

MY ÁNTONIA : ART VERSUS MARRIAGE

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One of the important problems in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* is the relationship between the narrator, Jim Burden, and the heroine, Ántonia Shimerda. Blanche H. Gelfant, for instance, writes in "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook : Sex in *My Ántonia*" : "The question has been raised bluntly by critics (though left unanswered) : 'Why had not Jim and Ántonia loved and married?' "(113). In *My Ántonia* the narrator could have loved and married her¹, because he could tell her, even after she was deserted by Larry Donovan and 'single' again, "Do you know, Ántonia, since I've been away, I think of you more often than of anyone else in this world. I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister—anything that woman can be to a man"(321). But soon he leaves her, never returning for twenty years, though he could even say as follows : " 'I'll come back,' I said earnestly, through the soft, intrusive darkness"(322). Is his reaction to her natural?

Although he could have married Ántonia, he married another woman and judging from the description of "Introduction" in *My Ántonia*, his marriage seems to be unhappy. His wife is described as follows : "*She is handsome, energetic, exclusive, but to me she seems unimpressional and temperamentally incapable of enthusiasm. Her husband's quiet tastes irritates her, I think, and she finds it worth while 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.*"

He appears again before Ántonia after 'twenty years' at the Cuzak's farm. His 'unhappy' marriage is sharply contrasted with Ántonia's 'happy' marriage. Here her happy marriage may seem to be a little 'unnatural' because this novel is full of instances of 'unhappy' marriages and bachelors. Why is only her marriage 'happy' in spite of many 'sad' cases in this novel?

It may be possible here to relate 'art' or 'artist' to 'unhappy' marriage. That is to say, Jim Burden's 'unhappy' marriage, for instance, results from his being an 'artist.'² James Woodress points out in *Willa Cather : Her Life and Art* as follows : "Nor is it surprising to find that in her fiction artists never have happy marriages"(87), because "Throughout her life Willa Cather was convinced that art and marriage did not mix"(86). Even in this novel art seems to be opposed to marriage.

The world of art, however, in *My Ántonia*, strangely enough, tends to something melancholic³, which is described as something completely opposite of the vitality, vigor and health shown in Ántonia's happy marriage. Among the major characters, Gaston Cleric and

Ántonia's father, for example, belongs to the melancholic world of art, while Ántonia belongs to the vigorous world of marriage. And the narrator belongs to both. Jim Burden's mind is torn into two kinds of world.

In this paper it will be shown that the world of art in this novel tends to melancholic, making keen contrast to the world of marriage full of vitality, vigor and health.

First of all, it would be necessary to show the vitality suggested in the married life of Ántonia. Jim Burden comes to see her at her farm in the Book V, "Cuzak's Boys," in this novel. For instance, Ántonia is described as follows when he sees her after twenty years : "As I confronted her, the changes grew less apparent to me, her identity stronger. She was there, in the full vigour of her personality, battered but not diminished, looking at me, speaking to me in the husky, breathy voice I remembered so well"(331-32). She is, to Jim, full of vigour even after her hard life of twenty years.

Not only Ántonia, but her children are also described as full of healthiness. One of the girls whom Jim met at the kitchen of Ántonia's house is a 'buxom' girl : "The older one, who wore shoes and stockings, came to the door to admit me. She was a buxom girl with dark hair and eyes, calm and self-possessed"(331). One of her sons, Leo is written as someone with wild vitality like a faun : "The boy was so restless that I had not had a chance to look at his face before. My first impression was right ; he really was faun-like"(348). Leo is rather close to an "animal" : "I was thinking about Ántonia and her children ; about Anna's solicitude for her, Ambrosch's grave affection, Leo's jealous, animal love"(352). After all, it is Jim Burden who is feeling like a boy again in the company of Ántonia's family and 'revived' by their vitality : "They were easy and confidential with me, as if I were an old friend of the family—and not too old. I felt like a boy in their company, and all manner of forgotten interests revived in me"(345). It is important to remember that he has reason to be 'revived' by the vitality in the family of Ántonia, because he lacks such vitality and at the same time he marriage is unhappy without any children.

