

**Jim Burden, Lost in Space: How Liminality and Temperament
Theory Work to Produce a Tragic Ending
in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*
by
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In Willa Cather's *My Antonia* Jim Burden, Antonia Shimerda, and Lena Lingard are all displaced characters. Antonia vacillates as she navigates the liminal space she faces after settling in the Midwest; Lena is determined to move beyond her pastoral beginning, and Jim never quite finds his place in space. Antonia moves to town to work as a "hired girl," learning the roles of a domesticated frontier woman. After an attempted marriage to Larry Donovan in Denver, and an accidental pregnancy, she finds herself returning to the rural surroundings of her childhood in order to live out her life as both wife and mother of bilingual children. Conversely, Lena finds her time spent in town working for a dressmaker to be more rewarding than her traditional pioneer woman experiences, which included raising her siblings and working the land. She is able to master her trade and quickly moves to Lincoln, Nebraska's state capital. Eventually, she settles in San Francisco, the uncharted Wild-West. Here she becomes a successful career-woman, choosing a life that contains neither marriage nor children. Interestingly, Jim does not appear to settle anywhere. Instead, he travels back and forth from the east to the west while working as a lawyer for the railroad. By utilizing the lenses of liminal space and David Keirse's temperament theory, I will examine how subordinating rites of passage and core values influences the development of Cather's characters: Jim Burden, Antonia Shimerda, and Lena Lingard, leading the novel to a tragic ending. For the purpose of this paper I am defining tragedy as a character's inability to avert disaster based upon the subordination of his or her temperament's core values, which in Jim's case is the pursuit of self.

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Antonia Shimerda and Lena Lingard are immigrants who find themselves facing and overcoming hardships while maturing in the vast spaces of the Great Plains. The liminal spaces they traverse as immigrants expose them to choices and limitations with regard to gender roles. Jim Burden is an orphan who is not from another country but is working through his own displacement by adjusting to his new life, as an orphan, while living with his grandparents near Black Hawk, Nebraska. Jim, Antonia, and Lena all come from different parts of the world bearing varied experiences; their point of entry into the rural lifestyle is the same, and it is familiar to Cather. The exposure they receive as children in the Midwest informs the choices they make as they enter into adulthood, and ultimately, how they end up living their lives. This is also true for Cather. All three displaced characters seek to fit into their new surroundings, attempting to assimilate into the life led by native Nebraskans, homesteaders, and immigrants; however, in the end only Antonia remains in rural Black Hawk, Lena flees to the west coast, and Jim is still riding the train back and forth between the coasts.

In order to begin this examination it is important to note that all characters must undergo certain rites of passage in order to develop (fully) and attempt to meet their core values. According to David Keirseay in his text, *Please Understand Me II*, all individuals have core values that need to be met, and what those core values consist of is determined by their temperament. Core values are the things in life that an individual must be secure in in order to live a mature life.¹ In addition, core values must be met in order for rites of passage to be achieved.

Cather's character development of Jim, Antonia, and Lena begins with their experiencing a rite of passage that involves "crossing." Joseph R. Urgo begins to explain the idea of rites of passage in his text *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration*, "Crossing is a fundamental American rite of passage [. It involves] crossing from one place or home to another and being prepared to answer the inevitable question: where do you come from...?"² In other words, Cather needed to develop characters that had an understanding of who they were and where they came from before they could start their assimilation into their new lives

in their chosen regions. She attempts to employ this technique by using Jim as the narrator. In keeping with the idea of crossing as a rite of passage, William R. Handley in *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West* asserts, “Cather neither dramatizes [her character’s] sense of belonging to America nor downplays the barriers and tensions among immigrant groups. At the same time, she conveys a sense of her characters’ quiet but epic heroism[. S]he is unsparing in her portrayal of their unaccountable failures and despair.”³³ It is in looking at these failures that Cather is able to create characters that radiate depth. Margaret Anne O’Connor elaborates, “*My Antonia* hasn’t a paper doll in it. The [characters] come out of it as you read it and refuse to be put back on the shelf with the book. They go about your work with you, and presently it seems as if you had known them well for a long time.”³⁴ To demonstrate this depth I will begin by observing all three characters in their new surroundings. In order for Jim, Antonia, and Lena to acclimate to these new surroundings in Nebraska, Cather needed to establish for the reader an understanding and an awareness of where they came from—Jim from Virginia, Antonia from Bohemia, and Lena from Norway. Once this was established, each character could begin the process of negotiating the rituals involved with the rites of passage they inevitably needed to experience before crossing over to secure their core values.

