

Death and Desire in Language: Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*

I think of you more often than of anyone else in this part of the world. I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister—anything a woman can be to a man. The idea of you is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don't even realize it. You are really part of me.

--Jim Burden in *My Ántonia*

This paper argues that Willa Cather's My Ántonia captures the story of a child's coming to be in and through language, a symbolic phenomenon that disrupts the Real by forcing the infant to surrender its soul—the primal state of being—at the altar of the symbolic order and sever its primal ties with the nursing mother. Seen thus, Jim Burden's failed but fascinating romantic relationship with Antonia, his departure from the prairie, and his sense of being torn internally signify a child's transition from the Imaginary state to the Symbolic order through the oedipal conflict. In this sense, Jim's reminiscences of bygone days, his obsession for Antonia, and his return to the prairie represent an unconscious attempt to recuperate his childhood past and be in primal intimacy with the maternal figure. My Ántonia thus captures the murderous nature of the symbolic that grants subjectivity by helping the infant coordinate the drives and desire that it is into a unified self so it can recognize itself as a person, but in the process nullifies it as subject that it is by taking away its childhood innocence, severing its primal intimacy with the mother, and turning it into a desiring being.¹

After years of separation, Jim Burden in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* returns to the Nebraska prairie to visit his childhood friend Ántonia. Reading this event in terms of the American Dream, James Miller writes, "Jim is in search of the American past, his past, in an attempt to determine what went wrong, and perhaps as well what was right, with the dream" (115). In a similar vein, Stephanie Lovelady describes Jim's journey as a pursuit to "regain access to the past and past self" (32-33). Among other Cather critics, Ann Fisher-Wirth explains Jim's life story as "his fall away from union with the worldbody, into the Law of the Father . . . [It] retraces what is fundamentally one loss, repeated and reinscribed: the loss of preoedipal fusion with the mother" (41).² While one

¹ Critics might argue that a Lacanian reading of Jim's prairie days is untenable because by the time he arrives on the Nebraska plains, he is already a grown-up adult and is thus fully subjected to the Symbolic order. Yet, the vastness of the Nebraska prairie as well as its undulating nature not only evoke the maternal body but also transform the land into a psychic space where Jim can relive the Imaginary past and re-experience the pre-oedipal plenitude it represents. His recollections—of the prairie, his schooling, and his eventual departure to the city—can be read in relation to Lacan's theory of the three registers: the Imaginary, the Real, and the Symbolic. While the prairie embodies unity and plenitude, Ántonia signifies "object petit a," the elusive object of desire, which Jim can never truly possess. It is within this context that my reading of *My Ántonia* must be understood.

² As Fisher-Worth notes, her intent is to "explore the multiple presentations of this single paradigm, in which the child falls from an imaginary state of preoedipal wholeness into what

might interpret Fisher-Worth's reading as Lacanian, she clarifies in her footnotes that her "essay is concerned only with what Homans argues is the male orientation to language, which is based on the male's difference from and loss of the mother. Homans's theory, like the gender-based psycholinguistic theories from which it derives, is highly controversial, but whether or not one accepts it, it is remarkably pertinent to a study of *My Ántonia*." In an attempt to offer a sustained Lacanian analysis, this essay explores the idea of loss in terms of the psychic processes of identification, desire, and language central to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. It argues that Jim's persistent preoccupation with the past and his infatuation with Antonia reflect an unconscious attempt to recover his childhood past and reclaim the maternal body and thus procure meaning in his otherwise meaningless life.³

At this point I would like to recall Claudia Yukman who dismisses Lacanian reading arguing that in Cather's work subjectivity involves appropriating social institutions, norms, and processes such as marriage, heterosexuality, and desire. In her view, a "reading of *My Ántonia* requires a model of subjectivity which includes what Julia Kristeva has termed the semiotic: an early stage of subjectivity in a child's relationship with the mother which persists in later life as the capacity for experiencing subjectivity beyond a Freudian and Lacanian model of loss and alienation" (94). Yukman's dismissal of Lacanian psychology is misplaced for multiple reasons: for one, Lacanian theory of subjectivity provides a lens for a comprehensive understanding Jim's obsession for Antonia and his feeling of being internally-torn, which lie at the heart of the novel. Likewise, his ceaseless admiration for Antonia and his longing for the past were the effect of his coming to be in language, a major symbolic event, which is marked by the loss of his childhood innocence. If it were not for his advent into language and the integration of his desire beyond the oedipal triangle, Jim would not be able to function as an individual, articulate his desire, and possess the ability to acknowledge the consequences of his desire for the primeval loss, points I will later elaborate later.⁴ We should also bear in mind that the novel's epigraph, "Optima quaeque dies miseris mortalibus aevi prima fugit," which translates to "Life's fairest days are ever the first to flee for hapless mortals," invites a Lacanian reading as the idea of life's finest days fleeing quickly foreshadows symbolic intervention, a phenomenon that subjects Jim to the alienating nature of language, separates him from the primordial figure—the

Lacan calls the Law of the father, the world of loss and time that is also the world of culture" (41). See also "Out of the Mother."

³I would like to note that, Antonia, a surrogate mother figure, governed Jim's life in the prairie filling perhaps unconsciously the role of his deceased mother.

⁴Critiquing the rattle snake episode in chapter VII, Anne Fisher-Worth writes, "what Jim does is clearly Oedipally symbolic: killing the snake, he makes a successful stab at asserting his own virility and earns the right to consider himself Antonia's protector. He appears to resolve the Oedipal conflict triumphantly, defeating the boychild's 'ancient, eldest Evil' (47), the rival, belittling phallus." See also "Out of the Mother." Her reading of the episode through Oedipal triangle challenges Claudia Yukman's claim that the novel "requires a model of subjectivity which includes what Julia Kristeva has termed the semiotic: an early stage of subjectivity in a child's relationship with the mother" (94).

1 maternal body, and brings an end to his life of plenitude—a metaphoric death,
2 and turns him into a subject of desire.⁵

3 For the purpose of this reading, I will briefly outline Lacanian
4 psychoanalysis. In his theory of subjectivity and psychosexual development,
5 Lacan draws on the basic principles of Freudian psychology, but he reinterprets
6 Sigmund Freud’s view of the unconscious in terms of structural linguistics.
7 According to Lacan, in the first few months of life, the newborn lacks
8 coordination in its own motor functioning and is unaware of the distinctions
9 between itself and the world.⁶ While the child is helplessly dependent upon the
10 mother’s body to satisfy its physical and emotional needs, for having not yet
11 suffered the violence wrought by the symbolic order, it lacks the sense of a whole
12 body. It is possibly between the age of six and eighteen months that the infant
13 becomes aware of its own reflection in the mirror, misapprehends the ephemeral
14 but perceptible image as itself, and develops a sense of “I” through imaginary
15 identification. Describing this phenomenon where the infant falls in love with its
16 own image as the image of its idea self, Lacan writes, “By clinging to the
17 reference-point of him who looks at him in the mirror, the subject sees appearing,
18 not his ego ideal, but his ideal ego” (*Four* 257). Lacan names this state in which
19 the child joyfully identifies with the image outside itself, the subject’s “other,”
20 perceiving itself as a whole being, the *mirror stage*.⁷ Whereas the formation of
21 the ego is nothing more than narcissistic and fictional identification with the
22 image on the mirror—a process which is mediated by the mother by affirming
23 the mirroric image as the child itself—the illusion of wholeness inaugurated by
24 the image is essential to establish the relationship between the inner and outer
25 world and thus develop a recognizable self-image.

