spotted hills marked the beginning of his life's mission nearly ten years prior.



The final time that trees—which have, by the novel’s end, become important to Latour’s understanding of the world and to the reader’s understanding of the novel—appear in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Latour, nearing death, is reflecting on a trip he took in 1875 to Canyon de Chelly, home to the Navajo. More than a decade before Latour’s 1875 visit, Kit Carson’s troops had driven the Navajo people out of the canyon, but by the time of Latour’s trip, the Navajo had returned: “[O]nce more crops were growing down at the bottom of the world between the towering sandstone walls; sheep were grazing under the magnificent cottonwoods and drinking at the streams of sweet water; it was like an Indian Garden of Eden” (312-313). The Edenic scene framed by Canyon de Chelly’s walls, with its grazing sheep and “magnificent cottonwoods,” is an image that appears two other times in the novel. Shortly before we hear the story of Canyon de Chelly, we hear the story of Father Junípero Serra, who, in a legend that deeply stirs Latour’s imagination, is rescued from death in the desert by a three-person family: a man “clad in sheepskins,” a “young woman of beautiful countenance,” and a child “scarcely more than an infant” (294). When Junípero returns to the scene of his salvation with several skeptical priests in tow, they find only three tall cottonwood trees growing at the spot. Father Junípero, convinced that he was saved by Joseph, Mary, and Jesus in the guise of a humble Mexican family, falls to his knees and kisses the ground (295). And, of course, the *first* time that an Edenic oasis of cottonwoods and shepherds appears in the novel is when Latour, at the novel’s very beginning, is himself rescued from a torturous demise in the desert by his miraculous discovery of Agua Secreta—a place where Latour encounters “a boy driving a flock of white goats” (24) as well as

“great cottonwood trees” that shade the town plaza and overhang the settlement’s titular spring (31-32).

As in the other instances of recurring images in the novel, trees are not the *only* details that help to draw connections between the scenes featuring Canyon de Chelly, Father Junípero’s Holy Family, and Agua Secreta. Yet I think it is fair to say that in the mind’s eye, it is the cottonwoods that dominate and define each place where they grow, and it is the cottonwoods, more than any other element, that convey the reader’s thoughts to the other places and times where “magnificent cottonwoods” appear.<sup>5</sup>

What is immediately obvious about the scenes featuring Canyon de Chelly, Father Junípero’s Holy Family, and Agua Secreta is that each cottonwood-shaded oasis is a place of divine deliverance and respite. Each successive scene featuring an Edenic, cottonwood-shaded space makes the holiness of these places more obvious, and each, I believe, marks a transformation in Latour’s faith. During his stay in Agua Secreta, Latour admits to himself that his encounter with the cruciform tree and his subsequent arrival in Agua Secreta were, indeed, “miracle[s],” but he uses the word “miracle” reluctantly because he associates it with metaphysical phenomena that work “not with nature, but against it”—phenomena, in short, that he doubts exist (30). We might expect, then, Latour to roll his eyes at the story of Father Junípero’s encounter with the Holy Family.

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<sup>5</sup> The bare, gnarled cottonwoods growing near the Navajo village where Latour spends three days in reflection are the only other cottonwoods in the novel. Though these naked, contorted cottonwoods do not provide a perfect mirrored image of the Edenic cottonwoods that appear elsewhere in the novel, the gnarled cottonwoods do, in a way, serve as a perfect, inverted counterpoint to the novel’s lush cottonwoods. The Edenic cottonwoods are symbols of miraculous salvation and each serves to bolster Latour’s faith. The bare, twisted cottonwoods, in contrast, appear when Latour’s faith is at its lowest ebb. Nonetheless, bare and twisted though they may be, the cottonwoods in the Navajo country are cousins of the lush cottonwoods growing elsewhere in the novel, so it should be no surprise that they, in the end, perform their own kind of miracle—precipitating Latour’s experience of the “all” feeling and triggering the realization that in the desert, “the world one actually lived in, was the sky—the sky!” (245).