According to Richard Schechner’s *Performance Studies: An Introduction*,

Rituals are a way people remember, similar to memories in action. Rituals that transform people permanently are called rites of passage. [...] There are three types of ritual: social (everyday life), religious (observances, celebrations, rites of passage), and aesthetic (codified forms, ad hoc forms).⁵

Cather’s characters are exposed to all three types of rituals. The first type of ritual—social, is shown when Jim kills the snake. Lisa Marie Lucenti, claims in “Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*: Haunting the Houses of Memory,” that “Jim initially frames his adventure with the snake as the

moment when Antonia returns to her proper place as a girl. Her pride at being able to work in the fields was for Jim a threatening elision of gender difference and the snake episode works to restore his pride.”⁶ Even though it appears that Jim has passed through this rite of passage, he in fact did not. Antonia’s equally gendered behavior displayed throughout the text causes Jim to subordinate his feelings for her when she does not treat him as he feels he deserves to be treated.

The key phase in a rite of passage ritual is the liminal phase. The liminal phase is the period when an individual is betwixt and between social categories or personal identities. Cather begins the text with all three characters in this phase. It is during the liminal phase that the actual work involved with a rite of passage takes place and transitions and transformations may occur (Schechner, 50). Victor Turner found this phase interesting because it held the possibility for “an anti-structure,” or rather a way to make new situations, identities, and social realities (Schechner, 57). This appears to be what Cather is attempting to create for her characters. As I’ll soon illustrate, Cather places each character in a liminal space and develops the novel’s tension and conflict through their experiences of finding identity in the social world. Because each of them is searching to secure different core values, their journeys take them to different places.

Antonia’s character is observed navigating liminal space as she approaches life after her father’s death while performing the role of frontier male as seen in this physical description by Cather: “[Antonia] wore the boots her father had so thoughtfully taken off before he shot himself, and his old fur cap. [...] She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor’s. Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders [...].”⁷ Antonia is participating in a fairly uncommon role when she participates in this masculine behavior. Perhaps she is merely helping her family continue their existence, or maybe she has observed that this role is championed over the domestic role led by her female mentors. Either way she is transitioning social selves. Cather does not leave her in this space, but rather moves her through it with the help of Grandmother Burden, who rescues her from the work in the fields. Jim’s grandmother makes arrangements

for Antonia to move to town and work for the Harling's, where Mrs. Harling becomes a role model for her next rite of passage. Here she is exposed to the role of frontier townswoman and mother: "Oh, I'm glad I went [to town]! I'd never have known anything about cooking, or housekeeping if I hadn't. I learned nice ways at the Harling's..." (229). Because Antonia now has the ability to generate an income, she has placed herself in a position of respect and perhaps desire. Her chances of securing her core values have increased based upon her ability to secure independence and perhaps freedom from the difficult lifestyle she was introduced to upon moving with her family to the Great Plains.

As Cather maneuvers Antonia through a series of liminal spaces, she finally places her as a mother and wife, living out the traditional role of frontierswoman, after she successfully advances her through her rites of passage.

Lena is also exposed to a similar series of liminal spaces, which involve learning the gender roles associated with her rural location in the Midwest, but she chooses to depart from this role and ventures into the other acceptable space for women during this time period, which is that of a career woman.

Lena clearly moves through a ritualistic rite of passage while in Black Hawk and its surrounding rural area. She continues this movement in the city of Lincoln before she moves permanently to San Francisco. Lena is exposed to judgment and scorn from the citizens in Black Hawk for her supposed behavior with Ole Benson; however, she takes the critical response in stride and trusts her own instincts while moving through this social space. She continues to transition through her social selves as she becomes independent by her own hands while running her own business in both Lincoln and San Francisco.

Lena also successfully moves through liminal space and matures as a character. Cather affords Antonia and Lena room to develop as independent female characters. She takes the opportunity to let their status as immigrants create even more space for their chosen gender roles and life paths.

Claudia Yuckman explains the choices granted to them because of their immigrant status, “Antonia and Lena are granted a social freedom to choose not to marry or to marry, to choose their own professions and to choose to live according to their own moral codes. [However,] they do not change the fabric of their society by actually marrying the Black Hawk young men.”⁸ Instead, they assume a position on the outside looking in on that which is acceptable and expected behavior of native Nebraskans. From here, they choose their own destinies based upon identification of what they needed to achieve their own identities. In the “Drama of Memory in *My Antonia*,” Terence Martin suggests that “Cather places Antonia and Lena together as friends in order to suggest the different roles each of them will play in the life of Jim Burden.”⁹ Their roles afford Jim a fluid place to seek himself, yet he does not appear comfortable with either female character or either place. Although Jim also enjoys city life, he longs for his childhood in the Midwest where his memory is filled with Antonia. This inability to move from his memory keeps Jim betwixt and between, emotionally homeless, and searching for himself within the liminal space.

