SENSE OF LOSS IN WILLA CATHER'S *MY ÁNTONIA*

Smaranda ŞTEFANOVICI[1]

Abstract

Traditionally, we think of the American dream as owning a home and having a happy family accompanied by financial success. Immigrants included dream in their visions about America as a promised land. Willa Cather's approach to the American Dream goes beyond this goal of happiness and success and shows the ephemeral character of the American Dream and how life is influenced by these destructive western dreams.The paper argues for western men and women's freedom to choose their lifestyles in the wild prairie but also deals with the elusive fulfillment of the American Dream when characters do not make the right choices in life and all that remains are regrets and lost choices.

Keywords: Western American Dream, sense of loss, gender roles, elusive fulfillment, past regrets.

Motto:
"The lost promise, the misplaced vision,
is America's loss" (Miller 152)

Introduction

One of the major themes in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* is the American Dream. Despite cultural differences all immigrants dreamed of settling and succeeding in the New World through hard work. James Truslow Adams was an American writer and historian known for his writings on New England and for coining the term 'The American Dream':it is, he says, " that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement." (Adams 17)

Trying to reach their goal to live the American Dream was not easy for immigrants. They faced numerous racial conflicts with settlers and received threats from them as well. Discrimination was also a main issue of that period for freedmen slaves (after the abolitionist movement, 1880), as well as for all immigrants that differed from white people. Those who were born in America inherited their ancestors' property and belongings, but the immigrants had to work hard in order to have their own land and home.

Education began to be a priority to fulfill the American Dream. Although half-paid, women took up in huge numbers this job of teaching. By mid nineteenth-century, due to the fast growth of population, the American government started funding the public schools and hired more teachers. Since the women were the cheapest to hire, the number of female teachers increased. For those women who moved to the frontier it was a great opportunity for a career and a farmhouse.

Willa Cather was familiar with the harshness of pioneer life in the prairie and their hopes in the American Dream. Her family were themselves pioneers on the Nebraskan frontier after selling their Willowshade, a Virginia farm that had long been in her father's

[1]Associate Prof. PhD, "Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu-Mureş.
Acknowledgements to Fazakas Mihály- Pál, BA student, for the contribution to this article.

BDD-A22825 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:19 UTC)

family. In Nebraska, she became acquainted with immigrants from Sweden, Russia, Poland, Germany, and Bohemia. Shewitnessed and admired the immigrants who settled along the western frontier line for their struggle for a prosperous life in a new land, against odds and conventions, for their fight with homesickness and transplanted customs.

In *My Ántonia* we have a wide range of immigrants, some rich as Jim Burden's family, while others are poor; we haveBohemian immigrants (ÁntoniaShimerda and her family, Cuzak, her future husband), Lena Lingard (Norwegian immigrant), Otto Fuchs (an Austrian immigrant), Pavel and Peter (Russian immigrants). They have to fight with nostalgic feelings for their native lands, with depression and feelings of estrangement:"I get awful homesick for them, all the same", Lena says (*Ántonia*822); Lena has been "so quietly conventionalized by city clothes". (*Ántonia*877); Ántonia says, "It makes me homesick, Jimmy, this flower, this smell…I ain't never forgot my own country" (*Ántonia*860).

The paper argues for women's freedom to choose their own lifestyles but also for the destructive power of illusion when fulfilling the American Dream, if you do not make the right choices at the right time. What Cather wants to tell us is how much it matters what we dream and whom we dream of.

In Willa Cather's novel *My Ántonia*, the American Dream is a complex concept providing immigrants with the hope of a better life. The book reveals much about them, about their dreams and despairs.

The action takes place in rural Nebraska, where there was nothing but land. The two main characters, ÁntoniaShimerda and Jim Burden, although belonging to different social background, bothwant to access higher education to fulfill their American Dream. However, unlike Jim, who has the opportunity to improve his knowledge - he goes to town to attend college – Ántonia is not given such a chance. She is drawn back by her family, especially by her elder brother, Ambrosch. Cather emphasizes the special case of the frontiersman who, more than other, has to work harder; Ántonia has no land and money, so she assumes responsibility for her family's survival in this new land after her father's death, as a brave stereotypical frontierswoman and she even boasts she can work as much as her brother.

Apparently, the American Dream fails all characters. Jim does not marry Ántonia to follow his educational dream; Ántonia gives up her education to take care of her family; Mr. Shimerda commits suicide, not being able to get used to the new land, life and customs; Otto's dream of becoming rich has a major influence on Jake as well and so they both go to work in the Yankee Girl Mine, where Jake gets the so called Mountain Fever and disappears.

