

**University of Pardubice**  
**Faculty of Arts and Philosophy**

**The Question of Social Difference in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia***

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**Bachelor Thesis**

**2021**

Univerzita Pardubice  
Fakulta filozofická  
Akademický rok: 2018/2019

## ZADÁNÍ BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

(projektu, uměleckého díla, uměleckého výkonu)

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Studijní obor: **Anglický jazyk pro odbornou praxi**  
Téma práce: **Otázka sociálního rozdílu v knize *Moje Antonie* od Willy Cather**  
Zadávající katedra: **Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky**

### Zásady pro vypracování

Bakalářská práce se zaměří na zobrazení nerovnosti mezi prvními osadníky na území americké prerie v románu *My Antonia* od Willy Cather. V teoretické části autorka charakterizuje danou oblast v období krátce před příchodem prvních přistěhovalců, popíše důvody, které je motivovaly k osidlování této nehostinné krajiny, a pojedná nejen o jejich původu, ale i o vznikajících společenských nerovnostech na území dnešní Nebrasky. V analytické části se studentka zaměří na vyobrazení rozdílů mezi prvními osadníky ve výše zmíněném díle a bude se zabývat kořeny této nerovnosti nejen u hlavních, ale i u vedlejších (především ženských) postav. Svoji argumentaci autorka opře o relevantní sekundární zdroje. Práci zakončí přehledné shrnutí daných zjištění.

Rozsah pracovní zprávy:  
Rozsah grafických prací:  
Forma zpracování bakalářské práce: **tištěná/elektronická**

Seznam doporučené literatury:

Cather, Willa S. *My Ántonia*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin: Dover Thrift Editions, 1977.  
Crow, Charles L. *A Companion To The Regional Literatures Of America*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2003.  
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Datum zadání bakalářské práce: **30. dubna 2019**  
Termín odevzdání bakalářské práce: **31. března 2020**

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Denisa Čermáková

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my supervisor Mgr. Petra Kalavská, Ph.D, and also doc. Mgr. Šárka Bubíková, Ph.D., for their guidance and valuable advice. Furthermore, I would like to thank my family and my friends for their help and support.

## ANNOTATION

This bachelor thesis deals with the question of social difference in the book *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather. It describes the life and difference between immigrants in Nebraska in the late 19th century. The theoretical part provides a historical and geographical context, focuses on the arrival of immigrants and the social division of society. The practical part demonstrates the differences in the characters from the book.

## KEY WORDS

Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*, Shimerdas, social difference, American dream, immigration, Great Plains

## ANOTACE

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá sociálním rozdílem v knize *Moje Antonie* od Willy Cather. Popisuje život a rozdíl mezi imigranty na území Nebrasky ke konci 19. století. Teoretická část poskytuje historický a geografický kontext, zaměřuje se na příchod imigrantů a sociální rozdělení společnosti. Praktická část demonstruje již samotné rozdíly na postavách z knihy.

## KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Willa Cather, *Moje Antonie*, Šimerdovi, sociální rozdíl, americký sen, imigrace, Velké planiny

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## **Introduction**

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, America underwent a major transformation to the form we know today. In the past, the middle of the United States was not inhabited at all. The great wave of migration came in connection with the Homestead Act, which made it possible to rent land for a very small tax. Many people took advantage of this opportunity and, with the vision of getting rich and a better life, people from all over Europe immigrated to America.

In the book *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather describes the arrival of the first pioneers and their path full of suffering. Maintaining a sustenance was very difficult. There were several factors that influenced life of pioneers, such as the climate, the language barrier, race or money.

Past years have also been connected to a position of women in society that was far from the one that is typical nowadays. For centuries, the role of women has been an integral part of society and every household. But the woman was not always taken seriously and respectfully. Women in the past were often seen as slaves to the household, their main task was to take care of the children, the household and the husband.

The theoretical part focuses on the description of the Great Plains area and its settlement. Furthermore, it focuses on the differences between the first settlers, where they came from and what reasons they had to abandon their birth country. It also characterizes the division of social classes and the relationships between them, which includes not only the difference between the people generally, but also between women and men. It also characterizes the literary style of regionalism and its authors, including Willa Cather, who wrote about settlers and immigrants in their works.

The analytical part focuses mainly on the main and afterwards secondary female characters in the book *My Ántonia*. The thesis follows the same timeline as the book is written. It discusses the differences between the characters from their childhood when they first arrived in Nebraska and each family had to deal with their lives in their own way. The next chapter describes the characters in their teenage years, when they left for the city and they experienced working for someone else. The last chapter portrays the characters as adults, how the differences between them deepened, what impact life in the city had on them and finally how their lives ended.



## 1. Settlement of the Great Plains

Great Plains are also referred to as Great American Desert because of their flat and surface, which is mostly covered by grassland and prairie. <sup>1</sup> Especially the states of Kansas, Nebraska and North and South Dakotas are located in the same continental climate and although this dry area did not offer beneficial and prosperous conditions for living, people started to settle there for various reasons.

One of the most significant reasons of settlement was the Homestead Act established in 1862, which allowed to buy 160 acres of land for a very small fee and then to cultivate this land for over five years. For accomplishing this conditions people could own the land.<sup>2</sup> As the land in Great Plains was really cheap, lot of people came to start a farm. African- Americans were one of the settlers because of their poverty they could not afford expensive land and also they were oppressed after the Civil War. But the largest increase of settlement was recorded right after the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> Different groups of people came there, such as freed slaves, who wanted to finally start a new free life, also people from the eastern seaboard came for the reason that they could not afford their own land because of growing population and the land becoming more expensive. Americans from New York and Pennsylvania sent their children to settle around Kansas, Dakota and Nebraska.

Many other settlers came from Europe due to various reasons such as lack of land for sale in their home country or a desire to live a better life without political or religious control. It was groups of Czech people, Germans, German Russians, Swedes and lots of others.<sup>4</sup>

However, the first immigrants came mainly from northern and western Europe. Those groups were called “old immigrants” and they were more easily accepted by the society than so called “new immigrants”, who came from southern and eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup>

Adaptation was not easy for Europeans in many ways. They were struggling with climate and weather and natural conditions like tornadoes, fires, blizzards and drought. This

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<sup>1</sup> “Great Plains,” Article, Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed November 17, 2020.

[https://www.britannica.com/place/Great-Plains\\_](https://www.britannica.com/place/Great-Plains_)

<sup>2</sup> “Homestead Act of 1862,” Article, Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed December 2, 2020.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Homestead-Act>

<sup>3</sup> David B. Danbom, *Sod Busting: How Families Made Farms on the Nineteenth-Century Plains* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2014), 6.

<sup>4</sup> “Reasons for westward expansion”, Article, *BBC Bitesize*, accessed December 2 2020.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/znhkpg8/revision/6>

<sup>5</sup> Harold Bloom, *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Willa Cather's My Ántonia* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), 41

was easier for immigrants who came from eastern Europe, for example Russia, because weather conditions were similar and they could adapt better and quicker.<sup>6</sup>

Czech immigrant group was one of the largest. They settled the Great Plains between the years 1865 and 1914 in the territory of states of Nebraska, Texas, Oklahoma, North and South Dakotas, Montana and Colorado. Their homes were usually on the farms or in the small towns. The biggest city of the above states where Czech American lived was Omaha in Nebraska. Between these immigrants there were various differences in religion, social class and occupation. Half of Czech immigrants were called the “freethinkers” which is demonstrated by establishing their own fraternity or associations instead of being part of any organised religion.<sup>7</sup>

Another group of settlers throughout the Great Plains was Poles, the most of them settled in Nebraska and North Dakota. Some of them were political refugees who joined the US Army.<sup>8</sup> Thousands of families came from Scandinavian countries, such as Norway, Denmark and Sweden. Despite the different climate, they were courageous and they did very well and proved to be strong pioneers.<sup>9</sup>

Germans came to settle because the traditional ways of life and work in Germany started to change into factory production and they were looking for a better economic situation in America and also they saw benefits in land ownership.<sup>10</sup> The group of German Russians who had to immigrate lived in Russia. Many of them accepted the offer from Catherine the Great. It consisted in turning the area around the Volga region into agricultural and productive centre by skilled farmers. In return she offered privileges like religious freedom, cultural protection and a possibility to leave. All this changed with the Alexander II., who cancelled almost all privileges and their only option was to immigrate to United States.<sup>11</sup>

Many people came also from England and Scotland to Nebraska and Dakotas, because they were attracted to the cattle industry. They expected profit and adventure.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “European Americans,” Article, Encyclopedia of the Great Plains, accessed December 2, 2020, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.ea.001>

<sup>7</sup> “Czechs,” Article, Encyclopedia of the Great Plains, accessed December 2, 2020, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.ea.006>

<sup>8</sup> “Poles,” Article, Encyclopedia of the Great Plains, accessed December 2, 2020, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.ea.030>

<sup>9</sup> Walter Havighurst, *Great Plains States: A Geography* (Grand Rapids, The Fiedeler Company, 1967), 57.

<sup>10</sup> “Germans,” Article, Encyclopedia of the Great Plains, accessed December 2, 2020, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.ea.013>

<sup>11</sup> “German Russians,” Article, Encyclopedia of the Great Plains, accessed December 2, 2020, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.ea.012>

<sup>12</sup> Havighurst, *Great Plains States: A Geography*, 57- 59.

## 2. Social class division – 19th century

From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, America was gradually becoming one of the strongest countries in the world. A lot of factors have changed, from demography, territorial expansion, economic situation to social organization and division.

