

Feminism in *My Ántonia*

Elizabeth Giglio

My Ántonia by Willa Cather is replete with strong female characters. Each woman in the book has a powerful personality that pushes her to become successful in her chosen lifestyle. It is because of these characters' embodiment of feminist ideals that *My Ántonia* becomes a novel that goes far beyond the difficulties of settling down in an unfamiliar territory. Cather's feminist approach to this particular period of history casts a new light on the roles that women played in the settlement of the western prairies in America.

It is important to note that much of *My Ántonia* comes directly from Cather's own life. In his book *My Ántonia: the Road Home*, John J. Murphy discusses this particular aspect of Cather's writing: "James Woodress explains in his biography of Cather how she created fictions about herself, that it is sometimes difficult to tell where reality ends and fiction begins. Much of her published fiction, especially *My Ántonia*, is in this overlapping area" (Murphy 23). Murphy goes on to quote Woodress as saying, "She turned her own life and experiences into literature to a degree uncommon among writers" (Murphy 23). This aspect of her writing is important because it shows that the portrayal of women in *My Ántonia* is not simply Cather's imagined view of how women might have been at this time. Instead, it is a fiction that is based on the reality she experienced as a young woman growing up in Nebraska.

In an interview with Cather, Latrobe Carroll asked the writer from where her impulse to write originated. Cather's response was as follows:

Few of our neighbors were Americans . . . I grew fond of some of these immigrants – particularly the old women, who used to tell me of their home country. I used to think them underrated and wanted to explain them to their neighbors. Their stories used to go round and round in my head at night. This was, with me, the initial impulse . . . I had an enthusiasm for a kind of country and a kind of people, rather than ambition. (Carroll)

This quote shows how Cather used the actual women from her childhood to frame the female characters in her books, such as the women in *My Ántonia*.

One of the main characters, Ántonia Shimerda, shows herself to be a strong-willed girl from her first encounter with Jim Burden. Even at a young age, she is eager to learn English and adapt to her new surroundings. When her father dies, she feels that she must take his place by doing the work of a man. Instead of spending her days in play with Jim, she now takes to working in the fields with her older brother, Ambrosch. Being physically active even seems to please her. In chapter nineteen of Book One, Ántonia exclaims, "Oh, better I like to work out of doors than in a house! ... I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man" (Cather 801). By the end of the novel, Ántonia is a successful woman who has achieved all that she had ever wanted. While her success is quite different from that of many of the other female characters in the novel, it is still a great accomplishment for her. In the conclusion, Jim sums Ántonia up by stating, "It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (Cather 926). This extremely influential character represents a positive compromise with feminist ideals. She is independent and strong while still living as a wife and mother.

Two women who resemble Ántonia's character are Mrs. Harling and Grandma Burden. Mrs. Harling is an active, youthful, educated woman who watches over Jim and Ántonia throughout much of their childhoods. Grandma Burden, on the other hand, is much older and more old-fashioned than Mrs. Harling, but she is extremely loving and caring. Jim describes his grandmother as "a strong woman, of unusual endurance" (Cather 720). Both of these women represent the

same compromise with feminist ideals that Antonia does. While Grandma Burden does not seem to be very independent, she is in fact strong and in control of her life. She commands her household and demonstrates her strength and courage numerous times throughout the novel. These three women, Antonia, Mrs. Harling, and Grandma Burden, all choose to live a conventional, married life; however, they continue to maintain their positions as important women. An interesting aspect of this novel is that the reader learns a great deal about these female characters but little about their husbands. Cather seems to do this on purpose, in an attempt to help the reader understand the importance of these women in the founding of a new land.

Another character who represents the newly emerging independent and strong-willed woman of this time is Frances Harling. She is the daughter of Mrs. Harling, a woman who is the epitome of the perfect wife and mother. While Mrs. Harling acts as a role model for Antonia's future as a wife and mother, Frances becomes a model for other characters, such as Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball. Frances works as her father's chief clerk, managing his office while he is away. She is extremely capable in the field of business and goes on to manage the Harling offices in the small town of Black Hawk after her father retires (Cather 894).