26 According to Lacan, when the child comes to be as a subject, it is faced with
27 the choice of meaning or *being*, but oddly the choice has already been made for
28 it because “If we choose being the subject disappears, it eludes us, falls into non-
29 meaning. If we choose meaning, the meaning survives only deprived of that part
30 of non-meaning that is, strictly speaking, that which constitutes in the realization
31 of the subject, the unconscious” (*Four* 211).⁸ What is ironic is that the ego is

⁵Cather borrows this line from Virgil. See *The Georgics*. Gutenberg.org

⁶For Lacan, the Real is the brute reality, “something that always returns to the same place” (*Ecrits* 92); characterized by fullness and completeness, it is a realm that exists prior to the mediation of language and is not marked by loss, lack, and desire. In a slightly different vein, the Real does not pass through the order of language, and as such, it is *lacking* or never present in the symbolic.

⁷I use “language,” “symbolic,” and “signifiers” interchangeably. For stylistic reasons, I use lowercase for ‘the imaginary,’ ‘the real,’ and the ‘symbolic,’ and italics for terms such as “anal stage,” “oral stage,” and “phallic stage.”

⁸At the level of language, we have a choice *either* to refuge subjectivity, which involves remaining outside of language so we can escape its alienating path or we come to be a subject, which involves entering into the symbolic order and positioning ourselves within the system of signification, but if we opt the former—which means not to *mean* or be a signifier—we remain nothing in that our life will not be effected outside the chain of signifiers; if we enter into the symbolic order, our body becomes written with signifiers and we come to exist as individuated beings, but in the process, we lose our own *being* or are nullified as subjects that we *are* because the words that constitute our subjectivity are void at the heart, and cannot ever fully deliver the

1 born through the illusory identification with an external image, but such a false
 2 unity between the child and the image is alienating because the so-called sense
 3 of wholeness “is brought about in an alienating way, in the form of a foreign
 4 image” (*Psychoses* 95). While the narcissistic identification with the mirror
 5 image as its own ideal self, and the act of snuggling into the space carved out for
 6 it by the signifiers through the adoption of a name given to it, are essential for
 7 the infant’s ontology to emerge, its *being*—having been subjected to signifiers
 8 that rely on difference and deferral to render what they represent meaningful—
 9 is nonetheless devoid of any substance. Lacan writes, “language, in its meaning
 10 effect, is never but beside the referent. Isn’t it thus true that language imposes
 11 being upon us and obliges us, as such, to admit that we never have anything by
 12 way of being (*del’être*)?” (*Encore* 44). In his account, language stands in for the
 13 infant by allowing it to carve out its being from nothing and granting it
 14 subjectivity, but having its psychic life structured by language and with the
 15 prohibitive function of the symbolic instituting primordial laws of society,
 16 mother is established as a taboo because she is now forbidden by the law of the
 17 father and made off limits except for the true father.⁹ Describing the fate of a
 18 newborn, Terry Eagleton writes, “to enter into language is to be severed from...
 19 the mother’s body. After the Oedipus crisis, we will never again be able to attain
 20 this precious object, even though we will spend all our lives hunting for it” (145).
 21 As a system of symbolic exchange, language plays a crucial role in the formation
 22 of subjectivity, that is, being takes on meaning only when the infant is
 23 represented by and in the other, but with the alienating function of language and
 24 with the symbolic acting as the paternal Law, the child is forced to relinquish the
 25 nurturing figure, and desire is born for now lost primal unity with the mother.¹⁰

26 Lacanian notion of language, subjectivity, and desire brings us to a
 27 fundamental difference between man and woman in becoming a speaking self.
 28 In Lacanian postulations, identity is an effect of language, but men and women
 29 attain subjectivity in a slightly different way. Lacan writes, “Woman is a
 30 signifier, the crucial property of which is that it is the only one that cannot signify
 31 anything, and this is simply because it grounds woman’s status in the fact that
 32 she is not-whole” (*Encore* 73). In Lacanian schema, while man and woman are
 33 determined in relation to the phallus, woman’s position and function is enigmatic
 34 because “she has different ways of approaching that phallus and of keeping it for
 35 herself. It’s not because she is not-wholly in the phallic function that she is not
 36 there at all” (74). It may strike one as odd that “she is not there at all,” but the
 37 “not there” should not be taken in a negative light as non-existing or non-being,
 38 rather, as *never here*, or the ability to ground herself as being not-whole when
 39 situated in the phallic function (72). Explaining this phenomenon, Mary Buhle

true essence of our being. Ironically, we are left with a ‘forced’ choice, that is, there is no other option than choosing language itself if we were to come to be in language to realize our being.

⁹Lacan defines the symbolic order as “the law of the Father” because as the bearer of cultural norms and values the symbolic forbids the infant’s incestuous desire for the mother.

¹⁰ Language institutes lack in the speaking subject because the signifiers through which the infant articulates its being are empty, referring only to a chain of signifiers for meaning. Lacan identifies this alienating nature of language as the phallic function.

1 writes that, unlike man, who must yield to the law of the symbolic by sacrificing
 2 bodily pleasure, woman “does not suffer the fear of castration [and] comes to
 3 represent the site of this ineffable bliss” because she comes to be a sexed subject
 4 through normative identification with a member of the opposite sex (328). If we
 5 grant this psychoanalytic assumption that woman is not subordinated by the
 6 symbolic the same way it does man or that she escapes the Law-of-the-Father or
 7 the castrating nature of the symbolic, it then appears that masculine desire can
 8 never escape symbolic castration because man is completely located within the
 9 symbolic, whereas having neither totally located outside the symbolic nor
 10 wholly within it, woman is not contained by the symbolic, resulting in her
 11 retaining the *jouissance*, an inexpressible and incommunicable feeling of
 12 transcendence (328).¹¹ Within the context of Lacanian theory of loss, death, and
 13 desire, let us read *My Ántonia*.

