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Suicide, Folk Belief, and Redemption in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*

For the Shimerdas, a recently immigrated Bohemian family in *My Ántonia*, Mr. Shimerda’s death signals hard times financially, emotionally, and socially, and those difficulties begin with a controversy over where he should be buried. After being denied burial at the Norwegian church cemetery, Mrs. Shimerda is insistent that her husband’s grave be “under the very stake” that marks the southwest corner of their land (89). The community is scandalized by this desire because a crossroad was supposed be built over that section of ground and, as Jim’s Grandfather puts it, “if [Mrs. Shimerda] thinks she will live to see the people of this country ride over that old man’s head, she is mistaken” (90). The text assumes that wanting to bury a suicide victim at a crossroads is a Bohemian tradition, or what scholars would now call a “folk belief.” The Shimerdas are never consulted on the subject, so the reader only has Jim’s comment about appreciating the “dim superstition” of the burial, which is not very helpful in elucidating the custom. What is clear, however, is that the whole situation is charged with tension between the Old Country and the New—between the budding “American” social customs of the Black Hawk community and the long-established traditions that have followed each immigrant to their new life in Nebraska. This tension is particularly apparent when folk beliefs clash with American ideals, as this episode demonstrates. Thus, by carefully studying these folk beliefs, specifically the folk beliefs surrounding suicide burials at crossroads, the reader comes to understand how the novel vindicates Mr. Shimerda’s suicide by undermining Old World traditions imposed on him by his family and allowing him redemption on the American prairie.

The practice of burying suicide victims at crossroads is what is now call a “folk belief.” This is the term that replaced superstition—because of its negative connotation—in literary
studies, though both words are defined as “a belief... concerned with the successful completion of a specific task, often associated with ritual behaviors” (Pimple 53). Folk beliefs are not necessarily untrue (McNiell 56), because objective truth has little to do with what people choose to believe, particularly in relation to traditions or social customs. Society is full of folk beliefs, and they continue to have an unexamined impact on the daily lives and decisions of ordinary people. However, some folk beliefs are interwoven with religious convictions, such as beliefs surrounding suicide or self-harm. Bertram Puckle asserts that “the body of the suicide [victim] has in all times been subject to some sort of penal measures” (150). He goes on to explain how the Romans buried suicide victims and murderers as a sign of disgrace because they held cremation to be the most honorable means of disposing of the dead, and similar practices of shaming and exiling have persisted throughout the centuries (150-51). In their book entitled *Sleepless Souls*, Michael MacDonald and Terence Murphy identify various forms of dishonoring a suicide victim in Europe and then explain that:

Elsewhere, including England, suicides were buried in a highway, often at a crossroads, pinioned in their graves with a wooden stake. These local variations in ritual detail are strikingly and plainly meaningful. They were almost certainly the residue of regional differences in religious belief and practice that were pre-Christian or that had developed over the centuries out of the dialectic between folk culture and Christianity. (MacDonald 19)

While there is some regional difference regarding how to handle suicides, staking victims into a crossroads burial was a remarkably prevalent method of disposing of the body that developed from ancient superstitions and ideas about self-harm. In many cases, the emergence of organized religion codified the practice and gave it a level of validity rarely afforded folk beliefs. And
although the specifics details could vary from place to place, this form of burial was always meant to shame, exile, and punish the person who took their own life. Burials at crossroads were meant to show the condemnation of the community for an act they deemed unforgivable before God.

