



WOMEN LIBERATION IN THE NOVELS OF WILLA CATHER

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ABSTRACT

Willa Cather (1873-1947) was the first female writer in America literary history that depicted the frontier life of pioneers in the Middle West America. She was best known for such novels as *O Pioneers* and *My Antonia*. She used her creative theme and artistic style full of unique characteristics to open a paradise with her unique charm in the history of American literature. Willa Cather is one of those quietly achieving American writers, whose works are quietly appreciated in the shadow of the era's Great Writers but, going on a century later, are still being quietly appreciated when many of the once great ones are no longer read. She did have a spell of relative fame in her forties with critical and popular acclaim-even winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1922-but by her late fifties her work was being reassessed as somewhat outdated. It would surprise many of her then-detractors to learn that so many years later so many of her books are cherished by so many readers. Willa's father, Charles, was tall and fair, with the manners of a southern gentleman. As a young man, he'd studied law for a couple of years and, because of his helpful nature, neighbors often asked for his help in settling disputes. Willa's mother, Jennie, was the dominant parent, and, according to biographer E. K. Brown, when necessary, she disciplined her children with a rawhide whip; in later years, none of them seemed to resent the whippings and even declared them beneficial. Mrs. Cather, however, gave her children the freedom to do almost anything they wished, so long as they obeyed household rules. When Willa was about a year old, her parents moved a mile or so to her grandfather William Cather's farm, Willow Shade, named for the multitude of willow trees surrounding the house. The soil at Willow Shade was too poor for farming, so most of the family's income came from raising sheep. Willa enjoyed going with her father to drive in the sheep, just as she equally enjoyed being read to by Grandmother Boak, who lived with the family.

KEYWORDS: Willa Cather, female writer, American writers, family.

INTRODUCTION

In 1877, Grandfather William and his wife, Caroline, left Virginia and moved to Webster County, Nebraska, where they bought a farm. Six years later, Charles moved his family to join them; Charles' brother George lived on a farm not far away. At first Willa felt as if she were being uprooted from everything familiar to her and abandoned in the middle of nowhere. With no playmates, she often spent her days exploring the vast prairie on her pony, where she discovered German, Norwegian, Swedish, and Bohemian neighbors in their dugouts and sod houses. In 1884, the

family moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska, about seventeen miles away (in those days, the land was open range, and distance had to be estimated by tying a rope with a knot in it around a wagon wheel and counting the revolutions). In town, Willa befriended the town's two doctors, accompanied them on their rounds and learned as much as her eager mind could absorb about prairie medicine. Once, she even administered chloroform to a boy whose leg needed to be amputated. In the evenings, she read to Grandmother Boak from

the English classics, the Bible, and Pilgrim's Progress.

As a child and adolescent on the Nebraska prairie, Willa Cather grew to know many people, some of whom would later figure prominently in her writing. One of these adults was William Ducker, an Englishman, who began tutoring her in Greek and Latin. The small laboratory in his home fascinated her and she often helped him with his experiments. Mr. Schindelmeisser drank heavily, gave Willa piano lessons, and became the model for Professor Wunsch in *The Song of the Lark*. Mr. and Mrs. Wiener, the Cathers' Jewish neighbors, introduced her to European literature and were immortalized as the Rosens in "Old Mrs. Harris."

Some of her most enduring stories centre on strong, hardworking women, stepping in to build lives in harsh settings where weaker men folk faltered. Which might make you think Cather would be regarded as a feminist writer? But she undercut this interpretation of her work by often selecting male narrators or male perspectives on the women characters. Moreover, her heroines got ahead by mixing allegedly male traits of hard-nosed practicality, rationality and business sense in with the supposed feminine charms of empathy and intuition.

A CAREER IN JOURNALISM (1896-1912)

In Cather's junior year of college, she began growing her hair longer and putting the eccentricities of her early university days behind her. In Pittsburgh, she wore more feminine clothing, and, for the first time in her life, she found herself popular. She was invited to join women's clubs and to attend parties and picnics. She was especially impressed by the museums and concert halls and was happy to be writing prodigiously and earning enough money to support her. She found it difficult, however, to write magazine copy about the

joys of decorating a home and raising children. When the *Home Monthly* was sold about a year later, Cather resigned and began working on the telegraph desk of the *Pittsburgh Leader*, writing dramatic and musical criticism; she sent the latter back to the *Journal*, in Lincoln. The *Leader* also ran several of her short stories, some under her own name and some under a pseudonym. Cather's new lifestyle soon began wearing on her. Cather's so-called prairie trilogy starts with *O Pioneers!* (1913), a heartfelt account of the life of one Alexandra Bergson, an immigrant Swedish girl who, upon her father's death, takes over the struggling family farm in Nebraska. Acting boldly and wisely, she expands and drives the farm to success, bringing wealth to her largely ungrateful family but denying herself personal happiness. The story is told in simple but lyrical language, similar to the early work of John Steinbeck two decades later, expressing the poetic relationship of the people and the often unforgiving land.