14 The novel lends itself quite readily to the Lacan’s schema of the human
 15 subject in the two contrasting pictures of blissful boyish prairie life yielding to
 16 an alienating, unloving, and fragmented adulthood world of the city.¹² In the
 17 early portion of the novel images and descriptions capture the pre-oedipal state
 18 of being, the imaginary register, in which the infant remains merely a mass of
 19 desire, and is at the mercy of the mother. A starting point for this discussion can
 20 be Jim’s recollection of the prairie roads that are reminiscent of an infant who
 21 experiences the world in primordial ways. In sharp contrast to the city roads that
 22 are encumbered with complex sign systems and have the urgency of directness,
 23 as if a newborn, who is merely a jumble of sensations, lacks motor capacity, and
 24 is utterly dependent upon the mother, the prairie roads run “like a wild thing,
 25 avoiding the deep draws, crossing them where they were wide and shallow” (*My*
 26 *Ántonia* 17). Arbitrary, contrapuntal, and non-parallel, the roads traverse the
 27 country following the “windings of the draw” and thus resist symbolization (16).
 28 Analogous to an inchoate and primordial state of existence in which the body is
 29 lived as fragmented, the roads run without any inhibition. Neither restricted nor
 30 with any limitations, prairie roads correspond to the primordial state of infantile
 31 helplessness, the temporal rhythm of a newborn who is not “a unified subject
 32 confronting and desiring a stable object, but a complex shifting field of force in
 33 which the subject . . . is caught up and dispersed, in which it has as yet no center
 34 of identity” (Eagleton 133). Mesmeric in sight and provisional as well as
 35 ambivalent in shape, the prairie roads represent the bodily pulsations of a
 36 newborn who lacks self-awareness for it has not yet acquired its first sense of
 37 unity and wholeness through the encounter with its own image in the mirror.

38 It is not only prairie roads that represent the newborn who is not a unified
 39 integrated totality but is merely a mass of uncoordinated drives and energies, but
 40 also, multiple other accounts allude to sameness and unity experienced by the
 41 infant of the imaginary, invoking thus the imaginary identification with the
 42 mother. In one of his early recollections, for example, Jim seems narcissistically
 43 happy and experiences the land as an intimate and safe space of sensational

¹¹Mari Buhle identifies *jouissance* with primary narcissism that is denied to the civilizing sex.

1 sameness: “There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, creeks or trees, no hills
 2 or fields.... There was nothing but land—slightly undulating, ... we were outside
 3 man’s jurisdiction.... This was the complete dome of heaven.... Between the
 4 earth and the sky I felt erased, blotted out” (11). A domain which is free from
 5 repressive effects of language and law, and as such, sexual distinctions do not
 6 exist and desire can still be satisfied, the land holds a special significance for Jim
 7 in that, suggestive of the unity and resonance of mother-child physicality, it
 8 guarantees him intimacy and wholeness. What is extraordinary about the
 9 reminiscence is the description, “outside man’s jurisdiction,” which signifies the
 10 naturalness of the plain in its primal glory and in its own excellence incorruptible
 11 and sheltered from social and cultural demands. Adding to this, Jim’s use of term
 12 “undulating” alludes to the maternal body, a primordial source of plenitude and
 13 survival that not only supplies his needs and shelters him, but also grants him
 14 blissful feeling that it is a “dome of heaven” (11). A domain without language
 15 and a site of primary identification, the land lures and hypnotizes Jim while
 16 bestowing him with a feeling of being “blotted out” which invokes the Lacanian
 17 child of the imaginary who identifies with its own mirroric reflection and
 18 experiences itself as an undifferentiated totality.

19 Analogous to Lacan’s mirror-stage infant who is enamored by its own image
 20 in the mirror, Jim is enthralled by the vastness of the prairie and his identification
 21 with the land is the most intimate: “I sat down in the middle of the garden....
 22 The earth was warm under me, and warm as I crumbled it through my fingers. .
 23 . . I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become part
 24 of something entire.... At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into
 25 something complete and great” (17). As this remark reveals, Jim’s identification
 26 with the land is the most intimate and whole. As if a newborn who enjoys the
 27 close and sensuous embrace of the nursing mother during the pre-oedipal phase,
 28 he enjoys the warm and affectionate nimbus of the plain and is caught up by its
 29 life-giving quality. If his existence functions, it is clearly because of a certain
 30 emotional force the prairie carries and the primal intimacy it offers as a crucial
 31 part of his psychic universe. While the prairie infuses Jim’s life with a sense of
 32 unity and wholeness, like an oedipally attached infant who mistakenly takes
 33 itself to be synonymous with the maternal body and deludes itself as an extension
 34 of it, he takes pleasure in its open and unblemished expanse. Having caught up
 35 in the lure of the land, he is lulled into a desire for self-annihilation, a
 36 phenomenon that invokes the newborn who wants to be the object its mother’s
 37 desire, and in so doing, remains blank, a mere nothing.

38 In the prairie, profound happiness governs Jim’s daily existence in the
 39 prairie, and more so, because of the presence of the primordial figure, *Ántonia*.
 40 As wondering children, they enjoy mutual intimacy and profound joy, and like
 41 the imaginary infant, who is prompted to jubilation by its own reflection in the
 42 mirror, they are enamored by the enormity of the prairie which is not yet ravaged
 43 by the law-of-the-father.¹³ Jim fondly recalls moments of sheer joy of them

¹³In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the name-of-the-father does not refer a biological father, but to a signifier that creates a fictive order of social system and values, establishes a split in the subject’s unconscious, and prohibits incest. As Lacan describes it, ‘the Name-of-the-Father . . . being the

1 exploring the countryside together: “We were so deep in the grass that we could
 2 see nothing but the blue sky over us and the gold tree in front of us. It was
 3 wonderfully pleasant Antonia wanted to give me a little chased silver ring
 4 she wore on her middle finger” (21). We can infer from the expression “it was
 5 wonderfully pleasant” that they experience the prairie as a totalizing ideal that
 6 provides them with a sense of unison and wholeness. At this point, the images,
 7 “gold tree” and “silver ring” are enigmatic and can be better understood if we
 8 view them through the lens of “defamiliarization,” a literary technique used to
 9 defamiliarize familiar things and objects for various reasons.¹⁴ According to
 10 Viktor Shklovsky, erotic subjects are “presented figuratively with the obvious
 11 purpose of leading us away from their ‘recognition.’ Hence sexual organs are
 12 referred to in terms of lock and key or quilting tools or bow and arrow, or rings
 13 and marlinspikes” (25). As natural and neutral objects in themselves, “tree” and
 14 “silver ring” are less likely to be perceived as erotic, but read through the lens of
 15 defamiliarization, they suggest male and female sexual organs respectively. By
 16 such logic, the excitements of Jim and Antonia’s lives takes on another
 17 dimension because it evokes the newborn’s discovery of its genital as a source
 18 of sexual pleasure. In this drama of primordial intimacy, Antonia offers her
 19 “little chased silver ring” to affirm her love for Jim. As well, it is important to
 20 note that, while there is no erotic inclination on her part, her desire to give the
 21 ring, which entails oblation of the gift, figuratively speaking, is seductive as it
 22 confers, perhaps unconsciously, upon her and the recipient of the ring, erotic
 23 pleasure, and thus the event invokes the *phallic stage* of psychic development.