But by the time Latour hears Junípero's story, Latour knows very well the "all" feeling that the trees of the Southwest can precipitate; he appreciates trees' special ability to bring to life the stories and legends they hold in their branches; he understands the *experience* of standing beneath a tree and *feeling* the presence of something, or someone, holy. Thus, Latour refrains from overthinking or over-intellectualizing Junípero's story, and instead *allows* the story to make a "strong impression" upon him (296). And when we, finally, reach the depths of Canyon de Chelly just moments from the novel's conclusion, the scene, by incorporating non-Christian people into the novel's system of Christian symbology, seems to mark the final transformation of Latour's faith. The Mexican shepherds that Latour met in Agua Secreta have transformed, across the trio of cottonwood-shaded scenes, into the Holy Family, cottonwood trees, and, finally, into Navajo shepherds. Thus, as the three scenes swim together in our (and, presumably, Latour's) memory, the Mexicans, the cottonwoods, the Holy Family, and the Navajos collide, intermingle, and become indistinguishable, and the novel reveals itself as, ultimately, "a novel structured to collapse seeming oppositions, such as pagan and Christian, Europe and America, past and present, into one another" (Williams).

The final fourth of *Death Comes of the Archbishop* is full of scenes that hearken back to other parts of the novel. As the novel draws to a close, the trees that fill the novel's final pages continually send the reader's thoughts to the tree-defined spaces that we encountered in the novel's early pages. Cather's system of doubling is hardly subtle, but it is never clear if, or how consciously, Latour recognizes the echoes of other places and times "about him always" that *we* see. It seems impossible that he could recognize all

of the correspondences that the readers recognize. Latour, for example, presumably never visits, nor hears reports of, the garden in the Sabine hills overlooking Rome. Nonetheless, that the story of Father Junípero's deliverance makes such a "strong impression upon the Bishop" (296); that he spends his retirement in the same "red hills spotted with juniper" (267) where his mission began—these things hardly seem like coincidences. It seems likely, then, that Latour, on some level, senses the same correspondences that we sense. It seems likely that the trees transport his mind across time and space in the same way that they transport the reader's mind to other times and spaces in the novel. Yet that Latour never comments upon, or analyzes, the correspondences suggests that he has taken to heart the lesson he learned beneath the gnarled cottonwoods in Navajo country. He has overcome his fear of the Southwest and learned to relax the tight grip he used to hold on his consciousness. Instead of escaping the physical world by forcing his thoughts to places and times beyond his immediate environment, he contently accepts his place in New Mexico. And because he has embraced his place in the Southwest, his thoughts are able to move fluidly and freely along the spreading branches of New Mexico's trees until he discovers that he has transcended his environment and can see clearly "what is about [him] always."

### **Conclusion**

On the surface, the trees of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* appear to serve a function quite different from the function of trees of *My Ántonia*. Whereas trees in *My Ántonia* draw Ántonia *downwards*, rooting her in place and dissolving her *into* the Nebraska soil, trees in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* draw Latour *upwards* and *out of*

the New Mexico soil; however, I contend that the reason trees transport *Ántonia's* spirit and Latour's spirit in opposite directions is not due to a fundamental difference between the character of the trees in the two stories, but rather due to the fundamental difference between the characters of *Ántonia* and Latour. To find happiness, *Ántonia* must find her place in her local community; she must find her place in Nebraska's story. Latour, on the other hand, must find his place in a larger context. Latour's happiness depends upon situating his life story within a grand, universal story—a story of martyrs long dead and saints yet to be born, a story of palm-lined streets far away and dusty desert paths nearby.

Ultimately, trees serve the same fundamental purpose in both novels. In both novels, trees are repositories of memories and stories through which human characters, by adding their own story to the mix, find meaning, purpose, and, ultimately, their place in a community. In both novels, trees act as liminal spaces where disparate things—humans and nature, nature and God, the past and the present, the far and the near—collide, intermingle, and become indistinguishable. In short, trees, in both novels, are places of *connection*. And in addition to being metaphorical liminal spaces that connect disparate times, people, and places, trees also, of course, occupy and embody a *literal* liminal space between earth and sky. Hence, *Ántonia* and Latour each use trees' connection to both earth and sky to their respective advantages. They both find in trees what they need. For *Ántonia*, whose destiny it is to become an earth mother of Nebraska, trees are a conduit through which she grounds herself more deeply in the life of her immediate community. For Latour, whose destiny it is to become part of a more catholic

story (the story, in short, of Catholicism) trees are a conduit through which he transcends the bounds of his immediate community and finds connection to all of creation.

