

Assignment: Write an interpretive essay on Willa Cather's "Neighbour Rosicky"

**Natural Abundance of Country Life
as Shown by Willa Cather's "Neighbour Rosicky"**

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Anton Rosicky believes the country is the best place to raise a happy family, because of its natural abundance. Though the fairy-tale city life of Castle Garden, New York, satisfies Rosicky for 5 years or so, the fantasy fades as his desire for real fulfillment in a more bucolic setting increases. "That was why he drank too much; to get a temporary illusion of freedom and wide horizons" (87). Rosicky realizes that although city life is appealing, it leaves an empty feeling in the end. Both country and city settings described in "Neighbour Rosicky" by Willa Cather illustrate the benefits of country living.

Rosicky's love for the land began at a young age, when he was sent to live with his grandparents following the death of his mother. "He stayed with them until he was twelve, and formed those ties with the earth and the farm animals and growing things which are never made at all unless they are made early" (88). Rosicky's childhood marks the start of a lifelong companionship between him and the open land.

The city, on the other hand, is disconnected from him because of its abundance of cement. While sitting in the park in New York City, Rosicky observes "so much stone and asphalt with nothing going on, so many empty windows" (88). Rosicky finds the isolation of the city to be exhausting, because the cement denies him contact with the nourishing land. Rosicky desires to move away from the city and get back to the country where his roots are.

Rosicky's decision to head west and "buy his liberty" (89) occurs on a significant holiday, Independence Day. Although he can't afford one of the finer farms in High Prairie, he does purchase property, and he enjoys the fact that he owns any land at all. This is an important accomplishment for Rosicky because he becomes the first person in the family to own land. For Rosicky, "To be a landless man was to be a wage-earner, a slave, all your life; to have nothing, to be nothing" (93). Rosicky fears that Rudolph will give up the farming gamble and sacrifice his freedom for guaranteed money made slaving at a factory job in the city. Rosicky compares these blank buildings to "empty jails" (88), which represent the lack of freedom associated with city life. Rosicky wants his son to understand that in the country, "what you had was your own. You didn't have to choose between bosses and strikers, and go wrong either way" (104). As Rosicky's health deteriorates, his concerns for his family's welfare increase. He wants not only freedom for himself, but for his family as well. It's comforting for Rosicky to know that his family will be together on the land long after he's gone.

Rosicky's heart may be failing, but he's not in the ground yet. In the meantime, Rosicky is encouraged by Doctor Burleigh to spend some quality time with his family. Dr. Ed advises, "My Lord, Rosicky, you are one of the few men I know who has a family he can get some comfort out of; happy dispositions, never quarrel among themselves, and they treat you right" (74). Rosicky feels blessed to have such a wonderful family as he recalls the types of families which inhabit the city. He remembers angry families arguing among themselves in dirty, overcrowded kitchens. Rosicky believes that "the worst things he has come upon in his journey through the world were human—depraved and poisonous specimens of life" (104). He doesn't think his children are prepared to understand the harshness and cruelty of human beings existing in the city. Rosicky is not naïve to the fact that mean people live in the country as well. He feels the advantage to living in the country is that such neighbors can be avoided by separation of the land. But in the city, "all the foulness and misery and brutality of your neighbors was part of your life" (104). There is no escaping the company of unwanted dishonesty.

The city also represents poverty and hunger for Rosicky. Rosicky remembers a special Christmas in London. Christmas is thought to be a joyous occasion, the season of giving. Rosicky describes an entirely different scenario. "All de windows is full of good t'ings to eat, an' all de pushcarts in de streets is full, an' you smell 'em all de time, a' you ain't got no money,—not a damn bit" (99). He understands that

although the city is a great place to live if you're rich, it's not an easy environment for the poor and hungry to survive in.

Rosicky counts his blessings for the opportunity to cultivate crops with which to feed and nourish his family. After all these years in the country, Rosicky "had never had to take a cent from anyone in bitter need,—never had to look at the face of a woman become like a wolf's from struggle and famine" (105). Rosicky knows that planting seasons are not consistent and stresses the importance of adaptation to the uncertain. Regardless of the success of each year's crops, the Rosicky family celebrates life together. The family picnic is an important event showing the strong bond uniting his family. Rosicky recalls a Fourth of July that was so hot, the intensity of the heat ruined the entire crop of corn. He did not let this catastrophe ruin him as it did his neighbors. Rosicky says, "An' we enjoyed ourselves that year, poor as we was, an' our neighbours wasn't a bit better off for bein' miserable. Some of 'em grieved till they got poor digestions and couldn't relish what they did have" (98).

To Rosicky, happiness doesn't come from having money but from enjoyment of his loving family. Neighbors wonder why Rosicky doesn't get ahead in life. "Maybe . . . people as generous and warm-hearted and affectionate as the Rosickys never got ahead much; maybe you couldn't enjoy your life and put money in the bank" (84). The influence of money is not a temptation for Rosicky because the satisfaction of being part of a family gives him all the wealth he desires.

Part of being in a successful family includes struggling together through the best and worst of times. The drought brings hard time to the country, which is a concern for Rudolph. Rosicky replies, "You don't know what hard times is. You don't owe anybody, you got plenty to eat an' keep warm, an' plenty water to keep clean. When you got them, you can't have it very hard" (96). The country offers feelings of comfort and companionship to Rosicky and his family. Rosicky hopes his son Rudolph will not give up after one bad season of crops but instead continue to work freely and live off the land.

The planting season is symbolic of reproduction, the cycle of continuous life and death. Rosicky appreciates the beauty of snow falling over the open pastures and the nice graveyard which lies nearby. "It was a nice graveyard, Rosicky reflected, sort of snug and homelike, not cramped and mournful,—a big sweep all around it" (81). Rosicky is awfully fond of his farm and isn't anxious to leave it, but in the event of his death, he won't have to go far at all. "The snow, falling over his barnyard and the graveyard, seemed to draw things together like. And they were all old neighbours in the graveyard, most of them friends" (81). The country graveyard is much more comforting than cemeteries found in the city. He thinks of city cemeteries as "arranged and lonely" (110) and considers them to be "cities of the dead . . . of the forgotten" (111). These city cemeteries are not open and free like the little graveyard at the edge of Rosicky's farm.

And so, the time comes for Rosicky to return to his roots, the country, for the final time. The condition of Rosicky's heart deteriorates, and a heart attack is inevitable. Even though Rosicky is dying, he celebrates the miraculous news of a future grandchild to be born to his son Rudolph and his wife, Polly. Doctor Burleigh, a lifelong friend of Anton, comes back to the country to visit the Rosicky family. As he drives past the graveyard, he notices the beauty. The Doctor reflects, "nothing could be more undearthlike than his place; nothing could be more right for a man who had helped to do the work of great cities and had always longed for the open country and had got to it at last. Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful" (111). Though Rosicky's life seemed to him complete and beautiful (111). Though Rosicky's physical body is buried in the ground, his spirit freely lives through his family's enjoyment of the country's natural abundance, thus ensuring the infinite cycle of life.

Works Cited

Cather, Willa. "Neighbour Rosicky." *Willa Cather: Five Stories*. Mattituck, New York: American House, 1930. 72-111.