24 What is particularly striking is that Jim, for his part, participates in this play
 25 of being an object of love and gratification for the other by offering the phallus:
 26 “Almost every day she came running across the prairie to have her reading lesson
 27 with me. . . . When the lesson was over, we used to go up to the watermelon patch
 28 behind the garden. I split the melons with an old corn-knife, and we lifted out
 29 our hearts and ate them with the juice trickling through our fingers” (23). As
 30 devoted companions, Jim and Antonia venture out into the land together and
 31 enjoy the thrill of eating melons together. From the perspective of
 32 defamiliarization, if, indeed, their dependence on prairie and their display of
 33 mutual affection signifies the mother-child dyad of the preoedipal phase, sucking
 34 and juice trickling through fingers point to the pleasure received from feeding at
 35 mother’s breast during the *oral stage*. What appears to be more or less neutral
 36 items, “melons” and “corn-knife” represent female breasts and male genitals
 37 respectively. In Freudian sense, the knife signifies the male organ, the penis *qua*
 38 phallus, which the child wishes, perhaps unconsciously, to be for its mother so
 39 she can fill her lack. As Lacan tells us, “If the mother’s desire *is* for the phallus,

signifier which, in the Other, qua locus of the signifier, is the signifier of the other qua locus of the law’ (*Écrits* 485). Simply put, language is the law or the name of the father. Meanwhile, Lacan uses ‘the Other,’ ‘the Law,’ ‘The Law of the Father,’ and ‘Phallus’ to refer to the structure of language, that is, the symbolic order. For details see *Écrits: a selection*.

¹⁴As a literary technique, “defamiliarization” is used as a tool to effect novelty in language usage for stimulating fresh perception, and the term is associated with a Russian Formalist, Viktor Shklovsky. See also Shklovsky’s “Art as Technique.”

1 the child wants to be the phallus in order to satisfy her desire . . . [and he is]
 2 satisfied with presenting to the Other the real [organ] he [has] that corresponds
 3 to the phallus” (*Ecrits* 582). In light of the schema of phallic desire and
 4 fulfillment, it is hard to avoid a conclusion that by offering up the object, “corn
 5 knife,” Jim wishes to be the phallic object of Antonia’s desire, which is, the
 6 phallus she desires but is lacking, so she can grab it, make it her own, and fulfill
 7 her desire for wholeness.

8 From Jim’s recital of childhood memories, we find primordial
 9 identification, ideal love, and mutual attachment as governing the reality of
 10 prairie life. Indeed, the many mundane details of life in the prairie allude to the
 11 state of existence where the demands of the symbolic order for separation from
 12 the mother do not exist. Jim tells us that “All the way to Russian Peter’s house
 13 we were extravagantly happy, but when we turned back . . . the sun lost its
 14 heartening power. I took off my long woolen comforter and wound it around
 15 Yulka’s throat. She got so cold that we made her hide her under the buffalo robe.
 16 Antonia and I sat erect” (41). As if an extension of their own body but not an
 17 independent external other, Jim and Antonia are intimately invested in each
 18 other, surrendering themselves to the lure of their love and warmth. Moreover,
 19 as much as this episode suggests shared existence, resembling the oedipal infant
 20 who is still in phallic identification with the mother for lack of its relation to the
 21 symbolic phallus thorough the mediation of language, the image of sitting
 22 “erect” uncannily alludes both to genital pleasure and the excitation produced by
 23 the environment on the infant’s body and to the latency period of sexual
 24 development during which bodily drives become centered on the sexual organs.
 25 Freud writes, “several phases of provisional organization are to be recognized
 26 [and] genitals are the latest of these erotogenic zones; and their organ pleasure
 27 must certainly be called ‘sexual’” (135/122). And it is in this context,
 28 concomitant with infantile sexual curiosity, the term *erect* signifies, perhaps both
 29 symbolically and metonymically, extreme bodily pleasure derived from the
 30 genital.

31 If the exuberance Antonia and Jim experience in relation to the prairie
 32 evokes the enthralling lures of the mirror and various phases of psychosexual
 33 development, multiple other accounts allude to the symbiotic unity that exists
 34 between the newborn and mother of the pre-oedipal phase. Among others, the
 35 most powerful, and perhaps most central reminiscence is the one where “We
 36 drifted along lazily, very happy, through the magical light of the late afternoon.
 37 All those fall afternoons were the same.... The blond cornfields were red gold,
 38 the haystacks turned rosy and threw long shadows” (28). As with the Lacanian
 39 child of the mirror phase, Jim and Antonia find themselves in narcissistic
 40 intimacy with themselves and the nature. With energy and passion, Jim further
 41 recalls: “The whole prairie was like the bush that had burned with fire and was
 42 not consumed. . . That hour always had the exultation of victory, of triumphant
 43 ending, like a hero’s death—heroes who died young.... How many an afternoon
 44 Antonia and I have trailed along the prairie under that magnificence” (28). Just
 45 as Lacan says about the undifferentiated state of existence, the imaginary, in the
 46 early chapters of *My Antonia*, Jim and Antonia enjoy an extremely close bond

1 with each other, consume the whole of each other's attention and desire, and
 2 bestow other a sense of wholeness, thus providing meaning to their existence.
 3 More so, they inhabit a land that ministers to their need, and as if the circuit of
 4 perpetual identifications and reflections of the imaginary order, they experience
 5 their existence in a ceaseless unity as the signifier has not yet inscribed lack in
 6 their being. Ann Fisher-Wirth has pointed out how "at the beginning of the novel,
 7 Jim and Antonia are heroes. Inseparable companions, by and large sexually
 8 undifferentiated" (66). It is true that as naïve partners of love who respond to and
 9 provide for each other, they pass many happy hours on the prairie, spend Autumn
 10 afternoons together, and we can see this immense intimacy in the united image
 11 invoked by "we," drifting "along lazily, very happy, through the magical light
 12 of the late afternoon." Although such recollections point to primary experiences
 13 of pleasure of the pre-verbal phase, the tragic story of young heroes dying young
 14 portends that their joy is a doomed glory after their subjection to the symbolic
 15 order. For all their innocent and idyllic childhood delights, Jim and Antonia will
 16 soon negotiate their passage from the imaginary plenitude to the symbolic and
 17 the symbolic phallus will intrude upon their body, sunder their unity, and take
 18 away their innocence.

