

Michaela Plicková  
B.A. Thesis  
Assessment  
Prof. David Robbins

Ms. Plicková's B.A. thesis on Willa Cather is a very accomplished piece of work. Misa has achieved a great deal in this deeply realized essay, which focuses on what she has come to understand as Cather's queer writing. Taking this flexible concept from Judith Butler, and launching her analysis from the work of a major Cather critic, Marilee Lindemann, who suggests its applicability to Cather's fiction, Misa undertakes an examination of illegibilities in Cather's texts. Such silences or evasions may be seen to originate in Cather's representations of ambivalent sexuality, an undecidedness that structures Cather's habitual demurrals and discrete insinuations about same-sex desire throughout her novels and stories. Lindemann enlarges the import of such expressive features by understanding them as manifestations of broader equivocations in Cather's view of national identity and history, domesticity, immigration and ethnicity, and so on. Such habits of under-representation constitute "queer" writing because they occasion moments of mixed feelings, allegiances, insights that indict the enabling social binaries of American life and national development. The brilliance of Misa's thesis arises from its powerful focus on a composite of sexual, racial, and class privilege—a kind of master normativity—that threatens to come apart at every turn in *My Ántonia's* anxious narrative. Read by Misa as a vast text of repressive self-construction, the novel resorts to such illegibilities in forging the self Jim imagines, in indicating the exclusions necessary to it, and in intimating an alternative life—a counter-self, a queer self—that might have formulated under other circumstances. The thesis takes up several large sub-topics—the methods by which Jim sanitizes his memoir, the painful historical memories he excises, the resemblance of his purposes to Cather's ways of dealing with history in several of her other novels, Jim's disturbing disillusionment with the very life he has paid so high a price to fashion, and the particular question of queer sexuality as a function of narrative structure and voice in *My Antonia*.

Misa exhibited indefatigable intellectual energy and commitment in designing a very ambitious project, reorganizing its logic several times, exploring often challenging gender theory and queer studies, familiarizing herself with the latest Cather scholarship, and polishing the prose assiduously. Many of the works of scholarship Misa found on her own (or at least independent of our extensive correspondence over sources), including major texts like Michael Warner's *Fear of a Queer Planet*. It has been a privilege to work with Misa on this project, and I would support its being awarded the highest grade.

Prof. David Robbins