At the beginning, the Great Plains were inhabited by Native American tribes, who lived their peaceful life without any intervention from white people. But as soon as the Homestead Act was established, the mass migration of European farmers started. This has shown human hatred, envy and racial intolerance, because new comers got into the bottle with Native Americans, who were defeated and who were pushed into seclusion to the poorest areas.<sup>13</sup>

Right from the beginning there were problems with racism and bigotry, which supported the inequality among all people. The North was dealing with the reconstruction of the South and furthermore they had to deal with freed slaves. Slavery was later illegal, but many people did not respect black codes, so the American citizenship was established. It still was not enough, and white people had problems with those black ones, so another amendment was enacted and African Americans got the right to vote in 1870.<sup>14</sup>

The poor areas were also occupied by cattle ranchers with large herds of buffalo that were replaced by herds of market cattle. But the slaughter of buffalo was a great and useless loss and as a result of this the Plain Indians, whose life depended on the buffalos, vanished. However, the cattle ranchers soon had problems with the incoming farmers who started to build fences around their farms with crops to protect it from the cattle, but the ranchers wanted to have the free space for their animals. This led to disagreements and conflicts and to ecology changes. Moreover, farmers from the West and Mid-West were producing crops for the Eastern people, where population was growing very fast, instead of running self-providing farms as the Jeffersonian-style farmers did. Little by little by growing corn and other crops the soil got exhausted and the erosion had started. Furthermore, the periods of drought did not help and due to other various reasons, such as over-productions, falling market prices, high transport tariffs or high debt rates, farmers were forced to abandon or sell their farms in the 1880s and 1890s. These lands became an interest for corporations which started industrial farming. It was

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<sup>13</sup> Hans Bertens, Theo D'haen, *American Literature: A History* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 93.

<sup>14</sup> "Social class in America," Article, WordPress, last modified July 6, 2011, <https://leahasilver.wordpress.com/2011/07/06/1865-to-1900-2/>

impossible for Eastern farmers to continue their farming and they were forced to abandon their farms too, then migrate to West and there join to urban proletariat.

The industrial area was growing very fast. The new sources of energy were used, such as electricity and oil. The railroads were built across America, of which there were four intercontinental links. Owing to refrigerator cars the mass production over long distances of meat was possible. Communication between people was more frequent because of usage of the telephone and the population of cities was rapidly growing, for example in Chicago the population increased from twenty eight thousand to one million in forty years.<sup>15</sup>

Living conditions in the cities were quite poor for the working class. People were often living in crowded flats, but from that they developed their own neighbourhoods, culture and relationships.<sup>16</sup> The working conditions were in the most cases horrible, since there was female and child labour, long working hours, low wages and in general the working conditions were awful and unhealthy and existence of these people was precarious.<sup>17</sup> The wage for women was barely the quarter of what men made and no protection laws were applied to children.<sup>18</sup> It is true that some children had the opportunity to attend school or at least Sunday school to gain basic knowledge like reading or writing, but the income was more important for the family, so the children had to work in the factory instead of going to school.<sup>19</sup> The incoming immigrants mostly worked in factories or in sweatshops in a garment district.<sup>20</sup> Many people did not have much experience in sewing, some of them knew a little from home. However, inventive and skilful people who were lucky soon set up their own successful business.<sup>21</sup>

Those people could be classified as the middle class. According to Daniel R. Hundley, a son of a slave-owner, the people from the middle class were ones of the most useful members of society. They were traders, mechanics, some manufacturers and farmers, schoolteachers, country lawyers, doctors and parsons.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bertens et al., *American Literature: A History*, 94.

<sup>16</sup> "A New Social Order: Class Divisions," Article, Lumen Learning, Accessed January 8, 2021, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/ushistory1os2xmaster/chapter/a-new-social-order-class-divisions/>

<sup>17</sup> Bertens et al., *American Literature: A History*, 94.

<sup>18</sup> "Social class in America", Article, *WordPress*, last modified July 6, 2011, <https://leahasilver.wordpress.com/2011/07/06/1865-to-1900-2/>

<sup>19</sup> "A New Social Order: Class Divisions," Article, Lumen Learning, Accessed January 8, 2021, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/ushistory1os2xmaster/chapter/a-new-social-order-class-divisions/>

<sup>20</sup> Bertens et al., *American Literature: A History*, 95.

<sup>21</sup> "History of Sweatshops: 1880-1940," Article, National Museum of American History, Accessed January 8, 2021, <https://americanhistory.si.edu/sweatshops/history-1880-1940>

<sup>22</sup> Daniel R. Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (Massachusetts, Applewood Books, 1860), 77.

It may be observed that during the industrialization the foundation of the middle class was created. The roles of men and women became more stereotyped as the man was the head of the family and was supposed to bring the salary, the woman was expected to stay at home and take care of her children. With this also education was becoming more and more important to these families.<sup>23</sup> The middle class children were lucky that they could attend school and did not have to work in factories, by which they gained free time for their self-improvement, for reading the books or playing the piano or they played various educational games. Families also began to reduce the number of their children, as they realized that education and quality childcare cost time and money.<sup>24</sup>

Economy was growing fast in America and that gave rise to a large economic elite and its wealth, also the industrial capitalist elite had been formed by wealthy merchants. Many rich people came from families that had a prosperous business in colonial trading with tea, sugar or slaves across the trade paths with Europe and the Far East. Merchants started expanding their economic movements and they focused on specific types of industry, which was based on ownership of their factories and on specific commercial services like banking, insurance, and shipping.<sup>25</sup>

That is also where a new idea and figure of the social class came to existence – self-made businessman. They took control over the huge sectors of industry, but their practices were often unfair, whether it was law manipulation or ruthless competition. These businessmen were known as “robber barons” and all they were interested in was success. For example J.D. Rockefeller, who operated the oil industry, Cornelius Vanderbilt from the railroad sector, or Andrew Carnegie, the steel tycoon.<sup>26</sup>

An important aspect for this sphere of people was marriage. It functioned as a strengthening of relationships between wealthy families and also helped to develop their business, which was often implemented in the luxurious homes of social elites. With the development of ostentatious homes, affluent neighbourhoods began to emerge, which wanted

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<sup>23</sup> “Social class in America”, Article, *WordPress*, last modified July 6, 2011, <https://leahasilver.wordpress.com/2011/07/06/1865-to-1900-2/>

<sup>24</sup> “A New Social Order: Class Divisions,” Article, Lumen Learning, Accessed January 9, 2021, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/ushistory1os2xmaster/chapter/a-new-social-order-class-divisions/>

<sup>25</sup> “A New Social Order: Class Divisions,” Article, Lumen Learning, Accessed January 9, 2021, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/ushistory1os2xmaster/chapter/a-new-social-order-class-divisions/>

<sup>26</sup> Bertens et al., *American Literature: A History*, 95.

to separate from the poorer classes, and thus the whole city began to be divided according to social classes.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “A New Social Order: Class Divisions,” Article, Lumen Learning, Accessed January 9, 2021, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/ushistory1os2xmaster/chapter/a-new-social-order-class-divisions/>

### 3. The position of woman in society

For a long time men had the most important role in almost every part of life, deciding and power, but the role of a woman was often underestimated. The situation was not any different in the Great Plains, men loved them, but women maybe had contrasting opinion.

When the Homestead Act was established, many women took a change and gained the free land for themselves. These women were usually very young and they wanted to experience adventure, achieve something and take care of themselves and to secure their economic situation. Also divorced, widowed or deserted women had a chance to acquire free land. Even elderly women could afford to rent the land, for example sixty- seven woman emigrated from Russia and started the new life in the Great Plains. This possibility was very beneficial for women from different ethnic groups like Danes, Hollanders, Germans, Bohemians, Poles, Ukrainians or Jewish Americans. Only married women could not own the land unless they were the head of the whole household.<sup>28</sup>

People varied in experiences with farming, some managed everything alone and some came with the family or children and some got help from a friend. For instance, a woman from Norway came all alone to the Plains, even if she did not know the English language and she had not known anyone.<sup>29</sup>

Although some women came to the Plains with their whole families, it was necessary for them to help with farming in the fields, at least at the beginning, although this varies from the traditional stereotype of a woman taking care of a household. Women did planting, ploughing, drag rocks out of the fields and pitched wheat bundles while men used agricultural machinery.<sup>30</sup> According to the survey many women lacked the farming tools, they said that their husbands and men in general were able to spend money on agricultural machinery, but they would not buy any tools for women to make their fieldwork easier.<sup>31</sup> In spite of this some women actually liked this kind of agricultural work, but many of them were happy when their children grew up and could took over the field work and they could come back to housework. But taking care of the household was not much easier. At the beginning of the 1900's women

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<sup>28</sup> "Women Homesteaders," Article, Encyclopedia of the Great Plains, accessed January 15, 2021, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.040>

<sup>29</sup> "Women Homesteaders," Article, Encyclopedia of the Great Plains, accessed January 15, 2021, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.040>

<sup>30</sup> "Women in Agriculture," Article, Encyclopedia of the Great Plains, accessed January 15, 2021, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.041>

<sup>31</sup> Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 1.

had some helpful facilities and things, for example canned food or hand-crank clothes wringers, but they did not have such huge possibilities of using of modern devices that city women had been using.<sup>32</sup>

It must be mentioned that women as homesteaders did very well. They found employment in professions such as a teacher, a seamstress, a nurse or a domestic worker. Those more courageous ones worked in journalism or photography. Some of them got married and started a family, but some of them stayed single. Those, who really reached the economic success continued in cultivating their lands and purchased another ones or they sold the lands and invested the money into the different sector.

Those Great Plains women were similar to today's modern woman in many ways. They were brave, resourceful and skilful. The ideas they came up with consumed lot of their time, but were later used, for example for building schools, churches and other community buildings. And that is why these women are considered pioneers of the community.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "Women in Agriculture," Article, Encyclopedia of the Great Plains, accessed January 15, 2021, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.041>

<sup>33</sup> "Women Homesteaders," Article, Encyclopedia of the Great Plains, accessed January 15, 2021, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.gen.040>



#### 4. American regionalism

Regionalism first appeared in America in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>34</sup> or the end of the Civil War is given as a more specific date of the start of this style. But the desire to write about the regions appeared much earlier. The American authors wanted to have their own American literature without any marks of copying foreign works. For this it was important to analyse the basis of American literature and furthermore, the nature of its readers. America was criticised for not being able to produce authentic literature and in one of the magazines the question of who really reads the American literature arose. But the American writers of course defended their literature and challenged nation to speak their own minds.<sup>35</sup>

For regionalism the setting is crucial as it tries to point out the authenticity and to add the interest to the story. It describes specific cultural and geography, and emphasises particular features such as history, music, region, dialect or dress, so the style of writing is often decorative and the mood of the story can be sometimes nostalgic.<sup>36</sup>

This literary style is also referred to as a local colour. However, some authors claim, that the some of the regional writing have more psychological depth and affinity, than the local colour writing should have.<sup>37</sup> Characters in regional stories represent the locale instead of being depict as individualized people. Regional writing uses two types of narration, and that is the first-person and the third-person. In the first-person the narrator is usually somehow part of the region, otherwise in the third-person the narrator keeps the distance between the characters or the place and the author and in this case the reader has to recognize whether the intention of this is ironic or sympathetic.<sup>38</sup>

Regionalism has a lot of famous and successful representatives among men and women. For instance Mark Twain (1835– 1910), who was one of the greatest authors and his regional realistic works were on the top. He was grew up in a small town on the Mississippi river, which inspired him to write the books *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Life on the Mississippi* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.<sup>39</sup> Another successful author and also Twain's friend is Bret Harte (1836– 1902). His works were written with a touch of irony, melodrama and sentiment

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<sup>34</sup> Bertens et al., *American Literature: A History*, 95.

