

# Willa cather and feminism analytical essay



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Was Willa Cather a feminist? How does she Portray Women in Her Novel ' My Antonia'?

A feminist can be regarded as a person who supports the equality of women. Willa Cather can be classified under the feminist authors through her literature work works. Various analysts of her work bring out the different aspects of feminism that are clear in her works.

For example, critics such as Granville Hicks say, “ Cather failed to conform to the contemporary life as it is” (O'Brien 464). This inconformity was mainly attributed to the fact that Cather would always dress in a masculine way. In fact, another analyst named Lewis says that during her life in college, “ Cather looked like a young man” (Lewis 38).

This dressing is seen as a purposeful step in challenging the social construct of the masculine gender. In addition, a photograph of Willa Cather in the archives of the University of Nebraska portrays her wearing a shingled hair during a period that women wore their hair fashionably long. The shingled hair is also seen as a masculinity symbol since it was gendered to be for men.

It shows Cather's fight for equality between men and women during her time. Another factor that brings out the aspect of feminism in Cather is the fact she always surrounds herself with female friends in all her life.

For example, in college, she had female friends such as Louise Pound and Isabelle McClung. It is also interesting that she moved in with these women

in Toronto after college. This aspect showed her approval of the relevance of females since she did not live with a man at any one time of her life.

It is also seen as a proof that a woman can live without necessarily depending on her male counterpart. This observation confirms why her sexual identity is still a big question to date. Cather's life was that of a total nonconformist with the societal standards of gender.

For example, from her masculine tone in various narratives to using male narrators in her writings, Cather indicates has assumption of masculinity as a woman. The fact that she dressed like a man and wore a hair like that of men is also an indication of her struggle against the social construct of masculinity. She used her personal life to illustrate that gender roles were literary assigned by the society and that they could be contravened.

Feminism is also deeply engraved in the masculine tone of Willa Cather's work. For example, Woodress says, " Cather so completely... embraced masculine values that when she wrote about women writers, she sounded like a patronizing man" (Woodress par. 10).

This observation is an indication of the deeper search for a balance of the two genders that the society constructs. Cather was stern on women who viewed men as the norm or standard in the society. Another evidence of Cather's feminism approach in life is seen in her continued use of the male perspective in her writings. For example, Sara Jewett who was a mentor and friend to Cather advised her at one time to use some females in her narrations.

However, Catha declined the advice. Cather replied that she preferred using male narrators (Woodress par. 11). This situation further indicates that Cather had a deeply seated approval of equality between men and women and that she would have approved the case of females behaving like males in different roles.

In fact, Cather would depict male playing feminist roles in her narrations. As a feminist, Cather used the work of art to illustrate that women could also play the role that men played since it was not ideal but a social construct. As a result, her personal life is packaged in a way that questions the social norms of masculinity and femininity.

Further, in the novel ' My Antonia', which will be tackled deeper in the next section, Cather draws a thin line between the main character Antonia Shimerda and her personal real life. In fact, analysts of her work have concluded that it is difficult to know where her fiction characters and their life end and/or where depictions of her personal life begin or ends.

For example in a biography, Cather was a feminist who " turned her own life and experiences into literature to a degree that is uncommon among writers" (Woodress par. 6). This confirmation indicates that feminism was inherent in Cather. She even had difficulties in separating her own feminist views and those of the characters that she creates in the novel.

Reality of feminism in her life creeps into her writing that overpowers her created characters. Therefore, she ends up presenting her real life experience as a woman who grew up in a male dominated environment,

namely Nebraska. Interestingly, Cather's interest in feminism is clearly depicted in her words during an interview with Latrobe Carroll (Giglio par. 2).

She says, " I grew up fond of some of these immigrants- particularly the old women who used to tell me their home country...I had an enthusiasm for a kind of country and a kind of people, rather than ambition" (Bohlke par. 4).

This statement shows that Cather had a clear perception of people and society that she desired. This perception is the feminist society that she draws in her works of art.

Hence, it suffices to declare Cather a feminist playwright. However, it is now crucial to investigate whether there is any link between her feminism and the way she portrays women in her novels such as ' My Antonia'.

In her novel- My Antonia, Willa Cather portrays women in a strong feministic light. Cather takes time to paint an accurate image of success to all her female characters. All women are depicted as ultimately successful at the end of the story. In the novel, Cather builds very physically powerful womanly characters who are feminists in nature.

