From Wine Glass to Plow: Willa Cather's Anticipation of *My Ántonia* in "The Bohemian Girl"

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Sarah Orne Jewett counseled Willa Cather in a 1908 letter to relinquish her editorial duties at *McClure's* magazine and commit herself exclusively to writing fiction: "You must find your own quiet centre of life," she advised "and write from there" (*Letters* 249). While serving as an editor, Cather completed her first novel, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), and several short stories. As Jewett observed, these efforts too often drew on artificial or shallow sources. The older writer urged Cather to exploit the rich natural material of her personal experience: "You have your Nebraska life,—a child's Virginia, and now an intimate knowledge of what we are pleased to call 'the Bohemia' of newspaper and magazine office life. These are uncommon equipment" (248). In the autumn of 1911, Cather took a leave of absence from her magazine position to revise *Alexander's Bridge* for serialization. She also wrote a novella, "The Bohemian Girl," published by *McClure's* in August 1912. The story marks Cather's first mature work to draw on her Nebraska memories of immigrant families, specifically her childhood friend Anna Sadilek Pavelka. According to Elizabeth Sergeant's memoir, Cather told her the story "was different from anything she'd ever written" (76). In a letter to Louise Pound, Cather asked her Nebraska friend to not bother reading *Alexander's Bridge* but to wait instead for "The Bohemian Girl" because it was real (Woodress 222). In 1912 Cather resigned from *McClure's* magazine and,

following Jewett's advice, thoroughly excavated her mine of "Nebraska life" material in her next three novels: *O Pioneers!* (1913), *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *My Ántonia* (1918).

Most critics ignore "The Bohemian Girl"; the story remained unavailable until 1965 when the University of Nebraska Press published it in *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction*. It did not appear in a mass-market paperback edition until 1989. Many critics dismiss "The Bohemian Girl" because they perceive Cather as having rejected it herself. She did not include the novella in her 1920 story collection *Youth and the Bright Medusa*. Despite melodramatic plotting, the story exhibits many of Cather's mature talents. Cather biographer James Woodress contends that in her old age Cather dismissed the story as immature but she may have left the story uncollected because it bore too great a resemblance to *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*. Woodress agrees with most critics in describing "The Bohemian Girl" exclusively as a "practice piece" for her first prairie novel *O Pioneers!* because of the similarities in plot and close chronological proximity (229). Yet "The Bohemian Girl" exhibits just as many connections and analogies to Cather's last fictive examination of her Nebraska memories, *My Ántonia*. The antecedents for several characters, images and themes found in the 1917 novel can be traced directly back to her 1912 magazine story. A comparison of the two narratives reveals how Cather transformed the melodramatic requirements of a romantic novella into the complex characters demanded by a novel.

Cather wrote "The Bohemian Girl" during the most crucial time in her literary career. In relatively few months she fundamentally shifted her focus from journalism and magazine stories to fully considered novels. Biographer Sharon O'Brien asserts that with this novella "Cather created a new literary identity without rejecting her past" (398). According to Sergeant, Cather believed that no magazine would consider "The Bohemian Girl" because it diverged so strongly from her previous work. But in a March 1912 Letter to Sergeant, Cather details the surprising reaction from *McClure's* general manager Cameron Mackenzie toward her new story. The letter shows both Cather's still-novice attitude toward her profession, and a new author's genuine enthusiasm at publication.

> I have actually sold the Bohemian Girl. Isn't that a jolt?…when I was lunching with the business manager, he asked me if I had nothing to show for my stay in the country. When I told him I had a story too

> long, to [sic] "high-brow," too remote etc, he said he guessed he'd like to see it that night if I'd send it up by the office boy. The next day… he offered me seven hundred and fifty dollars for it. I laughed him to scorn; he doesn't know how much a story is worth to his magazine half so well as I do, and I told him so. By no sort of figuring can such a story possibly be worth more than five hundred to McClures, so we finally agreed on that price. But he said I was silly, and I promised to take $750 for the next one. Everyone in the office was enthusiastic about the story—in the name of goodness why, I wonder? They will publish it this summer, all in one number, though I shall have to cut it some. But isn't this too amazing? (*Selected Letters* 143)