<sup>35</sup> Charles L. Crow, *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 95.

<sup>36</sup> J.A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (Malden: Wiley- Blackwell, 2013), 407.

<sup>37</sup> Gary Scharnhorst, Thomas Quirk, *Research Guide to American Literature: Realism and Regionalism, 1865– 1914* (New York: Facts On File, Inc., An imprint of Infobase Publishing, 2010), 57

<sup>38</sup> Scharnhorst et al., *Research Guide to American Literature*, 58.

<sup>39</sup> Bertens et al., *American Literature: A History*, 97.

and he had just two themes - American west in 1860s and the mining camps in California.<sup>40</sup> He was the first one to introduce characters of dubious existences, like prostitutes, gamblers and robbers. His famous works are for example *The Luck of Roaring Camp* and *The Outcasts of Poker Flat*.<sup>41</sup> Next author Edward Eggleston (1837- 1902) brought to life a sub-genre of regionalism, the regional fiction. The description of the local setting was excessively detailed, and the local speech was emphasized. His famous works are for example *The Hoosier Schoolmaster: A Story of Backwoods Life in Indiana* or *The Graysons: A Story of Illinois*.<sup>42</sup>

At the end of the 19th century, racial and social inequalities began to occur, so the works were mostly focused on social criticism. Also as the letters of the female authors indicated, together they created their own circle of moral support and influence and they works consisted mainly of novels, humorous prose and poems.<sup>43</sup>

One of the female authors focusing on social issues was Kate Chopin (1851- 1904), whose famous work *The Awakening* again deals with a woman as the main character. The young woman who has everything from a successful husband and children to money voluntarily gives up all of this to find her own identity and self-realization.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, this novel was criticised and her works were forgotten for almost the whole next century. But it came to life almost at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century and her novel *The Awakening* was seen as a call for women's emancipation as her story already suggests.<sup>45</sup>

Another one of the famous female regionalist authors is Willa Cather (1873- 1947). She was born in Virginia and spent her childhood in the Nebraska plains with new coming immigrants. Willa had another 6 siblings and was the oldest of them. The family moved to Nebraska when she was nine years old. At this age, she was still a little girl and she was not very happy at first and felt homesick and no one really took that into consideration. But later, Willa had started to have a passion for that country.<sup>46</sup>

She was an extraordinary person since she was born, she held on to the fact that she was born in 1876. Her middle name is Sibert, which she has adopted after her uncle, who perished

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<sup>40</sup> Bertens et al., *American Literature: A History*, 103.

<sup>41</sup> Kathryn VanSpanckeren, *An Outline of American Literature* (Vienna: United States Information Service, 1994), 94.

<sup>42</sup> Bertens et al., *American Literature: A History*, 103.

<sup>43</sup> VanSpanckeren, *An Outline of American Literature*, 55.

<sup>44</sup> VanSpanckeren, *An Outline of American Literature*, 55.

<sup>45</sup> Bertens et al., *American Literature: A History*, 105.

<sup>46</sup> Elinor V. Sharpe, *Willa Cather's Works As They Reflect Early American Folkways* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest LLC., 2014), 2

in the Civil War and she had ever met him and she also dedicated a poem to him called *The Namesake*.<sup>47</sup> Cather's father used to own a farm before he led an insurance office, they were always really close to each other and her father often mirrors in her books. As soon as the Cather's family moved to Nebraska, she began her education. She was very interested in literature and read a lot. She met an immigrant couple who introduced her to other literature and she had access to their extensive library. Later, this couple was her model for her short story *Old Mrs. Harris*.<sup>48</sup>

She has always had a respect for immigrant woman she often visited them in farms to listen to their anecdotes. Willa was very talented and skilled in many things. Her early dream was to become a surgeon, she was a friend with the family doctor and she accompanied him on his visits. With her another friend she consulted scientific experiments. Her other great interest was for music. Her neighbour Mrs. Julia Miners later represents Mrs. Harling in *My Ántonia*. Daughters of Mrs. Miners, Carrie and Irene are also portrayed in *My Ántonia* and the book is dedicated to them, because they stayed friends forever. Thanks to Miners family she met Annie Sadilek, she was a hired girl and later portrayed as Ántonia in the book.<sup>49</sup>

Willa was always a little different from other people. She was very much in favour of women's rights, even though, for example, she played male characters in theatre plays at school. She also wore her hair cut short and signed her name as William Cather, Jr. That's why people speculated about her sexual orientation and thought she might be a lesbian. This was confirmed when Cather lived in Lincoln, where she fell in love with her friend, but she did not return her love.<sup>50</sup>

She tried various jobs, from journalist, editor to teacher. Her famous works are for example *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia* and *Neighbour Rosicky*. In general, her works discuss the fate of women in the regional environment.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Danielle Russell, *Between the Angle and the Curve - Mapping Gender, Race, Space, and Identity in Willa Cather and Toni Morrison* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 8.

<sup>48</sup> Tatiana Vomáčková, "The Influence of Czech Immigrants on Willa Cather's Literary Work" (PhD diss., Charles University in Prague, 2016), 11.

<sup>49</sup> Tatiana Vomáčková, "The Influence of Czech Immigrants on Willa Cather's Literary Work" (PhD diss., Charles University in Prague, 2016), 12.

<sup>50</sup> Tatiana Vomáčková, "The Influence of Czech Immigrants on Willa Cather's Literary Work" (PhD diss., Charles University in Prague, 2016), 13.

<sup>51</sup> VanSpanckeren, *An Outline of American Literature*, 62.

The last example is Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852- 1930), who focused her works on rural life and horrible conditions under which the farmers had to live, *A New England Nun and Other Stories*.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Bertens et al., *American Literature: A History*, 105.

## 5. Demonstration on the characters

### 5.1. Life as children

In the book *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather portrays the life of Czech immigrants in the American Great Plains, especially in Nebraska. The story is mainly focused on the two families, the Czech Shimerda family and the American Burden family. Later in the book the reader finds out more about the side characters and their lives. Each of the characters or families represents a different social class and background. Through their life the reader can experience the social difference in that era and the position of immigrants in the society.

The Shimerdas family immigrated to America because of a dissatisfied life and they were also the first Bohemian family, who came to live to the part of Nebraska near the town of the Black Hawk.<sup>53</sup> Although they wanted to start a brand new and happy life, they had to face many complicated situations. The view of a better life is often described as an American dream, which is exactly why many immigrants came to America.<sup>54</sup> Ántonia's mother was so blinded by the wealth that she could not think of a negative thing that could happen during their immigration and she also did not care about the rest of her family's opinion as Ántonia's words confirmed: "My *mamenka* make him (Mr. Shimerda) come. All the time she say: 'America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls.'<sup>55</sup>"

As Willa Cather said in one of the interviews the immigrants came to America to live a similar and happy, yet better life they lived in the Old World. But because of people making prejudices they could not create that pleasant life. This is how Cather saw the United States, as a nation with plentiful cultural diversity, but with the opinion that immigrants are unable to assimilate properly.<sup>56</sup> In any case, the book shows how hard it was for the immigrants to start their life in a completely different environment. From Mr. Shimerda's narration the reader knows that at first, no matter what, he was proud of his family, both when they lived in Bohemia and in America. The second, his family was doing admirably great back in Bohemia, they were a respectable family, he was making enough money to provide for his family, even after the voyage to America they had a lot of money left. All their difficulties started in America. As a

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<sup>53</sup> Willa S. Cather, *My Ántonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin: The Riverside Press Cambridge, 1918), 22, <https://www.ibiblio.org/ebooks/Cather/Antonia/Antonia.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> Jessica Rabin, *Surviving the Crossing - (Im) migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Nella Larsen* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 26.

<sup>55</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 102.

<sup>56</sup> Tim Prchal, "The Bohemian Paradox: My Ántonia and Popular Images of Czech Immigrants," *MELUS*, no. 2 (2004): 4.

consequence of their ignorance of language, when they were cheated in the exchange office, the prices were significantly higher.<sup>57</sup>

The most difficult problem was that they did not know the English language, so the communication with other people was very demanding for them. Only *Ántonia* could speak English, but the only sentence she could say was “We go Black Hawk, Nebraska”<sup>58</sup>. However, *Ántonia* can be seen here as a shining example of a hard-working girl with a desire to learn a foreign language so that she can fit into the normal course of life of her new home. From the moment *Ántonia* arrived in Nebraska, she began learning English. Her father was very proud of her and he also wanted *Ántonia* to learn English, so he gave a book to Jim’s grandmother and asked her for help with words “Te-e-ach, te-e-ach my *Án-tonia!*”<sup>59</sup> *Ántonia* asked Jim for help with learning and she was an enthusiastic student according to Jim’s words “Almost every day she came running across the prairie to have her reading lesson with me.”<sup>60</sup>

The language barrier also caused the Shimerdas to be deceived by their countryman *Krajiek*, who was helping them to obtain their property. But he was cunning and he knew he is the only one who the Shimerdas have in America and he took advantage of their trust and rather than a house he sold them a hideous cave, which was overpriced, Mrs. Burden could just confirm that: “If they’re nice people, I hate to think of them spending the winter in that cave of *Krajiek*’s.”... “It’s no better than a badger hole; no proper dugout at all. And I hear he’s made them pay twenty dollars for his old cook stove that ain’t worth ten.”<sup>61</sup> Thus *Krajiek* contributed to the family struggle by his greedy behaviour.<sup>62</sup> When Mr. Shimerda was buying horses from *Krajiek*, *Otto Fuchs* wanted to intervene so that old man would not overpay. This was the case when his prejudices about the Bohemians prevented him from doing so and the certain difference between the nationalities could be seen:

“I’d have interfered about the horses - the old man can understand some German - if I’d ’a’ thought it would do any good. But Bohemians has a natural distrust of Austrians. Grandmother looked interested. “Now, why is that, *Otto*?” *Fuchs* wrinkled his brow and nose. “Well, ma’am, it’s politics. It would take me a long while to explain.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 55.