19 While the early chapters of *My Antonia* invoke the imaginary dimension of
 20 psychological development through its portrayal of a paradise of naïve wish
 21 fulfillment where Jim and Antonia assert in their bearings the sufficiency of their
 22 existence, the remaining sections of the novel invokes his subjection to language
 23 and his emerging sexual identity. It can be reasonably argued that the symbolic
 24 dimension of Jim's psychosexual development is marked by his schooling,
 25 which represents his advent into the symbolic, that severs his romantic intimacy
 26 with Antonia and drives him out of the imaginary plenitude, the Nebraska
 27 prairie, into a world of loss and desire of the symbolic where he cannot hold onto
 28 imaginary relations. In the novel, descriptions and images quickly accumulate
 29 suggesting the symbolic phallus inscribing his body, giving shape and structure
 30 to his existence, while taking the spirit out of him by effecting a split in his
 31 psyche and inducing alienation. Along with the inscription of the symbolic upon
 32 his body, Antonia and the prairie, an epitome of love, tenderness, and, emotional
 33 intimacy, vanish and we find Jim ensnared inside the symbolic domain of lack
 34 and absence. For this discussion on the incriminating nature of the symbolic,
 35 Jim's bitterness against the Shimerdas is of particular relevance. As a young boy,
 36 he shared a mutual bond with the Shimerdas, and a deeper identificatory relations
 37 with Antonia, but their relationship ends after a rivalry with her brother
 38 Ambrosch, who treats Jim and Jake poorly during their visit to retrieve the horse-
 39 collar he had borrowed from the Burdens. Up until this moment, Antonia was at
 40 the center of his universe as a cherished figure, but aggravated by Ambrosch, he
 41 decides to end his friendship with the Shimerdas believing that "they are all like
 42 Krajiek and Ambrosch underneath" (74). Having unconsciously assumed the
 43 role of a maternal figure, Antonia may have imagined herself as a center of Jim's
 44 attention, but she suddenly finds herself relegated to the position of an enemy.
 45 Astounded by the dramatic turn of events, she declares, "I never like you no
 46 more, Jake and Jim Burden. . . No friends anymore!" (72). What is significant

1 about this event is it serves as a prelude to Jim's subjectivity within language,
 2 such as his early confrontation with difference. Evocative of the reigning power
 3 of the symbolic phallus, the brawl wrenches Ántonia and Jim apart, thus severing
 4 the child from the maternal body.¹⁵ A major turning point in Jim's life, it is from
 5 this moment that his development takes its course as it dawns upon him, perhaps
 6 unconsciously, that if he were to obtain the symbolic one in language, he cannot
 7 continue to be her prized possession, her imaginary phallus. Jim must quickly
 8 come to an upsetting realization of her otherness, which entails recognizing the
 9 system of related differences and sacrificing the incestuous object, which means,
 10 relinquishing his primordial attachment to her, so he can participate in the social
 11 order in the same way as the infant of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory who is
 12 severed from its symbiotic relations with the mother when assuming a separate
 13 body image. However, with the acceptance of his separation from Ántonia and
 14 sublimation of his desire for her, he metaphorically dooms himself to death
 15 because hereafter the loss of the maternal figure functions as a lack that demands
 16 to be filled, thus giving rise to desire that drives Jim to enter into an eternal quest
 17 for the lost object.

18 In a Lacanian sense, the resentment with the Shimerdas serves as the
 19 institution of the first dialectic in Jim's life, whereas his initiation into the
 20 schoolboy culture of Black Hawk functions as the loss of the preverbal phase
 21 and his passage into the symbolic order. A source of symbolic foundation, the
 22 irrevocable actuality of schooling facilitates negotiation of identity in relation to
 23 the world by alienating Jim from Ántonia and fortifying identifications of
 24 otherness. Jim himself admits, "After I began to go to the country school, I saw
 25 less of the Bohemians" (72). Schooling delivers Jim up to the symbolic to receive
 26 its mark, but as in Lacanian theorizing, the symbolic phallus superimposes on
 27 his life by forcing him to internalize the incest taboo and demanding a sacrifice,
 28 which is, Ántonia, the maternal figure. As much as the symbolic provides him a
 29 name, an original signifier of self and subjectivity, it also places limits on his
 30 rights in relation to others by making Ántonia fall out of his view because she is
 31 now on the other side of the wall of language. And, the sense of unison lost in
 32 the process takes the form of Jim's animosity toward her: "My schoolmates were
 33 none of them very interesting, but I somehow felt that, by making comrades of
 34 them, I was getting even with Ántonia for her indifference" (72). Considering
 35 that love was the hallmark of his life in the prairie, the abrupt change in behavior
 36 reinforces my argument of Jim taking up his place in the symbolic domain. In a
 37 Lacanian sense, Jim must disavow the mother so his transition from the dyadic
 38 to the mediate relation proper to the symbolic becomes possible. With the
 39 intervention of the symbolic, the captivating dual relationships vanishes and he

¹⁵The term phallus should not be confused with a *real object* or human anatomy such as penis or clitoris instead the master signifier that produces difference; it is a linguistic marker, an arbitrary mark of meaning, or a signifier of signifiers that exists only through its circulation within the symbolic order governing language and inaugurating the process of signification such as by letting other signifiers flow from it. Lacan writes, "The phallus is not a phantasy, if by that we mean an imaginary effect. . . . it is even less the organ—penis or clitoris—that it symbolizes . . . it is the signifier destined to designate meaning effects as a whole, insofar as the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier (*Écrits* 579).

1 feels unloved and alone, and in consequence, he begins to form allegiances with
 2 his cohorts to get “even with Ántonia.” His anger over the loss of his love object
 3 and subsequent bonding with his classmates remind us of the Lacanian male
 4 child of the oedipal phase, who associates itself with the anatomically similar
 5 father, rejects identification with the mother in fear of castration, and comes to
 6 individuate itself from others as a separate individual.

7 Just as the infant’s interjection into language involves surrendering of its
 8 soul to the castrating nature of the symbolic, which leads to a sense of alienation
 9 in the Lacanian mirror stage, so too does Jim is subjected to the demand of the
 10 symbolic as marked by schooling, his separation from Ántonia, and his tutelage
 11 under Gaston Cleric. According to Jim, “at university I had the good opportunity
 12 to come immediately under the influence of a brilliant and inspiring young
 13 scholar. Gaston Cleric had arrived in Lincoln only a few weeks earlier than I, to
 14 begin his work as head of the Latin Department He introduced me to the
 15 world of ideas” (139). In his attempt to carve out a space within the symbolic,
 16 Cleric stays ‘until nearly midnight, talking about Latin and English poetry, or
 17 telling [him] about his long stay in Italy’ so as to invests him with knowledge
 18 (140). As the purveyor of patriarchal law, Cleric effaces the presence of Ántonia
 19 in his progeny’s life by initiating him into the castration complex, such as, the
 20 exposure to Dante and Virgil, and thus to the order of language, culture, and
 21 civilization. An embodiment of the symbolic, Cleric shares with Jim his own
 22 principles of understanding the world and projects a world of his own by setting
 23 standards for him. For example, Cleric advises Jim to attend law school, which
 24 he accepts without any reservation, but in doing so, he submits to the constraints
 25 of language, culture, and society, which sutures him solidly to the social order.
 26 In order to understand why Cleric wants to expose Jim to the signifying practices
 27 or the order of social symbolism, it is necessary to recall Lacan who holds that
 28 “Ontology is what highlighted in language the use of the copula, isolating it as a
 29 signifier. To dwell on the verb ‘to be’—a verb that is not even, in the complete
 30 field of the diversity of languages, employed in a way we could qualify as
 31 universal” (*Encore* 31). As Lacan reminds us, if it were “not for the verb to be,
 32 there would be no being at all,” then, Jim has to appear in the field of the other,
 33 which entails placing his faith on Cleric whose authority is legitimized by the
 34 societal order.¹⁶ However, his loyalty to the Cleric, and by extension, the trading
 35 of his innocence to the play of the signifier separate him from the real. As a
 36 consequence, he loses his sense of wholeness, and more so, feels astray and
 37 forlorn and finds it difficult to concentrate at school. Jim tells us, “While I was
 38 in the very act of yearning toward the new forms that Cleric brought up before
 39 me, my mind plunged away from me, and I suddenly found myself thinking of
 40 the places and people of my own infinitesimal past” (141). As this admission
 41 reveals, along with his tutelage under his guardian spirit, Cleric, and having thus
 42 caught in the logic of the symbolic, Jim comes to a realization that he cannot
 43 hold onto his imaginary ties with Ántonia. As in Lacanian theorizing, after the
 44 entry into language, Jim attains subjectivity, but he is now implicated in the most