McClure's heavily advertised the novella as a "Coming Attraction" in the July issue and featured the story's title prominently on the August edition. The illustrations by Sigismond de Ivanowski emphasize the story's sentimental aspects. They depict the lovers surreptitiously holding hands in a garden café and the heroine's final scene on the darkened prairie as she decides to elope with her lover. The hero stands ready with their horses so that they can catch the train seen approaching in the distance. The illustrations accurately portray the story's conventional romanticism common to the popular magazine fiction of the early twentieth century. The story evidently pleased readers. In a September 1912 letter to Sergeant, Cather wrote: "My surplus of time, my release from office bondage is really due to the strange way that 'The Bohemian Girl' has 'gone'; at least the business office has heard a lot about it and we've had a lot of letters…Everyone seems to like it much better than Alexander, which upsets all my theories about what people like and all Mr Mackenzie's" (*Selected Letters* 168).

The plot of "The Bohemian Girl" follows the traditionally melodramatic course of a worldly young man who offers an unhappy housewife the opportunity for romantic escape. After several years abroad, Nils Ericson returns to his family's prosperous Nebraska farm. In the intervening years his preacher father has died and Nils's mother has asserted herself as the family matriarch. Cather extends the melodrama to include a secret will granting Nils ownership of the family homestead. Nils rekindles his childhood romance with Clara Vavrika, now unhappily married to his stoic older brother Olaf. Nils renounces his claim on the family fortune and convinces Clara to leave her husband and return with him to Europe. But Cather does not end her story with the sentimental image

of two lovers eloping on horseback across the prairie. Instead Cather provides a concluding chapter or epilogue in which the lovers secretly correspond with Eric, Nils's youngest brother. For a year after their elopement Nils and Clara urge the boy to follow their romantic example and join them in Europe. Eric runs away but returns after one night because he cannot break his emotional ties to his home and mother. Woodress records that Cather added a scene to the story after its sale but before its publication. He conjectures that the final chapter is probably the added sequence because it is a "definite anticlimax" (226-27). This sequence may also have caused Loretta Wasserman to describe the story in *Willa Cather: A Study of the Short Fiction* as "overwritten" (42). Yet O'Brien argues that this ending raises "The Bohemian Girl" from a conventional magazine love story to one "about risk, change, and self-renewal" (397). Regardless of the composition process of the second ending, its presence reveals Cather's ambiguous attitude toward the presentation of Nebraska in her fiction. She resolves this conflict both thematically and among her characters with *My Ántonia*.

These conflicts appear most readily in the plot similarities between "The Bohemian Girl" and Book IV of *My Ántonia*. In both sequences a young man returns to Nebraska and renews his relationship with a Bohemian girl from his youth. The hero's romantic and idealized memory of this girl causes him to pursue a final communion with her. In "The Bohemian Girl," Nils initially returns to Nebraska out of curiosity and a vague feeling of nostalgia. This nostalgic tone pervades *My Ántonia* as Jim returns in Book IV for a final sustaining visit before embarking on his New York career. The structure of a short story or novella demands that the author focus on a series of concentrated episodes, often omitting detailed exposition and compressing time to advance the plot. In the first half of *My Ántonia* Cather presents the childhood relationship of Ántonia and Jim to which she can only allude in "The Bohemian Girl."

Parallels of plot between the two works appear so superficially obvious that "The Bohemian Girl" might easily serve as a subtitle for the 1918 novel. But on closer examination the titles reveal a clear distinction in thematic approach. Still tied to traditional cultural forms, Cather took the title for "The Bohemian Girl" from a nineteenth century opera by Michael Balfe (Giannone 51). She also includes two lyrics from this opera to highlight Nils and Clara's romantic encounters in her father's tavern. They emphasize the story's theme of bittersweet remembrance: "For memory is the only friend/That grief can call its own" (26).

Cather continues this artificial imagery when Nils acknowledges their role as romantic characters. While planning their elopement, Nils tells Clara: "They'll always remember us as we're dancing now. We're making a legend" (34). With the strong possessive tone of *My Ántonia*, Cather severs any debt to conventional romanticism and clearly claims this material as her own.

