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# BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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The Immigrant Experience in  
Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*

Prohlašuji, že jsem závěrečnou práci vypracovala samostatně a použila jen uvedených pramenů a literatury.

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.....  
vlastnoruční podpis

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this project is to describe the immigrant experience in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. The project provides background knowledge necessary for understanding the overall context of the analysed subject. The analysis focuses on the immigration process and its immediate effects on the newcomers. The struggles with adapting to the new environment are examined. Moreover, the project studies social differences between immigrants and native-born Americans. Finally, the phenomenon of the American dream is discussed.

## Introduction

The United States underwent a dramatic transformation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the country started expanding massively to the west. In order to populate the newly established states, the federal government took measures to improve the process. The construction of the transcontinental railroad and the Homestead Act of 1862 aided the prompt settlement of the west. From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, enormous numbers of immigrants started flooding the USA. People from older American states and immigrants mostly from Europe managed to reshape the virgin land to cultivated landscapes within a few decades.

Willa Cather offers us a glimpse into a world that no longer exists but belongs to the past. Her narrative reminds us of the difficulties that the determined pioneers had to endure whilst building a nation which we know today.

The aim of this bachelor's project is to revive the often forgotten stories of brave immigrants who took part in the nation building. The focus will be laid on the immigration process itself, the struggles with the specific climate of the Great Plains area, and also on the incomers' social position in comparison with the native-born Americans. Last but not least, the phenomenon of the American dream and its achievement will be examined.

The first part of the project will provide readers with background information about the Great Plains area, its climate, and settlement. The im/migration process and the reasons for it will be concerned. Furthermore, attention will be paid to description of specific immigrant groups which will provide us with knowledge necessary for understanding the second part of the project. Finally, the outline of events in Willa Cather's life that influenced her literary journey and political stance will help us to understand the overall context of the novel.

In the second part of the project, the immigration process, social differences between immigrants and native-born Americans, and also the achievement of the American dream will be analysed within the perspective of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. The Shimarda family's immigrant experience, their struggle with a new environment and also their social position will be closely examined. Then, the hired girls' transition from the prairies to town and consequently their position in a town society will be analyzed.

Finally, the last chapter will deal with an ethos of the American dream. Both those who succeed as well as those who fail in achieving the dream will be discussed.

## **1. The term “Great Plains”**

The term “Great Plains” has been adopted by the general public in the 1930s and it refers to an area of sporadically flat but predominantly rolling lands stretching “westward from the Missouri River at Omaha and Kansas City to the Rocky Mountains, and northward from the Texas Panhandle into the Canadian Prairie Provinces” (Center for Great Plain Studies, ©2018). Huge proportion of this land is covered in grasslands, prairies, and steppes, but the most distinguishing feature is its unique climate. The Great Plains are due to a scarcity of average amount of rainfall very arid, and that determines the plant life, animal life, and human life (Webb, 1959, p. 17). The deficiency in water and trees led the early explorers falsely to believe that the soil was infertile and that the Far West was nothing else but the “Great American Desert” that ought to be left to the herds of buffalo and the Indians who followed them.

The Great Plains remained unorganized until the 1850s. Thereafter, thorough explorations were carried out, discovering the hidden potential for agriculture. The news of vast fertile lands travelled to the east and the territory started receiving public attention. In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act came into force, creating territories of Kansas and Nebraska, and thus officially opening a huge area to white settlement (Brinkly, 1877, p. 348).

By 1858, the federal government persuaded the Native Americans to cede this territory and move onto reservations (Wishart, 2001, p. 238). Despite a few social groups’ pressure on improving Indian’s conditions, the situation kept worsening and eventually resulted in loss of cultural identity and Indian traditional way of life (Heideking, 2012, p. 169-70).



## **2. Settling the Great Plains**

By the 1860s, the population density in Kansas and Nebraska was just two persons per square mile. There were only 28,826 inhabitants in Nebraska, the majority was coming from the neighbouring eastern states, but one quarter was foreign born (Wishart, 2001, p. 239). At that time, Nebraska was not an agricultural frontier yet. Farming was difficult because the technology was very limited and expenditure related to it was enormous (Wishart, 2001, p. 241). Nonetheless, within a decade, Nebraska's population increased up to 122,993 out of which 52% were classified as farmers (Wishart, 2001, p. 241). The number of people immigrating to the Great Plains grew steadily reaching its largest annual total in 1907 (Luebke, 1977, p. 407). In only forty-nine years, the almost uninhabited frontier changed to a populated area of great cities and flourishing agriculture (Garver, 2011, p. 178). What caused the massive influx of migrants?

There were many factors for such a rapid increase of inhabitants in Nebraska and the Great Plains in general. We can divide them into push factors (= those that force individuals to move from their homeland to a destination country) and pull factors (= factors in a destination country that attract individuals to leave their homeland).

The most prominent pull factors were a series of homestead laws, improvements in transportation, and companies or agencies agitating for immigration. The push factors were usually identical for both Europeans and Americans. In most cases, it was a lack of free land and weak economy in their home countries that caused their exodus in the years following the American civil war.

### **2.1. Pull factors**

The Union Victory in the American Civil War ensured that the new states on the Great Plains would have a representative government, free labour and corporate enterprise (Garver, 2011, p. 181). To encourage the settlement, the government introduced a series of laws called homestead acts which made the acquisition of land relatively easy. For example, the Homestead Act of 1862 allowed people to either buy 160 acres of land very cheaply, or they could acquire it by living on it for five years whilst improving the quality of it (Edwards, 2011, p. 182). The act contained no racial nor gender restriction. Even usually excluded groups such as African Americans, women or immigrants could submit a claim.

According to Edwards (2011), the Homestead Act became very controversial in time owing to many frauds and misuses arising from it. Nevertheless, it most certainly had an enormous effect on the settlement by both American and foreign people.

Changes in transportation are considered as much as important in developing and settling the Great Plains as the homestead laws enactments. By the 1870s, steamers almost entirely replaced sailing vessels which was a key improvement in transcontinental crossing. Instead of one to three months, the voyage now took merely ten days. Steamship companies started promoting emigration from Europe. Advertisements as for example coloured posters, circulars, various pamphlets or maps were distributed in European countries (Jones, 1992, p. 156). Other businesses engaged in commercialism as well. State and railroad companies put a great deal of effort into advertising. They offered steamship and railroad tickets at low prices, free land-exploring, and afterwards, help with agriculture (Jones, 1992, p.162). Both companies had been granted land by the federal government in order to create a transportation system which would help populate the Great Plains and connect East with the West of the country (Nebraska studies, ©2018). With a first railroad running through Nebraska, thousands of people started travelling there by train. In 1869, the transcontinental railroad emerged, which revolutionized the transport infrastructure in the USA. Railroads started spreading all over the USA, which contributed to integration and prosperity of the national economy (Garver, 2011, p.192). Not only in the USA, but also in Europe the number of railways was increasing. Plus with the developing steam-powered ships, the journey from European cities to communities residing on the Great Plains shortened so remarkably that it contributed to "the most extensive and rapid mass migration of human beings in all of the world history"(Garver, 2011, p. 192).

## **2.2. Push Factors**

People leaving their homelands for another country depended on more aspects than just on means by which American states attracted individuals. For most native-born Americans, moving towards the centre of the USA was caused mainly by a lack of free land, especially on the eastern coast. For African-Americans, the abolition of slavery meant freedom, yet living in the South did not quite allow them to receive education, a piece of land or a decent job; therefore, these later called Exodusters left to seek better opportunities in the land where racism and poverty did not prevail (Tindall, 2006, p. 722). As stated in a previous chapter, the Homestead Act did not restrict anyone from claiming a land; hence, many women – single, widows or those separated from their husbands – would leave for the Great Plains.

