



2015-03-01

# Visions of the Past: Engagement and Avoidance Through Nostalgia in *My Ántonia*

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Visions of the Past: Engagement and Avoidance Through Nostalgia in *My Ántonia*

Maren Mazzeo

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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March 2016

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## ABSTRACT

Visions of the Past: Engagement and Avoidance Through Nostalgia in *My Ántonia*

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In Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, nostalgia marks both the ambience of the novel and its critical focus. This thesis illuminates Cather's self-aware deployment of nostalgia as an artistic tool and nostalgia's role in Jim Burden's agenda-driven narrative. Jim adopts nostalgic narrative as propaganda to justify and glorify his past and present life, presenting his past as a simplified and romanticized origin myth. However, through the novel's frame narrative and the frequent, jarring vignettes of violence and discord, Cather undermines Jim's authority as a narrator and prompts reconsideration of Cather's endorsement of his nostalgic creation. By appreciating the complex deployment of nostalgia within the text we are prompted to reconsider assumptions about nostalgia, Cather, and Cather's interest in representations of the past.

Keywords: Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*, nostalgia

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my committee chair, Trent Hickman, for all of your kindness and for taking on a late-blooming project. I am grateful to have you as a mentor. Thank you to my readers: Lance, your perceptive reading motivates me to try to write well enough for a double check-mark in the margins; Ed, your expansive interests prompt me to look in unexpected directions and your dry wit makes it fun.

Thank you to my fan club -- my adorable and loyal children. Your notes, prayers, encouragement, and faith in my abilities have brightened many a long day and late night.

Brian, thank you for everything – as always.

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### Visions of the Past: Engagement and Avoidance through Nostalgia in *My Ántonia*

Willa Cather's novel *My Ántonia* includes abundant reasons to question the novel's epigram: *Optima dies... prima fugit*, or "the best days are first to flee." While narrator Jim Burden endorses this epigram's nostalgic view, Cather's frame introduction, with its subtle critique of Jim's life, hints at a self-serving motivation in Jim's text by suggesting Jim's need to present the past in a way that justifies his life choices. Jim narrates, but quickly glosses over, frequent episodes of violence, abandonment, and isolation in his own life and the lives of those around him. He does not acknowledge their contradiction of his glamorized version of the past, but their presence complicates and undermines his manuscript's project of asserting his role as patron to both Ántonia and the West.

All too often, however, critics have been quick to ascribe Jim's distorted vision to Cather's own. For decades, critics, including Lionel Trilling, dismissed Cather's work as the product of her personal nostalgia. In Trilling's words, Cather's "rejection of her own time" renders her work "increasingly irrelevant and tangential – for any time" ("Willa Cather"). While Blanche Gelfant's and Sharon O'Brien's feminist readings have spurred serious reconsideration of her work, they continue to view Cather's nostalgic tone as symptomatic of some greater failing, whether Jim's uncomfortable sexuality or Cather's repressed lesbianism. These critics are perceptive recognizing nostalgia as a central element of the novel, since *My Ántonia* is undoubtedly nostalgic in tone, filled with longing for irretrievable times and places, and any interpretation must address the function of nostalgia within the text.

Yet critical consideration of nostalgia in the novel has thus far failed to acknowledge the way the novel's three layers of narration distance Cather from the novel's nostalgic sentiment.

Critics such as Wallace Stegner, John Murphy, and Gelfant have noted the structural importance of the frame narrative in separating Jim's voice from Cather's, but they have not addressed the ways in which incorporating multiple narrative layers complicates the function of the nostalgic tone and explores nostalgia's role in portraying and manipulating the past. Far from endorsing a simplistic or sentimental approach, the novel showcases nostalgia as a propaganda mechanism, a vehicle to assuage Jim's personal neediness and professional aspirations. At the same time, Cather fully harnesses the artistic possibilities of nostalgia's elegiac and emotionally compelling tone, crafting a novel of poignant longing and striking vignettes. Ultimately, the novel refrains from endorsing Jim's rose-colored vision, choosing instead to invite critical objectivity through the novel's structure. Cather's sophisticated deployment *and* critique of Jim's nostalgia highlights nostalgia as a tool to create and promote a fictionalized past that serves the needs of the present, even as nostalgia also is the undeniable source of the novel's aesthetic power.

In this paper I explore a nuanced understanding of nostalgia to examine Jim's assumed role as patron to the West and *Antonia*. From that understanding I show how Jim uses nostalgia as an interpretive tool to own and shape his past as the logical precursor and justification for his present life. I demonstrate how Jim draws upon the literature of his youth such as *Camille* and the *Aeneid* to frame his selective presentation of the past. We then observe how Jim glosses over violent and disruptive episodes that contradict his assertions concerning the idyllic beauty of the past. Importantly, these violent and dark episodes hint of alternative interpretations of the past, prompting us to reconsider to what effect Cather deploys nostalgia.

Jim Burden shapes his past to serve his present agenda: to fill his empty personal life and to justify—indeed, glorify—his role in Western development and expansion. He establishes his patronage to the woman who represents fertility, prosperity, and the Nebraskan landscape itself,

Ántonia. Jim, as we learn in the introduction, is a man whose family life consists of a marriage to a woman who “has her own fortune and lives her own life”; in fact, the narrator suggests that she “married this unknown man from the West out of bravado,” and that Jim married her to further his career (Cather 4). Jim finds happiness through his participation in “big Western dreams” of “mines and timber and oil” and, lately, in his renewed friendship with Ántonia (4). Jim values his relationship with Ántonia in part because in Jim’s mind she represents the West and its fruitful potential. Michael Gorman characterizes Jim as a kind of Western American imperialist, and I would further argue that part of Jim’s impulse to write is a driving need to frame his actions in light of a higher purpose to bring prosperity to the people of the West (119). In doing so, he writes his own origin myth that simultaneously sanctifies his work. Connection to Ántonia provides him with a family that takes the place of all that is, and has been throughout the novel, lacking in his personal life. Her children are companions for Jim, and the success of her family is the prosperous outcome Jim envisions as the result of his Western projects.