<sup>58</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 4.

<sup>59</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 30.

<sup>60</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 34.

<sup>61</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 23.

<sup>62</sup> Whitney N. Scott, “Grave Space: Mr. Shimerda’s Suicide And The Prairie In *My Ántonia* and Is This Still Shellmound?: The Plantation’s Troubled Boundaries In *Delta Wedding*” (MA diss., The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2013), 8.

<sup>63</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 23.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the American press used its magazine issues to spread various prejudices about Czech immigrants and people disseminated many stereotypes. As Sláma wrote in one of his letters to *The Bohemian Voice* newspaper, they did not have the right to spread those rumours, because they did not know the people personally and they just wanted to be fancy, on the other hand the number of people who could spread any stereotypes was less than ten. Therefore the book *My Ántonia* can be seen as a response to these judgements about Czech immigrants and it is kind of reshaping those stereotypes.<sup>64</sup>

The first social difference which is noticeable at the beginning of the book is standard of life and houses. Although Jim and Ántonia's family arrived concurrently, there was a huge difference in an environment they came to. Jim had already everything prepared, he knew he would not be alone in the new country, he had a house, food and everything else. On the contrary, the Shimerdas had nothing prepared. They headed for the unknown, without background, money and friends.<sup>65</sup>

Jim's grandparents were the portrayal of the average American village family. They lived on a farm and they had two grooms Jake Marpole, who arrived together with Jim, and Otto Fuchs, he was an Austrian and came to America as a little boy. Their house was quite spacious and one of the best houses, which added to the family's higher social status:

I had been told that ours was the only wooden house west of Black Hawk — until you came to the Norwegian settlement, where there were several. Our neighbours lived in sod houses and dugouts - comfortable, but not very roomy. Our white frame house, with a story and half-story above the basement, stood at the east end of what I might call the farmyard, with the windmill close by the kitchen door.<sup>66</sup>

In the house, there was a spacious kitchen with the large stove divided into the dining room on one side and the kitchen on the other side. The surprising fact for Jim was when his grandmother told him to go have a bath “down to the kitchen” and not “out in the kitchen” as he was used to from home.<sup>67</sup> Also they had a long cellar with the outside door and the place where men can wash out the dirt when they come from the outside. Jim slept in his own room with a bed on the upper floor of the house.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Prchal, “The Bohemian Paradox,” 4.

<sup>65</sup> Whitney N. Scott, “Grave Space: Mr. Shimerda's Suicide And The Prairie In *My Ántonia* and Is This Still Shellmound?: The Plantation's Troubled Boundaries In Delta Wedding” (MA diss., The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2013), 7.

<sup>66</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 15.

<sup>67</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 10.

The Shimerda's dwelling was much worse and smaller. They were literally living in a dark cave with stifling air, where they had only one window, so it was very dark in there and they had only one lantern with low light. One of their sleeping places was on a gunnysack filled with straw and the place for the girls is described as "in the rear wall was another little cave; a round hole, not much bigger than an oil barrel, scooped out in the black earth."<sup>69</sup> In these conditions, they had not been able to store groceries, for example the potatoes in a barrel were frozen and started to rot.<sup>70</sup>

Nature played a huge part in the lives of immigrants. It was clear from Jim's description that nature and climate were completely different considerably worse than he was used to in Virginia where he came from "There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made."<sup>71</sup>

Jim came to his grandparents to Nebraska when he was ten years old, which was only one year difference when Willa Cather came there. They had a lot in common and she basically sees her second self in Jim. Both, Willa and Jim had an experience with immigrants from the Old World. Jim came to Nebraska as a lonely orphan, whereas Willa came with her family members, but she felt lonely and she wanted to project her feelings of solitariness and desolation into Jim by making him an orphan. During the whole story the life of Cather and the life of Jim continue to intersect. They became friends with many foreigners and both of them had the same opinion on the contemptuous situation around the immigrants. As Jim comments on the local people and their attitude to foreign people: "I thought the attitude of the town people toward these girls very stupid. ... What did it matter? All foreigners were ignorant people who couldn't speak English. ...they were all Bohemians, all 'hired girls.'"<sup>72</sup> All immigrants, including *Ántonia*, had to face racial slander and were considered contemptible.<sup>73</sup>

The Shimerdas were not ready for new conditions, they had no experience with farming, and it took a large amount of time until they learned a bit about cultivating, yet with help from obliging neighbours. It is a nice example of diversion of people in the book, Mrs. Burden was

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<sup>69</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 85.

<sup>70</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 85.

<sup>71</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 7- 8.

<sup>72</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 228.

<sup>73</sup> Peggy E. Sahaida, "Forging New Paths: Willa Cather's Female Pioneering Artist" (MA diss., Truman State University in Missouri, 1997), 93.



a kind and generous woman with a Virginian charm, whereas Mrs. Shimerda made an impression of a mean and envious woman:

...she (Mrs. Shimerda) ran about examining our carpets and curtains and furniture, all the while commenting upon them to her daughter in an envious, complaining tone. In the kitchen she caught up an iron pot that stood on the back of the stove and said: "You got many, Shimerdas no got."<sup>74</sup>

The whole time she was immersed in her fantasy of American dream and she did not show humbleness, even it would be appropriate because the family was in a bad situation and she had no right to take liberties with the Burden family.<sup>75</sup>

Whereas Mrs. Shimerda kept being jealous, Mr. Shimerda became more and more helpless and sad, because their living did not go as they dreamed. *Ántonia* mentioned "My papa sad for the old country. He not look good. He never make music any more. At home he play violin all the time; for weddings and for dance. Here never."<sup>76</sup> The family despair intensifies in cruel winter, when they are cut off from the outside world they have barely something to eat. The whole situation results in suicide of Mr. Shimerda. According to Daiches the severe weather, snow and frosts amplify the horror situation of Shimerdas family and the suicide dilemma.<sup>77</sup> Another opinion by Scott is that he had to go through a great bifurcation of personality, where the first one was a man with a successful life, loving family, friends and work, whereas the second one was just an old devastated man with a crumbling life.<sup>78</sup>

As time passed, Jim and *Ántonia* grew older and the difference between them was evident. Spring came and *Ántonia*'s family finally began to prosper after the tragic event. With the help of neighbours, they built a new house, bought a cow and poultry, and even a windmill. So the family finally managed to rise from a poor situation to a higher social position.

*Ántonia* started to work in the field and at this point the transformation in her personality is visible. She works hard because she wants her mother to be proud of her and there can be even seen a certain implication of boasting that she can do as much work as her brother Ambrosch and also she can do more work than her neighbours when she said to Jim: "Jim, you ask Jake how much he ploughed to-day. I don't want that Jake get more done in one day than

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<sup>74</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 101.

<sup>75</sup> Michaela Plicková, "Emerging Voices: The Portrayal of Minorities in the Work of Willa Cather" (BA thesis, Charles University in Prague, 2012), 20.

<sup>76</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 102.

<sup>77</sup> David Daiches, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1951), 47.

<sup>78</sup> Whitney N. Scott, "Grave Space: Mr. Shimerda's Suicide And The Prairie In *My Ántonia* and Is This Still Shellmound?: The Plantation's Troubled Boundaries In Delta Wedding" (MA diss., The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2013), 4.

me. I want we have very much corn this fall.”<sup>79</sup> Mrs. Shimerda was worried about Antonia, because she worked so much: “Heavy field work’ll a spoil that girl. She’ll lose all her nice ways and get rough ones.”<sup>80</sup>

On the situation of the field work, one can also observe the difference between a man and a woman, that the man was still superior to the woman. Where Jim also refers to Mr. Shimerda he would not like how *Ántonia* was doing. Whenever I saw her come up the furrow, shouting to her beasts, sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust plastered, I used to think of the tone in which poor Mr. Shimerda, who could say so little, yet managed to say so much when he exclaimed, “My *Án-tonia!*”

Nowadays Tony could talk of nothing but the prices of things, or how much she could lift and endure. She was too proud of her strength. I knew, too, that Ambrosch put upon her some chores a girl ought not to do, and that the farmhands around the country joked in a nasty way about it.

Later, Jim asked *Ántonia* if she wanted to go to school with him, on which she said no, again because of work in the field. She was glad that she could do the work just as good as men.<sup>81</sup> According to Scott this is caused by her father’s death, when he took his life, he took a part of *Ántonia* with him, but just in spring she could liberate and look up in the nature. Her rebirth in nature could help her to find her gender identity, because the work in field makes her look very masculine.<sup>82</sup>

This attitude completely changes the social position of *Ántonia* from the little girl who was thrilled that she can get an education to the girl who does not care about anything else just farming, so she stagnates and can or want no longer to build up her self-development while Jim seems to be thrilled that he can grow further. He can clearly see the change of *Ántonia* when the question came to his mind “Was she going to grow up boastful like her mother, I wondered?”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 140.

<sup>80</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 143.

<sup>81</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 141.

<sup>82</sup> Whitney N. Scott, “Grave Space: Mr. Shimerda’s Suicide And The Prairie In *My Ántonia* and Is This Still Shellmound?: The Plantation’s Troubled Boundaries In Delta Wedding” (MA diss., The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2013), 2.

<sup>83</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 141.

## 5.2. Life in the town

In the second part of the book “The Hired Girls” Cather writes and adds a view on the situations of immigrant girls who came to town for better life and work and they have to adapt to the conditions with the local people. Those girls were of mixed nationality, at the age of fifteen to twenty and single. They were hired by richer people who could afford to pay for housekeeping services.<sup>84</sup>

Jim’s grandparents decide to move to town, because the farm work was too demanding for them. They moved into a family house in the Black Hawk. Jim liked the town and his description of it confirmed that the family has improved its social status.

