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My Ántonia and Czech Mushroom Folklore

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One of the most touching scenes in Cather’s *My Ántonia* is Jim and Grandmother Burden’s winter visit to the Shimerda’s dugout, and it is a scene centered on food culture. At the opening of the chapter, the Shimerda family is so desperate for food that when the rabbits are scarce, they are willing to consider eating the prairie dogs that Ambrosch shoots, news that “alarm[s]” Mrs. Burden to ask her husband about the Bohemian who had sold the Shimerdas their property: “Josiah, you don’t suppose Krajiek would let them poor creatures eat prairie dogs, do you?” (69). When Jim and Grandmother Burden visit the family, Mrs. Shimerda insists on showing her their pitiful provisions of rotting potatoes and a little bit of flour. Mrs. Burden shows disdain for her Bohemian neighbor’s sourdough method of baking bread, which had “horrified” her in an earlier scene (30), and she presents Mrs. Shimerda with an old stewing rooster, whose comb had frozen. The dugout scene culminates in Mrs. Shimerda, as poor as her provisions are, reciprocating with her own gift to Mrs. Burden:

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Mrs. Shimerda grew more calm and reasonable before our visit was over, and, while Ántonia translated, put in a word now and then on her own account. The woman had a quick ear, and caught up phrases whenever she heard English spoken. As we rose to go, she opened her wooden chest and brought out a bag made of bed-ticking, about as long as a flour sack and half as wide, stuffed full of something. At sight of it, the crazy boy began to smack his lips. When Mrs. Shimerda opened the bag and stirred the contents with her hand, it gave out a salty, earthy smell, very pungent, even among the other odors of that cave. She measured a teacup full, tied it up in a bit of sacking, and presented it ceremoniously to grandmother.

“For cook,” she announced. “Little now; be very much when cook,” spreading out her hands as if to indicate that the pint would swell to a gallon. “Very good. You no have in this country. All things for better in my country. . . .”

Ántonia undertook to explain. “This very good, Mrs. Burden. . . . Cook with rabbit, cook with chicken, in the gravy, — oh, so good!”

All the way home grandmother and Jake talked about how easily good Christian people could forget they were their brothers’ keepers.

“I will say, Jake, some of our brothers and sisters are hard to keep. Where’s a body to begin with these people? They’re wanting in everything, and most of all in horse-sense. Nobody can give ‘em that, I guess. Jimmy, here, is about as able to take over a homestead as they are. Do you reckon that boy Ambrosch has got any real push in him?”

“He’s a worker, all right, ma’m, and he’s got some ketch-on about him; but he’a s mean one. Folks can be mean enough to get on in this world; and then again, they can be too mean.”

That night, while grandmother was getting supper, we opened the package Mrs. Shimerda had given her. It was full of little brown chips that looked like the shavings of some root. They were as light as feathers, and the most noticeable thing about them was their penetrating, earthy odor. We could not determine whether they were animal or vegetable.

“They might be dried meat from some queer beast, Jim. They ain’t dried fish, and they never grew on stalk or vine. I’m afraid of ’em. Anyhow, I shouldn’t want to eat anything that had been shut up for months with old clothes and goose pillows.”

She threw the package into the stove, but I bit off a corner of one of the chips I held in my hand, and chewed it tentatively. I never forgot the strange taste; though it was many years before I knew that those little brown shavings, which the Shimerdas had brought so far and treasured so jealously, were dried mushrooms. They had been gathered, probably, in some deep Bohemian forest . . . .
That Cather had W.T. Benda illustrate this passage with the scene of a Bohemian woman gathering mushrooms in a forest suggests that she earmarked the scene as an important one. But the illustration does not show them all in the interior of the dugout, peering into the empty barrels or huddling near the fire. Benda’s illustration, which depicts an event that Cather only alludes to rather than describes directly, is the only one of the Benda illustrations that depicts a foreign scene that takes place in dramatically different landscape from the Nebraska prairies. Having left everything else behind, the mushrooms are the only remaining token of their life in the Old Country.