The novel’s structure prompts us to consider the inherently curated nature of Jim’s memories, and by extension his selective process at remembering in general. Like bookends, the opening and closing paragraphs of the novel emphasize the impossibility of communicating the past, with an initial claim that “no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it” and Jim’s final, wistful satisfaction in possessing “the precious, the incommunicable past” (Cather 3, 272). In opening and closing her novel, Cather signals that the novel cannot adequately transmit the past – the past cannot be shared, only possessed by those who have lived through it. The past, then, is the material from which Jim constructs his own story, his own conception of himself and his life. As he admits, in writing about the past, even about another person from the past, he must “say a great deal about myself. It’s through myself



that I knew and felt... I've had no practice in any other form of presentation" (5). Jim indirectly admits that his novel is all about himself, and not the "picture" of *Ántonia* it purports to be (5). The fact that Jim focuses on the past as the best days, in spite of the frequent scenes of violence and feelings of isolation it engenders, speaks not so much of a mythic or personal past as of Jim's dissatisfaction with or insecurity regarding his own present, and perhaps that of the American West.

Nostalgia can take many forms, and Jim's lack of balanced recognition of the failures of the past is an intrinsic element of Jim's nostalgia. Fred Davis indicates that nostalgia, or the longing for a former time or place, may include an element of self-awareness. While a "simple" nostalgic might fervently buy wholesale into the idea that the past is preferable to the present, a "reflexive" nostalgic considers the potential for error within his emotional preference for the past (Davis 18, 20). An "interpretive" nostalgic will even be able to question why a nostalgic feeling exists in his life (24). Far from interpreting his own nostalgic tendencies, Jim frequently asserts the faultless accuracy of his vision of the past, using phrases like "I can see them now, exactly as they looked" and "I can see her at this moment" (Cather 66, 119). "All the years that have passed have not dimmed my memory," Jim claims; nor do these years seem to offer any new insights into the meaning of his youthful experiences (27). While Jim will at times trace someone's history into the present time – such as with Tiny's success in Alaska, or Lena's life as a seamstress – he fails to provide any deeper interpretation of their lives or his involvement in them. For example, although he believes that Mr. Shimerda's suicide was preventable through greater neighborly care, he never suggests regret for his grandparents' failure to help the Shimerdas or his own part in this tragedy. He recalls the past, but he persistently rejects introspection that will threaten his romanticized conception of it.

Just because Jim's nostalgia is not self-aware does not mean that he refrains from willfully manipulating the past. Jim is in the habit of altering himself to suit the situation, as evidenced by frequent examples from his childhood. Jim admits that "[d]isapprobation hurt me... even that of people whom I did not admire" and throughout the novel Jim aligns his words and actions to win the approval of those around him (Cather 171). He pleases his friend Jake by "declar[ing] hotly" that "I'll never be friends with them [Ántonia and her family] again" (99). He abandons his sole enthusiasm, the dances at the Fireman's Hall, when his grandparents express their disapproval (170). He decamps to Harvard when his academic mentor disapproves of his flirtation with Lena Lingard (215). Jim demonstrates a deep need to please and receive the approbation of others, a compulsion that leads him to use his memoirs of Ántonia to create a satisfying account of his life's trajectory.

Jim's New York life is barren, and to create a compelling rationale for his life choices, Jim restructures the past to give value to his life endeavors and to smooth away any reference to his failings. His life, as the frame narrator notes, has been marked by "disappointments" that would be "severe enough to chill" dispositions less naturally "romantic and ardent" than Jim's (Cather 4). Jim's narrative evades these failures and instead creates a seamless and blameless evolution from his first encounters with the American West and Ántonia – which in Jim's mind are intimately linked -- to his triumphal welcome into her family circle at the novel's end. By demonstrating his lifelong relationship with Ántonia, Jim establishes himself as part of a thriving family life and the West as his "real" home. His New York life and its failings are therefore counterbalanced by an alternative, and idealized, life in the West.

By extension, by demonstrating his role as patron to *Ántonia* and her fertile and idyllic life at the novel's end, Jim asserts that he played a pivotal and beneficial role in the development of the West. The frame narrator observes that:

For Jim, no disappointments have been severe enough to chill his naturally romantic and ardent disposition. This disposition... has been one of the strongest elements of his success. He loves with a personal passion the great country through which his railway runs and branches. His faith in it and knowledge of it have played an important part in its development. He is always able to raise capital for new enterprises in Wyoming or Montana, and he has helped young men out there do remarkable things in mines and timber and oil. (Cather 4)

In establishing himself as spiritually belonging to the West, Jim constructs a birthright for his involvement in its industrial development. For him, Western expansion is a personal project, a passion, and he is apparently influential in the projects that are shaping the future of the landscape. It is no far stretch, then, to see how Jim envisions himself as a patron to the West. The frame narrator is aware of Jim's influence, as Jim himself must be. Jim's desire to see himself as destined for this position is part of the impetus for his writing. Again, although his New York life may be open to question or pity from acquaintances such as the frame narrator, Jim can comfort himself with assurance that his life serves some greater purpose for the benefit of his country.

Jim's narration trims off frayed ends and insists on continuity to constitute a kind of nostalgic propaganda that Svetlana Boym terms "restorative nostalgia," a mode which "tends to make a single teleological plot out of shared everyday recollections. The gaps and discontinuities are mended through a coherent and inspiring tale of recovered identity" (Boym 53). Boym

identifies restorative nostalgia as a frequent tool of nationalist myth-making, and I argue that similar purposes drive Jim's Western expansionism. The restorative nostalgic fetishizes his point of origin, fails to recognize discontinuities in his vision of the past, and shapes the past to project seamless continuity towards a hoped-for future. Jim does all of these things, entwining his own origin, his connection with *Ántonia*, and his current project to develop the West into a tale of romanticized hardship blossoming into prosperity.

For Jim, nostalgia guides his plot and characterization, and Jim's emotional agenda determines every facet of his writing, from episodes he selects to the selective sketch he presents of both himself and *Ántonia*. For example, the older *Ántonia* speaks of feeling "lonesome" and having "sad spells" when she lived in town, but Jim's depiction of *Ántonia* only presents her Black Hawk days as "like Heaven" (Cather 252, 133). Jim's insistence that his novel "hasn't any form" and that he didn't "arrange or rearrange" any of his writing could account for such a discrepancy, but this claim to formlessness belies his underlying nostalgic motivation (6). As noted before, Jim admits that his novel will "say a great deal about [him]self" – but it is ultimately all about himself and his need to smooth the discontinuities of the past and the discontent of the present into a romantic and compelling myth of homecoming and reentry into childhood as one of *Ántonia*'s offspring (5).