Black Hawk, the new world in which we had come to live, was a clean, well-planted little prairie town, with white fences and good green yards about the dwellings, wide, dusty streets, and shapely little trees growing along the wooden sidewalks. In the centre of the town there were two rows of new brick “store” buildings, a brick schoolhouse, the courthouse, and four white churches. Our own house looked down over the town, and from our upstairs windows we could see the winding line of the river bluffs, two miles south of us.<sup>85</sup>

Within only one month, they acclimated to the city, they adapted socially and made acquaintances. It was obvious that the Burden family was successful from the very beginning, no matter where they lived, they were able to create family background and a happy home. Jim could even see the change in himself when he became a city boy, but he knew he still had a lot to learn.<sup>86</sup>

Before the Burdens moved, Mr. Burden, of course, told Jake and Otto. They decided not to move to the Black Hawk with them instead they were seduced by the American dream:

Otto said he would not be likely to find another place that suited him so well; that he was tired of farming and thought he would go back to what he called the “wild West.” Jake Marpole, lured by Otto’s stories of adventure, decided to go with him. We did our best to dissuade Jake. He was so handicapped by illiteracy and by his trusting disposition that he would be an easy prey to sharpers. Grandmother begged him to stay among kindly, Christian people, where he was known; but there was no reasoning with him. He wanted to be a prospector. He thought a silver mine was waiting for him in Colorado.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Sylvia L. Sallquist, “The Image Of The Hired Girl In Literature The Great Plains, 1860 To World War I.”, *Great Plains Quarterly* 4, no.3 (1984): 166.

<sup>85</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 165.

<sup>86</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 166.

<sup>87</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 163 – 164.

In the meantime, *Ántonia* still stayed stranded in her home and hard-working in the field. Fortunately, Mrs. Burden found a work of housekeeper for her in a house of the Burden's neighbours, the Harlings and saved her from the terrible suffering on the farm. Harlings owned a large land with a house, a windmill and an orchard and Mr. Harling was a successful businessman.

When Ambrosch and Mrs. Shimerda came to Harlings with *Ántonia*, they argued with Mrs. Harling about money, because Ambrosch wanted to all *Ántonia*'s salary went to him and he would buy everything, like clothes and shoes for *Ántonia* himself. He stated that they want *Ántonia* to become a town girl and dress her up into grotesque clothes.

Jim and his grandparents were happy to see *Ántonia* almost every day, when she lived in town those days. *Ántonia* knew they did not like her status of a farm girl and she immediately proclaimed "Maybe I be the kind of girl you like better, now I come to town."<sup>88</sup> As she hoped they will like her more then and they would not despise her. Jim was also happy to speak about *Ántonia* in a positive way. But as *Ántonia* had her own head and she still had her own opinion on herself that she would be rather working in the field in the fresh air than indoors. She was proud of her muscles and she told Jim: "I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man."<sup>89</sup> In this way, she actually rejected the social status of a housewife, rejected feminism, and by declaring her opinion, she wanted to rise above the situation and stand up for her own point of view.<sup>90</sup>

However, as *Ántonia* spent more time in the house, she slowly started to realize that she liked that type of work, house cleaning, cooking and playing with children. She was always full of energy when they played outside together. Staying with the Harlings was a pleasant change in an environment for her. Evenings in the prairie were monotonous, but in the town it was entertaining thanks to all the bustle.<sup>91</sup>

Mrs. Harling gave *Ántonia* valuable advice in life, which she could later apply in her own household and family. These two characters were similar in certain ways as Jim proves:

They had strong, independent natures, both of them. They knew what they liked, and were not always trying to imitate other people. They loved children and animals and

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<sup>88</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 176.

<sup>89</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 157.

<sup>90</sup> Peggy E. Sahaida, "Forging New Paths: Willa Cather's Female Pioneering Artist" (MA diss., Truman State University in Missouri, 1997), 88.

<sup>91</sup> Peggy E. Sahaida, "Forging New Paths: Willa Cather's Female Pioneering Artist" (MA diss., Truman State University in Missouri, 1997), 89.

music, and rough play and digging in the earth. They liked to prepare rich, hearty food and to see people eat it; to make up soft white beds and to see youngsters asleep in them.<sup>92</sup>

Although *Ántonia* and Mrs. Harling were women who were passionate about their activities and had pleasure from that, Mrs. Harling was a type of woman who mastered her woman's responsibilities, she still trusted her husband and followed his directions about doing things and acting in a public, as usually women did in those times. The only reason of Mrs. Harling being the head of their house was because her husband was often away on his business trips. When Mr. Harling came home he demanded peace in the house and the attention of his wife.<sup>93</sup>

If he was at home, the children had to go to bed early, or they came over to my house to play. Mr. Harling not only demanded a quiet house, he demanded all his wife's attention...Mrs. Harling paid no heed to anyone else if he was there. ... and his wife made coffee for him at any hour of the night he happened to want it.<sup>94</sup>

Despite the fact that Mrs. Harling was not so critical about *Ántonia*'s behaviour as for example Mrs. Burden, she was still attached to the idea of fixed roles in the family and supported her husband in his decisions and did not protest even when he fired *Ántonia* for refusing to stop attending dance soirées.<sup>95</sup> *Ántonia* did not want to follow Mr. Harling's orders, arguing that he was her boss only in the terms of her work. Mrs. Harling could not intercede for *Ántonia* because the head of the house was Mr. Harling.<sup>96</sup>

Frances was the oldest child of Harlings. She was a very smart and talented girl, she ran father's office in Black Hawk when he needed to travel. Her character is not often represented in the book, but she deserves attention precisely because of her different social status in the world of women. Because of her great business ability, her father was strict with her and demanded a lot from her, but she was paid a good salary, although she had to work very hard, had little time off and could not just disengage from her obligations.<sup>97</sup> All these things suggested that Frances was an interesting example of "a businesswoman in a man's world."<sup>98</sup> Not only did her father lead her to this entrepreneurial life, but she also reflected on her father in terms

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<sup>92</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 205.

<sup>93</sup> Peggy E. Sahaida, "Forging New Paths: Willa Cather's Female Pioneering Artist" (MA diss., Truman State University in Missouri, 1997), 90.

<sup>94</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 178- 179.

<sup>95</sup> Peggy E. Sahaida, "Forging New Paths: Willa Cather's Female Pioneering Artist" (MA diss., Truman State University in Missouri, 1997), 91.

<sup>96</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 236.

<sup>97</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 170.

<sup>98</sup> Peggy E. Sahaida, "Forging New Paths: Willa Cather's Female Pioneering Artist" (MA diss., Truman State University in Missouri, 1997), 91.

of appearance, she also wore the clothes of an elegant lady businesswoman, who apart from all this also mastered an excellent conversation with men about important matters:

Frances was dark, like her father, and quite as tall. In winter she wore a sealskin coat and cap, and she and Mr. Harling used to walk home together in the evening, talking about grain-cars and cattle, like two men.<sup>99</sup>

Frances was very sociable and empathetic. When she went to business trips, she never forgot to visit old people, she attended funerals and weddings. Sometimes she also visited Mr. Burden, who was very flattered to see her. He admired Frances' appetite in a similar way, as he did with *Ántonia* and her dedication to work in the field.<sup>100</sup>

In the meantime, the book depicted the immigrant girls who moved to Black Hawk to help their families in debts, when their fathers could not to handle the situation themselves. The families had the lack of manpower, although they could afford to pay grooms, still it was not enough so the girls had to help with field work and in order to this they did not get a chance to learn English as *Ántonia* said to Jim: "I can work like mans now. My mother can't say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm."<sup>101</sup> *Ántonia* seemed to be a tough girl who almost competes with her brother for a job in the field, she did not seem to mind this kind of work at all, unlike her friend Lena.

After a while, Lena Lingard appeared in the town and the first mention about her was when she knocked on Harling's door. She looked pretty and well groomed, she was dressed in a lovely blue dress with a hat and stockings, and she was a complete opposite of *Ántonia* and even other farm girls. Jim and *Ántonia* could not recognize her as she had an image of a lady. Lena also came to the town to find a job. She used to work on a farm like *Ántonia*, but unlike her she did not like that and with her arrival to the town she stated: "I'm through with the farm. There ain't any end to the work on a farm, and always so much trouble happens. I'm going to be a dressmaker."<sup>102</sup> So she started to work for a seamstress Thomas.

In general, Lena was enthusiastic and energetic person, she did not want to ask anyone for anything, she mainly wanted to learn and later help her mother and children with the farm. Lena was ambitious and she found working on the farm useless and demanding and she has

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<sup>99</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 170.

<sup>100</sup> Peggy E. Sahaida, "Forging New Paths: Willa Cather's Female Pioneering Artist" (MA diss., Truman State University in Missouri, 1997), 92.

<sup>101</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 141.

<sup>102</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 183.

never liked that kind of work. All the time, she seemed careless and she wanted to enjoy her life and she was so excited about the town, her opinion was that everyone could think what they wanted. Jim liked Lena as far back as she was still living on the farm and grazing cattle. She was always different from the local girls who had been roughened by working on the farm, but Lena kept her softness and elegance, and whenever she met the boys, she encouraged them to stay with her and behaved almost according to etiquette, as if they were sitting in a room and not in a pasture.

Lena came from Norway and she used to live in a Norwegian settlement. Norwegians were in a nature to take care of their family, as Lena always said she needed to help her mother. For example her twelve years old brother got his first job in a church and from those money he wanted to buy Christmas present for his family. Except from women being family types, they were also conservative and with a sense of decorum. Yet Lena had only some characteristics of a Norwegian woman, otherwise she was herself and carefree. While she was grazing cattle Ole Benson used to visit her. That turned against her when his wife shouted at her at Sunday's church congregation and it was a big uproar for other citizens when a married man wanted to start an affair with an immigrant woman: "Look out, you Lena Lingard, look out! I'll come over with a corn-knife one day and trim some of that shape off you. Then you won't sail round so fine, making eyes at the men!"<sup>103</sup> Antonia's mother was also of the opinion that Lena could not have an affair with a married man, even though Lena had a completely different opinion on the situation: "'Maybe you lose a steer and learn not to make somethings with your eyes at married men,' Mrs. Shimerda told her hectoringly. Lena only smiled her sleepy smile. 'I never made anything to him with my eyes. I can't help it if he hangs around, and I can't order him off. It ain't my prairie.'"<sup>104</sup>

Lena was a friend with Tiny Soderball, who was also a Scandinavian immigrant and she worked in a hotel as a housekeeper. After she has done all her responsibilities, she and Lena always sat behind the saloon door and they were listening the music and anecdotes from business travellers sitting there, so they both were very sociable and longed for fun.