The dugout/mushroom scene pivots on the tensions between food cultures, which in turn suggests the subtle tension between the American and Bohemian settlers. Individual responses to the mushrooms offer a correlative for how Americans and Bohemians engage with each other and with the foreignness of immigrants in the early twentieth-century. Suggesting a nativist point-of-view, Grandmother Burden sees the mushrooms as something alien, suspect, dangerous—a product of a dark and distant forest. She has no name for the dried shavings, no point of reference to understand their strangeness (animal or vegetable, neighbor or “creatures”), and she sees them as something that she might even fear, as “queer” and perhaps even beast-like, a response Cather highlights with Mrs Burden’s “poor creatures” exclamation at the opening and Cather’s depiction of Marek, with his “queer noises” that variously sound like the bark of a dog or the whinny of a horse (74). If Mrs. Burden would rather discard the dried mushrooms that eat them, Jim is nevertheless curious about the shavings.
with their “penetrating, earthy odor.” He nibbles at one of the chips, and although he admits it is “strange,” he is willing to concede their importance to the Shimerdas—yet still too unsure about the foreign food to stop Grandmother Burden from discarding it. For Jim, the mushrooms are exotic, evocative of a place he will one day travel and a food he will one day enjoy. By the same token, he is initially guarded with the Shimerdas but more willing to accept their differences in food and culture. Looking from the other side of the mushroom-divide, Mrs. Shimerda presents her gift “ceremoniously,” and in contrast to Mrs. Burden’s gift of the old stewing chicken with its frozen comb, the dried mushrooms are “treasured so jealously.” The Shimerdas recognize them as a potent symbol of homeland, of their ties to the very soil from which the mushrooms were plucked. For all of Mrs. Shimerda’s boasting that food from her country is superior, her generous gesture, especially when her family has so little to give, is a deeply personal gift. Mrs. Shimerda’s cloth bag holds a finite amount of a food that is foraged rather than cultivated; it is, therefore, a limited, non-renewal resource and a reminder that some loss of their Bohemian identity is inevitable. The mushrooms are a precious, compact emblem of their Bohemian identity and culture in this foreign place.

PART TWO: MUSHROOMS AS EMBLEM OF CZECH CULTURE

Within Czech culture, mushrooms (“houby,” as they are called in Czech) are an iconic cultural symbol associated with beloved folk customs, and mushroom-hunting has been a quintessentially Czech cultural tradition for families for centuries. On average, today’s Czechs go out into the forests to hunt mushrooms twenty times per year, making it, as Czechs joke, a national competitive sport. For Czechs, mushrooming is serious business. Mushroom hunters jealously guard the location of their favorite spots. On weekends, especially after a rainy day, they head out to the forests in the early morning and make a day of it with their families. Occasionally, you will even see mushroom-hunters, with their baskets full, coming home from the forests late in the afternoon on the Prague Metro trains.

2. Nebraska does have certain varieties of wild mushrooms—including the morels that Czechs favor, but these grow mostly in eastern Nebraska in the wooded riparian areas. Cather’s Webster County is not known for mushroom foraging. However, Czechs did not give up mushroom-hunting entirely. In Miron Elisha Hard’s 1908 book The Mushroom, Edible and Otherwise, he describes how one of the first things that new Bohemian immigrants would do when they came to work in the Ohio mills was go out into the surrounding areas to forage for mushrooms.

3. In this essay, I use the term “Bohemian” to refer to the people Cather was writing about, who, before the book was published in 1918, came from the Bohemian lands that were under the rule of the Austrian empire. I use “Czech/Czechs” more broadly to refer to people who come from a Czech cultural background, including those who speak the Czech language today and those who lived in the post-1918 first republic of Czechoslovakia (1918-1993), which declared its independence from the empire in the closing days of World War I.

There is a long history in the Czech Lands of scientific interest in mushrooms as well. In 1909 Czech mycologists (mushroom scientists) established a publicly-funded Mushroom Advice Center in Prague to hold lectures and help amateurs identify their finds, and that office is still active and publicly-funded. There is an important mycology journal that has been regularly published since 1919, and in 1921 Czech scientists established the Česká Mykologická Společnost or The Czech Mycological Society, which oversees more than forty branches or clubs in the country. The journal and the society are among the oldest publications and organizations of their kind in the world.\(^5\)

Thanks to such resources and to families who pass along their knowledge, most Czechs are well-versed in identifying the thirty-five edible varieties found in the Czech Republic from among the hundreds of types that grow in the forests. The older generation take great care to teach the next generation tips for how to spot mushrooms in the plant litter of the forest floor and how to gather them (never simply pluck them like you would a flower). But family mushroom-hunting traditions like these are not just about transmitting knowledge—parents and grandparents are also fostering a love of the activity. Because mushrooms often suddenly appear overnight, people sometimes associate them with magic and providence, and throughout Eastern Europe people associate luck in finding mushrooms with general good fortune. For much of the population, gathering mushrooms has sacred overtones as important family time and a kind of spiritual retreat into the majesty of the natural world. Mushrooms also represent life born out of decay, as well as the capriciousness of life where one mushroom can be a treasure while the next one can prove deadly. This intermixing of life and death is characteristic of a Bohemian point of view and is evident in a common Czech joke about mushrooms that goes, “All mushrooms are edible, but some are only edible once.”