Jim hovers in liminal space as he is continually moving back and forth on the train from coast to coast, seemingly never content. According to Handley, Jim’s work with the railroad “becomes both the progress-oriented means by which he leaves his past behind and the regressive means by which his nostalgia claims him” (151). He continues, “Jim never directly writes about the world he is chiefly ‘invested’: in a male world in which dreams become money. He does write, however, about his lost self” (145). A permanently lost self does not bode well for a successful move through a liminal space. Rites of passage are not achieved if the liminal space does not provide experiences that allow an individual to be inscribed with a new identity and power. A lost self most certainly does not allow an individual to secure his core values, which for Jim, the Idealist, would be his predisposition to seek his identity and true authenticity. Keirseley briefly explains the basic dimensions of personality:

[T]he characteristics of the four temperaments ...are most likely derived from the interweaving of the two most basic human actions, how we communicate with each other and how we use tools to accomplish our goals. Humans are either concrete or abstract in their usage of words and tools. (26)

There is either a peaceful understanding that occurs between them allowing for core values to be secured, or there is tension and conflict created, resulting in an unsatisfactory blending of words and tools, which find characters unable to resolve the situations that arise when core values are not met, leading a text to a tragic ending.

As illustrated in the text, Jim has not found himself or his identity, as seen when he continues to ride the train from east to west, clinging to his memories of the past in hopes of finding his identity and ultimately securing his core values. According to Keirse, “An idealist secures their core values when they achieve a unique identity, and the ability to find meaning and significance in their lives” (24).

Cather offers insight into Jim’s character when she observes:

As for Jim, no disappointments have been severe enough to chill his naturally romantic and ardent disposition. This disposition, though it often made him seem very funny when he was a boy, has been one of the strongest elements in his success. (48)

Idealists are committed to seeing their separateness from other people, or at most their individual essence (Keirse, 143).

Idealists are also known for their abstract word cooperative tool usage. Jim tells Antonia of his feelings the day her father died. “I felt sure then that he was on his way back to his own country, and that even now, when I passed his grave, I always thought of him as being among the woods and fields that were so dear to him” (Cather, 176). Jim’s cooperative nature is comforting to Antonia who is also a cooperative individual. Keirse continues, “Sometimes Idealists wander intellectually, spiritually, [and] physically, looking to actualize all their

inborn possibilities and so become completely themselves, even though the paths in search of identity are never clearly marked” (143).

As seen in this final passage, Jim’s abstract, cooperative sense finds him right back where he started in the introduction, which is with his memories. “It’s through myself that I knew and felt her.” (Cather, 49). Jim is still searching for something, therefore, his identity, authenticity, his sense of self is not complete, his subordinated core values are not secured and the tension surrounding his character is not resolved.

Unlike Jim, Antonia, the Guardian secures her core values. Guardians are the security-seeking temperament. Their core values are met when they have achieved membership, belonging, and security. Their word choice is concrete, their tool usage is cooperative, and they function with a logistical intelligence (Keirse, 631). According to Marianne Davidson in the text *Willa Cather and F. J. Turner*, “Antonia moves neither horizontally nor vertically. Her self-actualization occurs in relative isolation at a point of stasis when human and economic factors coalesce in a unique balance.”¹⁰ Antonia recognized the importance of belonging. She recognized that in order to be a part of her new life she was going to have to participate. This is seen when she begins her language lessons with Jim, when she takes on the role of laborer on the farm, and when she acquires the skills necessary to run a household while working for the Harlings.

Guardians function best in an environment that is organized and secure (Keirse, 75). “I belong on a farm. I’m never lonesome here like I used to be in town. (Cather, 229). Davidson continues her description of Antonia, “In confining herself to a pastoral life as the one most congenial to her essential disposition and potentialities, Antonia manages to create her own cosmos [...]” (239). The rituals of domesticity—preserving, cooking, gardening, housekeeping—define culture in [Cather’s] fiction, where establishing a home is valued.

Antonia approaches these tasks with cooperative and concrete perseverance and grace. Antonia, successfully securing her core values, moves beyond her rites of passage through the liminal space, as does Lena Lingard.