The town of Black Hawk was highly different from the life in the prairie. It was inhabited by middle-class people who could already afford to live in brick houses, send children to school, go to church, and for immigrant girls it was a great opportunity to get a job, learn English, make

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<sup>103</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 190.

<sup>104</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 192.

friends and attend dance soirées where they were meeting with boys. The transition of the prairie girls to the town girls marked their significant change in life for the better and offers them a wide range of possibilities. The girls “play out the sociological transition from an agricultural system to money-exchange economy”<sup>105</sup>

The age of these girls plays a fairly important role. They were all young and beautiful. *Ántonia*, for example, became a housekeeper at the age of seventeen. This is the age when a girl is growing up and becoming more feminine. So the girls' appearance and demeanour caused a stir throughout the city, for instance when Lena Lingard came to the church: “The congregation stared at her. Until that morning no one — unless it were Ole — had realized how pretty she was, or that she was growing up.”<sup>106</sup> And even though the boys looked back at them, the era and the society did not allow any exceeding of conventions:

The country girls were considered a menace to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background. But anxious mothers need have felt no alarm. They mistook the mettle of their sons. The respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth.<sup>107</sup>

According to Sallquist, another important role in the characteristics of hired girls was a marital status. Writers, including Willa Cather usually portrays girls in housekeeping services as single, yet the pioneer women had their wedding relatively early, around the age of twenty. Of course, things were not only one-sided, and married women worked in services too. For example they performed some work for a family, they worked in a hotel or they worked as housekeepers from time to time.<sup>108</sup>

As Sallquist claims, many or even all of the servants were immigrants, mainly from Germany, Scandinavian countries or Bohemians. Cather confirms this assumption, because the hired girls in the book were exactly from these countries. She also thinks that this ethnic divergence prevents from hiring out to those girls.<sup>109</sup>

Sallquist also described education as other important status for hired girls. Novelists often portrayed hired girls like they gave up their education to the benefit of their family, which was also *Ántonia*'s case. Later, she regretted her choice to give up education, because she knew her father was a noble and wise man and her mother was ambitious and as if she did not want

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<sup>105</sup> Rabin, *Surviving the Crossing*, 27.

<sup>106</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 190.

<sup>107</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 229.

<sup>108</sup> Sallquist, “The Image”, 167.

<sup>109</sup> Sallquist, “The Image”, 168.



to disappoint them, but she threw her chance away anyway. What was beneficial for *Ántonia* was her work for the Harlings, because her English improved and she was a little closer to better integration among the local society.<sup>110</sup>

However, Sallquist claims that it did not matter how much freedom the girls had, they still had the adjective of the family they worked for, like “The Harlings’ Tony” or “the Gardeners’ Tiny” as if they were still someone’s property as immigrants and were diminished by the society all the time.<sup>111</sup> *Ántonia* was perceived by the townspeople almost as a Harlings’ ward, because she was so connected with them, she spend most of her time in their house, in their garden and with their children. As soon as she started to go to the dance tent with her friends, her popularity rose up that she had to interrupt her connection with the spare family.

After Mr. Harling fired *Ántonia* from their service, she decided to take her new job in the house of the local moneylender Wick Cutter. This decision was not very good for her social status, and Mrs. Harling was worried: “*Ántonia*, if you go to the Cutters’ to work, you cannot come back to this house again. You know what that man is. It will be the ruin of you.”<sup>112</sup> But *Ántonia* had her own had and she just thought about having more free time she could spend in the dance tent.

Although she left Harlings, she still maintained her classy side and together with Lena they sewed various clothes. “Tony wore gloves now, and high-heeled shoes and feathered bonnets, and she went downtown nearly every afternoon with Tiny and Lena and the Marshalls’ Norwegian Anna.”<sup>113</sup>

Despite *Ántonia*’s extravagance and her stubborn nature, she seemed to be well on her way to life. Jim also did very well, having been studying his last year of school, the girls were hanging around him and praising him for being very talented, *Ántonia* claimed, that one day he would go to studies and he would be someone. Jim knew he was not happy when he still had to be stuck in the Black Hawk, while he knew that for example the older son of Harlings, Charlie, was away at the Naval Academy. Already, he had been preparing for the compulsory subjects at the university, so he had a chance to study there and get out from his town in the most possible short time. The small town was no longer enough for him, he had little to distract, he did not want to sit anywhere with the old people and listen to their stories, he longed for more

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<sup>110</sup> Sallquist, “The Image”, 168.

<sup>111</sup> Sallquist, “The Image”, 169.

<sup>112</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 236.

<sup>113</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 244.

adventure. He was tired from the town society as he was almost angry at that small, sunken city and his feeling were strong about it:

There were no other lights burning downtown after nine o'clock. On starlight nights I used to pace up and down those long, cold streets, scowling at the little, sleeping houses on either side... The people asleep in those houses, I thought, tried to live like the mice in their own kitchens; to make no noise, to leave no trace, to slip over the surface of things in the dark. The growing piles of ashes and cinders in the back yards were the only evidence that the wasteful, consuming process of life went on at all.<sup>114</sup>

One day, The Cutters left for a few days and *Ántonia* was responsible for their house. She did not have a good feeling about the night, so Jim agreed to sleep there instead of her, and *Ántonia* slept at the Burdens. In the end, it turned out that Wick Cutter had planned the whole situation so that *Ántonia* was alone in their house and he could come to see her and his wife would not find out. *Ántonia* must have been lucky to change with Jim, who came back with a few bruises from the Cutters.<sup>115</sup> This was the difference between the prairie girls and the town girls. Black Hawk men was much more attracted to those country girls, because they saw more energy in them, they were crazier and they exuded that special sexual energy, even on the dance evenings, all men wanted to dance with those country girls. The town girls were more polished, innocent and invisible, but they were jealous of country girls as it is claimed: "The daughters of Black Hawk merchants had a confident, uninquiring belief that they were 'refined,' and that the country girls, who 'worked out,' were not."<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 249- 250.

<sup>115</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 287.

<sup>116</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 226-227.

### 5.3. Adult life of the characters

Some time has passed, the characters were a bit older and they were starting to shape their own lives and some of them lived their American dream, especially Lena, Tiny, and later Jim.

Jim finally started to live his dream life at the university in the Lincoln city, he attended lectures and studied hard. Also, he rented an apartment by an old couple, where he had his own and quite spacious bedroom and study, which was better than his small bedrooms at his grandparents' house. At first he was a bit worried that he has not saved any money, but he never stopped studying hard, and at the age of nineteen he went to study law at Harvard.

Lena was also living in Lincoln. One day she came to visit Jim and he could not recognize her, it reminded the situation a few years earlier. She was wearing an elegant black costume, a hat, and a thin silk blouse. She was so happy to tell Jim that she had established her own business, a women's dressmaking shop, which was going really good and she already had some money saved. Lena, with her diligence and ambition, had developed from an ordinary immigrant girl to a successful, peaceful and merry businesswoman. Jim greatly admired her success, which was also a mystery to him that Lena was so nifty to succeed in urban society:

She was so easy-going; had none of the push and self-assertiveness that get people ahead in business. She had come to Lincoln, a country girl, with no introductions except to some cousins of Mrs. Thomas who lived there, and she was already making clothes for the women of 'the young married set.' She evidently had great natural aptitude for her work. She knew, as she said, 'what people looked well in.'<sup>117</sup>

Lena was very interested in fashion, reading various fashion magazines, staying in her salon until late at night, and it could be because, as a little girl, she had not had enough money for nice clothes to buy and then could afford it in her new adult life. It was perfectly satisfying for Lena that she had her own apartment in the city, where she could relax peacefully.

Despite running a successful business, Lena suffered trauma from home and decided not to get married and not to start a family. She was enjoying living alone and did not want to have a discussion with anyone all the time. Back in the countryside she had to share a bed with other people, she had younger siblings to take care of, pay attention if they washed their clothes or hands. Sometimes she did not have the time or strength to take a bath, so it was not a good life for a girl in comparison to all the town girls. Lena had this family life etched in her mind and home was not the happiest memory for her.

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<sup>117</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 315.

She had already planned to finally build a house for her mother, and for which she worked hard. Even *Ántonia* was very proud of Lena as Jim confirmed: “Tony says you’re going to be richer than Mr. Harling some day. She’s always bragging about you, you know.”<sup>118</sup>

Lena enjoyed life in the city, and it was obvious she was happy there, she loved going to the theatre, where she also met Jim and later they visited the plays together. Their development from village children to educated young people was wonderful and Jim could see it too: “As I walked about there I congratulated myself that I had not brought some Lincoln girl who would talk during the waits about the junior dances, or whether the cadets would camp at Plattsmouth. Lena was at least a woman, and I was a man.”<sup>119</sup>

Tiny Soderball was very ambitious, she left to Seattle, where she started a business in the form of a hostel for sailors. People from the Black Hawk slandered and condemned her, claiming that this would be the end of her, again not believing the immigrant girl that she could fulfil her dream. When gold was discovered in Alaska, she set out on another adventure because she wanted more. She really worked out to be able to make a businesswoman, she could make money and then invest her money properly. She eventually settled in San Francisco. Even though she was satisfied with her wealth she did not seem to be that happy because she was absorbed in materialism and she was not able to take in anything else.<sup>120</sup>

She told me about some of the desperate chances she had taken in the gold country, but the thrill of them was quite gone. She said frankly that nothing interested her much now but making money.... She was satisfied with her success, but not elated. She was like someone in whom the faculty of becoming interested is worn out.<sup>121</sup>

Despite all this, she stayed friends with Lena Lingard, who eventually moved to San Francisco and started her business there. According to Rabin, this could be Lena’s chance to have a pretence of a family life she would be satisfied with.<sup>122</sup> According to Sjostrom the hired girls completely separated from their prairie spirit and they found the fascination but also and danger of materialism. By leaving the prairies and moving into the big city they became vulnerable. She also claims that this later happened to *Ántonia* when she left to Denver and she

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<sup>118</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 303.