The two Russians are the perfect example of how the American Dream can vanish into the air. Pavel and Peter came to the United States because they were considered outcasts. In Russia they attended a wedding where they were groomsmen and on their way home they were attacked by wolves and in order to survive they had to push the bride and the groom out of the sleigh. Shortly after they settled in America, they started having difficulties. Pavel soon became ill and died. Peter tried to achieve his American Dream but failed as well. Their dream of leaving the past behind and starting a new and better life in America soon came to an end.

BDD-A22825 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:19 UTC)

Lena's American Dream came true in a way. She was one of the hired girls who had always dreamed of becoming a successful dressmaker. She knew she had to concentrate on that goal. Meanwhile, she charmed the men around her, but she never married one. Jim was also under Lena's charm and even though Lena never wanted to get married, she considered Jim the only person she could live with. Lena's American Dream also shattered when Jim chose education instead of her. What was left for her was the dream of becoming a dressmaker.

Ántonia was Jim's American Dream, which he never fulfilled. Jim, in fact, is Willa Cather's voice. Unlike Cather, Jim eventually marries another woman, but we feel his intended emptiness in a prison marriage to a woman he hardly knows and with whom he has no children. He dreams on, as all other characters in the novel do, of what could have been but never happened. Still, it is the dream that goes on and, even if unfulfilled, it cannot be forgotten. All characters are in fact a combination of realism and optimism as clues to survive along the frontier line.

Ántonia, too, even if a woman, realizes that her only chance to survive is throughhard work and good attitude. She is presented by Jim as a strong pioneer woman, ready to fight against gender conventions:"Ántonia lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true. I had not been mistaken. She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions...It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races". (*Ántonia*926)

Things change for the better when she is offered a job at the Harling family. She starts by appreciating small joys of everyday life but soon she feels disappointment when she falls in love with Larry Donovan. Her beliefs are strongly shattered when, pregnant with Larry's child, she is left alone at the altar by him. Disregarding the consequences, she gives birth to Larry's child and life offers her another chance; she meets Cuzak who marries her.

We might think she fulfilled her dream of having a happy family to raise her child. Still, Willa Cather's apparent hidden message is that dreams are deceptive and what we take for good choices turn, in fact, later, into regrets and disappointments. The dreams we have are not necessarily the ones we really want. Once we have acknowledged that, we will be able to make the best choices in life.

The nineteenth-century was the age of both men and women. Men were focusing on organizing meetings in pubs and bars, where they would discuss economic and political affairs and, when time allowed, they would even relax. Women, on the other hand, when married, could not continue their teaching jobs. They took care of domestic chores or

BDD-A22825 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:19 UTC)

organized debates and book clubs. A couple of states on the frontier even granted them political rights, which lead to a movement that demanded women's rights. An outcome of that movement was a larger choice of careers for single women. So, if a woman wanted to have a career, then marriage was not an option. By the end of the nineteenth century, women gained more rights, the most important ones being the right to divorce if they were physically abused by their husbands, the right to own land after divorce, the right to obtain and raise the children after divorce and later the right to vote.

Women, thus became more independent. Such a case is Lena Lingard. She represents another facet of the American Dream. She gets control over her life and decisions. This freedom of choice, as an American tenet, strengthens her even if she is a single woman: "… 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 acceptable to nobody." (*My Ántonia* 892)

Although Lena is not appreciated by the upper class, she gains respect in everybody's eyes because of her independence and ambition to achieve her goal, even if she is not married. She is in fact the only character in the book who manages to fulfill, at least partially, her dream. Cather's feminist approach presents dominant female characters in the novel such as the strong-willed Ántonia, the young, but well educated mother, Mrs. Harling; yet, we have Emmaline, the grandmother, who, although old-fashioned' is a strong woman, proud, energetic, and with a lively intelligence: "She was a spare, tall woman, a little stooped, and she was apt to carry her head thrust forward in an attitude of attention, as if she were looking at something, or listening to something, far away. As I grew older, I came to believe that it was only because she was so often thinking of things that were far away. She was quick-footed and energetic in all her movements. Her voice was high and rather shrill, and she often spoke with an anxious inflection, for she was exceedingly desirous that everything should go with due order and decorum. Her laugh, too, was high, and perhaps a little strident, but there was a lively intelligence in it. She was then fifty-five years old, a strong woman, of unusual endurance." (*My Ántonia* 720)

As married women, Ántonia, Mrs. Harling and Emmaline can enjoy partial liberty when their husbands are away and can share the feminist dream and ideal of the nineteenth-century frontier feminism.

Ántonia's frontier feminism makes her manlike in her strife to help her family not to starve to death after her father commits suicide. Atypically, she takes a job as a servant and tries to make the best of everything for the Shimerdas. She wants to do all she can for her family but without sacrificing her independent lifestyle and thinking.