The most remarkable example, however, of the vitality in the family of Ántonia as well as the lack of Jim's vitality is in the following quotation. He experiences 'explosion of life' when he leaves the cellar at her house : "We turned to leave the cave ; Ántonia and I went up the stairs first, and children waited. We were standing outside talking, when they all came running up the steps together, big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs ; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight. It made me dizzy for a moment"(338-39). Here why is he feeling dizzy by the explosion of life? Again, it may show how much of his vitality in him is lost after he comes to contact with the world of art which is described as melancholic in this novel.

Ántonia's final success in her marriage with her husband, Cuzak, seems to come from her clinging to the prairie life. Except for some years at the Harlings and the Cutters in Black Hawk and some weeks with Larry Donovan in Denver, She did not try to live out of her prairie neighborhood. She even hates for living in a city. For example, she talks about life in a city to Jim : "She asked me whether I had learned to like big cities. 'I'd always be miserable in a city. I'd die of loneliness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly. I want to live and die here' "(320). As her husband, Cuzak, says, it is explicit that to the most extent their successful marriage life depends on Ántonia : " 'Sometimes I git awful sore on this place and want to quit, but my wife she always say we better stick it out. The babies come along pretty fast, so it look like it be hard to move, anyhow. I guess she was right, all right' "(365). Without her firm attachment to the farm life, they must have led a miserable, unhappy married-life like the many cases found in this novel.

In contrast to her attachment to the farm life, it is interesting to note here that Cuzak still shows his interest in a city life. Undoubtedly, he misses such a life back in Bohemia, when Jim talks about his trip through Bohemia and Vienna : " 'Gee ! I like to go back there once, when the boys is big enough to farm the place. Sometimes, when I read the papers from the old country, I pretty near run away, he confessed. 'I never did think how I would be a settled man like this' "(366).

According to Ántonia, Cuzak is still "a city man"(366). Just like Jim Burden, he enjoys going to theatres : "He liked theatres and lighted streets and music and a game of dominoes after the day's work was over"(366). In spite of his preference to city life, it was Ántonia that "hold him here on a farm" : "Yet his wife had managed to hold him here on a farm, in one of the loneliest countries in the world"(366). Here it seems that such enjoyable city life is some "threat" to her married life.

It seems worth noting that in this novel the world of art which is described as being related with some of the major characters such as Jim Burden, Gaston Cleric and Ántonia's father, presents a striking contrast to that of Ántonia. That is to say, the former tends to melancholy, mourning and hence death, while the latter tends to vitality, vigor and health.

Very important phase of such a melancholy kind of art suggesting death is in the scene of Jim's going to the theatres. In Book II, "Lena Lingard," after coming to Lincoln to enter the university, Jim goes to the theatre. For instance, Lena talks to Jim : "You do go to the theatre sometimes, though, for I've seen you there. Don't you just love a good play, Jim? I can't stay at home in the evening if there's one in town. I'd be willing to work like a slave, it seems to me, to live in a place where there are theatres"(268-69). Along with Gaston Cleric's introduction of Latin literature, going to the theatre seems to Jim the first experience of the world of

“art.”

Curiously enough, however, the world of “art” which Jim experiences in Lincoln seems not to inspire him to the world of the Truth nor the Beauty, but rather to lead him (Lena as well) to that of love related to death. The scene at the theatre fills him with the ecstatic excitement of love and death. For example, he goes there with Lena to see “Camille,” and he weeps unrestrainedly : “Even the handkerchief in my breast-pocket, worn for elegance and not at all for use, was wet thoroughly by the time that morbid woman sank for the last time into the arms of her lover”(277). The word ‘morbid’ here shows well that Jim is giving himself into the world of melancholic art.

Soon after this scene at the theatre, Jim goes out into the country part of the town. Here he sees the blooming lilacs, which seem to be also another symbol of death just like in the case of Walt Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” : “The lilacs were all blooming in the yards, and the smell of them after the rain, of the new leaves and the blossoms together, blew into my face with a sort of bitter sweetness”(277). The “sweet bitterness” shows the atmosphere of his ecstatic moment at the theatre of both “love” and “death.” It should be noted that even here he tends to give himself to the scene of death at the theatre : “I trampled through the puddles and under the showery trees, mourning for Marguerite Gauthier as if she had died only yesterday sighing with the spirit of 1840, which had sighed so much, and which had reached me only that night, across long years and several languages, through the person of infirm old actress”(278).