<sup>119</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 312.

<sup>120</sup> Heidi N. Sjostrom, “Willa Cather's Nebraska Prairie: Remembering the Spirit of its Land and People,” in *Issues in Travel Writing: Empire, Spectacle, and Displacement*, ed. Kristi Siegel (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), 197 - 212.

<sup>121</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 340- 341.

<sup>122</sup> Rabin, *Surviving the Crossing*, 28.

came back destroyed and dishonoured. But the prairie reminded her who she was and she found happiness.<sup>123</sup>

Similar situation like Tina's was Jake's and Otto's. They travelled too far with a vision of getting rich, but the difficulties did not miss them either, Jake was ill with a mountain fever, but later they started to work in the Yankee Girl mine. Jim commented that was the last letter they ever got from them and that suggested that they did not survive.<sup>124</sup>

Eventually, *Ántonia* reconciled with the Harlings and started to work as a housekeeper for Mrs. Gardener. Compared to her childhood friends, her life has not evolved as for her working carer. She did not start studying like Jim nor did she start her own business like Lena did. But the difference was that she got engaged with Larry Donovan, who was a passenger conductor, but Jim never liked him. None of her friend liked him, they tried to convince her that he is not good for her and she would get hurt, but she was not listening them.

Her life took a sharp turn. People referred to her as poor *Ántonia*, who ran away with Larry to marry him. He eventually left her and she was left alone with his child. Her life has not changed over the years and her social status has remained the same. She continued living on the farm with her mother and Ambrosch. Again, he had the power over her, she gave him money, worked in the field, and it was the retrospective to the time when she worked for the Harlings.<sup>125</sup> Jim could not believe what happened to *Ántonia* in comparison to Lena and her life:

I tried to shut *Ántonia* out of my mind. I was bitterly disappointed in her. I could not forgive her for becoming an object of pity, while Lena Lingard, for whom people had always foretold trouble, was now the leading dressmaker of Lincoln, much respected in Black Hawk. Lena gave her heart away when she felt like it, but she kept her head for her business and had got on in the world.<sup>126</sup>

Although *Ántonia* was socially humiliated and she played the role of a single mother, it was obvious from her acts that she was proud of her child: "She seems proud of the baby, though; wouldn't hear to a cheap frame for the picture."<sup>127</sup> *Ántonia* and Larry were different people, *Ántonia* was not afraid of showing who she really was, she was not ashamed to show her baby, even though it was a humiliation in front of the society that her husband had run away from her. Whereas Larry had the behaviour of an aristocrat even though he was only a passenger

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<sup>123</sup> Sjostrom, "Willa Cather's Nebraska Prairie," 197- 212.

<sup>124</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 165.

<sup>125</sup> Sallquist, "The Image", 172.

<sup>126</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 336.

<sup>127</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 342.

conductor. It bothered him when someone asked him for something, he did not bear the thought of being seen in his work uniform outside the train, he did not respect *Ántonia* and made a fool from her, and furthermore he was not ready for any kind of commitment which *Ántonia* later confirmed:

“He’s run away from me,” she said. “I don’t know if he ever meant to marry me.”... ‘He didn’t have any job. He’d been fired; blacklisted for knocking down fares. I didn’t know. I thought he hadn’t been treated right. He was sick when I got there. He’d just come out of the hospital. He lived with me till my money gave out, and afterwards I found he hadn’t really been hunting work at all. Then he just didn’t come back.’<sup>128</sup>

Despite all the possibilities, *Ántonia* never desired to climb the social ladder. Before the wedding with Larry it was a bit of a shock for her when he told her that they might have to live in the city: “I’m a country girl and I doubt if I’ll be able to manage so well for him in a city. I was counting on keeping chickens, and maybe a cow.”<sup>129</sup> Eventually, *Ántonia* found out that Larry had been fired, he was ill, and that he saw an opportunity of getting money from his fiancée. *Ántonia* was always nice to people and most of all she wished for her husband to like her. After that failure, *Ántonia* was disgraced and she descended from her original status of a country girl even lower. But the people from Black Hawk did not ever presume to humiliate her. Regardless of her being an immigrant, people showed a certain solidarity and regret for her because they could see how destroyed she was, even though she did not tell anyone.

Despite the fact she might have violated the social norms of nineteenth century, she stood out in a motherhood and that was important.<sup>130</sup> Once her baby was born, no one could take care of it better than *Ántonia* as Mrs. Steavens confirmed: “She loved it from the first as dearly as if she’d had a ring on her finger... no baby was ever better cared for. *Ántonia* is a natural-born mother.”<sup>131</sup>

After his studies on Harvard Jim started to work in a law firm in New York as a legal counsel for one of the great Western railways. He finally had the opportunity to live in a big city and he lived in a society, which was the complete opposite of the Black Hawk one where he felt anxiously. What was not so happy, however, was his marriage. Jim was not satisfied, he did not have any children, his wife was not very interested in him and she lived her own life:

I am never able to believe that she has much feeling for the causes to which she lends her name executive, but to me she seems unimpressible and temperamentally incapable

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<sup>128</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 353.

<sup>129</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 349.

<sup>130</sup> Sallquist, “The Image”, 173.

<sup>131</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 359.

of enthusiasm. Her husband's quiet tastes irritate her, I think, and she finds it worthwhile to play the patroness to a group of young poets and painters of advanced ideas and mediocre ability. She has her own fortune and lives her own life. For some reason, she wishes to remain Mrs. James Burden.<sup>132</sup>

After twenty years, at the final point, Jim meets *Ántonia* again. She was already married to Anton Cuzak and had a lot of children. In terms of social status, nothing has changed for *Ántonia*, she still remained among the low social class as Tiny Soderball claimed: "she told me that *Ántonia* had not 'done very well'; that her husband was not a man of much force, and she had had a hard life." Nevertheless she was cheerful and completely different than her old friends and Jim had always seen that in her: "I was thinking, as I watched her, how little it mattered - about her teeth, for instance. I know so many women who have kept all the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, *Ántonia* had not lost the fire of life."<sup>133</sup>

*Ántonia's* family was joyful, they did not mind being poor, they enjoyed ordinary pleasures. The children were proud of their mother and she was proud of them. They were also proud that they were Czechs and the love of homeland radiated especially from *Ántonia*, she had never forgotten her home village in the Bohemia, and even though they lived in America, they mostly used Czech language at home, the youngest children did not understand English at all. For example, children also boasted about spiced plums that the Americans did not know. *Ántonia* really loved her country life: "I belong on a farm. I'm never lonesome here like I used to be in town. You remember what sad spells I used to have, when I didn't know what was the matter with me? I've never had them out here. And I don't mind work a bit, if I don't have to put up with sadness."<sup>134</sup>

*Ántonia* started the same as Lena and Tiny on the farm in Nebraska and then in a town of Black Hawk. Although she was never as wealthy as her friends, she managed to achieve her dream after all and the dream was happy family and a loving husband. That was the biggest difference between *Ántonia*, Lena, and Tiny. They fulfilled their dream in the form of wealth, living in a big city, going to social events, but in their hearts they were never as delighted as *Ántonia*. Her success was determined by courage, strength and a good heart, although the path to all this was full of difficulties, she refused to end as a lost lady.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, x-xi.

<sup>133</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 379.

<sup>134</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 387.

<sup>135</sup> Rabin, *Surviving the Crossing*, 28.

Rabin suggests that *Ántonia's* life was far different from the Jim's, yet their lives can be comparable in a certain way. Although Jim's life was cosmopolitan and *Ántonia* was relatively poor, her life was complete and impressive. Otherwise all Jim had left were only memories from past and especially memories of *Ántonia* and the absence of a viable present without the place where he could feel like home. Rabin also suggests a certain point of view that Jim lives in a circle, which depends on his career, he travels to business trips, but there is no progress. Whereas *Ántonia* with her husband have their own homestead, which is an important part of American dream, which *Ántonia* fulfilled no matter she was an immigrant or poor.<sup>136</sup>

*Ántonia* has already achieved all aspects of the American dream, not only emotionally with her loving husband, but also materially with her own farm and house. None of their friends had that, they only had one aspect of this. Furthermore, she has found ideal harmony between the cultures. She still remembers the Old World and her birth village, and she tries to find the best in America.

In the book, Cather shows that American dream can be fulfilled, but if done wrong, it will bring troubles. Characters who abandoned the prairies risk losing their personality, for example Tiny Soderball who became rich but was never satisfied and lost her vitality. Contrary to Lena, who was not so broken, but also not so contented in a big city as she was still coming back to Nebraska. *Ántonia*, after all, represents ordinary life connected with nature, which encourages her to find balance.

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<sup>136</sup> Rabin, *Surviving the Crossing*, 29.



## 6. Conclusion

The aim of the bachelor thesis was to characterize the Great Plains and social differences among its inhabitants at the end of the nineteenth century with the analytical part using the work *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather as an example. Furthermore, the thesis describes the arrival of the first pioneers and what the motives were to leave their homeland, their suffering in the new world and inequalities that arose among the settlers for various reasons.

The Great Plains, which are part of Nebraska prairies represent an enormous area in the centre of the United States. Moreover this area was characterized by inhospitable climate and that is the reason why it was sparsely inhabited until 1860 when the mass migration started. The incoming people abandoned their homes particularly for economic reasons. Throughout the Europe it has spread that America is a new dream for living. People were not satisfied with their standard of life in Europe, for example for religious or political reasons, some emigrated with the vision of getting rich. Their decision was further supported by the Homestead Act of 1862, which brought new possibilities for little money.

However, with the arrival of immigrants, various riots and racist prejudices arose and there was fear that the land would be deprived by the newcomers. The arrival was not easy for people also due to several period of droughts, which had a negative impact on agriculture.

Willa Cather was an immigrant herself, she moved to Nebraska as a child. She was friend with people from Europe. The new world she lived in and some of her very good friends inspired her writing about immigrant issues.

