

# A Feminist Analysis of Protagonists' Self-development in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*

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This paper focuses on pioneer women's development of the self from the perspective of feminism in *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1994). As rigid social connections and concepts restrict women's autonomy and freedom, they must transform themselves and the world in order to survive. In order to analyze pioneer women's process of self-growth in the special period, the author of this paper compares and contrasts the specific situation, and analyzes the characteristics of the protagonists in the above two novels. Through analysis, the author concludes that pioneer women always create a nurturing and gracious atmosphere in their household. Practically, these women successfully transmit the old civilization to the newly established homestead.

**Keywords:** Willa Cather, feminism, pioneer women, self-development

## Introduction

### Current Studies on Willa Cather

Willa Cather's fiction has generated significant criticism and analysis during the last several decades. Four biographical studies appeared within five years of Cather's death in 1947. The first one is Mildred Bennet's *The World of Willa Cather* (1951), focusing on the memories and incidents of the Red Cloud years as they related to the fiction. James Woodress's meticulous biography, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (1987), illuminates the intricate connections between her works and personal life. Sharon O'Brien's work on Cather, culminating in *Willa Cather: A Literary life* is the most powerful body of criticism that deals with Cather as a woman and lesbian writer. Maxwell Geismar's *The Last of the Provincials: The American Novel, 1915-1925 (on Willa Cather, Anderson, Fitzgerald)* (1959) offers the first comprehensive assessment of Cather's fiction. He appreciates her investment of a life in art, her attempt to find meaning through art, her struggle to maintain values in hostile and threatening times.

Another dimension in Cather's studies began in 1967 with the publication of *The Kingdom of Art* by the University of Nebraska Press edited by Bernice Slote. The volume gathers Cather's dramatic and literary criticism, from 1893 to 1896, and reveals both her intellectual complexity and her significant experience with the arts and world literature. University of Nebraska Press published a book in 2000, named *Willa Cather and Politics of Criticism*, written by Joan Acocella. It has evoked wide repercussion in study of Willa Cather. Acocella provides an overview of Cather's life and works, and shows that Cather's works do not neatly fit the

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demands of critics—from the Marxists to the feminists.

Cather's place in American literature and culture has been the subject of several studies. The latest one is to re-examine Cather's writings from the aspect of eco-criticism in the context of globalization. Cather's works emerge as environmentally conscious texts when they are read against the background of Deep Ecology. Deep Ecology emphasizes that human beings represent only one strand in the intricate web of life; all forms of life have a right to continued existence; and human beings must integrate ecology into the world around them in order to achieve a suitable existence (Woodress, 1989).

Thanks to such groups of scholars of interpretation we have deepened the understanding of Willa Cather's works and broadened our view on Willa Cather studies.

### **A Brief Introduction of Feminism and Feminist Literature**

Feminism originates in the struggle for women's social rights, political movements, and later develops into the fight for equality between men and women in cultural and spiritual aspects. Feminists advocate the overthrow of the patriarchal domination and improve women's status. As the inevitable product of women's liberation movement, feminist literature advocates literary expression of women's situation from the perspective of the creation of gender awareness, and explores the feminine consciousness.

Feminist theory, which emerges from feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience; it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as the social construction of sex and gender (Chodorow, 1989). The feminist movement produces both feminist fiction and non-fiction, and creates new interest in women's writing. It also prompts a general reevaluation of women's historical and academic contributions in response to the belief that women's lives and contributions have been underrepresented as areas of scholarly interest (Blain, Clements, & Grundy, 1990). Much of the early period of feminist literary scholarship is given over to the rediscovery and reclamation of texts written by women. Studies like Dale Spender's *Mothers of the Novel* (1986) and Jane Spencer's *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* (1986) are ground-breaking in their insistence that women have always been writing. More recently, Broadview Press continues to issue 18th and 19th century novels, many hitherto out of print, and the University of Kentucky has a series of republications of early women's novels. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft, is one of the earliest works of feminist philosophy. *A Room of One's Own* (1929) by Virginia Woolf, is noted in its argument for both a literal and figural space for women writers within a literary tradition dominated by patriarchy.

