ABSTRACT

GRETCHE WALTERS. The Price of Prejudice: Narrating Ethnicity in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*. (Under the direction of Professor Anne Baker.)

Much of the subject and content of Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* was driven by her personal experience in Red Cloud, Nebraska. The novel reflects Cather’s responses to the ethnic biases she grappled with while living in the Midwest. She traces the confluence of immigrants and native-born American families that move west to chase the American Dream. This essay explores the challenging nationalistic prejudice that the immigrants had to battle and the difficult choices of Cather’s American protagonist, Jim Burden.

Jim’s burden throughout the novel is to navigate a barrage of influences, experiences, emotions and judgment during his life in Black Hawk, Nebraska so that he can reach self-fulfillment and contentment with his personal choices. This essay begins by examining the embedded play, *La Traviata*, which parallels Jim’s feelings about ethnic judgment and its effect on his love for a Bohemian girl, Ántonia. The novel begins with a young Jim innocently accepting immigrant differences as modeled by his grandparents. As a young man, Jim moves to town and becomes aware of the townspeople’s prejudice against the immigrant “hired girls,” who have moved from the prairies to town in order to find work. Jim rejects and disputes the townies condemnation of immigrants, and finally comes to understand and approve of ethnic differences. Ultimately, he makes an uncomfortable choice to follow an “intellectual migration” impulse, which leads him to leave Ántonia and his hometown. Twenty years of guilt leads Jim to confront his fear and assumption that leaving behind Ántonia would compromise her future. Jim returns to Black Hawk, Nebraska and visits an older and
worn out Ántonia, who has managed to build a Spartan but happy life of the harsh plains. Yet, he discovers that he admires the toil and adversity Ántonia (and other immigrants) faced, overcame, and eventually blossomed under. This leaves him to consider the combination of ethnic differences and choices that kept them apart, and whether or not all of his advantages and success by his definition have left him any better off.