Were a Latour-esque character the central character of *My Ántonia*, we would, I believe, see trees connect him or her to a worldwide community beyond Nebraska's borders. Similarly, were an Ántonia-esque character the central character of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, we would, I believe, see trees root her or him more deeply into the American Southwest. And, to some extent, I believe we *do* see, through each novel's secondary characters, Latour-esque relationships to trees in *My Ántonia*, and Ántonia-esque relationships to trees in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

By the end of Latour's life, he has transformed, at least within the confines of his garden, the once-barren ground of New Mexico into a lush paradise; he grows "such fruit as was hardly to be found even in the old orchards of California; cherries and apricots, apples and quinces, and the peerless pears of France" (278). Yet for all the gardening Latour performs in the novel, it is not Father Latour but rather Father Vaillant who can be best described, like Ántonia, as a person *of* the earth. After all, it is Vaillant, not Latour, who first exclaims, "Surely we must find time to make a garden" and it is Vaillant, not Latour, who nostalgically wails, "Ah, my garden at Sandusky!" (41). It is Vaillant whose "hardened and seamed skin" (39) resembles Ántonia's bark-like "browed and hardened" skin (177), and it is Vaillant whose love for the tamarisk—a love he feels because the tamarisk "had been the companion of his wanderings" and is "the tree of the people" (210-211)—most resembles Ántonia's love for the trees growing in her orchard—trees she loves "as if they were people" (179).

It is no mistake, then, that the images of Vaillant that endure in the mind's eye at the novel's end are images of the priest rumbling in his wagon from one Colorado settlement to another, stopping at each to celebrate mass "under a pine tree" with a collection of earthy and earth-covered miners (270), while the images of Latour that endure in the mind's eye at the end of the novel are images of Latour gazing proudly up at his great, austere stone cathedral. As J. Gerard Dollar observes, "Vaillant typically contents himself with the roots—down where the earth is, where the people are," but the "ideal for Latour is always transcendent, to lift the rock into the sky (8). Latour becomes a gardener out of necessity, but he is an *artist* by nature. Hence, Latour loves the tamarisk for its *aesthetic* qualities—because its beautiful "fibrous trunk...full of gold and lavender tints" seems "especially designed in shape and colour for the adobe village" (210). And while Vaillant fails to understand why it should matter whether Santa Fe's cathedral is Midi Romanesque or Ohio German in style, Latour's greatest ambition is to avoid building a "horrible," "clumsy" (253) or "ugly" (254) church, but to build, instead, from "beautiful" and "gleaming gold" stone (252), a church of "the right style" for the country (253).

If *Ántonia's* grounded earthiness finds its analogue in Father Vaillant of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, than so too does Father Latour's romantic imagination find its analogue in two of *My Ántonia's* characters: Mr. Shimerda and Jim Burden. Like Father Latour, Mr. Shimerda, a musician, and Jim Burden, a writer, possess artistic sensibilities. And indeed, Mr. Shimerda's "dignified manner" (20) mirrors Latour's "distinguished" manners (18) and "delicate perceptions" (266). Mr. Shimerda's "white

and well-shaped” hands (20) are identical to Latour’s “delicate, rather nervous fingers” (218). Jim Burden’s “romantic disposition” and tendency to “lose himself in those big Western dreams” (6) resemble Latour’s frequent flights of fancy about such topics as the Moorish silver in the Angelus bell or the history of French soup. And when he returns to Black Hawk at the end of *My Ántonia*, Jim Burden feels “at home again” only out “in the pastures where the land was so rough that it had never been ploughed up” (195) just as during his final trip to Europe, Latour feels suffocated and longs for the unplowed land of the Southwest: “the air [in France] had quite lost that lightness, that dry aromatic odour. The moisture of ploughed land, the heaviness of labour and growth of grain-bearing utterly destroyed it; one could breathe that only on the bright edges of the world, on the great grass plains or the sage-brush desert” (288).

