

# Importance of memories in my antonia novel

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



## **Subversion of Gender Roles in Willa Cather's *My Antonia***

Willa Cather provides an inverted perspective on gender roles contrariwise to the societal norm during the nineteenth century in her novel, *My Antonia*.

Cather's feminist approach to this period illuminates a different perspective on the roles that women played on the western prairies in America. The representation of female characters clarifies a clear image of what women really are. *My Antonia* enlightens readers through the depiction of female characters who are brave enough to overcome the hardships of life. Antonia is the dominant female figure in this novel. Her character is active, strong and hardworking. She rejects the traditional mold of femininity.

Antonia breaks the nineteenth century's gender parameters by attaching herself to the land. After her father commits suicide, Antonia takes initiative and strives to work just as hard as her male relatives do in the field. By doing so, she adopts traits predominantly seen as "masculine".

Antonia stood up, lifting and dropping her shoulders as if they were stiff. "I ain't got time to learn. I can work like mans now. My mother can't say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. I can help make this land one good farm. (Cather, 61)

Cather uses the words: lifting, dropping, and stiff to emphasize the motion of Antonia moving her shoulders after the hard work she has performed in the field all day. A "lady" would not have dropped or lifted her shoulders during this time. Her shoulders would not be stiff because she would have been

inside doing housework instead of using her muscles outside. Antonia confidently states that she can work just like a man would and be a great help to her family's farm. Her father dies and she persuades readers to believe it is natural to assume his role by speaking with such assurance that she can handle the tasks. Antonia's use of slang implies that she does not care about school anymore. It is for "little boys". Her character distorts the image of what a conventional feminine figure raised on the western frontier during this century.

Antonia commands the role of "patriarch" after her father passes away. Her family depends on her strength.

When the sun was drooping low, Antonia came up the big south draw with her team. How much older she had grown in eight months! She had come to us a child, and now she was a tall, strong young girl, although her fifteenth birthday had just slipped by. I ran out and met her as she brought her horses up the windmill to water them. She wore the boots her father had so thoughtfully taken off before he shot himself, and his old fur cap. Her outgrown cotton dress switched about her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor's. Her neck came up strongly out her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf. (60)

Antonia has matured tremendously in eight months, she is not seen a little girl anymore. She is described as strong and tall which were traditionally masculine descriptions of young boys who worked on farms. She performs male tasks on the farm by taking care of the horses. She wears her father's old boots. Girls were not to be seen in dirty and unruly clothing such as an

outgrown dress. Her skin is brown and not fair. Young ladies during this time were to well groomed and brown skin suggests field work. Women were not supposed to be in the fields. Antonia's neck is compared to the bole of a tree. The bole is the main wooden axis of a tree. Her neck holds a lot of weight. It is the foundation of her strength and muscular advancement. This description is one that emphasizes the warped role.

Antonia's strength is carried as a dominant trait throughout her life into adulthood.

All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions. It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races. (167)

Inside is where she finds her strength and courage. Her sons are a mirror reflection of who she is. Usually boys are compared to their fathers and girls are compared to their mothers. However, here Cather emphasizes the synonymous traits between mother and sons. Her sons stand tall because she has given them her strong heart and raised them as a powerful force. Antonia raised her children and installed the values that are seen within her.

Antonia maintains her leadership role and lends another helping hand to her husband when they get married.

The first ten years were a hard struggle. Her husband knew very little about farming and often grew discouraged. " We'd never have got through if I hadn't been so strong. I've always had good health, thank God, and I was

able to help him in the fields until right up to the time before my babies came.(162)

Her husband doesn't know how to work on a farm, while Antonia has years of experience and practice under her belt. She has the experience that most women during this time did not have because they weren't allowed to have such experiences working outside. Again, Antonia is cast in a masculine role. She has to teach her husband how to do traditional "mans" work. Antonia works on the farm while pregnant which allows her strength to be seen to the fullest extent. If she hadn't been so giving and healthy her family and her farm would have suffered. She is the backbone of her family and the men in her life depend on her more than she depends on them. Cather utilizes Antonia's character to prove that women have what it takes to perform the same tasks that men perform. Women are capable of leading along with nurturing. Antonia has provided a sturdy foundation for her family which was generally the male role to protect. Antonia takes on this role and challenges the notion that women came secondary to their husbands. Her role is equal if not superior to her husband's role.

Antonia is proud of her inner masculinity. She is aware that she is seen differently than other young women but isn't afraid of what others think.

Oh, better I like to work out of doors than in a house!" she used to sing joyfully. " I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man." She would toss her head and ask me to feel the muscles swell in her brown arm. (Cather, 68)

Antonia expresses to Jim that she likes working outside rather than inside. Men typically worked outside, while women took care of household chores, but not Antonia. She liked the rough men's work. She is comfortable with her masculinity and does not mind what others think of her because she likes it enough. Her body language also implies that she is fine with the fact that she is cast in a light unlike other women of her time. She tosses her head back implying her carefree notion to the situation. She confidently shows off her muscles because she is proud of the hard work she has put in. Her arm is brown because of all the time she spends outside. The sun turns her skin darker which also presumes a male trait. Women wanted fair skin, they wore clothes specifically to keep themselves covered up, but Antonia clearly does not care about that at all. She just wants to be outside working despite the sun's effects on her skin tone.

Gender roles are a tool used by society to set acceptable boundaries and ideals upon the sexes. Cather's novel, *My Antonia* challenges this tool. This novel emphasizes the fluctuating role of the "New Woman". As Antonia takes on characteristics commonly associated with men, readers are confronted with the subversion of the female role.