In her novel *My Ántonia* she depicted experience of immigrants, mainly on the example of the Shimerda family and their friends. They were one of the families who left their land to achieve an American dream. At first the arrival to the Great Plains was a bitter disappointment. They had to face many difficulties. The climate was unpredictable and the soil was harsh, they almost died because of having nothing to eat in a cruel winter. But those horrible conditions helped to strengthen bond between neighbours and they supported and helped each other. Yet there was a huge difference between people, who came completely unprepared, like the Shimerda family or who had at least some background, like Jim Burden, who came to live with his grandparents. The first third of the book ended in tragedy when Mr. Shimerda committed a suicide. The social status of his family has completely changed from esteemed citizens to poor and helpless immigrants. He could not cope with the pressure and harsh conditions of the prairies. So Mr. Shimerda is an example of a complete failure of an American dream.

Anyway, even in the new forming world there were tension among people. Local people feared migrants and spread slander about them. The social status is very well illustrated on hired girls in the Black Hawk. On one hand, they were very much appreciated as housekeepers and helpers, on the other hand their presence in the town was disturbing American inhabitants. All of the town men were attracted by their sexual energy and their joy of life. And the American girls were envious and furious about it, because they did not have that spirit. Despite all of this, the hired girls as they were called, which also suggest they never were anything more than distraction. Although American men had a weakness for them, the social borders did not allow them to marry them, so eventually they were marginalized from the society.

Many people were aiming to achieve the American dream, but they did not fulfil it in all aspects. Lena and Tiny were both successful businesswomen, living in a big city and they became wealthy, but lack of family background and missing husband was the crucial fact that prevented them from happiness. Despite the effort, someone's dream ended up in complete failure, like Mr. Shimerda who committed suicide, or Jake and Otto who did not survive and ended up in oblivion.

Even though there were the social differences between people, there were some pioneers and immigrants who managed to fulfil their American dream in all aspects. The most successful was *Antonia*, who managed to achieve the dream emotionally and materially. Despite the struggle, she got married, had a family, stayed on her farm and her life was full of happiness.

## Resumé

Tato práce se zabývá vyobrazením sociálních rozdílů mezi prvními osadníky na Velkých planinách v Americe, převážně na území Nebrasky. Předlohou byla kniha *Moje Antonie*, jejíž autorkou je Willa Cather. Kniha se zaměřuje převážně na osud české imigrantské rodiny Šimerdů a hlavně jejich dcery Antonie, v dalších částech knihy se čtenář dovídá i o osudech jejich přátel.

Teoretická část se zaměřuje na vyobrazení pozadí příchodu prvních osadníků ke konci 19. století, jejich strasti a také na důvody, proč emigrovali právě do Ameriky. Dále popisuje rozdělení sociálních vrstev ve společnosti, ale i rozdíl mezi ženskými a mužskými právy. Poté je charakterizován literární styl regionalismu, do kterého se řadí i Willa Cather, která spolu s jinými autory psala knihy o imigrantech.

První kapitola se věnuje popisu Velkých planin a jejich postupnému osidlování, kterému napomohlo hlavně ustanovení *The Homestead Act* z roku 1862. Tento zákon umožňoval občanům pronajmout si půdu za velmi malou sumu. Největší příchod imigrantů je evidován hlavně po konci Americké občanské války. Lidé nejprve začali přicházet ze severní a západní Evropy, kteří byli nazýváni jako „staří imigranti“ a také byli lépe přijati společností, než „noví imigranti“, kteří později přišli z jižní a východní Evropy. Lidé sem přicházeli kvůli různým nevyhovujícím faktorům, někteří měli politické či náboženské neshody, ale hlavně šli za americkým snem, kterým měli dosáhnout bohatství a spokojenosti. Příchod imigrantů ale nebyl vůbec lehký, na planinách bylo jiné podnebí, než v Evropě, půda byla poničená od sucha a byla špatně úrodná.

Druhá a třetí kapitola se věnuje americké společnosti a jejímu rozdělení. Po hromadném příchodu migrantů se začaly formovat různé rasové a sociální předsudky, které prohlubovaly nerovnost lidí. Chudé oblasti, které byly původně obsazovány pastevci dobytka, začaly být obsazovány farmáři a vznikaly tak spory, protože dobytek ničil jejich farmy a naopak dobytek se nemohl volně pást. Začalo docházet k dalším problémům jako vyčerpání půdy nebo nastaly doby sucha a farmáři byli nuceni opustit farmy.

Podmínky ve městech byly odlišné pro každou sociální vrstvu. Chudí lidé většinou žili v přeplněných bytech, pracovní podmínky byly také otřesné. Pracovat musely ženy i děti, pracovní doba byla dlouhá a mzda malá, pro ženy ještě menší než pro muže.

Za střední vrstvu byli považováni lidé, kteří si dokázali vytvořit a udržet úspěšné podnikání a byli to jedni z nejdůležitějších lidí ve společnosti. Mezi tuto vrstvu patřili například učitelé, farmáři, doktoři, vesničtí právníci nebo faráři.

Začal se formovat i stereotyp v postavení ženy a muže. Žena byla viděna spíše v domácím prostředí, kde se starala o děti, vaření a úklid, zatímco muž byl hlavou domácnosti a vydělával peníze. Děti z rodin střední vrstvy mohly chodit do školy a ve volném čase byly vedeny k samo vzdělání formou čtení knih nebo hrou na piano.

Poslední kapitola teoretické části popisuje regionalismus. Tento styl se poprvé objevil v polovině 19. století, i když autoři psali o regionech již dříve. Američtí autoři si chtěli vytvořit jejich vlastní styl bez nánosů zahraničních prací. Amerika byla kritizována za nedostatečné množství autentické literatury. Pro tento styl popisoval specifické kulturní a geografické znaky, s detailním zaměřením na hudbu, region, nebo dialekt. Mezi zástupce regionalismu patří Willa Cather a její díla o průkopnících jako *My Ántonia*, *O Pioneers!* or *Neighbour Rosicky*. Dalšími zástupci jsou Kate Chopin, Mark Twain nebo Mary E. Wilkins Freeman.

Analytická část práce již popisuje samotný život postav, rodinu Šimerdů, rodinu Burdenů a další vedlejší, i když důležité postavy jako Lena Lingard a Tiny Soderball. Tato část je rozdělena na tři podkapitoly, které jsou řazené chronologicky stejně jako v knize.

První část popisuje českou rodinu Šimerdů, která hlavně kvůli matce opustila svou rodnou zemi a vydala se do Nebrasky za lepším životem a bohatstvím. Zároveň z Virginie přijíždí i Jim Burden, který bude bydlet u prarodičů. Šimerdovi nemají ani trochu lehký začátek, a to hlavně i kvůli jazykové bariéře, kdy nikdo z nich neumí anglicky, až později jejich dcera Antonie se jazyk naučí. Dále je vidět, že bezbranné imigranty je snadné oklamat, když jsou okradeni také Čechem Krajíčkem, ten je ale jediným člověkem, kterého rodina v Americe zná. Sociální rozdíly jsou zřejmé již na první pohled. Šimerdovi bydlí v ohyzdném sklepě, kde je málo místa, kdežto Jim přijede do pěkného domu a vše už má zařízené. Šimerdovi si tímto činem velmi pohoršili, v rodné vlasti byl pan Šimerda váženým člověkem a rodina byla dobře zaopatřená. Naopak v Nebrasce neměli skoro nic, nebyli zvyklí na zdejší podnebí a v kruté zimě málem zahynuli. Burdenovi byli hodní lidé a Šimerdům se vším pomohli. Zde se ale stále projevoval rozdíl mezi rodinami a paní Šimerdová stále nebyla spokojená, protože paní Burdenová měla více lepších věcí. Vše vyvrcholilo tím, že pan Šimerda už neunesl celou situaci a spáchal sebevraždu. Po této události musela Antonie začít pracovat na poli, kde jí i její bratr Ambrož nakládal stále další práci, která pro ní nebyla vhodná a na které je znázorněna

nadřazenost muže nad ženou. Antonie se časem změnila, kdy už ani nechtěla chodit do školy, ale chtěla jen pracovat na poli a chvástat se, kolik práce dokáže za den udělat.

Druhá kapitola znázorňuje pozici imigrantských dívek v městských službách. Antonie začne pracovat jako hospodyně u Harlingů, kde se na ní projeví změna z pozice farmářky na vzdělanější městskou dívku. Kapitola popisuje Antoniiny kamarádky Lenu, která pracuje jako švadlena a Tiny, která pracovala v hotelu. Všechny dívky byly imigrantky a dříve žily na farmě. Lena měla jasný cíl, rozhodla se skončit s prací na farmě a vyučit se, aby si mohla jednou založit vlastní podnikání a stejně tak i Tina. Dívky společně chodily na zábavu, kde je na tomto příkladu popsán rozdíl mezi imigranty a Američany. Zdejší dívky na imigrantky žárlily, protože muži po nich toužily, ale nikdy pro ně nebyly ničím víc, než jen pobavením, protože společnost nedovolovala žádné vztahy mezi rozdílnými vrstvami.

Poslední kapitola popisuje dospělácký život postav. Jim vystudoval univerzitu, stal se právníkem a přestěhoval se do New Yorku, byl sice ženatý, ale jeho manželství nebylo šťastné. Lena a Tiny se nakonec usadily v San Francisku, obě vedly úspěšné podnikání a byly bohaté, ale ani jedna z nich neměla manžela nebo rodinu.

Osud Antonie byl poněkud krutý, když ji snoubenec opustil, ona zůstala sama s dítětem a musela se vrátit na farmu v roli svobodné matky. Vše se ale změnilo, když se vdala a s manželem vychovávala spoustu dětí.

Všechny dívky začaly stejně, jako imigrantky žijící na farmě, později se mezi nimi projevil velký sociální rozdíl. Lena, Tiny a Jim se sice svou pílí dostali na vrchol kariéry a do velkého města, po kterém vždy snili, přesto jim ke štěstí nestačilo jen postavení ve společnosti, ale chyběly jim milující osoby. Naopak Antonie zůstala žít v chudobě, ale sociální postavení pro ní nemělo žádnou váhu, protože si vážila hlavně toho, že má milujícího manžela, děti a vlastní farmu.

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