Jim's nostalgic myth starts with his and *Ántonia*'s placement in what he feels is a newly-formed world: From the time a recently-orphaned Jim leaves his childhood home to live on his grandparents' farm in Nebraska, "the world was left behind, that [he] had got over the edge of it, and [was] outside man's jurisdiction" (Cather 12). Jim frames his experience through the vocabulary of Edenic newness and disconnection from other human life, thus establishing the roots of his destined role of special kinship with the Western landscape. Jim also links *Ántonia*,

who has arrived as an immigrant at exactly the same time as Jim, with the Nebraskan landscape and wildlife: She revives the cricket, her family is like the local prairie dogs, she dresses in rabbit fur (35, 29, 36). Jim, *Ántonia*, and Nebraska begin a new epoch, and, Jim's narrative implies, their fates are intrinsically entwined. The road into Nebraska is, for them, "the road of Destiny" that "predetermined for us all that we [Jim and *Ántonia*] can ever be" (272). Jim cuts off speculation as to other possible roads for himself and *Ántonia*, compounding the restorative project. This road is also the inherently correct one, as demonstrated by Jim's descriptions of *Ántonia*'s and the West's successful evolution. While Jim shores up his presumed role in these successes, he simultaneously forestalls speculation on his other life choices by ascribing them to destiny.

In addition to his special relationship with the land, Jim assumes the roles of patron and protector of *Ántonia*. When Jim kills the rattlesnake – a predator to prairie dogs, which he associates in his narrative with *Ántonia*'s family – he assumes the role of her "dragon-slayer" and takes pleasure in *Ántonia*'s designated role in the episode, which is "to appreciate and admire" (Cather 42). As time passes, he takes indirect credit for her success and development. As *Ántonia* approaches womanhood, for example, Jim "used to think with pride that *Ántonia*, like Snow-White in the fairy tale, was still 'fairest of them all'" (161). Clearly Jim cannot take credit for *Ántonia*'s beauty, but he evinces a sense of ownership over *Ántonia*. This claim is echoed in the title Jim chooses for his memoirs, *My Ántonia*, which itself echoes Jim's adolescent proclamation that "she was, oh, she was still my *Ántonia*!" (168).

*Ántonia*'s marriage plans threaten to disturb Jim's ownership of her while Jim is at college. Jim responds paternally to this news, saying, "I think I'd better go home and look after *Ántonia*" as though she were a child instead of a woman four years older than himself (Cather

200). When her marriage falls through and *Ántonia* is a single mother, Jim “bitterly” resents her actions and declares that “I could not forgive her,” though what she has done to injure Jim is unclear to anyone without Jim’s sense of mutual destiny and patronage (221). When he fails to reestablish a conventional link with *Ántonia* as “sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister,” Jim abandons both her and Nebraska for Harvard, the East Coast, and his future marriage (237).

It is only after Lena Lingard coaxes Jim with “a cheerful account” of *Ántonia*’s thriving family life that Jim returns to see her, twenty years after leaving her and his life in the West (Cather 242). Jim stays away from a fear of “find[ing] her aged and broken; I really dreaded it. In the course of twenty crowded years one parts with many illusions. I did not wish to lose the early ones. Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again” (241). Once again, Jim provides a blatant clue to the fallacy of his vision, conflating his memories with illusions. Yet Jim quickly moves on, unaware of the irony in his insistence on the accuracy of his memory and his inherent romanticizing of illusions.

Furthermore, Jim openly prefers illusions and memories to realities. In fact, he transforms his fantasies and illusions into cherished past realities. As a young man living in Lincoln, Jim’s “old dream about Lena coming across the harvest field... seemed to me like the memory of an actual experience. It floated before me on the page like a picture, and underneath it stood the mournful line: ‘*Optima dies... prima fugit*’” (Cather 202). This telling scene is a key to understand Jim’s narrative as inaccurately nostalgic: A boyhood fantasy turned into reality emblemizes Jim’s “mournful” sense of the irretrievable past. In short, Jim longs for a past that never was, for a “reality” imagined through wishful thinking about Lena and *Ántonia* and “girls like them” without which “there would be no poetry in the world” (202).

When Jim does reunite with *Ántonia*, he insists on continuity with his nostalgic conception of her. Initially the changes in *Ántonia* are “a shock. It always is, to meet people after long years, especially if they have lived as much and as hard as this woman had” (Cather 244). The contrast between his nostalgic illusion and the reality of her causes him to distance himself from *Ántonia*, at least at first, referring to her as “this woman” and staring silently at her (244). Jim faces a direct challenge to his illusions, then repressively ignores these changes. As he “confronted her, the changes grew less apparent to [him]” and *Ántonia* returns “in the full vigour of her personality” (244). Jim even insists that twenty years of marriage and motherhood have not altered *Ántonia*: in Jim’s view, *Ántonia*’s children “seemed to be upon very much the same terms with *Ántonia* as [Jim and] the Harling children had been so many years before” and her marriage is nothing more than a partnership of “easy friendliness, touched with humour” (257, 262). Despite substantial evidence that *Ántonia* has matured and her life has changed, Jim casts these changes as predestined and unbroken progress towards his present harmony with *Ántonia* and his joy in their reunion. Jim’s restorative nostalgia has fixed *Ántonia*’s role, and he will not acknowledge any alteration in it. In denying any growth or progression in *Ántonia* outside of an extension of her previous roles, Jim transforms the “real” *Ántonia* into his static conception of her.

In Jim’s restorative nostalgic vision, he dictates the roles of others. He prefers static memories to evolving people and their roles. Just as Jim appropriates ownership over *Ántonia*, he controls others in his memories. As a college student away from home, Jim finds that “whenever my consciousness was quickened, all those early friends were quickened within it, and in some strange way they accompanied me through all my new experiences. They were so much alive in me that I scarcely stopped to wonder whether they were alive anywhere else, or how” (Cather

196). His lack of concern with how his memories align with the memories, perspective, or existence of others underscores his driving need to avoid contradiction of his beliefs. Jim is aware of his tendency to privilege his memories of the past over present reality, but he stops short of questioning the accuracy of these memories or the significance of their appeal. Were Jim to examine his motivations he would be forced to abandon his certainty as a narrator. Though unaware, Jim's inclusion of such details permits Cather to quietly prompt our consideration of Jim's reliability as a narrator and what it is he is actually documenting. Jim is a reliable narrator of his own beliefs about the past, but he is unable to provide any sort of documentation that takes into account inconsistencies within his own account or between his account and the accounts of others.