¹⁶Lacan, *Seminar XXI. Les non-dupes errant* (unpublished), lesson of 15/1/1974.

1 ancient demand of instinctual renunciation, which is, his renunciation of
2 Ántonia, and the loss leaves him with a sense of being torn internally.

3 After his positioning within the symbolic space created by Cleric, Jim
4 acquires the function of speech, but given the pernicious effects of the symbolic
5 phallus, he metamorphoses from a happy boy of the prairie to a melancholic
6 figure of a harsh and sterile city. It is unsettling that, as the symbolic imposes its
7 order through the logic of difference, Jim's blissful union with the prairie slips
8 away, leaving him gripped by pervasive and ruthless alienation. A number of
9 recollections are permeated with hauntingly vivid images that reveal a profound
10 sense of lack and newfound sense of loss. In one of Jim's bleakest accounts,
11 "The sun was gone; the frozen streets stretched long and blue before me; the
12 lights were shining pale in kitchen windows ... When I got as far as the
13 Methodist Church, I . . . remember[ed] how glad I was when there happened to
14 be a light in the church, and the painted glass window shone out at us as we came
15 along the frozen street" (96-97). Not so long ago, Jim was a spirited figure,
16 engrossed in loving intimacy in a protected enclave of the prairie with his
17 intimate friend, Ántonia, but following his entry into language, it is unsettling
18 that he now feels out of sync with the world. His plight reminds us of Lacanian
19 postulation that "the subject appears first in the Other, in so far as the first
20 signifier, the unary signifier, emerges in the field of the Other and represents the
21 subject for another signifier, which other signifier has as its effect the *aphanisis*
22 of the subject. Hence the division of the subject" (*Four* 218). Lacan further
23 describes the disappearance of the speaking self inside domain of language thus:
24 "when the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere
25 as 'fading,' as disappearance. There is, then, one might say, a matter of life and
26 death between the unary signifier and the subject, *qua* binary signifier, cause of
27 his disappearance" (218). Signaling the loss and lack by which Lacanian
28 subjectivity is constituted, Jim's mind is occupied by the absent sun, the frozen
29 streets, the pale kitchen window lights, and the vanished light of the Methodist
30 Church. Like a new-born, there was once innocence, love and protection, and
31 life for Jim meant joy; but with coming to be in language, he is wrenched from
32 his origin and his primal relationship with the mother figure, Ántonia, have come
33 to an end, and along with it he falls prey to lack, desire, and alienation. An
34 inhabitant of a forbidding world of oppressive isolation, he is no longer a blissful
35 boy of the prairie, frolicking together with the maternal figure, Ántonia, on the
36 contrary, a disoriented, melancholic figure, disoriented and grieving from a
37 distance, surveying the frozen street that stretches far away, and tracing any other
38 objects that meet his eyes in an adult world of law and language that does not
39 bear resemblance to the wholeness of the prairie.

40 Apparently, the symbolic grants Jim his identity, but much to his
41 disappointment, it has apparently nothing in store for him except terminating his
42 primordial relations with Ántonia and turning his secure psychic enclave,
43 paradisaical prairie, into a land of solitude, fragmentation, and disillusionment.
44 Many other recollections capture his current state of mind and/or continued
45 confrontation with his own alienated self, an overwhelming sense of
46 estrangement, and a major perspectival shift in his way of seeing and relating to

1 the world. An account that bears telltale signs of emotional turmoil, feelings of
 2 loss and alienation is where “the breeze sank to stillness. In the ravine a ringdove
 3 mourned plaintively, and somewhere off in the bushes an owl hooted” (133).
 4 Images of a mourning dove, hooting owl, and sinking breeze do not portray a
 5 recognizable atmosphere but depict a grim reality of loss and alienation. The
 6 land has lost its richness and is dreadfully hostile and infelicitous as the gold
 7 trees, deep grass, and red gold cornfields of the prairie have been replaced with
 8 stillness, mourning ringdove, and hooting owl. While previously the land lulled
 9 Jim into feelings of being “blotted out,” he now seems overwhelmed by a sense
 10 of alienation and otherness, and is in somber mood, all suggesting that he has
 11 stumbled, to borrow from Lacan, on the lack that “reduce[s] the subject . . . to
 12 being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in
 13 which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject” (*Four* 207). In addition
 14 to projecting Jim’s inner reality, his emotional isolation, and his perspectival
 15 shift onto a frantic world of lack and desire, the novel also portrays the
 16 nightmarishly rigid world of language, imposing itself on external world of daily
 17 interactions in the form “a plough [left standing] in the field. Magnified across
 18 the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun . . . heroic in
 19 size, a picture writing on the sun” (133). One notable Cather critic, James Miller,
 20 views the plough as a symbol of the “free and open spirit embodied in Antonia”
 21 (116). Within the purview of the Lacanian theory, the plough can be seen as a
 22 symbolic boundary that separates Jim from the pre-linguistic, maternal realm
 23 represented by Antonia. As a phallic power that prohibits against incest, its
 24 irrevocable nature, such as the vast apparatus of civilization, is embodied in the
 25 description “heroic,” “magnified,” and “a picture writing on the sun,” insisting
 26 that Jim’s desire cannot escape symbolic regulation. The most striking form of
 27 an uncanny inscription of the symbolic law, the plough exercises its tyranny over
 28 the infant, Jim, by severing it from the maternal body. An intermediary zone
 29 between Jim and Antonia and a marker of the moral order, the plough works its
 30 magic by forcing Jim into accepting mores that prohibit incest with the mother
 31 and by extension, drive him out of the protective maternal cave of the imaginary,
 32 so he can receive a signifier of self and subjectivity and transition from nature to
 33 culture.