Innumerable recipes suggest the Czech’s love of mushrooms, which are thought to ensure health and strength. They are often featured in a variety of soups, stews, sauces and egg dishes, or they can be fried and served as a main dish. At home in Bohemia, the Shimerda children would have almost certainly enjoyed a dried mushroom and barley dish called “Kuba” at their Christmas Eve dinner, which would have followed an all-day fast. (A kuba recipe is included on page 11).

References to mushrooms appear throughout Czech folk, artistic, and literary culture. For instance, beloved nineteenth-century Czech artist Mikoláš Aleš (1852-1913), who was known for his magazine and children’s book illustrations of Czech peasant life, depicted two common adages about how important mushrooms were as a food source.\(^6\) In the illustration depicting a nursery rhyme, a little boy tells his siblings, “Our father went hunting for mushrooms, and hopefully he won’t get lost! Don’t worry, look forward to the mushrooms he will bring us.” In another illustration, the children themselves are gathering mushrooms and fishing with a trap, and the proverb reads, “Lots of mushrooms [when there is] little bread. Lots of fish [when there is] few grains of wheat.” In both cases, the charming scenes of children and ornate decorative quality of the illustrations are combined with rather ominous undertones of the children fearing that their father might get lost and, in the second example, the approaching lightning storm shown within the letter M. These details underscore that mushroom-hunting wasn’t a game—very often it was a necessity.

5. For more on mycology in the Czech Republic, see https://www.myko.cz/english/.

A 1926 story published in a weekly newspaper and written by the famed illustrator Josef Lada (1877-1957) humorously describes the typical practices of mushroom pickers. One man parades back and forth through the village with his full baskets just so that his envious neighbors can see just how great is his haul (even if sometimes he fills the bottoms of his baskets with inedible varieties or even fallen leaves so that he can top the basket with the most coveted mushroom specimens). Another picker abides by the superstition that if you come prepared with knife and basket, you are less likely to find your prey, and so when he finds a good spot, he has to resort to bringing home his mushrooms in his hat. Lada ends the essay with one of his own stories, in which one day he finds a mushroom as “big as a great cobbler,” and carrying the prize on his shoulder as he heads out of the forest, he meets a farmer who remarks, “Why didn’t you say something? I have horses back home. I would be glad to bring that one home for you!” Lada’s humor comes from the fact that his Czech readers could all recognize themselves in these situations.

Mushrooming also finds its way into the 1924 opera The Cunning Little Vixen: The Adventures of Fox Sharp-Ears by Leos Janáček (1854-1928). Adapted from a serialized novella by Rudolf Těsnohlídek, the final scene of Janáček’s opera takes place in the woods where the main character, an aged forester, realizes that the tragic end that the lovely vixen had met is only another part of the perennial cycle of life’s renewal. He picks a mushroom and softly strokes it as he remembers the day after his wedding when he and his wife went mushroom hunting in a springtime long ago. But they often trampled them because they were blinded by their love. They gathered more kisses than mushrooms. How wonderful is the forest in May, the month of love, the forester sings, when the fairies come back to touch the flowers and trees in shimmering light and “men and women will walk with their heads bowed... overwhelmed by this miraculous, unworldly bliss.” If Lada’s stories point to the ubiquity mushroom hunting and Aleš to the necessity, Janáček’s opera uses mushrooms as a symbol of noble beliefs about human life and the natural world.


