

Robinson Crusoe and Isolation in Immigrant America

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Once the Homestead Act was passed in 1862, foreign settlers were presented with the prospect of owning extensive amounts of land across the Great Plains of America, provided that they cultivate and enrich their acreage. This promise of land and economic possibility encouraged mass migration from Europe to America, with the pioneering immigrants making their claims and attempting to cultivate the dry prairie soils of the Midwest. An array of characters within Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918) have followed this course and travelled to America under the illusion of finding a better and more profitable life; such is the case with the Shimerda family. However, such promises were often cruelly misleading and the unrelenting farmland proved severely challenging to cultivate in the extreme weather conditions. It is a culmination of this unforeseen difficulty and a sense of dislocation from their culture which leads to tragedy for the Shimerda family, as Mr. Shimerda's overwhelming sense of helplessness and isolation results in him committing suicide.

Succeeding this incident, the narrator and protagonist Jim Burden, alludes to an object which exemplifies these concepts of loneliness and dislocation during an analogous time of pioneering expansion: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Burden recalls "[t]hen, for the first time, I realized that I was alone in the house [...] I got 'Robinson Crusoe' and tried to read, but his life on the island seemed dull compared with ours" (Cather 43). Although the texts were published two centuries apart, many of the themes and experiences within Defoe's classic novel would have continued to resonate with the nineteenth and twentieth century readership of *My Ántonia*, most frequently the concepts of economy and materialism which prevailed during American modernity. Furthermore, the novel's position within the narrative implies a clear connection between the obstacles of the shipwrecked mariner and the hardships which faced the recently deceased Mr. Shimerda. As Joyce McDonald suggests "Cather's allusions to *Robinson Crusoe* [...] in all of her plains novels [...] suggest she perceived prairie life as being shipwrecked on

an island, cut off from the civilised world" (McDonald 21). The embedded intertextuality of *Robinson Crusoe*, both in terms of its physicality as a text and its allegorical implications to *My Ántonia*'s wider themes, performs as a symbol of isolation for Mr. Shimerda and the settlers of the Great Plains, particularly during a period of xenophobia at the turn of nineteenth century America.

Robinson Crusoe was pioneering both in its content and in its genre as it was arguably the first novel ever written. Whilst Crusoe's adventures across exotic landscapes are attuned to eighteenth century readers during the height of Empire, his voyages may be seen in this instance as emblematic of the expansion and migration across North America as *My Ántonia* also looks away from ordinary life, towards remote lands and peculiar customs. Similar to the traits of the "local colour" genre of *My Ántonia*, *Robinson Crusoe* retains moments of both romanticism and realism, such as what Michael Seidel suggests when he writes "[...] it is not just what Crusoe manipulates and arranges on the island that produces the book's realism, but what imprints on Crusoe's mind as well" (32). These similarities which remain extra to the plot of the two narratives successfully aid Cather in creating an underlying, definitive connection between her novel and Defoe's, in order to strengthen the association between the lives of Crusoe and Mr. Shimerda. Furthermore, Cather's awareness of genre concurrently draws attention to the points of contrast. Jim Burden's choice to turn to *Robinson Crusoe* shortly after the death of his family friend Mr. Shimerda, brings his religious beliefs into question. After attempting to read the novel, Jim questions "[...] whether Mr. Shimerda's soul were lingering about in this world [...]" (Cather 43), as though *Robinson Crusoe* and its tales of religious redemption have triggered him to consider the return of Mr. Shimerda's spirit. Cather is thus displaying a clear contrast of belief systems between Jim, the American and Mr. Shimerda, the immigrant. For Jim, tales of imperial expansion appear to obtain a sacred or divine property, as colonialism acts somewhat as a creation story for America. Mr. Shimerda, who in contrast is characterised by his devout Catholicism, has remained dislocated and unsettled in this country and the religious undertones of such colonial fiction do not resonate as part of his Old World values.

The passage within *My Ántonia* which includes reference to *Robinson Crusoe*, and is so indicative of Mr. Shimerda's isolation, is achieved by Cather's emphasis instead on the actions of Jim Burden; he narrates "I felt a considerable extension of power and authority, and was anxious to acquit myself creditably. I carried in cobs and wood from the long cellar, and filled both the stoves [...]" (Cather 43). Jim and Mr. Shimerda deal with their isolation in very different ways; the feeling of loneliness and separation causes Mr. Shimerda's downfall to depression and suicide, whilst it enlivens Jim with a positive sense of responsibility and stimulates him into productivity.