The situation in Europe varied from country to country, and thus, the immigration to the USA and also the reasons for it differed. It is difficult to summarise the causes that led to emigration from European countries. In the span of more than fifty years between 1860 and 1914, different patterns of reasons emerged. And in the end, a decision to leave one's country was made individually and the motives behind them were complex (Luebke, 1977, p. 408). Yet for each country in a particular time span, there were specific causes which predominated, so they can be subjected to a classification. Despite the time and place difference, one distinct reason that encouraged people to leave their homelands always prevailed: economic depression.

Garver (2011, p. 180) argues that on an international level, mass immigration to the USA from Europe was made possible owing to six large wars that had happened between 1850s and 1870s. The consequences of the wars advanced industrialization, enlarged civil liberties and rule of law in the USA and most parts of Europe. The enlargement of civil liberties removed restrictions on emigration, so in 1867 people from Austria-Hungary were granted freedom to emigrate. The same right awaited the Balkans only a decade later. By the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, nearly all European countries recognized the right of their people to emigrate freely (Jones, 1992, p. 169). Moreover, in 1848, with the abolition of manorial system and serfdom, the process of peasant emancipation began. The old agrarian order was replaced with factory system which resulted in economic and social change, and thus, stimulated people to leave their home countries (Jones, 1992, p.165).

With a rapidly developing industrialization, the situation on both European and American market changed enormously. Thanks to commercial agriculture and low costs of transportation, the price of grain fell dramatically which negatively affected European economy (Garver, 2011, p.183). Distant countries such as the USA, Russia, India or Argentina could finally compete in the European market (Jones, 1992, p. 166). European farmers could no longer produce and transport grain at reasonable prices, regardless of protective tariffs (Garver, 2011, p. 183). The foreign competition on European market resulted in immediate and disastrous agricultural depression (Jones, 1992, p. 166). Within a decade, Germany changed from grain-exporting to grain-importing country and was unable to support its growing population. England declared the doom of agrarian economy. In Sweden, crop failures in 1860s deepened the agrarian crisis resulting in a famine outbreak (Jones, 1992, p. 166).

While Europe was falling into agricultural depression, American economy was booming. This only more encouraged emigration, especially from overpopulated areas where inhabitants suffered from poverty.

Beside the more predominant economic cause, there were also other significant reasons for emigration from Europe. Among them were political and religious discontent, in some cases even persecution; others were social inequality or further psychological reasons. In Russia, Armenia and Syria these reasons even prevailed over the economic one. In Russia a group of Russo-German Mennonites were expelled from the country, as a result of rising nationalism. This, however, was overshadowed by a persecution of Russian Jews by Pan-Slav nationalists who massacred immense numbers of Jews (Jones, 1992, p. 173). Similar situation arose in Armenia and Syria where Christian minorities suffered from persecution. Those people, who survived, were forced to flee from these countries in order to escape death.

### **3. Ethnic groups**

The immigration to the USA in the 19<sup>th</sup> century occurred in several waves; each had its distinctive features. Generally, there were three major ones which gave rise to the concept of an “old” and a “new” immigration. The “old” immigration covers years between 1815 – 60 and 1860 – 90. In that period of time, the immigrants were arriving from northern and western Europe, chiefly from the British Isles, Scandinavia, Germany, Switzerland and Holland (Jones, 1992, p. 153). After 1890, the immigration from these countries declined almost entirely. Among others, one reason for the drop in immigration was that the economic and social conditions in northern and western European countries improved (Jones, 1992, p. 168). After a long struggling time, there were job vacancies on the market created by rapid industrialization and a fall in the birth-rate (Jones, 1992, p. 168). Moreover, these countries increased their efforts to keep their citizens at home by for example promoting land reforms and consequently broadening landownership (Jones, 1992, p. 168). The so-called “new” immigration replaced the proceeding one. The circumstances in Europe changed, and therefore, the immigration shifted as well. From the 1890s, the third immigration wave was comprised of southern and eastern Europeans. They came largely from Austria-Hungary, Italy, Russia, Greece, Romania and Turkey (Jones, 1992, p. 153).

In general, immigrant communities were often perceived by the public as inferior to their American counterparts. It was believed that they were not good enough to succeed in American society and that they did not bring much else than their muscle power (Cafferty, 1983, p. 67). On top of that, each group faced some negative stereotypes: Scandinavians and Czechs drank too much, Italians were clannish, Hungarians dumb etc (Cafferty, 1983, p. 70). In the popular press, journalists described immigrants as “hotbeds of crime, disease, filth, and family disintegration (Cafferty, 1983, p. 70). Cafferty (1983, p. 70) states that this was the view of politicians, scholars or journalists rather as of the public. However, these later proved to be misleading assumptions stayed universally accepted for decades. Furthermore, in 1907, the Congress charged scholars with the investigation of the “new” immigration. Dillingham Commission was set up in order to study consequences of the recent immigration from eastern and southern European countries (Jones, 1992, p. 152). The commission sharply distinguished the “new” immigration from the “old” one. It concluded that the “new” immigration stream was induced artificially and consisted of primarily unskilled and uneducated male peasants and labourers who had a greater tendency to impermanence (Jones, 1992, p. 154). Despite the Commission’s statistics and research, these claims were never validated. On the contrary, the

results appeared to be invalid and biased since the study did not examine all immigrant groups under the same conditions.

Nevertheless, the Commission's report had a massive effect on the American immigration policy. The political climate in the USA at that time was tense; a growing discontent and distrust of immigration resulted in political nativism, a policy that favoured the interests of native population over those of immigrants (Goggans, 2003, p. 153). By the 1920s, the progressive and nativist efforts to prevent the influx of "undesirable" immigrants resulted in the halt of immigration from the Orient and restrictions on immigration from southern and eastern Europe (Goggans, 2003, p. 153). For all the foreigners already present in the USA, the concept of "Americanization" was invented. According to this theory, all ethnic groups, immigrants and minorities should be deliberately or forcibly assimilated into American society, and thus forming a homogeneous American national identity, synonymous with the Protestant and English-speaking peoples (Tunc, 2006, p. 207-8).

Although, plenty of different ethnic groups had settled in the Great Plains, only those, that are relevant to this project, will be in the next paragraphs examined in more depth.

### 3.1. Czechs

Even though the Czechs do not count among the largest ethnic groups in the USA, they will be dealt with in more detail in this project as opposed to other ethnic groups as the focus will be laid on them in the analytic part.

The Americans of Czech descendant formed the majority of Slavic-speaking immigrant groups on the Great Plains (Garver, 2011, p. 187). Although, some individuals emigrated to the USA after 1848 for reasons resulting from the revolutionary turmoil (Prchal, 2004, p.5), the emigration in larger numbers did not appear before 1860s. After that, the Czechs seemed to be more interested in the USA, mainly because of the generous Homestead Act and also because the emigration treaties between the USA and Austria-Hungary allowed them to emigrate (Opatrný, 1993, p. 120). In a broad sense, there were two prominent reasons for emigration. The first one was political, which can be assigned to an earlier emigration in years just after 1848 or later towards the end of the 1870s (Opatrný, 1993, p. 123). The second type of emigration was economic and it was caused by “changes in the central European economy and social shifts in the towns and countryside” (Opatrný, 1993, p. 123). The majority of people came from Bohemia, Moravia and, Austrian Silesia in order to escape the economic uncertainty which they faced back in their home country. The number of Czech immigrants coming to the USA was increasing constantly until the 1870s. After a little decrease, a new wave started from 1890 to 1914, reaching its maximum around 1905 (Prchal, 1993, p. 5).

Opatrný (1993, p. 123) points out that historical literature has often presented emigrants as the poorest people driven out of their country by poverty and hunger. He claims that this is not in accordance with reality. In fact, people who emigrated came most likely from the middle class of society and were in possession of considerable resources which would allow them to pay not only the fare to overseas but also for the means necessary to establish themselves in a new land (Opatrný, 1993, p. 123 – 4). Their primary motivation was not to escape poverty, but rather to pursue economic and social advancement (Opatrný, 1993, p. 123).