8. Janáček so loved this aria that he asked for it to be played at his funeral. For the translation of Janáček’s libretto, I have quoted from the transcript of The Cunning Little Vixen performed by Orchestre de Paris, Choeur du Châtelet and Maîtrise des Hauts-de-Seine, Dir. Nicholas Hytner. Arthaus Musik, 1995. Academic Video Online: Premium Database. Web. I have also consulted the English translation in CD booklet of The Cunning Little Vixen the by Yveta Synek Graff and Robert T. Jones, Royal Opera House Production, Chandos Records Ltd, 2003.
But perhaps the story that echoes themes from Cather’s novel most clearly is a wonderful mushroom origin story documented by Božena Němcová (1820-1862). Before the nineteenth-century author became famous for her 1855 novel Babička (or “Grandmother”), she had traveled to villages throughout Bohemia and adjacent regions gathering and documenting Czech folktales and customs. As the story goes, one day Jesus and Peter happened upon a Bohemian village where a wedding party was taking place at a humble cottage. They joined the party, but not before Jesus told Peter to accept nothing more than bread and salt from the villagers because they were so poor. They were warmly welcomed into the celebration, and as Jesus had instructed, Peter only ate bread and salt and politely declined the offer of kolace, the small, traditional Czech pastries. But the kolace proved too tempting for Peter, who slipped a few of them in his pockets as they said their goodbyes. Later, as they walked through the forest, Peter lagged behind Jesus so that he could surreptitiously nibble on his pastry. But each time he took a bite, Jesus would abruptly turn around and ask what he was eating. Each time Peter would spit out the kolace and reply with guilt, “Nothing.” This went on until there was no kolace left and Peter had to confess his disobedience. As an act of reparation and compassion, Jesus transformed the morsels that Peter had spat out along the way into mushrooms, which would come back year after year. Thus, mushrooms became, as Czechs say, “the meat of the poor.”

Like Němcová, the young Cather loved to visit the humble homes of the immigrants who settled in the area surrounding Red Cloud, Nebraska; in their homes, she took careful note of their folk customs and stories in ways that would eventually translate into her own work. Her descriptions of Mr. Shimerda’s enjoying the companionship of his old friends in the old country suggests some of the same flavor of communal village life in poor villages that we see in the folktale. Immigrants like the Shimerdas left such villages for America because they wanted to live in a place where a gesture of generosity—whether that be offering a cup of mushrooms or a small pastry—wouldn’t have potentially tragic economic consequences for their families. In Němcová’s tale, Jesus’s transformative miracle of forgiveness for Peter and his grace and compassion for the poor is akin in Cather’s novel to the “clemency of the soft earth roads” that curved around Mr. Shimerda’s grave, refusing to let his grave be covered by crossroads where superstition meant the sinner would be forgotten (114).

Whether or not Cather ever heard these particular mushroom-related tales from her Bohemian friends isn’t my point here, but I do believe she was generally aware of Czech attitudes about the symbolic importance of mushrooms. It is just one more example of her keen instinct for portraying immigrants in ways that honors their folk cultures. And for our part, understanding those folk traditions only enriches our reading of a work like My Ántonia.

9. Originally published in Národní báchorky a pověsti (National Stories and Tales); an English retelling of Němcová’s tale can be found in Valentina Pavlovna Wasson and R. Gordon Wasson’s Mushrooms, Russia, and History, New York: Pantheon Books, 1957, p. 16-17.
Houbový Kuba

(Dried mushrooms are preferred in this recipe because they have more intense flavor, but 1 1/2 cup of fresh mushrooms and 1 extra cup of broth may be used instead. Czechs like a lot of garlic in this recipe, but you can adjust to taste)

1 cup dried mushrooms
1 1/2 cup cold water
1 cup pearl barley
4-6 tablespoons butter, divided
1 cup vegetable stock or broth
2 large onions, chopped
6 cloves garlic, minced
1 teaspoon caraway seeds (optional)
1 teaspoon dried marjoram
Salt and pepper, to taste

Rehydrate the dried mushrooms in 1 1/2 cup water; let them soak 2 hours or overnight. If using fresh mushrooms, slice and sauté in 2 tablespoons of butter. Rinse barley under running water and drain; then gently toast the barley with 2 tablespoons of butter until light brown (stir often to keep the barley from burning). After barley is toasted, pour in the broth and the soaked mushrooms, along with the soaking water. Add salt and pepper and cook this on medium low heat for 45 minutes until the barley is cooked. Meanwhile, sauté the chopped onions in the remaining butter until they begin to caramelize; add the garlic and allow the mixture to further caramelize to a rich brown but don’t burn the mixture. When the barley still has 10 minutes to cook, preheat oven to 350 F, and butter a large baking dish. When the barley is tender, add the onion/garlic mixture and the marjoram and caraway seed. Taste and adjust salt and pepper. Pour into baking dish and bake for 20-25 minutes. Serve as a main dish with a side of pickles or as a side dish.