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# FORUM

## In Support of a Visual Approach for Teaching *My Ántonia*

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According to Dr. Donna W. Tileston, who conducts studies in brain research, “It is unrealistic to believe that students who are constantly stimulated by the multimedia world will sit for hours each day passively listening to lectures, taking notes, and preparing for a pencil-and-paper exam without dropping out mentally” (16). One of the diversity objectives at Kean University, listed in the world literature course outline for all matriculating undergraduate students, is for students to acquire a global perspective that recognizes literary works as “embodiments of their cultures” that exist at certain times and places within history (*World Literature* 3). To meet this objective while teaching Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*, I choose to use a visual approach to stimulate discussion, interpretation,



Willa Cather had much in common with *My Ántonia*’s narrator, Jim Burden. “Willa Cather at about age 13” (1886). Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.

and understanding. A visual approach to teaching *My Ántonia* includes projecting images such as notes, illustrations, historical photos, maps, and movie scenes upon a screen or making use of illustrations, charts, or photos found in the classroom text or other sources to provide students with information and to facilitate discussions.<sup>1</sup>

Some of my colleagues who teach world literature restrict their visual materials to playing a film in class either before or after covering a work of literature, while others cover texts without the use of any videos or other multimedia. Certainly,

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different ways to approach a text may have different benefits. A skillful lecturer or discussion leader may create an image with words that provides as much information as a photograph. And one should not ignore the relevance of a close reading of the text along with discussions about allusions to works outside of the text or to figurative language within the text. But I have found that students also benefit from watching segments of a motion picture that relate to important portions of the text while they are reading about a time and place to which they have no direct connection. I believe that the different methods of instruction and learning -- the visual approaches -- offer the students a chance to gain common understandings about the text regardless of their cultural backgrounds or prior educational experiences. Getting students involved in oral and visual presentations also furthers the course's objective to improve oral communication skills. Viewing photos or historical documents relevant to the time period or to the people that Cather knew in Nebraska creates a richer environment for reading the text. Hence my case is for the use of a visual approach in a general education, college literature class, using a text such as *My Ántonia*, as a way to motivate students to explore, discuss, and understand the attitudes and actions of the people in the culture represented by this text and to discover how the text reflects and embodies the actual culture that the author lived in and experienced firsthand.

Some instructors may object to showing scenes from a motion picture production based upon a literary text because it may not adequately convey the author's original intentions. Admittedly, films include actors who bring their own psychological interpretations of characters to their roles. These productions often utilize the skills of directors or screenwriters who feel free to make changes to the scenes or to the dialogues. For example, when Elina Löwensohn, starring as Ántonia in the film, takes a break from her plowing and bites into a raw carrot, she explains to Jim that it does not matter if she wishes to attend school; she must labor because her family "got to eat." Although neither this action of eating a carrot nor this statement by Ántonia appears in the novel, it does help the students to understand why some immigrants to Nebraska did not strive harder to attend school and to improve their English. By watching brief video clips of Paramount's production of *My Ántonia*, rather than the entire movie, it is then possible to pinpoint how the film differs from and how it fleshes out the text. I may point out these differences to students or ask them for their reactions after showing a scene from the video in class. But I do avoid showing a scene that involves a significant change in the plot because students need to remember the events as conveyed by Willa Cather. At best, a film adaptation of the text creates a memorable impression and gives its viewers some common references for discussion and understanding.

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Although a few students might overestimate the importance of the movie, I attempt to overcome this misconception by advising students that the written exam will involve primarily the text, itself, and that questions involving the movie or other visual materials will be of secondary importance. When students majoring in English take this class, it has been my experience that they spend enough time studying the text itself to be able to separate the movie from Cather's novel for the purpose of responding to essay questions on the test.

Teaching students from diverse backgrounds with a visual approach creates a challenge for the instructor to bridge the gap so that all students feel prepared to analyze, evaluate, or write about various aspects of the novel. In the past, equipment had to be brought into the classroom, but today many classrooms have the equipment needed to display the Internet, DVDs, or videotapes. In addition, document cameras may be used to show paper documents. One of the main problems with using the visual approach is the amount of time that it takes to assemble the teaching materials. Fortunately, editors of texts sometimes have the foresight to assist instructors in this time-consuming task. I currently use the Broadview Literary Texts' publication of *My Antonia*, edited by Joseph R. Urgo, which includes "Appendix G: Photographs of Nebraska." Historical photographs or illustrations of subjects such as dugouts, sod houses, farm equipment, small towns, and the Nebraska prairies help students and teachers to recognize and to evaluate any inconsistencies that might be presented in other visual sources such as a movie that is made chiefly for entertainment.