How, then, does this background influence the reader’s understanding of Mr. Shimerda’s burial? First, it takes what is originally presented as a reasonably harmless practice, that of burying Mr. Shimerda at the corner of his property where a crossroad will one day be built, and reveals it to be both a punishment and act of banishment. What is worse, the text makes it clear that this rejection is coming directly from Mr. Shimerda’s family and not the Black Hawk community. Not only is Mrs. Shimerda the one who advocates for this disgraceful burial, when the neighbors protest she insists that, “There I will bury him, if I dig the grave myself” (90). Ambrosch also supports this plan, and as the oldest son he functions as the spokesperson for the whole family. This is a double rejection for Mr. Shimerda, and one with little historical precedent, because families usually realized that it was in their best interests to keep suicides quiet in order to save face. But Cather leaves little doubt that Mrs. Shimerda knew what she was doing. Jim reports that she wanted Mr. Shimerda buried where the crossroads would be built; “indeed, under the very stake that marked the corner” (89, emphasis added). This stake imagery alludes to the suicide burial traditional mention above of staking suicides into their graves. Mr. Shimerda did not have a stake literally driven through him, but the implication of ritualistic desecration is too apparent to be ignored: the stake was driven exactly into the spot where his body would one day reside.

Furthermore, after his funeral, Mr. Shimerda’s grave is marked with a wooden cross, a symbol that was also used to mark crossroads for religious purposes. Bertram Puckle explains in
his chapter on burial customs that, “Some have supposed that the fact that a preaching cross was often erected at the meeting of ways, and used by itinerant clergy when the churches were few and far between, hallowed the ground to some extent, and in the shadow of the cross kindly hands might lay the poor outcast when the Church herself had refused him sanctuary” (153). With this background, Mr. Shimerda’s cross can function as both a preaching cross to bless him and others, as well as a burial marker in the traditional sense. The idea that the cross on the grave was a way for strangers to function as good Samaritans for the “poor outcast” is present in *My Ántonia*. Jim suggests just such a thing while contemplating Mr. Shimerda’s grave: “Never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, I am sure, without wishing well the sleeper” (94). As will be discussed later in this paper, Cather is anxious to bestow grace on Mr. Shimerda, and this description of kind travelers suits that purpose. However, this grace is coming from strangers and not from the family that should have cared the most about Mr. Shimerda’s fate.

An additional folk belief about suicide victims is the idea that the spirits of the dead remain as restless ghosts who roamed the earth, haunting the areas that they were familiar with in life. In the article “The Idea of Suicide,” Anoop Gupta explains this belief as follows: “Some thought suicides ended up wandering the world as estranged ghosts, forever condemned from the world of the living and unlikely to gain entry into heaven. Perhaps an attempt at stopping these ghostly wanderings lay behind the popular custom of burying the suicide at a crossroads with a stake driven through his chest” (Gupta 87). Because humans have always been wary of the idea of spirits, especially evil ones, it makes sense that people would do whatever they thought was in their power to bind them to a particular spot. Crossroads were considered far enough outside of most towns and cities to be a good spot for these wakeful spirits, and the meeting of four roads could also work to confuse the ghost’s sense of direction so they never returned to the haunt
community, even during nights when they had more mobility. The fear that drove the practice is recognizable, even if the ritual itself seems ghastly in a modern context. This reasoning for a crossroads burial also rings true with the idea that many folk beliefs were intricately bound up in religious belief, and the notion of spirits who had not been allowed to enter heaven prowling their former home is both religious and superstitious.

The concept of suicide ghosts wandering the earth after death is paralleled in *My Ántonia* by Jim’s experience with Mr. Shimerda; however, instead of being something to be feared, the scene takes on a mournful quality akin to a memorial service. While Jim sits home alone waiting for the return of his grandparents from the grieving Shimerdas, he has the epiphany that, “if Mr. Shimerda’s soul were lingering about in this world at all, it would be here, in our house, which had been more to his liking than any other in the neighborhood” (81). Jim’s beliefs at this moment are obviously folkloric, but they do not frighten him. He wonders “whether [Mr. Shimerda’s] released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country,” but then he decides that “his exhausted spirit, so tired of cold and crowding and the struggle with the ever-falling snow” would need to rest a while before attempting this journey (81). He does all he can to keep from disturbing the worn-out spirit, and in the process recalls all that Ántonia had told him about Mr. Shimerda’s life in Bohemia. He dwells on these thoughts, and his impromptu interior eulogy allows him to connect on a spiritual level with the ghost of his neighbor. He said of the experience, “Such vivid pictures came to me that they might have been Mr. Shimerda’s memories, not yet faded out from the air in which they had haunted him” (82). The use of the word “haunted” is noteworthy because it connotes a superstitious experience, making this scene charged with supernatural forces rather than divine power. And while it may appear degrading and racist for Jim to not apply religious standards to his foreign friend’s father, it is actually
another moment of Cather showing mercy for Mr. Shimerda. By viewing his death through a folklore lens instead of through pure religion, she can sidestep the doctrines that damn him to eternal punishment, and instead depict him as a free spirit on the way back to where he felt most at home.