Lena is an Artisan. In order for an Artisan to secure her core values, she needs to make an impact (Keirse, 10). One of Lena's many impacts involves moving to town, then to Lincoln, and finally to San Francisco. Because Artisans seek stimulation and live in the moment, it was imperative for Lena to move away from Black Hawk. By experiencing life in the city, Lena was able to interact with sections of society not available to her in her rural existence. According to Davidson, "Lena is bent on self-affirmation and protection of her individuality and in order to secure them, she lives by the motto 'he who travels alone, travels fastest'. She seizes the opportunity of moving with the country as it advances from primitive forms of social organization to more complex ones" (236). Because of this desire to travel alone, and to make an impact marriage was not of interest to her.

Artisans are concrete and utilitarian in speech and action (Keirse, 62). Lena concretely informs Jim of the following, "I don't want a husband. Men are all right for friends, but as soon as you marry them they turn into cranky old fathers, even the wild ones. They begin to tell you what's sensible and what's foolish, and want you to stick at home all the time. I prefer to be foolish when I feel like it and be accountable to nobody" (Cather, 203). However, this sentiment does not stop her from exploring her sensual side.

But because Artisans are concrete and utilitarian, "She remembered home as a place where there were always too many children, a cross man, and work piling up around a sick woman" (Cather, 204). Because of this Lena chose to establish herself as a career woman. By employing her concrete and utilitarian methods she is able to secure her freedom and her core values.

By utilizing Keirse's temperament theory, it is clear to see that both Antonia and Lena secure their core values after moving through the rituals involved with their rites of passage. It is also clear to see that Jim has not secured his core values, rather he is still seeking himself and that which allows him to find meaning and significance in his life. At the conclusion of the text, he believes he has found his 'experience' with Antonia, "Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past" but in actuality, has not secured his sense of

self within himself (Cather, 244). In addition, because of the search Jim is still undertaking, the secured core values of Antonia and Lena become subordinated, failing to allow the tension and conflict to subside in this novel. Because the narrative voice of Jim Burden, frames the text, it is imperative for him to also secure his core values. Since he does not succeed in doing so, the novel has no choice but to end in a tragedy.

Cather's utilization of liminal spaces to reveal plot, conflict, and character development in *My Antonia* is fascinating. Because Antonia and Lena are concrete in their orientation, it was necessary for Cather to have them successfully cross these spaces in order to know who they are and where they come from in order to lead successful lives. Their passages resulted in opportunities to realize their goals and dreams. For Jim, being abstract in orientation, it is not as crucial for his rites of passage to be secured because he is on the quest for self and identity, which are on going processes. These passages are where core values are meant to be secured, allowing the betwixt and between space to be crossed; however, when Cather juxtaposes Jim, the Idealist's need to secure authenticity and identity with Lena's need to make an impact, and Antonia's desire for responsibility and belonging, the conflict is not resolved. By doing this she succeeds in letting all three characters tell their own story affording the novel to end tragically with the narrator, and perhaps the author still unable to secure his [their] core values.

NOTES

1. Keirse, David. *Please Understand Me II*. (Del Mar: Prometheus, 1998.) All subsequent references, cited parenthetically in the text, are to this edition.
2. Urgo, Joseph R. *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration*. (Chicago: U of IL P. (1995).
3. Handley, William R. *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West*. (Cambridge: U. P., 2002.)
4. O'Connor, Margaret Anne Ed. *Willa Cather the Contemporary Reviews*. (UK: Cambridge U. P., 2001.)
5. Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. (London: Routledge Group, 2002.) All subsequent references, cited parenthetically in the text, are to this edition.
6. Lucenti, Lisa Marie. "Willa Cather's *My Antonia*: Haunting the Houses of Memory." *Twentieth Century Literature*. 46. no. 2 (Summer 2000): 193-213.
7. Cather, Willa. *My Antonia*. (Canada: Broadview Literary Texts, 2003.) All subsequent references, cited parenthetically in the text, are to this edition.
8. Yukman Claudia. "Frontier Relationships in Willa Cather's '*My Antonia*.'" *Pacific Coast Philology*. 23 no. 1/2 (Nov. 1998): 94-105.
9. Martin, Terence. "The Drama of Memory in '*My Antonia*.'" *PMLA* 84. no.2 (Mar 1969): 304-11.
10. Davidson, Marianne. *Willa Cather and F. J. Turner*. Heidelberg: U C Winter, 1998.