Since most Czechs arrived to the New World full of hopes for economic improvement achieved through acquisition of land, most came to seek their happiness in the Great Plains states. Garver (2011, p. 193) suggests that many of them came too late to acquire farmland under the Homestead Act, but they arrived just in time to buy land along the transcontinental railroad. The majority of Czechs settled in Nebraska, Illinois, New York, Ohio and Texas (Garver, 2011, p. 188). Out of these states, Nebraska covered the greatest percentage of

citizens with Czech ancestry in 1890 and has done so until today. The Czechs usually travelled together and settled in small rural towns. Very often, they followed their countrymen who had arrived from the same or a nearby village (Garver, 2011, p. 188). It was also not uncommon that the Czechs would settle next to Germans or Scandinavians. All groups shared high literacy and comparable financial means (Garver, 2011, p. 188). Moreover, many Czechs could speak German as a second language and the German way of life was similar to theirs (Luebke, 1977, p. 418).

In comparison with their neighbouring Germans and Scandinavians, the Czechs differed from their host country extensively, particularly in language, religion and also culture. Moreover, they had two certain features which distinguished them from the rest of the newcomers (Garver, 2011, p. 191). First was their mother tongue maintenance. The Czechs were under Austrian and German domination for hundreds of years. By retaining their native language, their national identity was being preserved (Luebke, 1977, p. 427). The second feature was that unusually great numbers of Czechs chose not to associate themselves with any religious group (Garver, 2011, p. 191). In spite of their tradition in the Catholic Church, many leaned towards rationalism, freethinking or agnosticism (Luebke, 1977, p. 419). All of this reflected on their activities. Instead of churches, the Czechs established many educational, gymnastic and service institutions which served the same needs (Garver, 2011, p. 191). These associations as for example the *Sokol* assured “fellowship and community service as well as self-improvement in knowledge and physical fitness” (Garver, 2011, p. 191). Nonetheless, Garver (2011, p. 191) argues that the great emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility may have led to a relatively high percentage of suicides among freethinkers in contrast to the religious Czechs.

Despite their interest in maintaining their ethnic identity, the Czechs just like most of the European immigrants assimilated quickly, and that even on the Great Plains, where the great distance between neighbours might have impeded it.

### **3.2. Germans, the Swiss, Austrians, Alsatians, and Russian Germans**

The Germans became the largest immigrant group on the Great Plains, widely distributed in both rural and urban areas. In Nebraska, in 1990, they accounted for 18 percent of the total population (Luebke, 1977, p. 412). Agricultural depression and overpopulation forced great numbers of Germans to emigrate; most of them came from the northern and eastern parts of Prussia where severe conditions persisted (Garver, 2011, p. 188).



Germans, being a strongly religious ethnic group, would settle next to people who shared the same religion. Protestants clustered together in the Great Plan states, and consequently, the number of Catholic Germans lowered in this region (Luebke, 1977, p. 412). Luebke (1977, p. 413) points out that the Germans were highly heterogeneous. Before the unification of Germany into a country in 1871, Germany consisted of many diverse German-speaking nationalities gathered relatively close to each other. Their provincial identities were strong, and even more strengthened by religious differences.

Together with the Germans, other German-speaking nationalities emerged on the Great Plains: the Swiss, Austrians, and Alsatians. Sometimes the census data has proved difficult to differentiate between them and actual Germans (Luebke, 1977, p. 413). Besides, all of these groups would often mingle since their culture and language was similar.

The Russian Germans represented a specific group of German-speaking people. They were Germans born in Russia where they had moved several decades earlier. When their national autonomy was jeopardised by russification programs after 1871, they left to seek a new life on the Great Plains where they could proceed in their agricultural way of life (Luebke, 1977, p. 413).

### **3.3. Norwegians and Swedes**

The Norwegians were the most numerous group of Scandinavian people and they often settled in the Dakotas where they usually led a farming life. Their strong adherence to Lutheranism sometimes caused disagreements between pietists and the orthodox in their churches (Luebke, 1977, p. 417).

The Swedes represented the second largest Scandinavian group and they could be found in Nebraska where they had been emigrating from the 1860s (Luebke, 1977, p. 417). Culturally and religiously, they resembled the Norwegians. Firm in their religious beliefs, they also chose to reside among people of the same church.

#### **4. Expectations vs. the reality of the New Land**

The newcomers to the Great Plains faced a very unique environment. Most of these brave people had had a notion of what to expect before they came. Thanks to advertising, newspapers, pamphlets, correspondence, they often even knew where to find jobs or people from their native land with whom they could use their mother tongue (Cafferty, 1983, p. 68). Despite their awareness, the unusual conditions that existed in the Great Plain states frequently surprised even the most prepared people.

The majority of people immigrated in pursuit of the American dream which James T. Adams defines as a “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (Miller, 1994, p. 77). The Homestead Act seemed to represent the perfect means of achieving considerable wealth in a relatively short time, yet what a farmer could not realize was that the land granted under the act was not always suitable for agriculture, but rather for cattle raising (Tindall, 2006, p. 738).

The Plains posed a great challenge for the first arrivals since they were characterized by harsh environment and unpredictable weather. The whole area was covered in short grass with no trees. Due to small amounts of rainfall, the soil was too hard and the rivers too shallow (Burner et al., 1985, p. 391). The winters were bitterly cold with temperatures as low as 40 °F below zero, and summers were usually very hot with temperatures reaching 70 °F (Burner et al., 1985, p. 391). Moreover, dry seasons would unpredictably change with periods of abundant rainfall.

Furthermore, severe natural disasters e.g. drought, grasshoppers, prairie fires, blizzards afflicted the settlers and besides other things caused crop failures (Tindall, 2006, p. 723, 738). A Nebraskan pioneer Elizabeth Sargent recalled her experience: “The hardest period of my life was the years of drought, there was practically nothing. Corn, pastures and everything dried up. My husband killed prairie chickens and shipped them east and in this way was able to buy food for ourselves and our two children” (Montrie, 2005, p. 248).

The pioneers led modest and often difficult lives. They lived in dugouts or sod houses for years before they could afford to pay for imported wood from the east and build a frame house or a log cabin. The unfavourable weather conditions complicated their livelihood since they depended on farming and ranching. At times, pioneers struggled with poverty, hunger

and diseases. Later, with new technological innovations like dry farming, systems of modern irrigation, better ploughs and more, the quality of people's lives improved radically.

Many migrants arrived to the Great Plains with high expectations for new life, success, liberty, and equality. The reality was yet more complex, and the settlers realized that all of the things they wished for would not be acquired easily. Despite the many hardships the settlers had to endure, they found freedom and future in their new homes. As Mattie Oblinger writes in her letter home:

"I expect you think we live miserable because we are in a sod house. But I tell you in solid earnest, I never enjoyed myself better... It is because we are on our own. (...) I tell you this is quite a consolation to us who have been renters so long. There are no renters here. Everyone is on his own and doing the best he can" (Nebraska studies, ©2018).

## 5. Willa Cather and the immigrants

“Life began for me when I ceased to admire and began to remember,” were Willa Cather’s words that summarize the journey towards her literary work (Woodress, 1989, p. 40). It took a good deal of time and effort before she could write in a style of her own, and about subjects that were close to her, that is pioneering. Her novels filled with epic air tell stories about eager pioneers who passionately overcome hard obstacles in order to achieve freedom, success, and happiness (Van Doren, 1947, p. 284-5). Her convincing plots and vivid portrayals of place and people come from a close observation that she had gathered during her childhood years.

