

# My antonia: the early-american working woman's reprimand



Despite the trajectories and implications Jim Burden may have imposed upon the female characters of *My Antonia*, each of the “hired girls” winds up successful by their own means, simultaneously demonstrating and defying the stereotypical roles of women during the late 19th century and ultimately cementing *My Antonia* as a critical work in Early-American feminist literature. Willa Cather, accredited American author famous for her depictions of pioneer life, rather brilliantly created a frame for the women of *My Antonia* by juxtaposing their lives with the critical narration voiced by Jim Burden while simultaneously showcasing her eloquent writing in this Künstlerroman that has withstood the test of time. In analyzing aspects of Willa Cather’s personal life, Jim Burden’s hypercritical narration, and the outcomes of said female characters, it becomes quite clear that the portrayed women of *My Antonia* are feminist heroines rather than defiant subordinates as Jim may have once thought of them.

Upon reading through the first books of *My Antonia*, the female characters are tainted by a negative commonality in the way Jim undermines his affection for them with denigration, seeming at first as though Cather’s regards for women are indistinguishable from Jim’s. Jim Burden has a very resolute idea of how women are to act, and anytime one of these characters defies his constrained perception, he is quick to point it out. Numerous points of evidence can be addressed in proving these notions; for example, Jim dictates his shallow contempt for Antonia as she begins to treat him “more like an equal” by saying, “she was four years older than I, to be sure, and had seen more of the world; but I was a boy and she was a girl, and I resented her protecting manner” (Cather 24). He rather blatantly states that

Antonia knows more than him in the regarded situation, but because she is a girl, her help is not wanted. Later on, when Antonia declines the offer to attend school because she instead chooses to work on her family's farm, Jim regards her as boastful and states that "[e]verything [about her] was disagreeable to him, [...] [s]he had lost [all of her nice ways]" (Cather 61, 62). Antonia isn't the only character to be scrutinized in this way. When Jim later moves to Black Hawk, he regards Lena, Tiny, and Antonia as "menace[s] to the social order," noting them to be unrefined and often comparing their actions to that of boys (Cather 98). Despite that Jim affectionately thinks of the women being discussed in this essay, he still holds them all to a rigid and objectifying standard. Having a first person perspective in this regard is critical in showcasing just how Antonia and her female counterparts defy the stereotypes set before them. Jim is simply a delegate of the society he was written into; his words represent how America as a whole felt towards women during the late 19th century, and by illustrating how these women far surpassed Jim's initial impressions, they defy the relevant societal implication of women of their generation.

In proving *My Antonia* as an iconic work in feminist literature, it is also important to establish the difference between Cather's views and that of Jim's. In exploring Cather's background, it makes sense that she would hold high regards to her female characters as most of the notable relationships in her life were with women (Koss). While several critics have come to discuss the potential of Cather being lesbian, the only point that really matters is that Cather respected and looked up to the women she kept in her life.

Knowing that Cather wrote mostly from personal experience also goes to

further prove her adoration for and the importance of the female characters in her novels (Koss). However, critics often argue that Willa Cather was not a feminist at all. It's easy to point out examples where Cather portrays a sexist voice in her writing. Even going to point out Cather's defiance of femininity as a young adult is a credible reason to argue how Cather is far from a feminist, but as English and Humanities expert, Elaine Aprthorp, goes out to point, Cather's writing is a reflection of " her later conscious evaluation of that period from the vantagepoint of a different consciousness, itself the product of her earlier evolutions," essentially stating that Cather's negatively implicative voice is a projection of " her adult embarrassment of her actions as a youth" (Apthorp 8). From here, it is easy to assume that Jim Burden's narration may simply be a reflection of Cather's early opinions and rejections of femininity in combination with the gender-based stipulations she felt as a woman of the 20th century. Proof of Cather's regards for the women in her story is evident simply in knowing that Antonia's enamoring character is drawn from a woman Cather knew personally and wholeheartedly respected as a child, Anna Sadilek; Cather stated in an interview that "[Anna] was one of the truest artists [Cather] ever knew in the keenness and sensitiveness of her enjoyment, in her love of people and in her willingness to take pains," later going on to state that Anna's strong personality was always something that she had wanted to write about (Koss). While Cather's work may come across as sexist or critical of women, Cather simply used Jim's voice as a brilliant framework to juxtapose the strength in the women of her story. Using this device shouldn't be misjudged as Cather also holding women to a stereotypical standard but as a highly crafted way to highlight the roles of the female characters in her story, conclusively providing further reason as <https://assignbuster.com/my-antonia-the-early-american-working-womans-reprimand/>

to why *My Antonia* is clearly brilliant feminist prose from the perspective of Early-American literature.