34 The symbolic makes both the world and self intelligible for Jim by binding
 35 him within a symbolic relationship, but having caught up inside the net of
 36 signifiers, he turns into a subject of desire. What has been repressed during
 37 symbolic intervention manifests in the form of desire. It is probably no
 38 coincidence that, after completing his undergraduate studies and before traveling
 39 east to attend Harvard, he returns to Black Hawk. During this visit, he sees
 40 Antonia. They both reminisce about the bygone days. Jim says: “The idea of you
 41 is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds
 42 of times when I don’t even realize it. You are really part of me.... I’m so glad
 43 we had each other when we were little” (171). As much as this revelation
 44 mesmerizes us with its nostalgic charm, it also reveals that she is his anchor, and
 45 thus her absence in his life marks as a fundamental lack. Like the Lacanian
 46 subject, the symbolic phallus attributes a sexual position to his body, but it

1 imposes a toll such as by making Antonia, the object (*a*), off limits except for
 2 the true father, and thus, the motivation of his visit is to recover the primary
 3 object of his love, Antonia, who is a cause of desire that he desires, and restore
 4 the now lost totalized identification with her, but unable as he is to transgress the
 5 law that sustains the symbolic order, he is bound instead to say: “Do you know,
 6 *Ántonia*, since I’ve been away, I think of you more often than of anyone else in
 7 this part of the world. I’d have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or
 8 my mother or my sister—anything a woman can be to a man” (171).¹⁷ As this
 9 admission reveals, *Ántonia* is the locus in which Jim’s identity is constituted.
 10 While his egoic separation from her is difficult, having cast off his previous
 11 existence by the compulsive force of language, Jim retreats into a dream-like
 12 fantasy: “I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of these
 13 fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could
 14 end there” (172). Put in readers’ words, Jim cannot flaunt the incest taboo or
 15 regain his boyhood past. Given this, the only recourse for attaining sexual
 16 fulfillment is an uncanny desire for death. It is true that if her were to die, he
 17 would be able to annihilate the barrier between the self and other, return to the
 18 mother’s womb, liberate himself from the word—that is, obliterate the presence
 19 of the object of desire, the position of the other that betrayed him by taking away
 20 the primordial limitless self of the pre-mirror phase—and thereby fulfill his
 21 desire for primordial unity with the mother.

22 We should bear in mind that, Jim has already established an intricate and
 23 comprehensive social contract with figures such as Gaston Cleric and thus he
 24 does not have much choice in the matter rather renounce the maternal figure,
 25 which means, heading to Harvard. So, after the reunion and as suggested by
 26 Cleric, he leaves for the city, but the closer the ‘edge of the field where [their]
 27 ways parted,’ the more feverish he becomes, and like an infant who clings to its
 28 mother in fear of losing her, Jim takes *Ántonia*’s “hands and [holds] them against
 29 [his] breast, feeling once more how strong and warm and good they were, those
 30 brown hands, and remembering how many kind things they had done for me. I
 31 held them now a long while, over my heart” (171). It is worth recalling that since
 32 his relation to the phallus is already established through his pact with Cleric, he
 33 can no longer remain submerged in her by modeling his desire on hers, and thus,
 34 in his own terms, “I had to look hard to see her face, which I meant always to
 35 carry with me; the closest, realest face, under all the shadows of women’s faces,
 36 at the very bottom of my memory” (172). Lacan would say this desire to savor
 37 her glimpse as representing his search for the other of the imaginary register that
 38 satisfies his desire, and it is at *Ántonia*, the object *a*, at which his desire aims and
 39 around which his fantasy circles. Nevertheless, her continued presence in his life
 40 is an impediment to his positioning within the symbolic. We can conjecture that,
 41 if he were to have an access route to pre-oedipal plenitude, he would be in phallic

¹⁷As defined by Lacan, *object petit a* is an object of drive ‘from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly that has some relation to the lack’ (*Four Fundamental* 103). Thus, *object petit a* is a void or the gap around which the symbolic order is structured.

1 attachment with her, but her desire is invested elsewhere, that is, *Ántonia* has
 2 now become a mother, and he must renounce her forever. This is why Jim wants
 3 to carry her image, a phantasmatic frame of her body that is marked by some
 4 residues of the imaginary. While a mental representation but not the body in its
 5 ontological materiality, with the trace of her body etched into his psyche, Jim
 6 can bring it to the forefront of consciousness through reminiscence and invest it
 7 with feelings of unity with the lost mother and thus come to terms, at least
 8 phantasmically, with the trauma of loss.

9 As Lacan says, “Every dimension of being is produced in the wake of the
 10 master’s discourse—the discourse of he who, proffering the signifier, expects
 11 there from one of its link effects that must be neglected, which is related to the
 12 fact that the signifier commands” (*Encore* 32). Language legislates Jim’s
 13 subjectivity, liberating him from the primordial state of existence by giving him
 14 consciousness, but reminiscent of the Lacanian child of the symbolic, in the
 15 process, it takes away his innocence and separates him from the maternal figure,
 16 *Ántonia*, thus effecting a split in his psyche. Implicated as she is in the formative
 17 years of his life, she is a part of his own being and holds a powerful presence in
 18 his mind. Jim confesses that “*Ántonia* had always been one to leave images in
 19 the mind that did not fade—that grew stronger with time” (186). If it were not
 20 for the symbolic becoming a new dimension of his life, severing his primordial
 21 connections with her and prairie forever, his married life would not be cold and
 22 loveless and he would have led a much happier life in New York. With the
 23 symbolic becoming a new dimension of his being and his primordial connections
 24 with *Ántonia* and the prairie have become a permanent loss, he returns to the
 25 prairie thus keeping his “promise.” Catherine Holmes views the return as “a
 26 nostalgic attempt to recover a personal old world” (337). In the sense that Lacan
 27 speaks of desire, his return is motivated by the desire that belongs to the realm
 28 of the other as the locus of signifiers: *Ántonia*, the primary attachment figure,
 29 and so the journey is a quest for “not of the sexual complement but of the part of
 30 himself, lost forever” (*Four* 205). In this sense, what appears from the outside to
 31 be a physical journey is in fact a psychic event, it is a pursuit for the forbidden
 32 mother and the primary object of love, *Ántonia*, so he can bring the primordial
 33 trauma to resolution, be whole.