The titles also reflect the different narrative techniques used by Cather. In "The Bohemian Girl," she employs a traditional omniscient third-person narrator to facilitate the rapid advancement of plot and clear delineation of character necessary for a melodrama. In *My Ántonia*, the title becomes a point of personal revelation for Jim Burden's character. He deliberately changes the original title of his narrative, "Ántonia" to "My Ántonia," emphasizing his conscious role as a subjective narrator. The title also initiates the narrative device of storytelling that appears throughout the novel as many characters relate separate stories. This technique suits a novel especially well; if used in a short story, it could easily confuse and distract the reader. As with much of Cather's fiction she begins both narratives in mid-journey. "The Bohemian Girl" opens with Nils's return to Nebraska by train: "The transcontinental express swung along the windings of the Sand River Valley" (3). Because he has changed greatly in his travels, the station master greets him as a stranger. Cather repeats this device in her original introduction to *My Ántonia* in which a nostalgic conversation reminds Jim of "a Bohemian girl" during a cross-country train trip (*MÁ* 6). Jim also opens his narrative of the novel proper with his remembrance of a train trip: "I first heard of Ántonia on what seemed to me an interminable journey across the great midland plain of North America" (*MÁ* 9). Like Nils, Jim has family in Nebraska but arrives as a virtual stranger.

Both plots also include the vivid description of a suicide but each episode serves a different function in the story. As an aside, Nils dispassionately retells the story of an eccentric farmer who strangled himself by ingeniously using a stick to twist twine around his neck. Eric wonders about the dead man's motivation but Nils dismisses the suicide as silly. The retold story briefly introduces the desperate loneliness of the prairie and emphasizes the different responses to it by Nils and Eric. In *My Ántonia* the suicide of Mr Shimerda, similarly intricate, plays a central role in the novel's development. It emphasizes the tragic isolating

power of the land and the necessity of a strong community. Cather also uses Shimerda's suicide to develop Jim's religious awakening as the boy senses his ghost returning to his homeland in peace.

"The Bohemian Girl" contains many antecedents to characters found later in *My Ántonia*. Nils Ericson obviously corresponds to Jim Burden as a returning romantic hero. Befitting a conventional love story, Nils's love for Clara progressively deepens as the plot advances. Yet Jim's affection for Ántonia is cemented early in the novel during their childhood experiences. He does not fall in love with Ántonia as a young man. Instead, the dynamic of Jim and Ántonia's relationship derives from his attempt to maintain an idealized image of her. Nils also differs from Jim in his lack of devotion to his family and Nebraska heritage. He intellectually admires the "heroic frame" of the pioneer women but regards them as separate from himself (29). Jim identifies so strongly with Ántonia's final role of prairie mother that he fancies himself as a surrogate member of her brood, even sleeping with her sons in the hayloft. Cather anticipates Jim's worship of prairie life in "The Bohemian Girl" by assigning familial awareness to the youngest brother, Eric. He abandons all wanderlust for the love of his mother. A short narrative demands that such disparate perspectives be placed in separate characters. But in *My Ántonia*, Cather can incorporate the two Ericson brothers into Jim, granting him the complexity required of a strong narrator. This combination of divergent characteristics does not read as contradictory, but rather provides Jim with the means for his salvation. His memory of Nebraska, Ántonia, and his childhood friends anchors his emotions whereas his intellectual restlessness impels his wanderings. While studying at the University of Nebraska, Jim observes the continuing presence of his past: "whenever my consciousness was quickened, all those early friends were quickened within it and in some strange way they accompanied me through all my new experiences. They were so much alive in me" (141-42).