Jim's lack of interest in the harsher realities of his childhood is part of what creates the beauty of the novel in clean, uncomplicated pictures and assertions. Jim describes the Danish laundry girls in lyric celebration of the picturesque. They "never looked so pretty... as they did standing by the ironing board, or over the tubs, washing the fine pieces, their white arms and throats bare, their cheeks bright as the brightest wild roses, their gold hair moist with the steam or the heat and curling in little damp spirals about their ears" (Cather 166). Jim transforms their labor into a sensuous tableau in which the disagreeable dimensions of laundering are ignored. Blanche Gelfant puts it well when she observes of Jim's version of these girls, "How charming they are: flushed and happy... no swollen ankles, no boredom or rancor; no exploitation: a cameo image of 'the beautiful past'" (Gelfant 97). Jim glamorizes the constant, grueling work of laundering by hand, leaving only these linen goddesses who are "always happy" in their toil (Cather 166).



While Gelfant reads Jim's inaccurate vision of the past, especially women, as evidence of his traumatized sexuality, I argue that Jim's distortion centers more directly around his need to create a myth of cultivation. Throughout the novel, Jim romanticizes cultivation and eventual blossoming of the raw and wild into something prosperous and fecund. With the Danish laundry girls, Jim's sensual description of labor turned into "clean, freshly ironed clothes that had been put away with rosemary leaves" celebrates the product and virtually ignores the hardship (Cather 166). For Jim, the harvest is the object of interest. This is the case with the hired girls, including *Ántonia*. She loses Jim's interest when she is seemingly doomed to remain a drudge on her brother's farm raising an illegitimate child. She regains his attention as a successful and productive matriarch, epitomizing the change from something fallow into something productive. While *Ántonia*'s case is the most important to Jim, he makes the same assertion about all the hired girls: "I always knew I should live long enough to see my country girls come into their own, and I have. To-day the best that a harassed Black Hawk merchant can hope for is to sell provisions and farm machinery and automobiles to the rich farms where that first crop of stalwart Bohemian and Scandinavian girls are now the mistresses" (Cather 151). The country girls, despite their difficult childhoods, blossom into prosperity and abundance. Jim overlooks the Danish girls' hardships because they are on their way to rich futures. In fact, their hardships give rise to their future success.

In a move typical of his simple nostalgia, Jim implies that it is their early suffering that transforms the hired girls into a superior race. As Davis notes, simple nostalgics have a tendency to note "that people then, too... experienced hardships" but this is "usually followed by an inner feeling or spoken phrase beginning, 'But despite this...'" (Davis 18). Jim gives lip service to the hired girls' struggles, but focuses his attention on their eventual triumph over poverty. In Jim's

view, these “girls who helped to break up the wild sod, learned so much from life, from poverty... they were almost a race apart” (Cather 149). He claims them as “my country girls” and further envisions himself as their patron who champions and draws attention to their auspicious qualities, taking credit for their future success. His patronage is benevolent in tone – Jim believes in and hopes for their success – but it also involves a proprietary attitude that limits the girls to Jim’s simplified construction of them and their future.

Jim’s passion for cultivation extends to the landscape, as does his sense of special belonging. His first morning in Nebraska he accompanies his grandmother to her garden some ways from the house. He remains alone, reveling in a “new feeling of lightness and content” as he “lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins” (Cather 19). To be intrinsically a part of the landscape makes Jim “entirely happy... to be dissolved into something complete and great” (20). As much as Jim connects to the native landscape of Nebraska, he does not lament its disappearance into crop fields. As a young man he notes the changes the last decade brought to the prairieland with satisfaction:

The old pasture land was now being broken up into wheatfields and cornfields, the red grass was disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing. There were wooden houses where the old sod dwellings used to be, and little orchards, and big red barns; all this meant happy children, contented women, and men who saw their lives coming to a fortunate issue... all the human effort that had gone into [the land] was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or of a great idea. (Cather 227)

Once again, the eventual emergence of a bountiful, cultivated future swallows up early hardship. While it is natural to prefer bounty to hardship and to find satisfaction in the greater comfort of the developing community, Jim's feelings suggest a more fervent gratification in the process of expansion, cultivation, taming of the wilderness. These changes are not just good for the individual families, they are part of some greater whole that encompasses providing for the entire community, the country, the world. Since his first morning in Nebraska he finds happiness in being swallowed up in something great, whether contemplating the expanses of "grass... about to run over" everything else, or feeling himself a hawk who "float[s] off into... only sun and sky" (17, 18). The *scale* of the landscape is the greatness that leaves him "feeling... lightness and content" (19). For Jim, the civilization of the West, as evidenced by his development projects and pride in *Ántonia's* success, is the greatness that has claimed his life.

Jim's development of the land aligns with his overall nostalgic restoration. Not only does he reconstruct the past with his own inflection of it, but he establishes a smooth progression of the past to the present and into the future. The teleological changes brought by farming seem "harmonious" to Jim; there is no disruption of the natural landscape, no concern that the landscape of his cherished youthful days with *Ántonia* is all but gone. This evolution is desirable even as it erases physical connection to the past because it cements Jim's rightful, even predestined, progression. Jim's focus on the past is only significant as it relates to his feelings and assertions about the present. The landscape of the past is dispensable to Jim's project; his descriptions stand in their place as a sufficient monument to his childhood. In fact, the erasure of evidence leaves less possibility to contradict Jim's views. The prairie was as he says it was. But the concrete, present successful agriculture stands as a testament to his early efforts and physical

proof of his story's accuracy As Jim feels himself a part of this landscape, he feels ownership of its beautiful and harmonious development and its fertility.