HER PIONEERING SPIRIT AGAINST MEN AND NATURE

The famous king of Macedon (Alexander the Great) led his army to conquer large areas of Europe and created the splendid empire. Just like her male ancestor, Alexandra, the heroic female protagonist in *O Pioneers* also established her own "empire" on the colossal wilderness of American West. She turned the wild land into the prosperous countryside and became one of the most prosperous farmers on the Divide after 16 years' struggle. Both of them were conquerors and creators, while their feats were totally different. For that, Alexander was just a male whose desire for achievements was not acknowledged. However, "Cather won't be bounded by such gender-discrimination tradition and prejudiced myth and her Alexandra is a challenge to this 'Woman Myth'-an actual prejudice against women" (Woodress, 1990). Her Alexandra

seems to be more a woman of head than one of heart. With the great intelligence, reason, open-mindedness, and strength of will, she not only gains a spiritual and eventual success over the frontier, but also transcends all the male characters around her. The story started from a gloomy town named Hanover, which was so small that there was only “a cluster of low drab building huddled on the gray prairie, under a gray sky” (Ryan, 1998) with snowflakes curling and eddying about. The fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its “somber wastes”.

With so many calamities like crop failures and diseases, Bergson was so depressed that he died at an early age of 46. Bergson had to entrust his family’s future and the task of taming the land to Alexandra because “the boys were not as half intelligent as their sister” (Cather, 1987). Alexandra was the first child of Bergson’s four children together with three boys, Oscar, Lou, and Emil. She was a tall, strong girl, walking rapidly as if she knew exactly where she was going and what she was going to do next. She wore a man’s long coat and had a serious, thoughtful face and “her clear deep eyes were fixed intently on the distance” (Cather, 1987). Through the description of her dress and her appearance, Willa Cather presented us with an intelligent, powerful, and independent woman image that was totally different from the stereotyped weak women images. Alexandra was bound to achieve her self-fulfillment in the taming of the wild land and bringing modern civilization to it with her unusual pioneering spirit. Willa Cather believed that “a pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves” (Cather, 1987) and Alexandra was such an image of a typical pioneer. The task of taming the land could never be accomplished because pioneering in the wilderness demanded flexible mind and dauntless spirit. During the tough process of pioneering, if the pioneers

were afraid of making mistakes and making changes, they would never go ahead. Unfortunately, Lou, Oscar, and their neighbors were such people because they refused to accept new ideas and reforms, sticking to the old ways. In contrast with her brothers and neighbors, Alexandra stood out as a pioneer. In her teens, “Alexandra could make more money than a hired man by raising chickens and cows”. She knew where her advantages lied in, compared with the men. She asked Ivar for advice on the caring of her big bunch of hogs. The old man suggested reforms in the traditional way of raising hogs, which displeased Oscar and Lou. But Alexandra followed his wise suggestion and finally succeeded. What is more, she also learned from one young farmer who had been away at school. It is Alexandra who put up the first silo on the Divide; it is Alexandra who said the land was ready for wheat and had to raise three big wheat crops before others quit putting all their land in corn. Alexandra’s open-mindedness enabled her to adapt to the circumstances easily and embrace new ideas warm-heartedly. Therefore, she led her family and community to get through the most difficult times on the prairie. The essential factors to Alexandra’s success under the terrible circumstances include her adventurous spirit to experiment, her willingness to learn from others, and her strong will, passion, and desire. Finally Alexandra brought prosperity to her family and her community, and planted civilization to the wilderness. After 16 years, the once bleak Nebraska prairie took great changes. The prairie was now “a place of milk and honey”. Willa Cather presented Alexandra as a woman possessing creativity and productivity by which Alexandra found her with pioneering spirit.

FEMINIST MOVEMENT

A movement to secure legal, economic, and social equality for women. It has its roots in the nineteenth-century women’s movement,

which sought among other things, to secure property rights and suffrage for women.

DEPICTIONS OF FEMINISM IN MY ANTONIA

Willa Cather's *My Antonia* has been the cause of much dispute in literary society. One of the main questions argued is whether or not *My Antonia* is a feminist novel. Feminist criticism focuses on taking a look at the meaning within texts in order to discern inequalities and the power structure of each depicted gender. In fact there are many instances throughout the novel where Antonia herself could be perceived as a symbol of feminism. We can also see the male narrator exhibiting a number of actions that create questions about his masculinity as well as traditional gender roles within society. As a result of these examples *My Antonia* may indeed be classified as a feminist novel. To begin the analysis of *My Antonia* through the feminist perspective we will take a look at exactly how the character of Antonia may be perceived as a symbol of the feminist movement. Feminism theory is particularly concerned with the depiction of traditional gender roles and the equalization of men and women. Often such classic definitions of gender created a strong male personality and a weaker female personality. Through much of the novel Antonia can be seen breaking these gender roles and personality types far more often than she adheres to them. One difference is found within her character makeup. Antonia is pictured as an extraordinarily strong and independent woman. She refuses to let anyone make her do what she doesn't want to and is in fact uncontrollable. This is made clear when Antonia is working as a housekeeper for the Harlings. Antonia begins to frequent dances in town and is seen there many nights. This behavior escalates until an engaged man attempts to kiss Antonia and Mrs. Harling gives her an ultimatum to either quit dancing or find another place to work. Here is

where Antonia's individuality and determination shines through as she refuses to quit dancing and remains independent by finding work at the Cutter's.