Ostensibly Clara Vavrika Ericson corresponds to Ántonia Shimerda Cuzak because both portray haunting Bohemian girls. But they display vastly different attitudes toward their lives and their connection to the land. Cather presents Clara as selfish, discontented, and often bitter in her misplaced role of homemaker to a politician farmer. She fulfills few of her traditional duties, relegating them instead to her efficient aunt Johanna (an antecedent for Mrs Shimerda). Throughout the story, Clara remains a passive outsider resigned "to let her destiny be decided for

her by intelligences much below her own" (14). She finds her only solace amid the Bohemian community in her father's tavern garden. Clara never assimilates but rather maintains her foreigner status throughout the story. At a barn-raising celebration, Nils celebrates the pioneer women present:

> He fell into amazement when he thought of the Herculean labors those…hands had performed: of the cows they had milked, the butter they had made, the gardens they had planted, the children and grandchildren they had tended, the brooms they had worn out, the mountains of food they had cooked. (29)

This description could easily fit Ántonia but Nils understands that Clara will forever stand apart from the prairie women: "'she'd never be like them, not if she lived here a hundred years. She'd only grow more bitter. You can't tame a wild thing; you can only chain it'" (29). In *My Ántonia*, Cather reconciles the foreignness of the Bohemian girl to the requirements of prairie life. Clara's failure becomes Ántonia's success.

Despite Clara's complete cultural alienation from the Ericsons, she does share a defining trait with Ántonia. Cather connects both heroines strongly to the land. The romantic climax to "The Bohemian Girl" occurs at night in a wheat field where the two lovers meet to elope. Nils refuses to declare his love for Clara but promises that he will never leave her. Clara balks at their escape as she realizes that her existence, albeit miserable and confining, is defined by her relationship to the land:

> The great silent country seemed to lay a spell upon her. The ground seemed to hold her as if by roots…Never could she pass beyond that skyline against which her restlessness had beat so many times. She felt as if her soul had built itself a nest there on that horizon…it was dear to her, inexpressibly dear (37).

For Clara, the grandeur of the land represents tragic suffering from which only Nils can save her. Imposing his will on hers, he lifts Clara onto her horse and charges her to the station melodramatically shouting "A last gallop, Clara Vavrika. Forward!" (38). Cather must describe Clara as miserable and disenfranchised for her ultimate rescue by Nils to be read affirmatively. In direct contrast with

Clara's situation, Ántonia ultimately emerges as the ideal immigrant, providing the nation with future races. Whereas Clara feels trapped by the power of the land, Ántonia accepts her connection to it and exults in it. Like Clara she endures a loveless marriage but she adapts to her role of pioneer woman and succeeds. Clara marries for material and political reasons—her husband depends on the Bohemian vote—but Ántonia marries to found and continue a family. Jim's identification of Ántonia with the land reads as a sharp contrast to Clara's imprisonment: "She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last…She was a rich mine of life…" (*MÁ* 186).

Both Clara and Ántonia enjoy strong loving relationships with their fathers, Joe Vavrika and Mr Shimerda respectively. Cather presents both men as violin players with great nostalgia for their homelands, but they experience opposing fates. Joe Vavrika succeeds within the Bohemian settlement by insulating himself in his tavern from the physical and cultural hardships of the Nebraska frontier. Vavrika's tavern anticipates Anton Jelinek's saloon in *My Ántonia*, in that both provide a romantic escape for the young heroes. Mr Shimerda fails to adapt to the prairie. His death severely alters the family's emotional ties to Europe and forces them to acclimate to their new home. Eric's father and Jim's grandfather also share a strong resemblance, particularly in their expression of religious tolerance. Although Nils's preacher father dies before the story opens, the son invokes his memory to rebut his mother's bigotry against the Bohemian community. Her derisive response reveals the dead father's liberality: "'Your father,' Mrs Ericson said grimly, 'liked everybody'" (19). Jim's grandfather performs the same role in *My Ántonia*. When Mr Shimerda kneels before the Burden's Christmas tree as if it were a religious icon, the Protestant grandfather surprisingly does not object. He explains later, "'The prayers of all good people are good'" (*MÁ* 52).

Cather's strongest anticipation of *My Ántonia* in "The Bohemian Girl" lies in her use of natural imagery. The two narratives illustrate how her imagery evolved from negative sublimation to positive revelry. In "The Bohemian Girl," Cather acknowledges the sublime power of the land but also accuses it of overwhelming individuality: "The splendour of it seemed to transcend human life and human fate. The senses were too feeble to take it in, and every time one looked up at the sky one felt unequal to it, as if one were sitting deaf under the waves of a great river of melody" (34). Engulfed by the landscape, Nils's "own life seemed strange and