Given the similarities between Father Latour, Jim Burden, and Mr. Shimerda, it should come as no surprise that the tree which most captivates both Jim and Mr. Shimerda is the Burdens’ Christmas tree—a tree that becomes “the talking tree of the fairy tale,” a tree in which “legends and stories nestled like birds” (50). Just as New Mexico’s trees transport Latour’s spirit and imagination across oceans and across centuries, the Christmas tree transports Jim’s and Mr. Shimerda’s spirits and imaginations to times and places far removed from Nebraska’s plains, reassuring both of the new Nebraska transplants that even on the bare edges of the world, they remain part of a grand, universal story. It is, however, Jim and Mr. Shimerda’s tragic fate to never learn, as Latour does, to fully embrace the physical world and surrender their imaginations to the trees growing naturally out of the earth. In an artificial setting, the uprooted Christmas



tree, decorated with man-made artifacts, displays very conspicuously the stories of disparate places and times. But neither Mr. Shimerda nor Jim ever realizes that the trees growing out on the plains could nourish his imagination in the same way as the Christmas tree propped up in the sitting-room. Neither character realizes that *every* tree holds the world's stories in its branches, that *every* tree can both deepen our relationship with our local community *and* send our thoughts outward and upward. Thus, neither character ever feels entirely at home in Nebraska. Mr. Shimerda commits suicide and Jim moves away.

As an artist herself, Cather may have transferred her own feelings about Nebraska and New Mexico onto her novels' artist characters. As Cather revealed in a 1912 letter to Elizabeth Sergeant, Cather, like Jim Burden, loved Nebraska, but she never felt entirely comfortable on the plains:

The West always paralyzes me a little. When I am away from it I remember only the tang on the tongue. But when I come back I always feel a little of the fright I felt when I was a child. I always feel afraid of losing something, and I don't in the least know what it is. It's real enough to make a tightness in my chest even now, and when I was little it was even stronger. I never can entirely let myself go with the current; I always fight it just a little, just as people who can't swim fight it when they are dropped into water. (Letter to Elizabeth Sergeant)

The reason Cather struggled to let herself "go with the current" in Nebraska is unclear. Sharon O'Brien posits that the anxiety Cather felt when she returned to Nebraska arose from the same "association Cather made in her fiction between the return to the mother and death" (408), while John Murphy, quoting Edith Lewis, suggests that Cather never

entirely shook the feeling, which began during Cather's childhood, that the bare plains separated her "from everything she longed for and wanted to become" (qtd. in Murphy 325).

Whatever anxieties prevented Cather from letting herself go with the current in Nebraska did not follow her to the Southwest. The Cather of the Southwest was, according to her friend Elizabeth Sergeant, a Cather "set free and moving with the current" (83). Sharon O'Brien contends that Cather found the Southwest "congenial to release, expansion, and self-abandonment" not only because it, unlike Nebraska, did not evoke childhood anxieties, but also because its mesas, canyons, and mountains provided boundaries and landmarks that made its topography less overwhelmingly monotonous (408). In the Southwest, Cather allowed herself "to enter and be entered by the external world" and as a result found "the psychological state central to her creative process...a state in which the ego realizes its guard over consciousness, a state which Willa Cather found too frightening on the prairies" (O'Brien 409).