THE WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

A movement to combat sexual discrimination and to gain full legal, economic, vocational, educational, and social rights and opportunities for women, equal to those of men. Also called women's liberation movement, women's movement, women's liberation.

A HISTORY OF FEMINISM IN THE 1960S AND 1970S

The women's liberation movement was a collective struggle for equality that was most active during the late 1960s and 1970s. It sought to free women from oppression and male supremacy.

THE MEANING OF THE NAME

The movement consisted of women's liberation groups, advocacy, protests, consciousness raising, feminist theory, and a variety of diverse individual and group actions on behalf of women and freedom. The term was created as a parallel to other liberation and freedom movements of the time. The root of the idea was rebellion against colonial powers or a repressive national government to win independence for a national group and to end oppression. Parts of the racial justice movement of the time had begun calling themselves the "black liberation." The term "liberation" resonates not just with independence from oppression and male supremacy for individual women, but with solidarity among women seeking independence and ending oppression for women collectively. It was often held in contrast to individualistic feminism. The individuals and groups were loosely tied

together by common ideas, although there were also significant differences between groups and conflicts within the movement. The term “women’s liberation movement” is often used synonymously with “women’s movement” or “second wave feminism” although there were actually many different types of feminist groups.

WOMEN’S LIBERATION VS. RADICAL FEMINISM

The women’s liberation movement is also sometimes seen as being synonymous with radical feminism because both were concerned with freeing members of society from oppressive social structure. Both have sometimes been characterized as a threat to men, particularly when the movements use rhetoric about “struggle” and “revolution.” However, feminist theorists overall are actually concerned with how society can eliminate unfair sex roles. There is more to women’s liberation than the anti-feminist fantasy that feminists are women who want to eliminate men. The desire for freedom from oppressive social structure in many women’s liberation groups led to internal struggles with structure and leadership. The idea of full equality and partnership being expressed in a lack of structure is credited by many with the weakening power and influence of the movement. It led to later self-examination and further experimentation with leadership and participation models of organization.

PUTTING WOMEN’S LIBERATION IN CONTEXT

The connection with a black liberation movement is significant because many of those involved in creating the women’s liberation movement had been active in the civil rights movement and the growing black power and black liberation movements. They had experienced disempowerment and oppression there as women. The “rap group”

as a strategy for consciousness within the black liberation movement evolved into consciousness-raising groups within the women’s liberation movement. The Combahee River Collective formed around the intersection of the two movements in the 1970s. Many feminists and historians trace the roots of the women’s liberation movement to the New Left and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. Women who worked in those movements often found that they were not treated equally, even within liberal or radical groups that claimed to fight for freedom and equality. Feminists of the 1960s had something in common with feminists of the 19th century in this respect: Early women’s rights activists such as Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were inspired to organize for women’s rights after being excluded from men’s anti-slavery societies and abolitionist meetings.

WRITING ABOUT THE WOMEN’S LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Women have written fiction, non-fiction and poetry about ideas of the 1960s’ and 1970s’ women’s liberation movement. A few of these feminist writers were Frances M. Beal, Simone de Beauvoir, Carol Hanisch, Audre Lorde, Kate Millett, Robin Morgan, Marge Piercy, Adrienne Rich and Gloria Steinem. In her classic essay on women’s liberation, Jo Freeman commented on the tension between the Liberation Ethic and the Equality Ethic. “To seek only equality, given the current male bias of the social values, is to assume that women want to be like men or that men are worth emulating. It is just as dangerous to fall into the trap of seeking liberation without due concern for equality.” Freeman also commented on the challenge of radicalism versus reformism which was a tension in the women’s movement. “This is a situation the politicians frequently found themselves in during the early days of the movement. They found repugnant the possibility of pursuing

‘reformist’ issues which might be achieved without altering the basic nature of the system, and thus, they felt, only strengthen the system. However, their search for a sufficiently radical action and/or issue came to naught and they found themselves unable to do anything out of fear that it might be counterrevolutionary. Inactive revolutionaries are a good deal more innocuous than active ‘reformists.’

CONCLUSION

Through her works, Cather likewise gave us an individual account of masterful advancement: Every craftsman makes himself conceived. Presently she is viewed as a standout amongst other scholars amid the principal half of twentieth century. For Alexandra in *O Pioneers*, she not just picked up poverty, self-sufficiency, getting a charge out of a feeling of nobility, yet additionally wound up plainly one with the spirit of nature in soul. During the time spent making Alexandra, who was a female character instilled with cognizance and power rather than a question of male want and longing, Willa Cather proposed to pass on the beneath said thoughts regarding ladies. Besides, ladies should look for her personality in something complete and incredible as opposed to love and marriage. Cather’s prosperity and Alexandra’s accomplishments ashore showed that ladies would never restrain their creative energy just to love and marriage. Thirdly, it would be so noteworthy for a lady to get the financial and otherworldly freedom in her interest for self-personality. Willa Cather’s originations about pioneer soul and ladies’ freedom have incredible importance to present day ladies.

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