All the female characters are able to overcome the difficulties they face as they settle down in a new land. This power to overcome is meant to compromise the male dominated world of success (Woodress par. 4).

Through the way Cather brings out the characters, the reader is able to identify the feminist ideals of the author.

Cather's inspiration to present the significant roles that were played by women during settlement of westerners in America is visible in this novel

based on her approval of women equality with men in terms of role-play. For example, the abilities that men have in overcoming difficulties of settling their families in new areas are equal to those of women in the novel.

In fact, she presents female characters that played equal or more important roles than those of men. For example, in the novel, Antonia Shimerda actively compromises gender norms to show that such norms can be changed. Antonia assertively takes over the duties of her late father immediately he dies. For example, Antonia begins undertaking roles that were traditionally assigned for men.

The plan is to compromise those outdated norms. In fact, she says, " I don't care that your grandmother says it makes me like a man" (Cather 801). This assertion shows her tough belief in gender parity. Cather's feminism approach in writing is also brought out by the way she questions the andocentric system where the male gender is believed to be the standard.

Through Antonia Shimerda who is one of her strongly depicted feminist characters in the novel, Cather questions the male norm construct in the society. For example, Antonia says, " I like to be like a man" (Cather 801). This remark, especially by a main character, indicates the author's approach of the masculine societal construct that a woman can play the role of a man with comfort.

It also shows the thirst for equality in women. Women desire to be like men and/or to be equal to them. Therefore, Cather questions the notion that men are the standard in the society. Cather continues to present Antonia as able and active woman who achieves all she desires in life. Despite the death of

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her father, this woman assumes all the manly duties and succeeds amidst dissenting voices that claim that she acted like a man.

At the end of it all, she is able to bring up her family in a better way than men do. For example, Jim, a character in the novel remarks, “ it was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight” (Cather 926). In this statement, Cather wants to disapprove the traditional societal construct that boys learn to be assertive from their fathers or other males.

She portrays Antonia as a woman who brings up well-cultured and upright men as evidenced by Jim’s words. In fact, Cather wants to show that despite a woman having a husband and children to cater for, she can still be successful as men are.

Feminists also advocate for abolition of the inequality construct that exists between males and females. Cather uses female characters that are determined, opinionated, and self-directing to bring about the aspect of females being equal to males. She presents some gendered roles that are typically believed to characterize males through women characters.

To deliver this point, she makes all female characters successful. From the novel, Lena Lingard moves to the city as a stranger and succeeds in business as seen in, “ she had come to Lincoln, a country girl, with no introductions except to some cousins...and she was already making clothes for the women of the young married set” (Cather 885).

Cather depicts women as hard workers and breadwinners in their families, a construct that the society rejects. For example, she writes about Lena as a

role model whom other people have emulated based on her devotion to work (Cather 885). Cather also presents Tiny Soderball as a woman who has strong business acumen.

Tiny is drawn as an adventurous woman who travels to different parts of the world searching trade goods of high value such as gold. In fact, she says, “She was satisfied with her success, but not elated” (Cather 897). Cather uses this statement to portray women as self-determined and successful, just like their male counterparts.

In the novel, women are depicted as uncompromising creatures. A strong-willed person is one who shows the character of determination, fortitude, and resilience. Cather draws a picture of women who are determined to achieve, despite the challenges they come across in a male-dominated society.

For example, the novel presents a woman Antonia Shimerda who is eager to learn a new language at a young age. In fact, her determination is clearly brought out when her father eventually dies. She fills the gap by playing his roles as seen in her words, “I like to be like a man” (Cather 801).

She cannot heed to criticizing voices and outcry by some individuals who say that she is playing a man’s role. For example, she tells Jim Burden, “I not care that your grandmother says it makes me like a man” (Cather 80). Her strong will presents women as a tough gender that is able to defy discouragements and achieve amidst obstacles.

After the death of her father, people expected that Antonia would either take to the streets or move to her relatives to beg for food. However, she is



determined to work towards her success. In fact, she stops spending her time playing with other young people such as Jim so that she can begin to work. Consequently, Antonia is portrayed as a very successful woman at the end of the story (O'brien 462).

This depiction shows how determined women end up succeeding in life. With reference to her success, the author says, " She was like a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (Cather 926). Another woman who is painted as strong willed is Frances Harling.

This woman represents the young and upcoming woman. Cather draws this character working in a white-collar job as a chief clerk. Frances is also depicted as the person who manages her father's office when he is absent. This responsibility shows how a determined woman can be trusted to perform duties that men perform.