Jim's lack of regret over the disappearing prairie demonstrates his agenda-driven, forward-looking nostalgia. Jim does not mourn the loss of the background landscape of his childhood years. And while his descriptions of the prairie are beautiful, such as when he describes the land's "motion... in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and... the shaggy grass... a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of buffalo... galloping, galloping..." Jim himself seems underwhelmed by the landscape he describes (Cather 18). As he first passes through Nebraska, "The only thing very noticeable about Nebraska was that it was still, all day long, Nebraska" (10). When he first leaves his grandparents' farm in daylight, "I could hardly wait to see what lay beyond that cornfield; but there was only red grass like ours, and nothing else" (21). Jim looks for something more; he wishes to "walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world" into something different (18). In creating his nostalgic myth, Jim seeks to recreate a myth of destiny and homecoming, not to recapture his actual childhood and its setting. His nostalgic project relates the past only to justify the present. Since Jim centers experience and the landscape of his past in *Ántonia* and not in Nebraska, he is free to alter the landscape as long as he is able to retain his special relationship with its symbol. As opposed to the simple nostalgic who focuses on longing, Jim establishes a background that favorably frames his present life.

Jim's restorative nostalgic agenda is driven by his need to establish and justify himself in development of the West and *Ántonia*, but he does so in an indirect way. Jim is not personally responsible for farming the land, for fathering children, for providing for *Ántonia*, nor even for personally overseeing the "big Western dreams" of mining and foresting that his influence helps

initiate. Jim's role is that of a patron, not a participant, and so Jim must establish how his patronage contributes to the success and fruition he admires. Jim implies that without his influence, *Ántonia* would not thrive the way she has; without women like *Ántonia*, the West would not reach its agricultural potential. Therefore, Jim envisions that his beneficial patronage inspires and nurtures what is finest in *Ántonia* and the West.

Jim's patronage is inherently appropriative, benevolent but controlling. He desires to protect and nurture, but to do so he must own the object of his patronage. This possessiveness is integral to his restorative nostalgia. In preserving *Ántonia* through his narrative, Jim envisions introducing her and sponsoring understanding of *Ántonia* for others, such as the frame narrator. However, his recuperative vision is inherently possessive, even predatory. Within his narrative *Ántonia* has no voice of her own, only the words Jim allots. As Gorman points out in his imperialist reading of Jim, *Ántonia* "has become both his inspiration and his invention and, like other resources in the West, will become subject to his exploitation" as he "mold[s] her to the extent possible" through his imaginative construction of her (Gorman 123). Jim chooses not to include *Ántonia*'s words as she experiences her "sad spells" in town, nor does she narrate her own feelings about Larry Donovan, the man who seduced and abandoned her, except through the medium of the Widow Steavens. *Ántonia* can only be accessed through Jim, and I argue that Jim imaginatively exploits her to establish self-attribution for the prosperity and success he did not create but wishes to take credit for. It is not the job of patrons to *do* great work but rather to inspire, nurture, and promote it. Under the guise of preserving *Ántonia* through literature, Jim weds his benevolent and self-interested impulses through beneficial patronage. We next consider the literary heritage that Jim espouses.

Within his narrative, Jim dwells on literary influences that shape his idea of beneficial patronage. These influences become a part of his own nostalgic myth-making. The first is the work from which the epigram to the novel is drawn, Virgil's *Georgics*. Jim is moved by Virgil's claim, or hope, that "I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country" (Cather 197). Jim embraces the idea of bringing civilization to an undeveloped land. When he considers Virgil's death, made bitter by leaving the *Aeneid* unfinished, Jim believes that Virgil's mind "must have gone back to the perfect utterance of the *Georgics*, where the pen was fitted to the matter as the plough is to the furrow; and he must have said to himself... 'I was the first to bring the Muse into my country'" (198). For Jim, introducing the spark of civilization is a redemptive, lifelong pursuit. Although he does not forge a formal relationship with *Ántonia*, Jim sees himself as different from the other town boys he views with "contempt" for their failure to "give all the country girls a better position in town" through marriage or friendship (153).

Through his western projects, Jim brings the agricultural Muse to his country, spreading industrialization and civilization to the wilderness of America. He also brings the local Muse to his rural countryside. *Ántonia*, who "more than any other person... seemed to mean... the country" arrives on Jim's train in Nebraska (Cather 5). First to teach her English, he frees her to voice "her opinions about everything" and to influence others (28). His family introduces her into Black Hawk, where she is "discovered" by the townspeople (154). In these ways, Jim has brought the Muse to Black Hawk. When she falls out of favor with her employer, Jim "continued to champion *Ántonia*" and won't give up her friendship (163). In his text of *My Ántonia* Jim introduces *Ántonia* to the world at large. His work also aims to preserve *Ántonia* for those who did know her, such as the frame narrator. She encourages Jim to record "how he knew her and felt her" as "exactly what I most wanted to know about *Ántonia*. He had had opportunities that I,

as a little girl who watched her come and go, had not” (6). Influenced by his beliefs about the redemptive quality of bringing the Muse, he cherishes his role as having done something similar with *Ántonia*. However, Jim springs from contributions to *Ántonia* to greater claims of contributions to the West.

Another work influential in Jim’s conception of restorative nostalgia and patronage is Virgil’s *Aeneid*, which he spends hours “scanning... aloud and committing long passages to memory” before college (Cather 174). The *Aeneid* incorporates nostalgia with an agenda similar to Jim’s. Virgil revives an older myth about the foundation of Rome that explicitly celebrates the supposed family connection between the current emperor, Augustus, and the founder of the Roman race, Aeneas, son of Venus. In doing so, Virgil cements Augustus’s right to rule as a descendent of divinity, the first Roman, and a great hero. Virgil crafts the destiny of Rome and the fate of Augustus as part of an inevitable progression decreed by the gods. At the same time, he includes prophecies indicating that under Augustus’s hand the Roman Empire will reach new levels of prosperity. Although on a much shorter time-scale, Jim makes similar moves to connect himself with *Ántonia* and the unfolding development of the West. *Ántonia*, Jim claims, is “a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races” (259). Jim envisions her both as a natural resource, like a mine, and an Aeneas-like founder of a race, both of which he exploits for material to fabricate his nostalgic vision of the past. In the close of the novel, Jim portrays himself as a part of *Ántonia*’s family to establish a mandate for future influence similar to Augustus’s. Jim makes plans to fill his future years with “trips I meant to take with the Cuzak boys [*Ántonia*’s children]... There were enough Cuzaks to play with for a long while yet” (271). Jim conceives of himself as a surrogate brother to the Cuzak children, sleeping alongside them in the haymow and joining them on their chores, simultaneously allowing him a return to childhood and affording

him an opportunity to play benefactor to the next generation of *Ántonia's* family. If *Ántonia's* family symbolizes Jim's vision of a Western Empire, and if Jim is adopted into this lineage, then he cements his claim to legitimacy in shaping the West.