Willa Cather was born in Virginia where she spent first nine years of her life. After that, she and her family moved west to Red Cloud, Nebraska (Murphy, 1994, p.87). At first overwhelmed by such a major event in her life, she later identified herself with the land and developed empathy with the foreign immigrants (Murphy, 1994, p.87). It was the country and its people that had a great influence upon her and determined the themes of which she wrote. In one interview she recalled, “We had very few American neighbors. They were mostly Swedes and Danes, Norwegians and Bohemians. I liked them from the first and they made up for what I missed in the country. I particularly liked the old women; they understood my homesickness and were kind to me” (Woodress, 1989, p. 38). Cather grew fond of these people and found a huge source of inspiration in them. One of the people to which she developed a deep attachment and who became a role model for *Ántonia*, a main protagonist of *My Ántonia*, was Annie Sadilek Pavelka, a Czech “hired girl”. Even after leaving Red Cloud, Cather never lost touch with her friends. On the contrary, she frequently paid them visits, especially whilst creating *My Ántonia* (Murphy, 1994, p. 88). Cather reported that in talking to and spending time with foreigners, even though they spoke little English, she found intense intellectual excitement that gave her an impulse for writing (Van Doren, 1947, p. 281).

Cather’s childhood experience shaped not only her writing, but also her social and political attitudes. Her novels, short stories, essays and interviews oppose the public opinion predominating in the USA that all immigrants should melt into one homogenous nation in the image of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture (Prchal, 2004, p. 4). Cather, fascinated with immigrant culture, agitated for multinational America in which various cultures would coexist (Reynolds, 1996, p. 73). She felt a great distaste for xenophobia, Anglo-centrism and of Americanization she thought that, “This passion for Americanizing everything and everybody is a deadly disease with us” (Murphy, 1994, p. 88; Reynolds, 1996, p. 73). Cather’s opinion

on Americanization in relation to the immigrant tradition goes as follows: “Americanization committee worker who persuades an old Bohemian housewife that it is better for her to feed her family out of tin cans instead of cooking them a steaming goose for dinner is committing a crime against art” (Woodress, 1989, p. 320).

## 6. An immigrant in a new land

### 6.1. The Shimerdas

#### 6.1.1. The arrival

The Shimerdas, a Czech immigrant family, depicted in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* represent the so-called "new immigration wave" which was associated with people who arrived to the USA rather late, that is between 1890 and 1914. The term "new immigrant" came to connote negative ideas about foreigners and Prchal (2004, p. 6) writes that the Shimerda family reflects this change in the national picture of immigration. The division between old and new immigrants was further described in chapter three.

The Shimerdas came to the USA for the same reason as many immigrants had before; they believed in the American dream. They were convinced that hard work on the land would bring them wealth and a happy future (Rabin, 2004, p. 26). Ántonia explains to Jim the reason for their emigration:

"My mamenka make him [Mr. Shimerda] come. All the time she say: 'America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls' (...) my mama, she want Ambrosch for be rich, with many cattle" (*My Ántonia*, henceforth MÁ, p.45).

Back in their home country, the Shimerdas must have heard the often exaggerated news of cheap lands in America waiting to be cultivated that spread across Europe. The idea of getting rich quickly when working hard influenced many keen emigrants. Furthermore, Mrs. Shimerda's relatives supported her decision to leave Bohemia by arranging a deal with their cousin who had already left for the New World. This practise was not uncommon. It is only natural that people had appreciated some level of certainty before they set out to the unknown world. Unfortunately, the pre-arranged deals often did not turn out well and sometimes people found themselves being cheated upon. This was the case for the Shimerdas. They purchased a homestead with a dugout house, basic equipment and some oxen and horses from their countryman, Petr Krajiek. Despite being a family member and a countryman, he did not hesitate to sell them goods of low value for an inflated price. Krajiek, being a greedy person, took advantage of his position as a mediator for the Shimerdas who unlike him could not speak English.

"Krajiek was their only interpreter, and could tell them anything he chose. They could not speak enough English to ask for advice, or even to make their most pressing wants known" (MÁ, p. 13).

The absence of English language skills was undoubtedly one of the biggest obstacles that the Bohemians encountered. They hated Krajiek, but they let him take advantage of them, because “he was the only human being with whom they could talk or from whom they could get information” (MÁ, p. 18). Elliott (1985, p. 35) notices that *My Ántonia* fails to place the Shimerdas in an ethnic community. The Czechs usually immigrated to areas where their countrymen had already been present. However, ethnic communities were not so usual in rural areas. The Shimerdas were the first Czech family to come to this part of the country. Their language barrier and Krajiek’s recommendations not to go to town otherwise they end up being robbed, kept the Shimerdas isolated from other inhabitants. Paradoxically, their neighbours helped them a great deal in contrast to Krajiek who was the only one to steal from them.

### **6.1.2. The struggle with the land**

Isolated, with no knowledge of the local language and cheated by their countryman; all of these problems were half the trouble they faced after the arrival. The inhospitable climate of the Great Plains was shocking even for the Americans from the East. Jim’s reaction to the local landscape is dramatically depicted:

“There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made” (MÁ, p. 7).

The Shimerdas found themselves in a position of the first pioneers who came to the natural, unspoiled land that needed to be modified from the raw material to a cultural landscape (Murphy, 1994, p. 96). Unfortunately, the family was not ready for this. The father was “old and frail and knew nothing about farming” (MÁ, p. 13). In spite of Mrs. Shimerda’s housekeeping skills which had been at a high level back in Bohemia, the new conditions demanded for a different approach; one that was not clear to Mrs. Shimerda until her neighbours gave her advice. The Shimerdas struggled greatly with the new environment. Soon after their arrival, they lived in severe poverty. All of their life savings was spent, so no money was left for proper food. For days, they lived on corncakes and sorghum molasses.

Throughout the first chapter, a reader can feel the immense effects that the nature has on the characters. Cather precisely describes every little detail which influences reader’s emotions. Not only that, but the weather conditions also foreshadow the plot. As Miller (1958, p. 478) notes, “almost every little detail in ‘The Shimerdas’ is calculated to shrink the significance of

the human drama in contrast with the drama of the seasons, the drama of nature, the drama of the land and sky.”

In autumn, both the Shimerdas and Jim arrive to the vast, barren landscape which seems to have power over humans. In time, as the autumn starts changing to winter, the story gets darker and bleaker as showed on Peter and Pavel’s depressive narration which reveals why the duo escaped from Russia. With winter coming, the situation for the Shimerdas worsens rapidly. The poverty, they live in, reaches extreme conditions. Only one overcoat protects a family of six from cold and their food supplies for winter are either frozen or rotted. The dreadful winter escalates when the father of the family commits suicide. As Daiches (1951, p. 47) puts it, the atmosphere of the frozen landscape with fierce blizzards emphasizes the horror of the misfortunes that the Shimerdas went through.

Consequently, spring symbolizes a retreat of the cold, bitter and depressive winter. Things finally start looking good for the Shimerdas. They build a new log house which provides them with comfortable housing. They get a credit and buy all the equipment necessary for farming for which they all now have to work hard since their father killed himself.

According to Miller (1958, p. 478), the human beings are “at the mercy of the cyclic nature of the universe”. And it seems that *Ántonia* realizes this fact when she sighs: “I wish my papa live to see this summer. I wish no winter ever come again” (MÁ, p. 69). *Ántonia* blames winter for the death of her father and at the same time, she expresses concerns about the next winter for she is aware of the cyclic fate that cannot be avoided (Miller, 1958, p. 478).

### **6.1.3. Community**

The prairie brought many hardships upon the first settlers. Some were not fortunate enough to overcome the problems. Others, who were not overwhelmed by the dominance of the nature, were eventually shaped by the landscape and all that it brought with it. Murphy (1973, p. 152) notices that the biting cold in winter forms a sense of brotherhood among pioneers. After Mr. Shimerda’s death, the people cluster together in order to take care of the situation. Jim comments: “One pleasant thing about this time was that everybody talked more than usual” (MÁ, p. 55).