34 Caught in the grip of desire that forever seeks to recover the originary loss,
 35 which involves the retrieval of totality, of object a, which is, *Ántonia*, who was
 36 lost during his advent into language, Jim arrives in Cuzak farm with a heart and
 37 hope, and he was not willing to stomach time’s any tragic news of change
 38 because he had feared that *Ántonia* may have faded with age and he ‘really
 39 dreaded it’ (*My Ántonia* 173). A symbolic reunion of the son and the mother lost
 40 during symbolic intervention, Jim feels immensely relieved when he finds
 41 *Ántonia* in high spirits. With this reunion, it seems he has at last reached to the
 42 originary source of his desire, the lost maternal body, but to his disappointment,
 43 her sons introduce new bonds of intimacy. As sole claimants of her love, the
 44 boys annihilate any prospect of Jim’s recovering the mother, be her little prized
 45 possession, and feel protected. Driven by the desire for the other, the mother,
 46 who gives maternal substance to their existence of plenitude, the boys prod Jim

1 with questions. From a psychoanalytical perspective, they vent their infantile
 2 envy against him by asking whether he knew anything about the plums their
 3 mother uses to bake *kolaches*. While the mention of *kolaches* catches Jim off
 4 guard, it can be argued that, as *objects petit a*, they trigger past memories
 5 bringing him in closer relation to his inherent lack, *Ántonia*. As the boy's
 6 presence or rather their claim over their mother poses a threat, it opens a gate to
 7 Jim's repressed love but in the form of subdued rivalry: "You think I don't know
 8 what *kolaches* are, eh? You're mistaken, young man. I've eaten your mother's
 9 *kolaches* long before that Easter Day when you were born" (179). A testament
 10 to his ability to appropriate the power of the symbolic, instead of confronting the
 11 boys directly, Jim conceals his annoyance of their insensitivity into a
 12 recollection. Equally, from the perspective of desire, insofar as Jim is the subject
 13 of the symbolic, he would not know how to attain what he wanted even if he
 14 were to act on his desire or it may be that startled and displeased as he is by the
 15 boys, he reprimands them: "I couldn't stand it if the boys were inconsiderate, or
 16 thought of her as if she were just somebody who looked after you" (183).

17 Given Jim's desperately frantic, but inevitably fruitless quest for primordial
 18 unity before language, we can speculate that he is not excited to participate in
 19 triadic relations established by the boys, but they triangulate desire between him,
 20 themselves, and their mother. Much like the presence of the other, when the boys
 21 jolt Jim, the dreamer, into awareness by holding him back from his childhood
 22 wish to find the mother again in *Ántonia*, as if a jealous sibling who is resentful
 23 of his youngest brother for receiving much attention from his mother, Jim says:
 24 'You see I was very much in love with your mother once, and I know there's
 25 nobody like her' (183). Oedipal in its overtone, this forth-right self-disclosure
 26 shows his extraordinary love for the boys' mother, but at the same time, it reveals
 27 his desire for what is already lost, which is, his primordial intimacy with her.
 28 While he would like to restore now lost imaginary dyad that existed before his
 29 installation into language, he must position himself in relation to the new
 30 relational order. More troubling still, as the bearer of law, *Ántonia's* husband,
 31 Papa, intervenes, detaching Jim from wanting to be the mother's phallus, in this
 32 case, that of *Ántonia*. Jim tells us, "Papa interested me, from my first glimpse of
 33 him. . . there was an air of jaunty liveliness about him . . . He advanced to meet
 34 me and gave me a hard hand" (188). As a gesture of pleasantness, they exchange
 35 a handshake, but what is striking here is the 'hard hand' which signifies a
 36 formidable power of the symbolic—the final stroke of the symbolic phallus that
 37 issues a threat which forces Jim to forsake the taboo object of desire. As a
 38 speaking self, Jim cannot displace the father and reclaim the lost maternal figure.
 39 So, he shakes hands with Papa and thus submits to the law, otherwise, his desire
 40 for *Ántonia* would be in conflict with his relation to the law. With the presence
 41 of Papa, symbolic order is reaffirmed and along with which Jim's inscription in
 42 the symbolic world of language is solidified, and hereafter, the primary object of
 43 love is permanently forbidden—*Ántonia* is lost forever. As in Lacanian schema
 44 of psychosexual development, Jim gets accepted inside the kingdom of culture,
 45 gains access to the Law and attains social power and agency, but positioned as
 46 he is inside the symbolic and tied as he is by its phallic function, the trauma of

her loss becomes permanent, and once a joyful prairie boy, he metamorphoses into a desiring being as evidenced by his feelings of loss, ceaseless idealization of *Ántonia*, and longing for now lost prairie past.

My Ántonia thus captures the ordeal of a little boy, Jim, who acquires speaking position at the expense of his unity with a primary attachment figure of the preverbal stage, *Ántonia*. As in the broader Lacanian theory of subjectivity, we witnessed his passage from the imaginary to the symbolic order, from the world of nature—the paradisaical prairie—to the world of culture, the city, in terms set by language. The nightmarish fact of an inscribed self, governed by the abstractions of language, finds its expression in Jim’s observation, “For *Ántonia* and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be” (196). What is worth discussing here is the term “destiny,” which connotes inevitability and, in the context of this reading, signifies the symbolic that restricts and stagnates desire and seizes control over the body—the speaking self. Lacan writes, “Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total they join together those who are going to engender him ‘by bone and flesh’ before he comes into the world; so total that they bring to his birth . . . the shape of his destiny; . . . the law of the acts that will follow him right to the very place where he *is* not yet and even beyond his very death” (*Ecrits* 231). If Lacan is right about the preordained permanency of the symbolic, and if we already have a place inside the symbolic that exists prior to our birth and remain subjected to it even after our death, then Jim cannot forge his destiny bypassing it, but is fated to come to it. Were he to refuse to submit to the inscription of the symbolic, he would have no consciousness, no subjectivity, and no existence. For his existential certainty as a speaking subject, Jim had to be positioned within the symbolic and subjected to its terms regarding how he can function within it, but depressingly for him, those terms involve the loss of pre-verbal innocence and the renunciation of his childhood friend and maternal figure, *Ántonia*.

As I have argued, in coming to be in language, Jim is subjected to the conditions of the symbolic—such as the annihilation of his primordial relations with *Ántonia*—and this trauma of separation turns him into a desiring subject, resulting in his persistent need to recover his forfeited childhood past; but try as he might, he cannot recover the primordial loss or reclaim his primal intimacy with *Ántonia*, the maternal figure, because they both inhabit the symbolic position of the other. An unconscious strategy for attaining what was lost during his advent into language, Jim retreats into fantasy, obsessively idealizes *Ántonia*, and willingly shares intimate details about his childhood past. Simon Lesser writes, “fiction makes restitution to us for some of our instinctual deprivations” (82). If *Ántonia* could be a part of his life, Jim could relive the past and feel complete, but he is left with no such recourse except taking pleasure in storytelling, ceaselessly idealizing *Ántonia* as a “rich mine of life, like the founders of early races” (*My Antonia* 186), and retreating into reminiscence, because it is only through these modes that he becomes a part of “something complete and great” (14), comes to terms with the trauma of primordial loss, and attains meaning in his otherwise meaningless life.

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