In addition to the aspects of Cather's life that influenced the structure of the text, it is also essential to talk about the characters themselves that solidify the piece's importance. The three major female icons in *My Antonia* that are being referenced are Tiny Soderball, Lena Lingard, and Antonia Shimerida, the "hired girls" as Jim calls them. As Erika Koss, administrator for the National Endowment of the Arts, notes, "[s]ince the most popular American novels featured upper-class ladies and gentlemen, it was a radical aesthetic move for Cather to feature lower-class, immigrant 'hired girls'" (Koss). From the beginning, these girls are cast as outsiders, working for wages of the townsfolk who let them live amongst them. While Jim often depicts these factors as components of weakness by regularly establishing his class differences between the girls, these factors that are seen as unfavorable are ultimately the fundamentals to what brings them their success.

Tiny Soderball, previously working a fickle job at a men's boarding house, might be considered to have wound up the most successful of the girls after finding fortune in her keen independence in Alaska. Lena Lingard most closely portrays modern feminist ideals. For numerous male characters throughout the book, Lena is an icon of sexuality; not only is she described endlessly based on her physical traits, she is also the center of Jim's sexual desires, and yet despite all of this, Lena treats her luring air of sexuality with indifference. She rather blatantly stated that she had no interest in seeking a husband and is often noted by Jim to refuse his offers to pay for her (Cather 138). Her strong attitude and fidelity to her own desires, regardless of the <https://assignbuster.com/my-antonia-the-early-american-working-womans-reprimand/>

impressions they may have imposed on her, led to quick success as the leading dressmaker of Black Hawk. In the end, Lena moved to San Francisco in pursuit of even greater endeavors alongside Tiny. Even after Lena's eventual success is accredited, Jim still discounts her achievements by saying, "Lena's success puzzled me; [s]he was so easy going," only reiterating both the predisposed implications he has for the girls and his role as their own personal naysayer (Cather 133). Regardless of Tiny and Lena's scrutinized secondary roles, it goes without saying that Antonia is most heavily affected by Jim's gender-based confines. Even the title of the novel itself is steady proof of Jim's misguided idealizations of Antonia. David Laird, professor at UCLA, reiterates this by saying, "[Jim's] appropriation of her is evident in the title, [...] [it's] his way of claiming ownership [over her]" (Laird 248). Somewhere as a child, Jim created a romanticized vision of Antonia, despite that she never once reciprocated his affection. In response to this unsatisfied affliction, Jim turns Antonia into some idyllic pinnacle, and anytime he catches a glimpse of Antonia's natural human flaws, he is more rash in pointing them out, as was previously noted. When Antonia is visited later on in the book, it is blatantly obvious that her character is Jim's personification of his undying tie to a romanticized past. Antonia's success lies in her thriving family and omnipotent happiness, and by association, Jim seems to come to terms with a likeminded contentment. Despite that Jim may feel that he has found happiness at this point, his experience is really only a secondary echo of Antonia's abundant joy. In the end, the women of the story are the only one's who really seem to find happiness. While Jim's voice leads the reader throughout My Antonia, these women sail a course of their own, refusing to fit the standards that had been set for them. In the <https://assignbuster.com/my-antonia-the-early-american-working-womans-reprimand/>

end, it was their determinedness to sense of self and their undying courage to uphold their strengths in the face of adversity that led them to success.

In the end, these women grew up to defy the precedents set before them. True of Cather's brilliant nature to share more in what is left unsaid, My Antonia is a story voiced in opposition to an unspoken narrative. Contrary to the conventional attitude and feigned artificiality of Jim's thoughts of these girls, these women find a success far superior to anything he has ever known. In comparing Jim Burden's hyper-analytical voice towards these girls and their eventual individual successes, a powerful juxtaposition is created, conclusively demonstrating their strengths despite the gender barriers held against them. Cather's depiction of feminism in My Antonia is a story of which strict holds to conventionality forbade success and bravery amongst adversity became rudimentary to happiness, irrefutably rebelling the ideals of gender as a patriarchal construct and solidifying My Antonia as exemplary feminist prose of its generation.

## **Works Cited**

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