Many literary critics including Heidi Sjostrom (2002) agree that the specific landscape forced settlers to form a community. Goggans (2003, p. 165) claims that pioneers’ identity comes from the place they are surrounded by. He adds that the place-based community is flexible



and works for both migrants and immigrants, so that in the end they are able to establish a sense of identity.

In *My Ántonia*, the sense of community that the settlers created can be observed on many occasions. When the Shimerdas move onto their homestead, their closest neighbours come to meet them as early as the next day. Since the beginnings on the prairie are difficult for everyone, the Burdens bring some provisions with them. From the first day, the American neighbours have good intentions as Mrs. Burden declares: “If they’re nice people, I hate to think of them spending the winter in that cave of Krajiek’s” (MÁ, p. 13). The Burdens accept the Shimerdas into their community immediately. On the prairies, it does not matter who you are. If you are a good person, you become a part of the neighbourhood.

This has proved to be true especially in difficult situations. When Mr. Shimerda commits suicide and leaves his family behind, the neighbours gather around to help the poor family. The Burdens take care of most necessities arising from arranging a funeral. Mr. Burden fixes a coroner, Otto Fuchs builds a coffin and Mrs. Burden handles the visitors who arrive from the neighbourhood. Anton Jelinek, a Bohemian, also comes to the aid of his countrymen in trouble. Finally, all neighbours attend the funeral.

Another proof of a close-knit community established on the prairies is when the neighbours come again to assist the Shimerdas as they build a new log house in spring. Also, the Burdens stand close by and help the Shimerdas to establish themselves.

However, no community ever functions without any disputes and misunderstandings. As the inhabitants of the prairies are heterogeneous, opinions differ when it comes to the problem as where to bury Mr. Shimerda’s body. Rabin (2004, p. 35) notes that the Old World national prejudices endure even in a new environment. Both Catholic and Lutheran Churches decide not to bury a man who killed himself, to which Mrs. Burden replies: “If these foreigners are so clannish, Mr. Bushy, we’ll have to have an American graveyard that will be more liberal-minded” (MÁ, p. 56).

Nevertheless, the American citizens do not seem to be that liberal-minded as Mrs. Burden suggests. On the contrary, they appear to hold deeply rooted stereotypes about foreign people. Jim comments on the attitude of the town people toward immigrants:

“If I told my schoolmates that Lena Lingard’s grandfather was a clergyman, and much respected in Norway, they looked at me blankly. What did it matter? All foreigners were ignorant people who couldn’t speak English” (MÁ, p. 98).

Even the Burdens and the Shimerdas encounter a problem that jeopardises their friendship. However, all troubles are forgotten when the course of events present them with another difficult situation on the prairies that in the end force them to conclude peace. Regardless of the dispute that the families have between each other, Mr. Burden rushes in to assist when the Shimerdas’ animals get sick. It is the natural conditions that encourage settlers to forge communities and through them, the people maintain their sense of identity. Sjostrom (2002) concludes that maintaining the sense of community provides the settlers with strength and hope.

#### **6.1.4. The Shimerdas and the Burdens**

The Shimerdas and the Burdens form a community from which the family members benefit. But there are many explicit and implicit differences between the families that influence their relationship and maybe even disrupt their integrity. First of all, as Murphy (1973, p. 151) mentions, “we are never allowed to forget the social superiority of the Burdens over the Shimerdas”. What makes the Burdens socially superior is their ethnicity and social class.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the climate of American public opinion of the immigration was negative to that extent that by 1920s the immigration was greatly restricted (Elliott, 1985, p. 27). The idea of the American melting pot which should fuse all the diverse foreign countries into one homogeneous nation was still strong. Nonetheless, with the rising theories of nativism that boosted antipathy towards the immigrants, people started to believe that not every ethnic group is able to fully assimilate into American culture. Consequently, the newcomers faced class and racial discrimination.

##### **6.1.4.1. Ethnic differences**

Tunc (2006, p. 210) provides us with a description of how, according to public belief, the immigrants differed from the native-born Americans. The Burdens represent the “true” white Americans. In order to live up to this archetypal image, one has to be a member of the middle or upper-class and be of Anglo-Saxon Protestant and Caucasian origin. If people differed in at least one regard, they were considered as the inferior “other”. For example, many Europeans had a pale skin, but still, they were not considered “white” enough because they did not meet

the previously mentioned features. Tunc (2006, p. 210) clarifies that other “social or class arbiters, such as mannerisms, employment, and housing also determined who was ‘white’ and ‘non-white’”.

The “non-white” groups included African Americans, the working class, and the new immigrants (Tunc, 2006, p. 210). To all of these groups, negative characteristics were attributed as for example primitivism, closeness to natural world, savagery; the people were believed to be unsophisticated, illiterate, and spreading diseases.

The Shimerdas are affected by these negative associations. They are eastern European immigrants: non-white and of lower class. On a journey to Nebraska, a passenger conductor suggests that Jim meets an immigrant family who is headed to the same town as he is. Jim refuses and Jake, his fellow-traveller, approvingly nods and warns him saying, “you were likely to get diseases from foreigners” (MÁ, p. 6). Later during a dispute between the families he declares, “These foreigners ain’t the same. You can’t trust ‘em to be fair” (MÁ, p. 64). Other time, Mrs. Burden pronounces haughtily that, “these foreigners are so clannish” (MÁ, p. 56). When Jim visits the Shimerdas for the first time, he describes them with words connoting animals. Their dugout is referred to as a sort of shed, *hole in a bank*, *cave* or a *badger hole*. When portraying Ántonia’s appearance, stress is laid on her *brown* skin and cheeks that glow of rich, *dark colour*. Her curly *brown* hair is *wild-looking*. Marek’s fingers are “*webbed* to the first knuckle, like a *duck’s foot*” (MÁ, p. 14). He makes uncouth noises; he *crows* like a *rooster*. Later that visit, Yulka “*curled up like a baby rabbit* and played with a grasshopper” (MÁ, p. 15). By using the similes that emphasize the Shimerdas’ inclination to nature, Jim reinforces the traditional stereotype and thus “exposes the narrowness of American views” (Tunc, 2006, p. 212).

#### **6.1.4.2. Class differences**

The Shimerdas were thought of as inferior not just as a result of their ethnic origin, but because of their social class as well. Mr. Shimerda explains to the Burdens that “they were no beggars in the old country; he made good wages, and his family were respected there” (MÁ, p. 39). Elliott (1985, p. 33) states that out of all eastern European immigrant groups, the Czechs had the highest percentage of skilled craftsmen. Mr. Shimerda “was a weaver by trade; had been a skilled workman on tapestries and upholstery material” (MÁ, p. 13). The family both socially and ethnically fitted to their old country’s culture and was not marginalized. However, their social status changed dramatically as they decided to leave their

homeland and become immigrants. The respect they enjoyed back home does not apply to the new environment.

#### **6.1.4.3. Cultural plurality vs. nativism**

The Burdens seem to show an inconsistent stance towards the Shimerdas. Rabin (2004, p. 33) suggests that the family name carries a symbolic meaning: a burden of identity. The Burdens' ethnic origin and social status is a part of their identity and influences them whether they realize it or not. Throughout the book, the native-born Americans "vacillate[s] between an acceptance of diversity and a more reactionary nativism" (Rabin, 2004, p. 33). On several occasions, Jim loses patience with his European neighbours. When *Ántonia* becomes sad about her father's homesickness, Jim exclaims, "People who don't like this country ought to stay at home" (MÁ, p. 45). Other times, opposite attitudes are presented. While Jim complains about Mrs. Shimerda's envious behaviour, his grandmother demonstrates empathy and understanding and justifies Mrs. Shimerda's actions, "you see, a body never knows what traits poverty might bring out in 'em. It makes a woman grasping to see her children want for things" (MÁ, p. 46). Tunc (2006, p. 212) however, finds another symbolism in Burdens' name as he claims that the family consider themselves to be good, civilized ("white") Christians who are "now *burdened* with the responsibility of being 'their unfortunate brothers' keepers.'" Murphy (1973, p. 151) suggests that it is the burden of Christian duties that reduces the class separation.