We witness gender roles exchange. Jim, as a young boy, feels confused, has problems of communication; he communicates better with Ántonia and Emmaline, his grandmother, than with the boys of his age. Jim is attending school while Ántonia has to work on the farm to survive. The white skin color also contributes to Jim's larger life choices and opportunities. However, going to the city college does not make him a better

BDD-A22825 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:19 UTC)

chatter and communicator. He is alike lonely and seen as a simple farmer by the town people.

The moment Lena appears in his life he realizes he is attracted physically to her while with Ántonia he is connected emotionally. His natural romanticism, yet, does not stop him "to lose himself in those big western dreams." His "ardent disposition" and the "impulsiveness by which his boyhood friends remember him" make him remain young, though he is over forty and help him be successful in "new people and new enterprises." (*My Ántonia…Readings* 28)

Traditionally, we think of the American Dream as owning a home and having a happy family accompanied by financial success. Immigrants included dream in their visions about America as a promised land. On the other hand, race, ethnicity, or gender-based vision exclude a certain category of immigrants from dreaming. Adams for the first time in his monumental work *The Epic of America* (1933) defined the American Dream as a "dream of social order". His dream was that each immigrant should attain this social order irrespective of race, ethnicity, or gender, and be recognized by others "for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." (214-215) In other words, the American Dream is about material plenty but it also means to be able to grow to the fullest development.

Jim cannot connect his dream of personal fulfillment to his dream of Lena: "In some dark sense, Jim's experience is the American experience, his melancholy sense of loss also his country's, his longing for something missed in the past, a national longing." (Miller 152).

Jim's thoughts from the last paragraph of the book one again stress Willa Cather's original approach to the American Dream. The American Dream defeated Jim with its elusive character: *"This was the road over which Ántonia and I came on that night when we got off the train at Black Hawk and were bedded down in the straw, wondering children, being taken we knew not whither. I had only to close my eyes to hear the rumbling of the wagons in the dark, and to be again overcome by that obliterating strangeness. The feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand. I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is. For Ántonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past.*" (*My Ántonia* 937).

Eventually, he found the past in Ántonia. It was an unforgettable past, still "an incommunicable one". He longed for something missed in the past, something he could not connect to, something he could have done and did not do because of his indefinable dream of fulfilling a*national* American Dream to education. His personal sense of loss following an elusive fulfillment of a cherished American Dream displaysthe destructive power of an abstract dream, which links his destiny to the destiny of all American immigrants.

BDD-A22825 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:19 UTC)

Conclusion

Willa Cather's approach to the American Dream goes beyond this goal of happiness and success. The American Dream is an age to relive past memories, an urge to reconsider missed choices and opportunities. In the case of *My Ántonia* the aspirations link to the western frontier. The characters fail because of their impersonal dreams: John leaves Lena to acquire education; Lena does not show her love for Jim in order to fulfill her career aspirations; the Shimerdas want wealth and Mr. Shimerdas commits suicide due to depression; Ántonia wants material success and a happy family. The more we dream impersonally the more ephemeral our dreams are, be they material, erotic, national, racial, sexual, or any other.

The fulfillers of the American Dream, Willa Cather says, men and women alike, should be strong, independent, in full control of their destiny with no regrets for whatever they could have done and did not do because of stereotypical attitudes. Ambitions should be free and not manipulated by a nation who needs immigrants who, through hard work, can lead to the growth of that nation and country.

Despite their obsessive urge to achieve the American Dream, all characters in *My Ántonia* fail to a certain degree: Jim was unable to dream about Ántonia in a sexual way and he fell into a sterile marriage; he dreamed of Lena carrying 'a reaping hook and emerging from a field of stubble', which is a sign of nature 'violation' (Cf. Murphy 155)

Regrets and lost choices is all that remains unforgettable for Willa Cather's characters in *My Ántonia*, who, apparently, all have their American Dreams to follow. Success does not make the characters forget the past and the lost chances.The nineteenth century Nebraska American characters from Willa Cather's novels, although apparently fulfill their American dream of a better life, feel a sense of loss and disappointment; the cause of their distress is the realization thatthey exclusively pursued a national dream (growth of the country through education, etc.) and did not identity that national dream with personal dreams of self-choices.

References:

Adams, James Truslow. *The Epic of America*. USA: Transaction Publishers, 2012.

Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia* in *Cather. Early Novels and Stories*. USA: The Library of America, 1987: 707- 937.

Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia: With Related Readings* (The Emc Masterpiece Series Access Editions) EmcPub, 2002.

Miller, E. James. Jr. "My Ántonia and the American Dream" in Prairie Schooner (1974). *Bloom's Literary Themes. The American Dream*, NY: Infobase Publishing, 2009: 141-153.

Murphy, John.J. "The Respectable Romantic and the Unwed Mother: Class Communication in *My Ántonia*". *Colby Library Quarterly*, Series 10, no. 3, September 1973: 149-156.

BDD-A22825 © 2015 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 22:00:19 UTC)