Kean University recruits a diverse student body, and degree-seeking students enter with different reading experiences based upon their educational backgrounds. Some have been accepted under normal admissions standards, and others have been accepted into special programs such as PASSPORT or Equal Educational Opportunity, EEO. The EEO program accepts "Students whose potential for success in college cannot be identified by conventional criteria" (*Kean* 9): they are not admissible under the regular standards; or they have lower standardized test scores than the institutional norms; or they may need to improve some basic skills (18). If these students have academic deficiencies, the EEO Learning Assistance Center offers them support (9). Another alternative program called PASSPORT accepts students who do not meet the admissions requirements but "have potential to succeed academically" with academic support and counseling (18). My students often include first-generation Americans who hear a language other than English spoken at home, and, in a typical class, a few students call a language other than English their native tongue. A few special students experience inclusion with some adaptations provided by the university's Office of Disability Services.

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Despite their diversity, my students do not remain passive learners during this unit on *My Ántonia*. In my opinion, the most effective classroom learning occurs when audio and visual modes of presentation are combined. Kean University caps the class size in world literature at twenty-five students, making it manageable to require presentations from all the students. Therefore, I ask each student to complete a writing assignment and present it orally using at least one image that relates to the topic. The image does not necessarily need to come from the same historical period as the novel, but if it does not, the student must be able to explain why he or she chose the image and how it contributes to the fulfillment of the assignment. The source of the image must also be described. Some students who wish to present bulleted points of information choose to present PowerPoint slides. Finally, some students may draw the image or create a diagram. The assignments are selected from a list that I provide to the students, and no two topics are the same. These assignments require skills such as detecting bias, evaluating, describing, or comparing and contrasting. The students use the Urgo edition of *My Ántonia* as well as various Internet sources or articles from databases for information.<sup>2</sup>

My student, Brittany Wallack, received the following assignment:

Read pages 3-8 of the article "The Bohemian Paradox: *My Ántonia* and Popular Images of Czech Immigrants" [by Tim Prchal]. Write about what this article tells you about the Czech immigrants and the way they were regarded by the Americans. Does Cather change these stereotypes in her own writing?

In her visual PowerPoint slide presentation of this assignment, my student showed a quotation from Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's 1910 article in *McClure's* that stereotypes Czechs and other foreigners from central and southern Europe and Asia Minor as "passive, inarticulate, and illiterate agriculturalists" (qtd. in Prchal 6). Using bulleted points and quotations, Wallack also listed various negative traits ascribed to the new immigrants and countered them with two slides showing "Willa Cather's Views" with bulleted points and quotations that present the Czechs in a positive way. These slides make an excellent visual impression because the class can connect these stereotypes to the ways that the citizens of Black Hawk react to the Czechs and also see a brief statement about Cather's point of view, which is expressed in the novel through the viewpoint of the narrator, Jim Burden. As a class, we may then discuss how Jim rejects these stereotypes by praising Ántonia and other hired girls.

Some assignments require the students to select details from the text and to present their own unique persona poems written from the point of view of a specific character in the novel. Each student reads his or her poem to the class and shows a picture of a person or a situation that complements the poem.

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These oral presentation and writing assignments do not replace but rather supplement the type of writing that traditionally occurs in a literature course. The students, in my class, are also required to write a traditional essay at some point during the semester concerning another literary work such as an epic or a tragic drama.

Cather herself considered visual material to be desirable for *My Ántonia*. In 1916, she engaged W.T. Benda to illustrate this novel while reserving the right to reject anything that she did not approve. Cather insisted that these drawings appear in the first edition of *My Ántonia* in 1918 despite the publisher's objections that the money would be better spent on a frontispiece. When her publisher omitted the illustrations in a reprint of 1930, she considered the edition unauthorized (Schwind 52). I ask the students in my class to discuss these illustrations in the context of the culture of Nebraska's settlers. Six of the eight Benda illustrations appear in book 1, and they influence the reader's formation of a mental picture of Ántonia and the other characters.