The widespread interest in women's writing is related to a general reassessment and expansion of the literary canon. According to Elyce Rae Helford, "Science fiction and fantasy serve as important vehicles for feminist thought, particularly as bridges between theory and practice" (Helford, 2005, pp. 289-291). Feminist science fiction is sometimes taught at the university level to explore the role of social constructs in understanding gender. Notable texts of this kind are Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Joanna Russ' *The Female Man* (1970), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), and Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

### **The Harsh Social Environment**

In the patriarchal society, "the sexual distribution of political authority and economic power tends either to place women at the bottom of the system or to exclude them entirely" (Ryan, 1998, p. 5). Usually, women's

function in the economic development is ignored or invisible. But in the social and economic development of the American west, women possess a unique position because the value and degree of their participation in the pioneering are necessitated by the arduous task that faces the American pioneers. "In order to accomplish the task of planting a society in the wildness, no man, no woman can be exempted from this toilsome undertaking" (Moynihan, 1990, p. 8). The efforts of frontier men as well as women are required and emphasized to create a civilization out of the vast wilderness. Because women are needed in men's undertaking, men's oppression, repression and suppression over women are not so evident and rampant. The pioneering process in the first part of *O Pioneers!* (1913) is such a case.

In the patriarchal family, only the patriarch of the family can rise to the leadership in the economic, political, cultural, and religious affairs of the community. The husband will make the important decision and does not pay much attention to his wife. For example, Mrs. Bergson in *O Pioneers!* is one of these poor and neglected woman. She is reluctant to leave her dear home for this raw place, but she has already internalized the patriarchal ideology that makes men always have the dominant or masculine roles and women always have the subordinate or feminine roles. Therefore, she has to move together with her husband against her own will, trying to reconstruct her old life on the new land as possible as she can. Being unable to say "no" to her husband, Mrs. Bergson has to content herself with preserving picking and other endless chores at home and in the garden. Since she identifies herself with the traditional subordinate, passive and timid women, Mrs. Bergson will accept whatever her husband gives to her.

Another couple in *My Antonia* (1994) plays the same. They are Mr. and Mrs. Harlings. Mrs. Harling actually has strong, independent nature. She knows what she likes, and is not always trying to imitate other people. However, such an independent and joyful lady behaves completely different when Mr. Harling is at home. No matter how independent the woman's own personality is, she is subordinated to male authority in marriage. The husband is the God's representative within the family, and a wife should not question his wisdom.

A man will have a sense of superiority enjoying his inherent privilege as a man in patriarchal society, no matter how foolish and how incompetent he is. He firmly believes that he is always the dominant power in the family and the woman only possesses a secondary economic and social status in it. A woman is inferior to the patriarchal head and also the other male members of her household. What's worst is that man intends to ignore, even negate women's function.

It should come to mind that this is still a male dominated world in which women are denied the freedom to enter the public world. Society has the false belief that women are by nature less intellectually and physically capable than men. Accordingly, a set of customary and legal constrains is established to block women's entrance to success in the so-called public world. As a result of this policy of exclusion, women are confined to the domestic sphere and the true potential of many women goes unfulfilled. Because women are not given the same opportunities and civil rights as men, they are confined to such household duties always assigned to women in the sexual division of labor, such as cooking, washing, caring for children, ironing, mending, and gardening. The space for women is so narrow that it nearly smothers them to death. Women can neither share with men the rich and colorful life, nor participate in the keen competition on the battlefields of life. Furthermore, they do not have many chances to embrace new ideas, without the sunshine from the outside, the stimulus from competition, the introduction of new ideas, it can be easily imagined that women's pace

becomes slow; their way of thinking is becoming rigid; their germ of life is extinct and there is no need for them to compete with men, they are content with their status quo, and they do not have great incentives and consciousness to improve them, which will do a great harm to the development and self-fulfillment of women in the long run. This is a vicious circle. In turn, women's incompetence will reinforce her status quo as the subordinate and subsidiary beings both in the family and in the society. As women, they are living in a house with a glass window through which they can peep at the busy and interesting life lived by men, but they are denied the entrance to participate in and enjoy it. Life is also like a game whose rules are made by men and for men only. Although both men and women are competitors, women as one group of the runners in the race for society's goods and services are systematically disadvantaged.

