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Kotani Koji
九州大学言語文化部

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The Sacred *Ántonia* and Jim Burden's Ideological Perspective in *My Ántonia*

Koji Kotani

The present paper is an attempt to examine how Jim Burden, the first person narrator in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, glorifies and "rewrites" *Ántonia* to create his sacred portrait of her and how the cultural ideology of patriarchal society works in the process.

As is beautifully shown in the image of *Ántonia* with an insect in her hair, she emerges, in Book One, "The Shimerdas," as a life-giving figure, which foreshadows *Ántonia* as an earth mother figure in Book Five, "Cuzak's Boys." Having a romantic disposition and a penchant for adventure stories, legends, myths, fairy tales and so on, Jim is inclined to glorify and "rewrite" *Ántonia* to fit her into the pattern of those kinds of romantic stories.

In addition to its romantic quality, Jim's perspective is ideologically imbued with dominant cultural assumptions of his community—the assumptions which assign women to the home and men to the world, subordinating women to men, and are based on hidden ethnocentrism. It is true that Jim romanticizes the overflow of life in *Ántonia* and "the hired girls" and criticizes the repressed way of life in Black Hawk, thereby creating his image as a rebel against the dominant social and cultural ideology of his community, but this is an unconscious self-deception on his part to conceal his own participation in that ideology. This unconscious self-deception reflects Cather's difficult positions as a "lesbian" in patriarchal culture and as a female writer in a male literary tradition.

Some feminist critics assert that *Ántonia*, in Book Five, is reduced to a stereotypical figure of the earth mother and deprived of her individual identity. But as the juxtapositions of *Ántonia* with Lena Lingard and

Tiny Soderball, so-called “independent” women, suggest, it is Ántonia who achieves genuine selfhood as a woman. Regardless of Jim’s glorified vision of her, and without being confined in the stereotype of the earth goddess, Ántonia lives her own life and in so doing re-defines and rejuvenates the conventional figure of the earth mother.