Like Virgil and the *Aeneid*, Jim constructs a mythological origin story. Nostalgia, as Boym reminds us, is “an ache of temporal distance and displacement. Restorative nostalgia takes care of both of these symptoms... Displacement is cured by a return home... Never mind if it's not your home; by the time you reach it, you will have already forgotten the difference” (44). Jim narrates such a “return” to *Ántonia's* home at the close of the novel (a place he has never yet been). This return home assuages any loneliness Jim may find in his New York life as he obtains a ready-made family, origin, and return to youth. *Ántonia's* children already know who he is and his life history from *Ántonia's* photo album and stories. He makes himself at home, sleeping with the younger boys in the hayloft rather than in a guest bed. He asserts his prior claim on *Ántonia*, curtly reminding a young son of *Ántonia's*, “I've eaten your mother's *kolaches* long before that [day] when you were born” (Cather 248). Pumpkins “sunning themselves... on the porch steps” of *Ántonia's* home symbolize Jim's homecoming (243). Echoing his childhood ecstasy to exist like the pumpkins in his grandmother's garden, these pumpkins signal to Jim that this is home.

Jim portrays his self-imposed exile from the objects of nostalgia through the play *Camille*. Although he presents *Ántonia* and the West as his true passions, he voluntarily relocates to New York, marries someone else, and stays away from “his” *Ántonia* for twenty years. Yet in *Camille* he discovers a pretext and pattern to justify his behavior without diluting his emotional connection to what he has left behind. Jim spends five pages describing the play and its effect on him, indicating its significance to him. Due to the death of the heroine, Marguerite, the romance



of Marguerite and Armand is forever irretrievable. Yet even before Marguerite's death, she sacrifices her happiness and love affair for what she believes is best for Armand's future. Jim adopts this posture when he justifies his departure for the east coast as a similarly selfless act of love for Lena Lingard: "I even tried to persuade myself that I was standing in Lena's way – it is so necessary to be a little noble! -- and that if she had not me to play with, she would probably marry and secure her future" (Cather 215). Although Jim chooses selfishly, he casts his life narrative in light of service to a greater cause.

I contend that Jim justifies his twenty-year absence from *Ántonia* in the same way he frames his putatively-selfless departure from Lena. Again, his motives are self-serving. He travels east to attain an education and remains, no doubt, in part due to his advantageous marriage to a wealthy New York socialite. He also stays away from *Ántonia* to spare himself the pain of his disappointment in her and to retain his illusions about their past together. In re-writing his life story he finds it more satisfactory to emphasize his patronage of *Ántonia* over his abandonment of her.

Just as Jim spends long segments of his narrative describing other literature, he frequently spends pages considering the histories, stories, or anecdotes of others. Jim blends them into his pastoral narrative, but the episodes themselves, complete with graphic and grisly detail, are strikingly violent and gruesome. A jealous neighbor chases Lena and "made [Jim and *Ántonia*] feel how sharp her blade was, showing us very graphically just what she meant to do to Lena" which is to "trim some of that shape off" her; a friend and his bride are thrown to ravening wolves; Wick Cutter murders his wife and then, having shot himself, lies "on a sofa... with his throat torn open, bleeding on a roll of sheets" asserting his triumph over his wife's rights to his property; a tramp throws himself into a threshing machine from which his body is "wedged in so

tight it was a hard job to get him out, and the machine ain't never worked right since" (Cather 126, 265, 135). On the surface, these vignettes fall into the kind of narrative Jim claims he has written – "what of herself and myself and other people *Ántonia's* name recalls to me" (6). But within Jim's nostalgic project, and within Cather's larger consideration of nostalgia and memory, these episodes must be considered in the way they either contribute to or retard the progress of the nostalgic vision of the novel.

These episodes are not, as David Daiches dismisses them, "episodes... that have little if any relation to the story" (9). Daiches is correct in that these short stories do not advance *Ántonia's* personal biography, but in Cather's presentation of Jim's curated recollection of his past, these episodes betray a rougher side to his idyllic childhood. And while Blanche Gelfant rightly asserts that "*My Ántonia* is a magnificent and warped testimony to the mind's image-making power, an implicit commentary on how that creative power serves the mind's need to ignore and deny whatever is reprehensible," Gelfant reads these episodes as Jim's relapses to disguise his fear of sexuality (Gelfant 162). While many of the most striking stories can be understood in this light, Gelfant does not hypothesize Jim's impetus to write nor Cather's interest in writing such a sexually-inhibited narrator.

These violent episodes illustrate Jim's glamorization of the past, even when such glamorization is patently wanting in sympathy or gravity. Details such as the "bunches of hair and stuff sticking to the poles and straw along the roof... blown up there by gunshot" from Mr. Shimerda's suicide contradict the romanticized nature of Jim's narrative. He dismisses these episodes as part of the excitement and drama of his childhood, but further consideration reveals discontinuity between Jim's rosy picture of the past and the events he details. For example, when Jim learns of Pavel's and Peter's past, he relishes it as a macabre fairy tale: "We did not tell

Pavel's secret to anyone, but guarded it jealously – as if the wolves of the Ukraine had gathered that night long ago, and the wedding party been sacrificed, to give us a painful and peculiar pleasure” (Cather 50). Indeed, as Paul Schach has shown, the story is rooted in German folk tales and its violence carries a certain haunting beauty. However, the further history of the two Russians' wanderings and sufferings, Pavel's slow death and Peter's loss of everything he loves at auction, merit a different level of contemplation from the adult, if not the child, Jim. However, the adult Jim harvests Peter and Pavel for their chilling story without any significant compassion for their plight.