Although Miller (1958, p. 481) writes that the comparatively sophisticated people in the West "are compelled literally to begin over again, on a primitive level, shedding their cultural attainment like an animal its skin," the class consciousness is already present even in far western states. The social differences create tensions between settlers, however, "it is in dealing with these tensions and showing compassion for those defeated by them that Cather's characters grow in spirit" (Sjostrom, 2002).

#### **6.1.4.4. Immigrant vs. American – conclusion**

Palmer (2001 p. 242) summarizes the Burden – Shimerda relation when he writes, "Although they share the same destination, Jim and *Ántonia*'s point of origin determinates their future movement." Right from the beginning, their class and ethnic separation is portrayed by the way they travel to Nebraska. Jim enjoys his ride in a day coach furnished with a plush red seat, while *Ántonia* is located in a crowded "immigrant car" (Palmer, 2001, p. 242).

The difference between the Burdens and Shimerdas' social standing is evident, thus their starting position in a new environment is undoubtedly not the same. It means that for the Shimerdas and immigrants in general, the start is more challenging. As *Ántonia* says to Jim, "If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us" (MÁ, p. 69). It takes more effort for non-Americans to become successful. Palmer claims (2001, p. 247) that crossing the borders of social class is demanding, and still, never truly achieved. But the tension can be at least eased by "moving from the low position of working class immigrant to the entrepreneurial realm of the merchant class" (Palmer, 2001, p. 247).

## 6.2. The Hired Girls

In the second book, “The Hired Girls”, Cather continues to examine the social fragmentation that is already hinted in the previous book (Murphy, 1973, p. 152). As an object of her examination she chooses young immigrant girls who through hard work and devotion overcome the challenges of the prairies and look for better working and living conditions in town.

The term “hired girls” refers to young women who hired themselves out to people who needed and could afford their services in housekeeping in the nineteenth century (Sallquist, 1984, p. 166). The girls were usually in their mid- to late teens, single and mixed ethnically. (Sallquist, 1984, p. 166 - 8).

### 6.2.1. From the prairies to towns

In *My Ántonia*, the girls do not differ much from the above mentioned. Ántonia, Lena, Tiny, the three Bohemian Marys, or the Danish laundry girls; all of them moved from the prairies to Black Hawk in order to financially support their families. Most of their fathers were in debts, so the daughters “were always helping to pay for ploughs and reapers, brood-sows, or steers to fatten” (MÁ, p. 97).

Before they arrived to town, many of the girls had worked side by side with men breaking the wild sod on the fields. For the lack of finances and manpower in their families, the girls did not have an opportunity to learn English properly, let alone to receive education. Ántonia explains to Jim:

“I ain’t got time to learn. I can work like mans now. My mother can’t say no more how Ambrosh do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is alright for little boys. I help make this land one good farm” (MÁ, p. 61).

Ántonia feels sad for having missed the opportunity to be educated; however, she understands her predicament and realizes that she is obliged to help her family. After Mr. Shimerda’s suicide, she found herself to be both literally and figuratively in her father’s shoes. Each day, she got stronger and more “man-like”, for which she was very proud of. Even her external appearance and manners reminded of men.

For Lena, the situation was similar. She, too, led a hard life on the farm; however, compared to Ántonia, she did not find anything positive about it. When she arrives to town, she states: “I’m through with the farm ... I’m going to be a dressmaker” (MÁ, p. 79).

The neat little prairie town differed greatly from the wilderness of the countryside. The middle-class population could afford to build brick houses with white fences, schools, churches; there were trees growing along the sidewalks, and most importantly, the girls could find undemanding jobs with American families, learn English, and moreover, attend dancing evenings, make new friends and meet boys.

The girls' departure from the prairies to town shows a remarkable change not only in the quality of their lifestyle and the opportunities arising from it, but it also symbolizes the transformation of the barren land to a marvellous prairie town. The settlers create the new country from "the material out of which countries are made" and thus become a part of it (MÁ, p. 7; Rabin, 1985, p. 27). Moreover, by selling their labour in exchange for money, the hired girls "play out the sociological transition from an agricultural system to money-exchange economy" (Rabin, 2004, p. 27).

By coming to town, the girls' inner and outer appearances change: from wild girls of the prairies to sophisticated town girls. Jim expresses it aptly when he describes Lena's looks:

"I had not recognized her for a moment, either. I had never seen her before with a hat on her head—or with shoes and stockings on her feet, for that matter. And here she was, brushed and smoothed and dressed like a town girl, smiling at us with perfect composure" (MÁ, p. 79).

For *Ántonia*, it is Mrs. Burden who, by arranging her job at the Harlings, "saves" her from the hard labour and mannish looks. Tunc (2006, p. 213) suggests that by placing *Ántonia* "in a nice (i.e., Anglo-Saxon Protestant) home where she could learn some manners", Mrs. Burden "whitens" *Ántonia* and thus tries to assimilate her into the middle-class. Her attempt however cannot be successful because firstly, *Ántonia* does not desire assimilation, and secondly, the social circumstances in American society do not fully allow it.

### **6.2.2. The Hired Girls' social position in Black Hawk**

The new environment brought many changes to the lives of the hired girls. The new jobs were less demanding than their previous occupations and most of the girls were embraced by their families. *Ántonia*'s life was completely "intertwined with her employers' that townspeople regarded her as the Harling's ward rather than their hired girl" (Sallquist, 1984, p. 172). Working conditions also improved rapidly for the girls' individuality was honoured (Rabin, 2004, p. 27). In addition, the jobs could be resigned from whenever required. Sallquist (1984, p. 172), however, suggests that the girls as much as they had freedom in their occupation, they

also became owned. “The Harlings’ Tony”, “the Gardeners’ Tiny” etc. had nothing else to rely on but their services. Not only were they owned, but in time they became distinctively marginalized from the community.

The presence of the immigrant girls in town caused a stir. Their vigorous personalities stood out from the crowd. Some girls were much more noticeable than others because they tried to compensate for the years they had spent working on the farms. When the girls arrive to town, all of them are in their teens. Both their bodies and minds change with the maturing process. The town environment motivates them to behave more ladylike. They begin to take care of themselves, wear pretty clothes, do their hair etc. It does not take much time before the townspeople notice their beauty.

“Lena appeared at church, a little late, with her hair done up neatly on her head, like a young woman, wearing shoes and stockings, and the new dress, which she had made over for herself very becomingly. The congregation stared at her. Until that morning no one—unless it were Ole—had realized how pretty she was, or that she was growing up. The swelling lines of her figure had been hidden under the shapeless rags she wore in the fields” (MÁ, p. 82)

Soon after, the young ladies start to attend dancing nights, and the men are not able to detach themselves from them. Townsmen, hotel guests, even country boys, who arrive from distant farms, never miss a night with the girls. Jim notes: “All the young men felt the attraction of the fine well-set-up country girls who had come to town to earn a living” (MÁ, p. 96). As Tunc (2006, p. 217) puts it, girls’ ”bodies become sites for the articulation of Anglo-American sexuality, exoticized desire, and anti-miscegenation rhetoric.”