Robinson Crusoe was originally considered a children's text, as amid the adventure narrative resides important life lessons and a celebration of the value of hard work; the overall impression being that active and productive effort is necessary for survival, even at a time of complete isolation. Within the passage, Jim is clearly exercising his adherence to this theory and is heavily contrasted to the deceased presence of Mr. Shimerda, who's failure to internalise these New World values has led to his demise, as Joseph R. Urgo suggests "[...] Jim, unlike Shimerda, will learn to turn his sense of loss into productivity" (56). Cather's repetition of foregrounded personal pronouns throughout this paragraph, in addition to her use of complex and sophisticated lexis and Jim's appraisal that "life on the island seemed dull compared to ours" (43), all accentuate Jim's personal development and the ease at which he has overcome the obstacle of isolation. Moreover, this passage is one of many within *My Ántonia* to act as an emblem for the concept of "coming of age" which was a new notion within twentieth century attitudes and one which *Robinson Crusoe* is hereby helping Cather to explore in her contrast between Jim's progression and Mr. Shimerda's deterioration.

The significance of isolation in *Robinson Crusoe*, which is projected on to the deceased Mr. Shimerda, is concurrent with the idea of homesickness and Jim explicitly announces "I knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda [...]" (43). By identifying Shimerda as homesick, Cather can create a further contrast between he and Jim who, in distinction, characterised as homeless. Urgo suggests that "[d]espite what Jim thinks he is essentially a migratory American [...] historic immigrant crossing is the archetype of his own restlessness" (55). Throughout *My Ántonia*,

Jim is in perpetual motion, refusing to remain in one place or settle for any amount of time and it is this trait which opposes his character to Mr. Shimerda's as fundamentally American. Urgo goes on to declare "[...] the great fact of American existence is to continue moving on to find a home" (57). This hypothesis is highly indicative of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, during the proceedings of pioneering and countrywide expansion. Jim recalls just prior to picking up his copy of *Robinson Crusoe* "[t]he quiet was delightful, and the ticking clock was the most pleasant of companions" (Cather 43). Cather is therefore suggesting that Jim, the rooted American, finds great reassurance in the progression and development of time.

Whilst Jim proceeds with perpetual agency, Mr. Shimerda is stranded both in time and place, his progression inhibited by his emotional attachment to his home country and Urgo concludes "[a]lthough his body has uprooted and immigrated to Nebraska, his mind never left Bohemia [...]" what Jim managed to erase on the passage to Nebraska, Ántonia's father won't erase from his mind" (59). *Robinson Crusoe*, as a character, is able to project his English heritage onto the uninhabited island as part of his colonial mission. In contrast, the vast multiplicity of cultures, religions and national principles that were a result of the extreme levels of immigration to the Great Plains, Mr. Shimerda is prevented in doing the same. Jerome Reich alludes to the relationship between motion and immigration as he claims "[Germans] tended to settle as church groups and retain their language and customs. This [...] retarded their absorption into American life" (136). By refusing to fully settle and become a permanently progressing American, Shimerda cannot be rewarded with a return journey; his only means of release from this static entrapment of cultural disharmony is his demise.

In addition to the ethnic and social dissonance which inhibits Mr. Shimerda's ability to fully assimilate with American culture, is the unremitting presence and desperation for economic success. *Robinson Crusoe* has been most frequently analysed in terms of its exploration of economy and its treatment of trade and commerce, as Ian Watt declares "*Robinson Crusoe* is a symbol of the processes associated with the rise of economic individualism" (40). *Crusoe* and Mr. Shimerda have both come from respectable and prosperous backgrounds to find themselves stranded and impoverished in their unfamiliar territory. *Crusoe*,

fortified by his isolated productivity is able to dominate his environment and survive successfully outside the usual modes of trade, as Seidel details, “[the life] of Crusoe is a kind of exercise in material possession and possessiveness” (56). For Shimerda, meanwhile, this change in status merely creates a further degree of isolation and separation from who he once was in his distant home.

The American mind-set which prevailed at the time of publishing *My Ántonia* was heavily concerned with prosperity as a result of the preceding Industrial Revolution and the increase of modernity’s materialistic consumerism. This materialism and drive for economic prosperity is something again which Jim Burden appears to grasp far more successfully than his Bohemian neighbour and we learn early on within *My Ántonia* that Jim can look beyond the beauty of the prairies to see the land for its economic worth; Cather writes “[t]here was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material; out of which countries are made [...]” (7). The concurrency of Crusoe’s success and Jim’s vision is shown in harsh contrast to Mr. Shimerda’s repetitive failures at farming and its denial to his prosperity, therefore reiterating his removal from American settler life and towards isolation once again.

In conclusion, the presence of this eighteenth century work gives an exemplary account of successful relocation and settlement within a challenging and foreign landscape. Jim Burden’s reference to *Robinson Crusoe* immediately following Mr. Shimerda’s death marks it a medium through which the characters are contrasted in their ability to pioneer in the American Midwest. It is Jim’s internalisation of the American values first exhibited by Crusoe, such as movement and materialism, which allow him to successfully progress and integrate into society in the Great Plains, whilst Shimerda’s unaffected connection to his homeland and culture refuses him the right to success.

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