Jim does internalize the story, as evidenced by his recurring imaginary reenactment: “At night, before I went to sleep, I often found myself in a sledge drawn by three horses, dashing through a country that looked something like Nebraska and something like Virginia” (Cather 50). This is an enigmatic remark that Jim does not follow up. Is Jim choosing to pretend or is this a waking dream? Does the dream give him pleasure or fear? As the remark follows up Jim's observation that the story gave him “a painful and peculiar pleasure” it is safe to assume that his fantasy has elements of both. While Jim is dashing along, he does not mention what he is pursuing or what is pursuing him. But the transition from his native Virginia to his adopted Nebraska is one of the very rare indications that Jim continues to think about his former life and home. In this setting, Jim's past seems to be the main thing that preoccupies him as he dashes along through it – or away from it.

Jim is not the only one struggling to come to terms with the past, and he frequently observes the way the past influences the lives of those around him. As a child, episodes like that of Peter and Pavel, whose past “story followed them” wherever they tried to hide, alert the young Jim to the dangerously haunting nature of the past (Cather 49). On his dying bed, Pavel is

tormented by the recollection of the wolves, crying in fear at the similar sound of the Nebraska coyotes. Peter, who is not responsible for throwing the bride and groom to the wolves, takes responsibility of Pavel and together they are “run out of their village” and eventually their country (49). They settle in America, but “had been alone ever since” their night with the wolves (49). The past shapes – and limits – their present and future prospects.

Shortly after Jim witnesses Pavel hounded to his grave by the past, another neighbor falls victim to the persistence of past recollections. *Ántonia*’s father, Mr. Shimerda, does not adjust well to his new home and falls into despondency, longing for his old country and friends. After the loss of his Russian friends Peter and Pavel, Mr. Shimerda succumbs to his depression and commits suicide. Even as a boy Jim has the conviction that “homesickness had killed Mr. Shimerda” and Mr. Shimerda’s example schools Jim on the danger of focusing on the aching aspect of nostalgia (Cather 78). Wallace Stegner contends Mr. Shimerda’s “sensitive [and] gentle” nature causes him to succumb (44). While his refinement may sharpen his suffering in his primitive American conditions, it is his nostalgia that kills Mr. Shimerda. *Ántonia* confirms Jim’s conviction of this, lamenting that “Her papa sad for the old country” (Cather 70). Therefore, as Jim approaches his own longing for the past, he is careful to focus on recapturing his childhood and not on the longing it inspires in him. Svetlana Boym’s following distillation of the components of nostalgia help distinguish between Jim’s project and Mr. Shimerda’s affliction:

Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* [home] and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance... The first category of nostalgics do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe their project is

about truth... [R]eflective nostalgia lingers... in the dreams of another place and time. (Boym 41)

Jim adopts a vision that claims to be an accurate record of the past, a monument to both his childhood home and his metaphorical home in *Ántonia*. He does not recognize any discord or inaccuracies in his narrative, nor does he offer any emotional insight into the violence or contradictions present. His project is to establish a past that promotes a positive interpretation of the present and points to a promising future. Jim does not dwell on the instances of violence, isolation, and ugliness in the past but provides an alternative narrative to his assertions. Disturbing memories do influence Jim, but, as is his practice, he turns away from investigating what they signify to him or why they haunt him. Although Jim “begrudge[s] the room that Jake and Otto and Russian Peter took up in my memory” they are constantly in Jim’s thoughts (Cather 196). These men all show kindness to the young Jim and then abruptly depart, vanishing into a void of unknown experiences, never to be heard from again. Jim can choose to dwell on the loneliness or sadness their memory inspires, or he can choose to write them into a cohesive and soothing narrative of childhood. Having witnessed the torment of Pavel, Peter, Mr. Shimerda, who were all at the mercy of their past, Jim chooses instead to control his past by constructing his own narrative. In consequence, for Jim “[these people] stood out strengthened and simplified now” and at the mercy of whatever interpretive spin he gives their stories (196). Jim’s present life is a burden to him, just as Mr. Shimerda’s was once he arrived in America. But rather than long for the past, Jim recaptures and reenacts it, lending his present a kind of inevitability that displaces responsibility away from Jim.

In *My Ántonia* Cather layers a simplistic, sentimental nostalgia within a broader analysis of Jim’s recreation of the past. Jim’s vision is that of a restorative nostalgic, but by contrast

Cather's novel operates on the level of reflective nostalgia, analytically addressing the condition and consequences of nostalgic longing. The novel harnesses both the aching sincerity of Jim's vision of the past but uses it and him to contemplate more broadly the process of recollection, revision, and writing life narratives. The epigraph to the novel is not Cather's simplistic belief framed in the words of Virgil, but an introduction to what that the novel will explore: the fervent belief that the best days are first to flee, despite evidence to the contrary. There is ample evidence that even Jim is aware, on some level, of the less pleasant side to his "best days" but he lacks the initiative or motivation to embrace a nuanced view of his past. Jim veers away from acknowledging the pain in longing for the past, but misses the opportunity to reflect on why the pain is present. He focuses on reconstructing a home and an origin story rather than interpreting their meaning in his life.

Were Jim's version of events the only one proffered by the novel, it would be understandable why so many Cather critics have conflated her sentiments so closely with Jim's. Jim does indeed seem to reject elements of modern life, choosing to absent himself from New York City for weeks at a time, asserting that no women he has ever met compare to the intelligence, beauty, and vitality of the "hired girls" of his youth, and looking to recapture childhood pleasure by acting like a boy alongside *Ántonia's* children. Yet Cather's frame narrator refrains from condoning or condemning Jim's life, simply opening the space to question the validity of Jim's choices and beliefs.