There was something special about the exotic country girls. In comparison with the townswomen, from whom they were almost “a race apart,” they were full of vigour (MÁ, p. 97). Jim perceives that “their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background” (MÁ, p. 98). This, however, was a male’s point of view. The Black Hawk girls “had a confident, uninquiring belief that they were ‘refined,’ and that the country girls, who ‘worked out,’ were not” (MÁ, p. 97). The daughters of the merchants become envious of the country girls’ unusual beauty and sexual energy they were bursting with. The men would choose to dance with them rather than Black Hawk girls whose “bodies never moved inside their clothes” (MÁ, p. 97).

Despite the attraction and temptation that the American young men felt towards the immigrant girls, they would never marry any of them. The flirting often resulted in a romance; but still,



the line between that and a serious relationship, let alone marriage, was never crossed. A perfect example provides Sylvester Lovett who is very much in love with Lena, and everyone knows it. In order “to escape from his predicament he ran away with a widow six years older than himself” (MÁ, p. 99). The reason is simple, the immigrant girls’ are considered to be “a menace to the social order” (MÁ, p. 98). Tunc (2006, p. 217) writes that in *Black Hawk*, “the romance, which dealt with desire and exoticism, was, to a certain extent, acceptable on the American frontier. However interracial marriage, or miscegenation, which dealt with procreation and the purity of bloodlines, was a completely different issue.”

Tellefsen (1999, p.4) suggests that “many of the ‘real Americans’ try to keep the newly arrived immigrants on the outside, marked as Other and barred from meaningful economic and political activity as well as social interaction (most especially marriage) with the upper classes”. Even though the men would not marry the immigrant girls for their social status and ethnic origin, they could not resist the temptation to at least be close to them. Jim comments that the young men who attended the dancing nights, “used to drop in late and risk a tiff with their sweethearts and general condemnation for a waltz with ‘the hired girls’” (MÁ, p. 96).

Despite the fact that the hired girls were looked down on and “considered as dangerous as high explosives to have about the kitchen”, their cooking and housekeeping skills were so admired that they were welcomed in *Black Hawk* and they never had to look for a place (MÁ, p. 99).

### **6.3. Chapter summary**

The newcomers to the USA found their new environment even more challenging than they have pictured. The local climate was unpredictable and caused crop failures, so the people were often caught in the poverty trap. Moreover, native-born Americans felt nativist tendencies towards foreigners, so consequently, the immigrants’ social position worsened and it was much more difficult for them to become successful in a new country or to assimilate into American culture. The social differences between Americans and immigrants are shown on the example of the Shimerda family and the hired girls.

## **7. Chasing the American Dream**

Most immigrants left their homelands in a pursuit of the American dream which promised a better life for everyone, regardless of ethnicity or social class. The promise thrilled people to that extent that they undertook a dangerous journey to the New World without knowledge of the local language, and sometimes ignorant of the struggles resulting from a new lifestyle in a foreign country.

Although some of Cather's characters have come closer to achieving the dream than others, "none of them have done it without highly visible self-sacrifice and/or the sacrifice of others" (Tellefsen, 1999).

### **7.1. The Hired Girls**

#### **7.1.1. Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball**

Lena and Tiny, Scandinavian immigrants, started their lives on the prairies. They grew up in poor first generation immigrant families. Oldest of all their siblings, the responsibility for their younger brothers and sisters fell on them. Their endless hard work came to an end when they hired themselves out as housekeepers, cooks or any kind of helpers in Black Hawk.

Thereafter, Lena Lingard immediately renounces her life on the farm and decides to become a dressmaker. From Mrs. Thomas, she learns the craft of dressmaking and follows her dream to become a successful independent business woman. And she does succeed. However, the journey towards her dream does not come without sacrifices. Traumatized by family life as a child, she decides not to have a family of her own. In order to have control over her life, she rejects men as potential obstacles. Rabin (2004, p. 28) points out that Lena later forms "some semblance of a family life" when she moves to San Francisco with Tiny of whom she feels that is her equal.

Tiny Soderball is very ambitious and eventually, she becomes one of the few "to achieve the most solid worldly success" (MÁ, p. 142). She has led a very adventurous life which has brought her a fortune. Nevertheless, on her exciting expedition to Alaska, she has lost three toes. At the end, she becomes interested in nothing else but moneymaking and gives herself up to materialism (Sjostrom, 2002). She is "satisfied with her success, but not elated" (MÁ, p. 143).

Lena and Tiny's dream of becoming independent and financially self-sufficient businesswomen has come true. Seemingly affected by their social position as hired girls of foreign origin, they have managed to gain respect in the eyes of Black Hawk inhabitants. Despite their fortunes and better social position, their lives seem to be empty and unfilled. Cather shows us that abundance of material wealth does not necessarily bring happiness, and that "advancement should not be evaluated in terms of income alone" (Rabin, 2004, p. 27).

### **7.1.2. Antonia Shimerda**

Antonia had the same starting point as Lena and Tiny. She spent her childhood on the Nebraska prairies and adolescence in Black Hawk. But in contrast with her friends, Antonia, although less wealthy, has actually become much richer and managed to achieve the American Dream in all aspects. But the dream has not been fulfilled without difficulties. Abandoned by her fiancé and pregnant with illegitimate child, she must "endure disgrace and (one assumes) near-despair" (Tellefsen, 1999). What ensure Antonia's success are her endurance, strength, and resilience. Despite the hardships, her spirit is unbowed. She refuses to become a lost lady (Rabin, 2004, p. 28). Instead, she returns on a farm to work out in the fields ploughing, harvesting, and herding the cattle. Rabin (2004, p. 29) claims that "it is the country that gives Antonia a sense of herself." There, where she knows "every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly, "she feels self-possessed. Murphy (1994, p. 97) adds that Antonia's identification with the land is complete when Cather writes: "Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf" (MÁ, p. 60). When Jim meets her in the final book, he describes her as flat-chested, toothless, battered woman (MÁ, p. 157). However, she is not diminished. On the contrary, her personality is full of vigour, her identity stronger, and her inner glow has never faded (MÁ, p. 157,159).

Antonia knows her identity; she knows that she belongs on a farm. Her American dream has been fulfilled both materially and emotionally. She becomes a farm-owner, and her good husband and many children represent "her triumphant creative achievement" (Miller, 1958, p. 483). Her family lives in complete harmony. She appreciates her past, because it has taught her valuable lessons. The hardships have transformed her into a stronger personality, and the American way of life has improved her housekeeping skills and manners (Elliott, 1985, p. 40). Moreover, she has found the perfect balance between the cultures. On the one hand, she honours the Old World values and never forgets her homeland, on the other, she "has taken what she needed from the host culture" (Elliott, 1985, p. 40). The Cuzaks are a bilingual and

bicultural family who respect the past and simultaneously, live in the present. Prchal (2004, p. 20) suggests that future does not belong to the old immigrant stock nor the recent but more assimilated immigrants. The future lies with families like the Cuzaks who “head there one bridge from the past” (Prchal, 2004, p. 20). Cather affirms this assumption when she writes of *Ántonia* that “she was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races” (MÁ, p. 167).

### **7.1.3. The hired girls’ American dream**

The hired girls’ life journey depended not only on their personality or different attitudes towards the American dream, but also on their bond with the land. Sjostrom (2002) points out that “the hired girls seem to lose their prairie spirit as their separation from the land lengthens.” Lena and Tiny have moved to the west, far from the Nebraska prairies. They become successful and rich; however, they do not find happiness. Tiny serves as a warning against materialism (Sjostrom, 2002). By losing her touch with the prairies, she becomes vulnerable and exposes herself to the materialistic world of the big cities. *Ántonia*’s fateful decision to leave the prairies for Denver left her devastated and dishonoured. Nonetheless, by returning to the land from which her identity has been forged, she finds peace and happiness.

## **7.2. American dream shattered**

Miller (1958, p. 117) writes that *My Ántonia* does not portray the fulfilment of the American dream, but rather depicts the pioneers’ dreams as shattered, and their lives broken by the hardness of wilderness life. This is not entirely true as some characters, e.g. *Ántonia*, Lena, and Tiny, prove otherwise. However, there are some pioneers for whom a persuasion of the American dream becomes even fatal.