In order to get a picture of the time period and the setting for *My Ántonia*, spanning approximately from 1883 until 1916, it is helpful to discuss what it would be like to live in or around a small prairie town. Filming for the movie occurred at the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer in Grand Island, Nebraska, sixty-two miles north of the town of Red Cloud, Nebraska where Willa Cather lived as a youth. According to the Curator of Collections at the Stuhr Museum, the film crew for *My Ántonia* used the train station and many period buildings from the last half of the nineteenth century, located on the museum's grounds, for film sets (Vollnogle).

The historical background of the novel may be examined by reviewing photos and letters from the appropriate locale and time period. The prototype for Ántonia, Mrs. Annie Sadilek Pavelka, the daughter of Bohemian immigrants, had arrived in America at age twelve. Annie worked at the Miners' home in Red Cloud as a hired girl, and Cather knew her through her friendship with the Miners (Bennett 46-48). While she was a young girl, Annie's father (Frank Sadilek) told the family that he was going out to shoot rabbits, but instead he took his own life and was buried on the corner of their farm (Pavelka letter, qtd. in Murphy 116). In small groups, my students examine a letter, sometimes referred to as the Pavelka letter, in which Annie explains this tragic event to a young correspondent named Frances. The groups find the parallels between the letter and the fictional event of Mr. Shimerda's suicide in Cather's novel.

In one of the *My Ántonia* writing assignments, a student imagined how a wife would feel after losing her husband. He presented the following haunting, poetical portrait of loss from the point of view of Mrs. Shimerda:

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I miss my home, the smile that lived on my husband's face,  
My young ones, so innocent. I weep for them and for us.

And so time as it is, has told its tale.

It sits waiting for us to break down.  
My husband, my devoted husband,  
You have left us.  
This land has consumed you with all its troubles

For there is little hope for us.  
Only the morning sun will bring its warmth,  
With the grace of those whom God has brought forth to me  
To aid me in this struggle.

When my student read this poem during class and showed a picture of a sad, dark-haired woman staring at the ground, it produced a reaction of empathy for Mrs. Shimerda. In a way, it balances Jim Burden's negative portrayal in book 1 of this poor, Bohemian immigrant as a mother who "wants other people's things" (Cather, *My Antonia* 99). This poem about personal suffering reminds us that to achieve a balanced perspective it is important to evaluate characters from a point of view that does not reflect the prejudices of the narrator. In Benda's illustration of the Shimerda family from the first book of *My Antonia*, the mother appears, holding a box as if she were supporting a baby. This drawing suggests that Mrs. Shimerda has no small children and yet is clinging to the past, to her prior role of cradling babies.

During class we discuss the narrator and his relationship to Willa Cather. Burden, is the actual name of a Red Cloud, Nebraska storekeeper whom Cather knew (Bennett 201), but she blessed Jim, her narrator, with many of her own personal qualities. Having students review some biographical information about Cather in small groups reveals to them what she has in common with Jim Burden. According to John J. Murphy, "Cather's choice of a male narrator is somewhat explained if not justified by the male pose she assumed in Red Cloud" (31). After Cather arrived in Nebraska, she adopted a short, boyish haircut. Like Jim, she lived in Nebraska on a farm and in a small town, Red Cloud for Cather and Black Hawk for Burden, and later attended college at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln.

One character in the novel, Otto Fuchs, the Austrian who becomes a cowboy and a hired hand in America, might be a composite of several people including Willa Cather's cousin Kyd Clutter. One of my students spoke these descriptive words about Otto in her oral presentation:

Otto, Grandfather's hired hand,  
Looks like a Western desperado,

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Wiry and brown, with a long scar on his cheek,  
Only part of his left ear,  
And, a mustache which he twists up at the ends,  
Wears cowboy hats and boots,  
And keeps fancy chaps and spurs in a trunk.

Mrs. Annie Sadilek Pavelka, *Antonia's* prototype, refers to Kyd Clutter as "Willá's cousin" and "a good looking cowboy" in her letter to Frances Samland (qtd. in Murphy 116). Several photos of Clutter appear in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries' Digital Collections. (A representative photo may be found in the Image Gallery of the Willa Cather Archives under digital object identifier number 1107.) He is shown in Western gear with a horse or in formal wear sporting a mustache with turned-up ends.



Cather's cousin Kyd Clutter shares a few similarities with the character Otto Fuchs. "Kyd Clutter" (1895). Courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.