In other words, just like Latour, Cather discovered in the Southwest "Something soft and wild and free, something that whispered to the ear on the pillow, lightened the heart, softly, softly picked the lock, slid the bolts, and released the prisoned spirit of man into the wind, into the blue and gold, into the morning—into the morning!" (*Death Comes* 273). And just like Latour, Cather found the Southwest a place where time and space collapsed. While visiting cliff dwellings during her first visit to the Southwest in 1912, Cather was "deeply...stirred" by contact with an "an age-old...but intensely near and akin civilization" (Lewis 81). She met a young Mexican singer who reminded her of

an “antique sculpture in the Naples Museum,” and she described the region around Albuquerque as “something like the country between Marseilles and Nice” (Sergeant 80-81). And as the ideas for *Death Comes for the Archbishop* percolated in her brain, Cather writes that “Archbishop Lamy...became a sort of invisible personal friend” (“On *Death Comes*” 375). In short, Cather found the Southwest a setting of “grandiose and historical scale” (Sergeant 81), a setting whose story needed to be told, according to Cather, in the “style of legend” (On *Death Comes* 376).

The impact of Midwest and Southwest landscapes on Cather’s psyche is reflected not only in the psyches of the artist characters in *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, but also in the formal elements of each novel. Both novels are episodic, but the episodes of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* ultimately cohere more successfully—particularly once Latour embraces his physical environment, and the novel, in turn, begins to deploy the system of doubled images that ultimately “bind chronological time into the continuous present” (Stouck 132). The novel’s form thereby comes to reflect both Latour’s all-encompassing perspective as well as the clarity and “control of inner creative forces which had tended to swamp her” that Cather *herself* experienced in the Southwest (Sergeant 85).

The episodes that make up *My Ántonia* cohere slightly less successfully than those of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, though if form indeed follows function, it is somewhat unfair to criticize *My Ántonia* for its failure to perfectly cohere. Jim Burden, after all, narrates the story, and the episodes that may confuse or disorient the reader—such as the third section, titled “Lena Lingard,” which barely mentions the

novel's titular character—serve to emphasize the feelings (confusion, disorientation, and loss of connection to *Ántonia* and the community she represents) *Jim* feels by making readers feel the same way. Thus, just as Nebraska baffled Cather—making her “afraid of losing something” though she never could identify “in the least” what that *something* was—and just as Nebraska perplexes *Jim*—“disappointing” him and making him feel “at home” all at once—so does the novel's form make the readers feel like the novel is missing *something*, even if we are never quite sure what that *something* is. Were the story's events filtered through *Ántonia*'s perspective, we might expect a more linear novel, a novel more grounded in time and place. And, were *Ántonia* the narrator, it seems likely that—just as trees help *Death Comes for the Archbishop* to cohere by standing at the center of the novel's doubled images—trees in an *Ántonia*-narrated tale would help to delineate the story's form, perhaps marking the passage of time with their slow growth out of the Nebraska soil. But *Ántonia*, of course, is not the narrator of her own story, and, indeed, it may have been impossible for Cather to write a story containing so many autobiographical details in a form different from the (somewhat-confused) form her own thoughts took when she considered her childhood home.

Taken together, *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* can, I suggest, provide insight into Cather's own evolving relationship with the natural world—an evolution that was inextricably linked with her development as an artist. In *My Ántonia* we sense Cather's profound longing for a deeper connection with Nebraska and Cather's dismay at her failure to forge the kind of connection with the land that *Ántonia*, or *Ántonia*'s real-life counterpart Annie Pavelka, forged. Then, in *Death Comes for the*

*Archbishop*, we sense Cather's ecstasy at discovering, like Latour, a landscape that freed her mind and honed her imagination.

More simply, together, *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* can be read as a parable about the importance of *finding* a connection to the natural world that best suits one's own personality—a parable, in short, about finding one's place. For although Latour's relationship to his environment closely mirrors Cather's own relationship with the natural world, it would be a mistake to claim that Latour's relationship with the Southwest is "better than" Ántonia's relationship with the Midwest. Ántonia and Latour love their environments in different ways and for different reasons, but Cather writes about both characters, and the ways they interact with the world around them, with palpable reverence. In the end, then, Cather presents us not with a didactic lesson but rather with an open-ended question—a question that asks us to consider how our relationship with trees, and the natural world as a whole, might help each of us to find where, and how, we belong. And whether we spend our time down with the roots or up in the branches, what ultimately matters is that we have, in the open plains and barren deserts of our lives, a tree through which, and in which, we find our place.

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