Ability to work and/or supervise oneself as a woman is also quietly depicted through the girl who is able to work in the absence of her father. Her strong will is also depicted by the way Cather portrays her success in business. In fact, Frances proceeds to be the manager of her father's offices when he eventually retires.

Perseverance in learning the art of business and succeeding is another aspect of a woman that is clearly brought out through her. It is through strong will that women in the novel are seen as successful.

An independent person is one who is self-sufficient. He or she has the ability to make decisions without the influence of others. Cather portrays women as

independent beings who have the capacity to produce excellent results based on their independent decisions. One of such women is Lena Lingard.

This woman is able to assert her independent desire in life, despite criticisms from her people. For example, the people of Black Hawk believe that a woman should not leave home to work in town. However, Lena defies all these unfounded notions and moves to the city where she becomes a successful businessperson.

“ She had come to Lincoln, a country girl with no introductions...and she was already making clothes for the women” (Cather 885). Lina’s drive for self-reliance is also evident in the way she moves to the city without depending on anyone to show her the way or to introduce her to the city dwellers (Cather 885). Her determination to provide for herself is portrayed through her hard work too as seen in, “ She evidently had a great natural aptitude for work” (Cather 885).

Lena even refuses to marry in a bid to maintain her independence. In fact, when she involves herself with Jim, the relationship does not erode her independence. Woodress’s biography presents her as influentially reminiscent and not noticeable through zeal (par. 3).

At this point, Lena is both financially and emotionally independent. Hence, she cannot be manipulated. This point portrays women as independent and hardworking people.

Another woman who is painted as powerful is Tiny Soderball. Cather portrays her as a successful businessperson. The autonomy of Tiny is brought out

through her numerous travels that she makes in search of gold. She moves from Seattle, to Alaska, and then to San Francisco.

Only independent women can make numerous long distance travels without being questioned or denied permission (Palleau-Papin 542). Cather portrays women as having the ability to move from one city to another in a free way without help from their male counterparts as depicted in the words of Cather, “ She was satisfied with her success” (Cather 897).

These words show how women’s power resulted in self-satisfaction, as opposed to dependency that is witnessed in defenseless women who have to rely on their male counterparts. Cather also uses Frances Harling to portray women as powerful. She depicts her as a working person who is able to stand in for her father in his office work.

In fact, she is drawn as the chief clerk who is in charge of others. The writer goes ahead to show her as the manager of her father’s offices in Black Hawk town after he eventually retires (Cather 894). This depicts women as bosses who are reliable and dependable by others.

Another character that is used to portray women as powerful is Genevieve Whitney. Cather paints her as a sophisticated, intelligent, and an educated woman. Such a woman is less dependent on the help of other people since she can independently work for her wealth.

The author refers to her as having, “ her own fortune and her own life” (Cather 712). It is important to note the use of the possessive term with reference to Whitney livelihood. The implication is that she is independent of

factors that control a person's life. Women are therefore painted as well armed to face and conquer the challenges of life without being dependants.

An opinionated person is one who is able to bring forth his or her ideas without fear. Cather depicts most of the women in her novel as opinionated. She portrays women as having the ability to decide on their own and/or take action without influence of others.

One character that is depicted as opinionated is Antonia Shimerda. Antonia is depicted as asserting her opinion to take a man's job after the death of her father, despite objections, for example by Jim's grandmother (Cather 801). She goes ahead to implement her decision by avoiding playing with Jim. Instead, she devotedly works in the farm. The author finally portrays Antonia as a very successful woman.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the literature work by Willa Cather depicts her as a strong feminist as she confirms in an interview with Latrobe Caroll where she narrates the path that her life has taken since her childhood. The paper has revealed her as a powerful character who had to beat all odds to attain a feminist title that acted as an awakening call to all other women who had been used only as vessels or machines of producing children.

They had no other role to play. Cather passes the message that such women need to break these chains loose, come up with a plan for their life, and rise up to execute it, despite the challenges that might come their way from men who will pronounce them as betrayers of societal norms.

The paper has found that such norms are unfounded and that they only tie women to the extent that they cannot exercise their full potential of taking leadership positions, being breadwinners, and/or deciding on behalf of their male counterparts.

Cather's belief in equality between men and women has also been clearly brought out by the way she paints all her female characters as independent, strong willed, opinionated powerful, and successful in roles that were typically preserved for men. Any fanatic of Cather's work will declare it an informative masterpiece whose message will continue making sense to the world.

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