Lena Lingard, following Frances Hardling, represents a more common view of feminist ideals. She overcomes the opinions of the people in Black Hawk and goes to the city to become a very successful dressmaker: "She had come to Lincoln, a country girl, with no introductions except to some cousins of Mrs. Thomas who lived there, and she was already making clothes for the women of 'the young married set.' She evidently had a great natural aptitude for her work" (Cather 885). She is modern, sophisticated, and extremely independent. She even refuses to marry in an attempt to keep her autonomy. The young and inexperienced Jim falls for her charm while he is in Lincoln attending the university. While Antonia embodies Jim's childhood and innocence, Lena represents the role of a woman to suit him in adulthood, sexuality, and style. John J. Murphy describes Jim's relationship with Lena as "convincingly suggestive," but "it is not marked by passion; they are not like the lovers in *Camille* . . ." (19). Thus, this affair, with a self-determining woman who is emotionally secure enough for a sexual relationship, can be seen as Jim's passage into adulthood.

Tiny Soderball, along with Lena and Frances, leads an exciting life. Tiny is able to find adventure in her travels as well as success in the business world. She moves to Seattle, travels to Alaska in search of gold, and then moves to San Francisco after accumulating a small fortune through her journeys. While she leads an interesting and independent life, she is not portrayed as being very happy about it: "She was satisfied with her success, but not elated. She was like someone in whom the faculty of becoming interested is worn out" (Cather 897). This description of Tiny seems to suggest that she might not be perfectly suited for the independent, feminist lifestyle that she has chosen for herself.

Lena and Tiny, along with many of the other girls in Black Hawk make up an important part of the novel and Jim's childhood. Jim speaks about his affection for the country girls in Book Two: "I can remember a score of these country girls who were in service in Black Hawk during the few years I lived there, and I can remember something unusual and engaging about each of them" (Cather 838). During his childhood, Jim feels an attraction to these capable women; however, when he describes his dreams, it becomes apparent that his taste in women is changing as he matures. Murphy describes this change in the following passage:

The dreams he has about these girls clarify his responses and how they run counter to his intentions. He dreams of sliding down straw-stacks with Antonia out in the country, but Lena appears in his dreams as a fertility goddess with a curved

reaping hook and a rosy glow about her, who approaches his supine figure in a harvest field and threatens to kiss him as much as she likes. (79)

This statement supports the idea that *Antonia* represents the romantic ideals of feminism that Jim held as a child. As he grows into a young man, he discovers the more self-sufficient women of the cities and begins to understand their appeal as well. Once he attends the university and meets Lena as an adult, the ideal of the women that he once found attractive completely changes. He is now an educated, intelligent young man. Thus, he no longer feels the same way for the country girls. Hence, he turns toward more modern women, such as Lena and ultimately, his wife, Genevieve Whitney.

Genevieve is described as "restless" and "headstrong" (Cather 711). She embodies the more sophisticated, contemporary woman that Jim now sees as compatible with himself. Like Lena, Frances, and Tiny, she too has many of the characteristics of the independent feminist woman. She is even described as having "her own fortune and...her own life" (Cather 712).

Each female character in this novel represents a different form of feminist ideals. The women are varied and unique in many ways; however, they all show signs of being independent, strong-willed, opinionated, and powerful. Whether they decide to marry and have children, travel, or succeed in the business world, they each decide on their own futures without having their lives planned for them. This work of historical fiction eloquently portrays the many different forms of feminism that were available to women living on the western prairies in the nineteenth century.

Works Cited

- Carroll, Latrobe. "Willa Sibert Cather." *Bookman Interview*. 3 May 1921. Willa Cather: Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation. 21 April 2005. <<http://www.willacather.org/InterviewsLettersetc/BookmanInterview.htm>>.
- Cather, Willa. *My Antonia* in *Early Novels and Stories*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States. 1987. 711-937.
- Murphy, John J. *My Antonia: The Road Home*. Boston: Twayne, 1989.