Mr. Shimerda did not emigrate from his homeland deliberately; it was his wife who made the decision. The new environment, however, does not agree with him. He misses his dear friends with whom he could share his passion for music. Woolley (2006) writes, that “he lacks the vitality necessary not only to create art but merely to survive the hardships of such a life.” His family’s decision to follow the American dream, and subsequently the extreme conditions of the new land and homesickness eventually forces him to take his own life.

Peter and Pavel committed terrible actions back in Russia, for which the local community did not find understanding, and banished them from the village. In order to find relieve from the social pressure, they both immigrate to the USA with hope for a fresh start. However, “moving to America does not enable them to expiate their guilt; they are forever rendered

unfit for life in society” (Cohen, 2009, p. 52). They live isolated on the prairies until the day comes when the stigmatized duo has to pay for their past actions. Pavel becomes sick which results into his death and Peter is condemned to lead a broken life (Woolley, 2006).

When Otto Fuchs’s job is no longer required with the Burdens, he decides to come back to his adventurous life he has led before. He persuades Jake Marpole to join him on his daring expedition to the “wild West”. Jake, lured by the stories of rich silver mines waiting for them in Colorado, agrees, so they set out on a journey to adventures out of which they would make a fortune. We never precisely know how their story ends, but Jim’s comment that Otto and Jake are never heard from again implies that they probably did not survive.

### **7.3. Chapter conclusion**

Cather shows that the American dream can be achieved; however, it may involve certain dangers if done recklessly. Characters that recede far from the prairies risk losing their identity and prairie spirit. Tiny is an example of a materialistic person whose needs are never satisfied. Her chasing after success and wealth results in loss of her vigour. Having gone to San Francisco and never returning back to Nebraska, is what prevented her from fulfilling the American dream. Lena, in contrast, is not yet lost even though she is fond of big cities, because she still feels attachment with the land and returns to it frequently. Antonia, however, shows a complete merging with nature, and that is what gives her a true sense of identity which helps her to find the right balance in life. She works hard and overcomes every obstacle that crosses her way, but she is not looking for enormous wealth. Her modest personality and sense of identity helps her to become both materially and psychologically fulfilled.

There are some characters, nevertheless, whose journey towards the American dream can become even lethal. Mr. Shimerda is not able to identify himself with the land which ends drastically for him. Peter and Pavel’s sins are too serious to be forgotten, so peace cannot be found anywhere in the world. Otto Fuchs and Jake Marpole, similarly like Tiny, travel too far from the prairies and allow themselves to be lured by the idea of getting rich by mining the west. Their longing for adventures and riches becomes fatal for them.

By and large, *My Ántonia* tells a story of the American dream and its bright and darker side. Its fulfilment requires hard work, persistence and identification with the prairie values.

## Conclusion

The Great Plains, of which Nebraska prairies are part of, represent a huge area of lands that for its inhospitable climate were only scarcely populated until the 1860s when a great influx of immigrants started arriving to this area. The incoming settlers left their homelands mostly for economic reasons. The concept of the American dream had spread throughout Europe and many came in hope for a better and happier future. There were some, however, who emigrated from their countries in order to escape political or religious repression. The immigration process was intensified by the Homestead Act and the enhancement of transportation.

Until 1890s, it was mostly western and northern Europeans who immigrated to the USA. Thereafter, the situation in Europe changed, thus forcing mainly eastern and southern Europeans to emigrate. The more recent wave was afflicted by many negative stereotypes. Fear that the nation would be corrupted by the newcomers caused emergence of nativist and Americanization theories which influenced the general public. Although there were many different ethnic groups arriving to the USA, they were all considered “new immigrants”.

The arrival to the Great Plains could not have been easy for anyone. The local climate caused severe droughts which prevented trees from growing. Moreover, the arid soil was affected by natural disasters which had a negative impact on crop production. The pioneers grappled greatly with the new environment.

Willa Cather was a migrant herself who had left her home and moved to Nebraska. There she found herself to be surrounded by people coming from many European countries. These people and the land they lived on inspired her writing and even shaped her political attitudes which diverged from the public ones.

In her novel *My Ántonia*, Cather vividly depicted the immigrant experience. The Shimerdas represent an immigrant family who left their home believing in the American dream. The reality of such an action was very complex. By coming to the USA, the Shimerdas faced many problems. Their language barrier made them vulnerable and they were deceived by their own countryman. The harsh prairie almost killed them, was it not for their neighbours. The tough conditions on the prairies, however, helped to forge tight-knit communities. Nevertheless, Cather then showed us that the political influence and stereotypes were rooted even in the newly established American states. The economic, ethnic, and class differences

created tensions among settlers. In American perspective, the immigrants were inferior to the native-born Americans.

The section about the hired girls broadens this sociological examination. The girls' help and skills were very much appreciated in Black Hawk; nonetheless, their presence disrupted the American integration. The young American girls envied the hired girls their vigour and sexual energy which attracted "their" American men. Even though the girls were considered a good distraction for their gender counterparts, they were never allowed to cross the social border and marry them. For their ethnicity and social differences, they were marginalized from the American society.

Despite the social differences between people, there were some immigrants who managed to achieve their American dream. However, the realization included some sacrifices. Lena Lingard and Tiny Sonderball worked hard to become successful and rich. Nevertheless, they were never entirely filled with happiness. Lena's rejection of men and family life left her life empty. Tiny was defeated by materialism and could not think about anything else than moneymaking. *Ántonia's* journey towards the American dream was gruelling, but it was worth the endeavour for she found both material and emotional fulfilment. There were those, however, whose efforts came in vain. For Mr. Shimerda, Pavel, Otto, and Jake it even resulted in death.

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## **Résumé**

Bakalářská práce se zabývá přistěhovalectvím Evropanů do Spojených států amerických na základě románu *Moje Antonie* od Willy Catherové. Čtenáři je poskytnut kontext nezbytný pro pochopení analýzy románu. Dočítá se o imigraci Evropanů do oblasti Velkých plání v devatenáctém a začátkem dvacátého století. Dále se také dozvídá o tehdejší politické atmosféře, jež nebyla zrovna k přistěhovalcům příznivá. Analýza knihy pak poukazuje na problémy spojené s příchodem do jiného státu. Poté také popisuje sociální rozdíly mezi přistěhovalci a rodilými Američany. V poslední části se soustředí na fenomén Amerického snu.

## Annotation

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<b>Název práce:</b>	Přistěhovalectví v knize Moje Antonie od Willy Catherové
<b>Název v angličtině:</b>	The Immigrant Experience in Willa Cather's My Ántonia
<b>Anotace práce:</b>	Bakalářská práce popisuje přistěhovalectví Evropanů do USA a přináší analýzu samotného procesu imigrace a jeho důsledků na přistěhovalce. Dále práce zkoumá sociální rozdíly mezi imigranty a rodilými Američany. V poslední řadě rozebírá fenomén Amerického snu.
<b>Klíčová slova:</b>	Willa Catherová, imigrace, prairie, sociální rozdíly, Šimerdovi, Burdenovi, „služebná děvčata“, Americký sen
<b>Anotace v angličtině:</b>	The Bachelor project describes the immigrant experience of Europeans to the USA. It analyses the process of immigration and its immediate impacts on the newcomers. Then, it examines the social differences between immigrants and native-born Americans. Finally, it provides an analysis of the American dream.
<b>Klíčová slova v angličtině:</b>	Willa Cather, immigration, prairies, social differences, the Shimerdas, the Burdens, the hired girls, American dream
<b>Přílohy vázané v práci:</b>	
<b>Rozsah práce:</b>	44 s.
<b>Jazyk práce:</b>	Anglický jazyk