Here again, the world of art in this novel comes very close to melancholy and death, which is the opposite of the vitality shown in the married life of Ántonia. And the word ‘infirm’ also shows the curious relationship between art and ‘unhealthiness’ which is often suggested in this novel.

We should note here a good example of the world of art related with the destiny of an ‘unhealthy’ man. Ántonia’s father commits a suicide in his deep sorrow for coming to America from Bohemia. It is interesting that he as well as Gaston Cleric is described as a man with artistic disposition. Here his artistic mind is related with something melancholic or death. For example, he is a frail and unhealthy man like Cleric : “One son, Fuchs said, was well-grown, and strong enough to work the land ; but the father was old and frail and knew nothing about farming”(20).

Other examples of his feebleness contrasted with Ántonia’s vitality are not hard to be pointed out : “He was tall and slender, and his thin shoulder stooped. . . . I noticed how white and well-shaped his own hands were. They looked calm, somehow, and skilled. His eyes were melancholy, and were set back deep under his brow. His face was ruggedly formed, but it

looked like ashes—like something from which all the warmth and light had died out”(24). It is apparent that he is already equal to be ‘dead.’

His melancholy feeling can be sometimes led to sadness : “We stood there in friendly silence, while the feeble minstrel sheltered in *Ántonia’s* hair went on with its scratchy chirp. The old man’s smile, as he listened, was so full of sadness, of pity for things, that never afterward forgot it”(42). And he is described as sick just like Cleric : “He sat still and passive, his head resting against the back of the wooden rocking chair, his hands relaxed upon the arms. His face had a look of weariness and pleasure, like that of sick people when they feel relief from pain”(86).

He is after all no ‘farmer,’ but rather an ‘artist’ like Cleric. It can be pointed out that here lies unhealthy-artist motif in this novel. *Ántonia’s* father seems to be always related with music, or in other words, he is a ‘violinist’ : “He was a weaver by trade ; had been a skilled workman on tapestries and upholstery materials. He had brought his fiddle with him, which wouldn’t be of much use here, though he used to pick up money by it at home”(20). His fiddle shows most effectively the doomed end of his life by suicide.

Hence, it is always the memories of music with which *Ántonia* refers to her father : “He never make music any more. At home he play violine all the time ; for weddings and for dance. He never”(89). And his artistic mind is exemplified by the following : “He know a great deal ; how to make the fine cloth like what you not got here. He play horn and violin, and he read so many books that the priest in Bohemie come to talk to him”(124).

It is possible to say that the world of art to which *Ántonia’s* father belongs is something melancholic, which is opposed to the vitality of *Ántonia*.

However, it is, without doubt, Gaston Cleric who is deep in the world of art which is most firmly related to death in this novel.

He is, as an artist or a poet, suggested as ‘unhealthy’ like *Ántonia’s* father, contrasting again with *Ántonia’s* healthiness : “He came West at the suggestion of his physicians, his health having been enfeebled by a long illness in Italy”(257). Here lies another unhealthy-artist motif and ‘artists’ are someone who are deprived of their vitality and destined to die for the sake of art. After leaving Lincoln for Boston, Cleric dies from pneumonia : “I found myself telling her everything : why I had decided to study law and to go into the law office of one of my mother’s relatives in New York City ; about Gaston Cleric’s death from pneumonia last winter, and the differences it had made in my life”(320). Here again the melancholy and unhealthy world of art is opposed to the vitality of *Ántonia*.

It may be almost useless to point out that the world of literature which Cleric introduces Jim, that of Virgil, is full of melancholy and death suggestions. For instance, Jim reads Virgil’s

'Georgics,' but he tends to feel melancholic : "I propped my book open and stared listlessly at the page of the 'Georgics' where to-morrow's lesson began. It opened with the melancholy reflection that, in the lives of mortals, the best days are the first to flee"(263). This melancholy yearning for the past is soon followed by the death-bed scene of Virgil : "Cleric said he thought Virgil, when he was dying at Brindisi, must have remembered that passage"(264). Here the world of art which Cleric introduces Jim tends to suggest death, which seems to be always in contrast with the vitality of the heroine, Antonia.

However, in spite of the melancholy world of art which Jim experiences in Virgil, full of death contemplation, he instinctively feels it dangerous to lose himself completely in such a world of melancholy art. While he enjoys the melancholy tone of Virgil, he thinks that he cannot be a scholar studying like Cleric : "Although I admired scholarship so much in Cleric, I was not deceived about myself ; I knew that I should never be a scholar"(262). To Jim, the world of art is 'impersonal' : "I could never lose myself for long among impersonal things"(262).