Willa Cather also created one exact portrait of a character from her own life: Mrs. Miner, who becomes Mrs. Harling, the Black Hawk employer of *Antonia* (Hinman 275). In an interview for the Lincoln *Sunday Star* published on November 6, 1921 Cather stated, "All of my characters are drawn from life, but [with the exception of Mrs. Harling] they are all composites of three or four persons" (qtd. in Hinman 276). In *My Antonia* book 2, Mrs. Harling, who comes from Christiana (Oslo) is married to a Minnesota-born American with ancestors from Norway (Cather 129). The commercial success of the Harlings reveals that the immigrants who stay in America do have the potential to move up in society. In the film version of *My Antonia*, the Leshner House, a former Grand Island, Nebraska residence built in 1883 and now located at the Stuhr Museum, served as the set for the residence of the Harlings.

Even though illustrations and photos may give an adequate historical orientation to a novel, a novel is still about characters and relationships. Some of my own students have commented that the relationships in *My Antonia* do not seem real to them until they watch the movie. The movie brings out some warmth in the friendships among *Antonia*, Jim, and Lena that the students claim is difficult to sense from a reading of the text. I conducted a survey in a class during

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the fall of 2007, a class during the spring of 2008, and a class during the fall of 2008. The survey asked the respondents to choose a response from the following options: to a great extent, to an appreciable extent, to a moderate extent, or to a negligible extent. One item asked for an identification of the degree to which the VHS production of *My Ántonia*, shown in segments during class, “enhanced” the respondent’s “appreciation or understanding of the novel.” No one in any of these classes selected to a negligible extent. The clear majority of the student respondents in each class chose “to a great extent” or “to an appreciable extent.”

Some key images in the text that are rarely seen as important or fully comprehended by the students become memorable when they are viewed in color on a large screen. Such images include the Shimerdas’ living conditions in the winter at their cave-like dug out home and the scenes with Ántonia or Lena trying to fit in as hired girls in the town. These scenes and images in the film allow students to view settings that they may have trouble imagining. Students have also commented that they find Cather’s image of the “plough against the sun” (189), as it appears in book 3, to make sense only after they have seen this image in the film when Jim appears to be gazing it after his reunion as a middle-aged man with Ántonia. The film cuts back and forth between an image of a contemplative Jim Burden and an image of a plough standing in a field as the sun sets in the background. This exact scene does not occur in the book. However, the film’s narration finishes the movie with the exact wording from Cather’s novel in book 5 about how Jim and Ántonia share the “precious ... incommunicable past” (244). This part of the film enhances Cather’s repeated emphasis on the importance of the past for Jim Burden.

In order to emphasize this image of the plough and the sun as it actually appears at the end of book 2, I recreate it in a PowerPoint file as an old-fashioned plough completely contained within the semicircle of a setting sun. I will spend some time discussing this image in order to establish its central importance in any discussion and interpretation of this novel. Cather’s description of it at Jim’s outing with the hired girls before he leaves for the university appears below:

The girls sat listless, leaning against each other. The long fingers of the sun touched their foreheads.... Just as the lower edge of the red disc rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it.... There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun. (181)

At the beginning of this passage, Cather takes us back in time to a memory of Homer’s poetry with her image of the sun’s fingers of the sunset, which are similar to the rosy fingers of the dawn mentioned in *The Odyssey*.

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It is also helpful to think about various examples of picture writing in order to appreciate this particular purple patch of Cather's descriptive writing. During the summer of 2007, when I visited the Historiska Museet (Museum of National Antiquities) in Stockholm, I photographed a memorable example of picture writing: a stone with a Viking warrior on horseback and a ship in full sail below the horseman. I now display it in class during the *My Ántonia* unit. A ship, for the Viking, or a plough, for the farmer, represents an object of central importance in each respective culture. The farmers use ploughs to subdue the land. They need ploughs to prepare the land for planting the crops. If farmers at the end of the nineteenth century in America were to choose a symbol of their way of life to engrave onto a stone, it might be the plough. The plough is a symbol of the commercial interests of the farmers just as a ship represents the commercial interests of the Vikings. The ship would be culturally important for the Vikings, who crossed the sea for trade or to plunder the wealth of their European neighbors. Cather might also have been thinking of different primitive images when she wrote this passage. In the summer of 1915, she visited Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado with Edith Lewis to view the ancient caves and primitive dwellings and drawings of the cliff dwellers (Woodress 262-264). Perhaps primitive figures or paintings in the Cliff Palace of Mesa Verde or in the book by Gustaf Nordenskiöld called *The Cliff Dwellers of the Mesa Verde* inspired her passage about the picture writing of the plough on the sun in *My Ántonia*.<sup>3</sup>