While the novel does not allow the reader direct access to Mr. Shimerda’s feelings before his suicide, the short story “Peter”—the germ for what would later become the first book of *My Ántonia*—does, and in doing so offers insight on the way Cather chose to describe Mr. Shimerda’s death in the novel. In this version, written and published while Cather was a nineteen-year-old college student, Mr. Shimerda’s name is Peter Sadelack, and he is an old man who loves his fiddle more than anything. He is constantly being harassed by his hardworking but “hard” son Antone—the inspiration for Ambrosch—who runs their farm with an iron fist (“Peter” 263-65). Just like Mr. Shimerda, Peter longs for the Old Country where he could play his fiddle and be immersed in the high culture that does not yet exist on the American prairie. But unlike Mr. Shimerda, he is a “lazy” old man that no one had “a good word to say for” and who loved drinking and spending his time with beautiful women (263). By a Christian standard, Peter is far more immoral than Mr. Shimerda, but he is also more openly religious. The narrator claims that “he loved his violin and the holy Mary, and above all else he feared the Evil One, and his son Antone” (264). He argues with his antagonistic son about wanting to go to mass on Sunday instead of cutting firewood, and he plays religious hymns on his fiddle. It is while playing “Ave Maria” that Peter’s hands, which had been injured before he left for America, gave out and refused to play another note. This is the catalyst for Peter’s decision to commit suicide; filled with despair, he holds a crucifix to his heart, recites part of a prayer in Latin, breaks his violin in half (so Antone could not sell it later), and kills himself exactly as Mr. Shimerda does in
the final version of the story—with a gun to the head triggered by his toe. While this story is not as saturated with folklore as the novel, it does offer perspective on how Cather viewed religious expressions negatively, or at least had previously associated them with unsympathetic characters. This is significant, because it shows that Cather deliberately chose folklore over religion as a way of contextualizing Mr. Shimerda’s death. She had already toyed with the idea of a religious and less sympathetic immigrant father who dies the same way, but for her final and more agreeable version of the character she decided to steep him in folklore. As discussed in the previous paragraph, this benevolent move spared Mr. Shimerda from the condemnation of religion.

It is apparent that Cather did what she could to save Mr. Shimerda from damnation, but her final act of absolution was to redeem Mr. Shimerda from what she saw as the clutches of folkloric and religious punishment and grant him deliverance through his American community. As mentioned above, Mr. Shimerda’s wife and son did what they could to get him buried at a crossroads, but ultimately their plan failed. Jim recounts that, “As grandfather had predicated, Mrs. Shimerda never saw the roads going over his head. The road from the north curved a little to the east just there, and the road to the west swung out a little to the south; so that the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island” (94). His grave becomes a place of “clemency,” due to the “propitiatory intent” that led the community to respect his resting place, and allowed him his own wild piece of the prairie (94). In this way, it is the community of immigrant Americans that saves Mr. Shimerda—they grant him mercy and acceptance when the religiously sanctified traditions of the Old Country fail him. He is redeemed at their will, and the “tall red grass” growing on his resting place—red like the blood that buys redemption, tall like the cross that raised the Savior of mankind—uses familiarly religious symbols to signify their
blessing. Mr. Shimerda’s burial could have been, and was intended to be, a continuation of the European customs that had bound generations, but instead, his gravesite becomes “in all that country…the spot most dear” (94).
Works Cited


Rosowski, Susan J. *Approaches to Teaching Cather's "My Ántonia."* Modern Language Assoc. of America, 2003.