By suggesting that Jim's recollections may be prompted by current emotional needs, the frame narrator invites the reader to consider Jim's nostalgia with caution. The frame narrator is fond of Jim and kindly towards his enthusiasms; we aren't enjoined in a scathing rejection of Jim and his feelings. Rather, we can view Jim and his novel with an appreciation for his sense of

loss, but with an awareness and tolerance for the fragmented and imperfect nature of any presentation of the past. While to Jim the past is a complete vision, the inaccuracies and disturbances in his story add additional depth of feeling for the reader. While it is true that Jim's vision may be inaccurate, and therefore easily toppled, can any reader join Jim in asserting the early days were really better for the "hired girls"? Surely the prospering and contented matriarch *Ántonia* does not feel that her best days were her early ones of starvation, deprivation, and endless toil. All the same, Cather's novel does not explicitly condemn Jim's inaccuracies, but rather showcases them as part of the price of an agenda-driven recreation of the past. Jim possesses his beautiful, imaginative past, but he seems to have failed to develop meaningful relationships since he was nineteen. His insistence on *Ántonia*'s unchanging nature precludes any fresh element in their relationship. Jim's emotional life is static and his narrative evidences the flattening and overly cohesive tendency typical of this sort of restorative nostalgic vision as he smooths all labor, heartache, and violence into the fertilizing impetus for the eventual harvest. Cather explores the beauty, the brittleness, and consequences of Jim's nostalgia.

Understanding nostalgia in a sophisticated way, as more than a simplistic preference for longing for the past, allows us to grasp the wider vision of *My Ántonia* as a reflection on the malleability of memory and the fallacies of nostalgic myth-making. It also opens the door for further consideration of the role of nostalgia within Cather's canon. Especially in her later novels, Cather probes the role of the past and memory in life choices and in self-narration. Some works, such as *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, incorporate a similar irony in the nostalgic premise of the novel. As John Jacobs has argued, Cather's narrative offers a much richer and ambivalent engagement with the memories of an Old South childhood than actual life narratives that are similar in theme and scope. While the novel may appear to be simple or even racist in the pro-

slavery sentiments of some of the characters, Cather is once again exploring the *process* and prejudices of recollection as much as any of the details of the represented past. *A Lost Lady* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* similarly explore the aspects of reexamining the past through the sentiments of the present.

As previously noted, both the beginning and end of *My Ántonia* assert the incommunicable nature of the past. In bookending her novel with this claim, she directs our attention to the narrative not as a transmission of the past, but an exploration of Jim's relationship with the past. In Jim's case, the past is harnessed to justify Jim's career as a Western expansionist, to fill the void of his empty marriage through Jim's association with Ántonia's family, and to provide Jim with a rose-colored narrative that smooths over past hurts. This is but one instance of how the past can be reimagined through a nostalgic lens, a case study to prompt contemplation of the process of recalling and reimagining the past.

Many critics have read the novel as Cather's rejection of the troubles of the modern world – her own manipulation and glorification of the past to comment on her dissatisfaction with the present. Granville Hicks's reading that "Miss Cather has never once tried to see contemporary life as it is; she sees only that it lacks what the past, at least in her idealization of it, had," sums up the pejorative assumptions regarding Cather's nostalgic tone (Hicks 708). It also epitomizes the shallow approach that accepts without question Jim's preference for the past and puzzles over the "irrelevant" details that contradict this reading.

Even as Cather has re-entered the American literary canon in the 1970s after her expulsion in the 1930s, critics continue to assume her nostalgic tone is personal. While Robert Scholes' assertion that the novel is entirely pessimistic about the future, that "Willa Cather does



not celebrate [Ántonia's] triumph" and that "rather, she intones an elegy... over the days that are no more" seems an extreme claim that even outstrips Jim's own belief in the better days of the past, current scholars like Sharon O'Brien continue to invest in the idea of the melancholy and pessimistic Cather (Scholes 35). O'Brien generally sees Cather's nostalgia as denial of her own femininity and sexuality, personal wounds that inspire her art. She claims that "Cather's creative process was based on loss. In order to write, she needed to feel the desire to possess and recreate what was missing or absent" (O'Brien 5). Readings like Scholes's and O'Brien's fail to acknowledge any gap between Cather's voice and Jim's, nor do they question the motivation for Jim's memoirs.

My work is not the first to highlight the inaccurate assumptions of Hicks or Trilling in dismissing Cather's work as sentimental escapism. Nor do most contemporary critics accept Jim's narrative voice without suspicion. Yet critics continue to shadow-box the insinuation of failure embedded in a simplified conception of nostalgia, stretching to account for its presence without pigeonholing Cather as a sentimentalist or anti-modernist. Blanche Gelfant reads Jim as an example of the sexual misfits that populate Cather's novels, an involuntary product of Cather's inhibitions and not a deliberate characterization. Gabriel Scala goes so far as to hypothesize sexual abuse as the root of Cather's nostalgia, admitting that "there is no verifiable evidence of sexual abuse in Cather's childhood" but asserting that "we must account for the undercurrent of violence and sexual desire" as potentially "the disclosure of a childhood sexual trauma" (139, 143). Scholarship has searched everywhere for an explanation of nostalgia in Cather except in the most uncomplicated answer: Cather's interest in nostalgia itself. Whatever prompted her interest in nostalgia, her work is a nuanced critique of myth-making of origins and

ideals and *My Ántonia* is a sophisticated depiction of the tendencies and inaccuracies of nostalgia.

Cather deliberately wiped out much of her unpublished legacy to prevent manipulation of her own past. Near her death, Cather instructed her companion, Edith Lewis, to destroy personal documents, drafts of novels (including an unfinished one), and letters. Her remaining papers were to be unpublished. She begged friends to destroy her correspondence. Cather's insistence on controlling her papers and literary work underscores her recognition of the possible manipulative interpretations that may be placed on her work and personal life. Cather is deeply aware of the impossibility of recapturing the past as it was and the temptation in an emergent present to shape past material to suit a current agenda. In limiting access to her personal papers, Cather limits the risk of her private words being used as material for a restorative nostalgic project such as Jim's.

Cather's interest in representations and distortions of the past is both personal and professional. It informs many of her novels. *My Ántonia*'s particular interest is nostalgia, the sentiment referenced in the epigraph to the novel. By understanding the way Cather approaches nostalgia we discern richer interpretive possibilities in Jim's memoirs of his childhood friend, Ántonia. Through Jim's presentation of the past we are able to interpret Jim, and through Jim we are able to explore the motivations underlying his presentation of the past. We are also able to reexamine Cather's other works, recognizing more self-awareness in her shading of the past than has been previously acknowledged. Understanding Cather's awareness of restorative nostalgia even allows us insight into Cather herself, a writer who, in drawing from her childhood experiences throughout her literary career, was always in the process of reinterpreting and

reimagining the materials of the past. Cather *is* focused on the past, just not the way her critics have believed.

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