No matter which source inspired Cather, this "picture writing on the sun" gives the instructor a good opportunity to have the students reflect upon and discuss its meaning for various characters. In a modern context, this symbol may be interpreted through various perspectives. For Jim it represents his prior adolescent life in Nebraska with the hired girls and his family, which is now at an end as he prepares to leave for college. For Ántonia it is a symbol of farming: Ántonia's family becomes rooted in Nebraska and to a life of living off of the land. Lastly, in the context of the novel, for James Woodress, it represents the Westward Movement, the community of people moving west to the new "farming frontier" (Woodress 296).

As if to confirm the importance of "the plough against the sun," Cather, in book 3, re-introduces the image in the reflections of Jim Burden, the university student:

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. They stood out strengthened and simplified now, like the image of the plough against the sun. (188-189)

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After leaving Black Hawk, Nebraska and the farming community, Jim studies with the scholar Gaston Cleric. In his musings, he associates the image of the “plough against the sun” with his memories of the farm country and people of Nebraska, showing that the past remains a part of him and coexists with present thoughts. While Jim leaves the farm, others stay. The Shimerdas, for example, stay and survive because of family solidarity. Instead of sitting at home and acting refined for her suitors like an American-born girl in the Black Hawk culture (157-58), foreign-born *Ántonia* works to supplement her family’s income to pay for the farm expenses so that her family can get ahead.

When my students display their genuine photos of Nebraska farms using the document camera and the projector in our classroom, it makes me feel as if I am actually transported to the place where Willa Cather grew up. Certain well-chosen images magically connect themselves to the text when you look at them. Nebraska’s extreme climate changes from season to season have a tendency to make or break the individual. Writing from her own experiences and creating fiction based upon the people and the history of a state that formed her as an individual, Cather makes this text particularly well suited for the visual approach. In the classroom, we attempt to recreate the environment and culture of Nebraska, as Cather knew it, to enhance our appreciation of *My Ántonia*. Students in more advanced classes that study this text may also benefit from researching data available through the Internet and various library databases and writing longer essays about Cather’s



The film *My Ántonia*, based upon Cather’s novel of the same name, used the Leshler House at the Stuhr Museum to represent the middle-class home of the Harling family, neighbors to the Burdens of Black Hawk. Photo courtesy of the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, Grand Island, Nebraska. Copy and reuse restrictions apply: <http://www.stuhrmuseum.org/research/copyright.htm>.

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background and how it relates to the novels that reflect her early experiences in life. I believe that my diverse students benefit from our learning experience with *My Antonia* by sharing their thoughts about the text in the college classroom and by using visual images to give everyone in the room a chance to synthesize many sources of information. When we are all looking at the same data and images, for that moment, it gives us common points of reference for discussion, and with our collective wisdom we can then move our individual thoughts a little closer to the culture of the people in the text.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I first advocated this approach in a conference paper titled “A Visual Approach to Teaching *My Antonia*” presented at the Visible Knowledge Project session of the 61st Annual Convention of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, held October 4-6, 2007, in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. I thank Leslie A. Vollnogle, Curator of Collections, and Karen Keehr, Curator of the Research Department at the Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, Dr. Andrew Jewell of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the late Dr. Merrill Skaggs of Drew University for their assistance in the presentation and/or this article.

<sup>2</sup> Some helpful websites include the following: *Cather Foundation*, <http://willacather.org>, *The Nebraska State Historical Society*, <http://www.nebraskahistory.org>, and *The Willa Cather Archive*, <http://cather.unl.edu>.

<sup>3</sup> Cather’s Jan. 31, 1916 newspaper article “Mesa Verde Wonderland is Easy to Reach” appears in “Appendix B” of Joseph R. Urgo’s edition of *My Antonia*. Urgo suggests a parallel between the cliff dwellers of Colorado and the Nebraska settlers with whom Cather had a familiarity. Like the cliff dwellers, the Nebraskans fit themselves into the environment (“Appendix B” 247). In the newspaper article, Cather refers to a book published in Stockholm by Nordenskiöld about the cliff dwellers of Mesa Verde.

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