He thinks that he cannot live in the impersonal world of art, because he shows very firm sympathy for his past life in the prairie. His mind is, in his university life in Lincoln, torn in half. That is to say, one is his yearning for the world of art, and the other is his yearning for the life in the prairie which was full of vitality. Or in other words art and life. He says as follows : "While I was in the very act of yearning toward the new forms that Cleric brought up before me, my mind plunged away from me, and I suddenly found myself thinking of the places and people of my own infinitesimal past"(262).

From a different point of view, however, it may be possible to say that he is 'saved' from losing himself in the world of art which is melancholic and impersonal in this novel by remembering 'people' with whom he spent his childhood, which can be symbolized as 'life.' His mind is torn in two, but he can return to the world of life, instead of stepping into the impersonal world of art. So in this context it is very suggestive that Lena Lingard comes to visit Jim just at the time when he is reading Virgil. After the impressive class of Gaston Cleric, Jim almost loses himself in the impersonal world of art : "We left the classroom quietly, conscious that we had been brushed by the wing of a great feeling, though perhaps I alone knew Cleric intimately enough to guess what that feeling was. In the evening, as I sat staring at my book, the fervor of his voice stirred through the quantities on the page before me"(265). But his impersonal contemplation on Virgil is disturbed by a knock on his door. And it is Lena Lingard, one of the people with whom he spent his childhood : "The voice seemed familiar, but I did not recognize her until she stepped into the light of my doorway and I beheld—Lena Lingard !"(265). It seems apparent that he is 'saved' by her from going deep into the melancholy world of art, because after this reunion he comes to love her and loses interest in studying Virgil : "All this time, of course, I was drifting. Lena had broken my serious mood. I wasn't

interested in my classes”(288). Here it seems in this novel that life is regarded as something opposed to art. In other words, art is something melancholic, while life is something vital.

As is pointed above, the world of art in *My Ántonia* is full of melancholic tone, and sometimes it comes very close to death, while Ántonia's married life with Cuzak is described full of vitality and vigour. But here it is not possible to conclude that Cather thought of the superiority of marriage to art. We should note that in her opinion there is a fundamental gap between art and marriage. Woodress writes : “Liberty and solitude were necessary for the artist, and marriage was incompntible with either. . . . The artist, she declared, must love his art above all things and must say to it, . . . ”(87). Hence, the happy marriage of Ántonia functions to deepen more the gap between the two.

‘Drifting’ between the world of art and that of life, Jim Burden seems to choose the former and remain after all in the world of art as an artist by writing the story of ‘My Ántonia.’

Notes

1. Jim could have married Lena Lingard, too, but he did not. E. K. Brown writes : “Jim too had his chance to marry Lena and did not take it”(203). She is not Ántonia's rival. Because of her ‘inactivity,’ she is the opposite of Ántonia. Brown writes : “Lena is never a rival for the central place in the book—she has not Ántonia's force or her insight, she is never so much alive. At times she is a foil : her fairness against Ántonia's sparkling nervous dark beauty, her slowness and quietness against Ántonia's vivacity”(203). Hence, it may possible to say that, because of the lack of such vivacity, both Jim and Lena belong to the same world of ‘inactivity.’
2. Jim is, in a sense, undoubtedly an artist, because he is the writer of the story, ‘My Ántonia.’
3. Among the ‘artists,’ who appear, though minor characters, in *My Ántonia*, two of them seem to be free from melancholy. One is the Negro pianist, Blind d'Arnault, in Book II, “Hired Girls.” The other is Mr. Ordinsky, the Pole, in Book III, “Lena Lingard.”

The former is described as a happy pianist. Jim observes as follows : “He would have been repulsive if his face had not been so kindly and happy. It was the happiest face I had seen since I left Virginia”(184). He has nothing to do with melancholy, though he may have his own ‘unhappiness’ as a blind.

The latter is a violin-teacher. He is not melancholic, but is, without doubt, one of the

bachelors in this story, and he seems to love Lena. But Lena just says as follows : “ ‘Poor fellow,’ Lena said indulgently, ‘he takes everything so hard’ ”(287). He is after all one of the poor artists in this novel.

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