### **Alexandra's Frustration With Marital Problems**

Different from the traditional passive women images in the past, Alexandra is a creative woman, who is passionate to create a meaningful existence for her in the patriarchal society. Success brings loneliness as well as wealth. Although Alexandra possesses a large wealth and enjoys some benefits that go with it, she is not as happy as she is expected to be.

Having dedicated her beauty, youth and energy in the tiresome work of carrying on her father's task, Alexandra is still single at the age of 40 and she lives a very lonely life. Being a woman carrying great weight, she longs for a partner to share her sorrows and joys, to release her fatigue, and to refresh her after a day's work. From her girlhood till her adulthood, when troubled or tired, a same dream recurs, in which, she was lifted and carried lightly by someone very strong, she felt free from pain.

Alexandra is ambitious for her achievements on her land, but she's also hungry for love and happiness of a marriage. However, in a patriarchal society, her rightful pursuit for her personal happiness is no easier than her transformation of the wild land. She can transform the wild land but she can't transform the society full of gender injustice and oppression over women.

In the novel, when Alexandra grows older, Mr. Bergson has to depend more and more upon her resourcefulness and good judgment, recognizing that his daughter is intelligent. But in his mind, son and daughter do not mean the same thing. Unfortunately, although his sons are industrious, he can never teach them to use their heads about their work. However, unlike her mother, Alexandra not only dares to say "no" to men, but also has the consciousness as well as actions to defend her individual rights and protect the downtrodden and the ostracized, resorting to the means of law.

Together with Lou and Oscar, Emil also objects to Alexandra's marriage. As for Emil's reaction to her marriage, Alexandra encounters an unexpected disappointment, sadness and irony. She has expected that he can understand her a little more, than his two older brothers but Emil fails her. To Emil, Alexandra acts as more a mother than a sister. After their parents' death, she brings up Emil herself, builds her house for him, and sends him to college in an attempt to create a chance for him to do whatever he wants to. Although Emil loves and even admires Alexandra, he can never understand and appreciate her. Ironically, the people who really understand and appreciate Alexandra are her friends Marie and Carl. Emil remains the same as his brothers—one member of the superior male group.

Even Carl, Alexandra's love, is not as good as he is expected to be. Before Carl plans to go away, Alexandra

confesses to him that she doesn't need money, but needs him for a great many years. Furthermore, she says, "what I have is yours if you care enough about me to take it" (Cather, 1913, p. 84). But Carl is not only "too little to face the criticism of even such men as Lou and Oscar" (Cather, 1913, p. 90), but is also unwilling to accept what Alexandra would give him until he has something to show for himself and has something to offer her. In other words, Carl believes that women should be dependent upon men rather than vice versa. To share with Alexandra what she has without offering something himself is to Carl unthinkable as well as unacceptable. Therefore, despite being tired of the endless wandering days, he chooses to leave for Alaska to seek his fortunes in order to vindicate his poor indignity as a man.

Carl leaves and Emil is gone, Lou and Oscar do not come to her home again, severing the relations with Alexandra. Success can bring man wealth, fame, love, friendship, and power, almost whatever he desires, whereas it brings women loneliness and a sense of resignation. Take Alexandra's marriage for example, her dedication to fulfill her father's task is one reason that she has not got married yet at the age of 40. She simply can find no time and energy to consider her marriage in the painstaking process of pioneering. But the more important reason is that her success and her independence turn out to be a hindrance rather than a help to her marriage. Her independence, success, and power must have kept many a man at a distance. Since these qualities are indirect oppositions to the gender-related roles and attitudes as dictated by a male-centered society for its women. This is the great sadness of a successful woman like Alexandra. To be a woman in a male-centered society is a hard destiny but to be an exceptional one must be doubly hard. Feeling puzzled, helpless and tired, Alexandra questions sadly "I wonder why I have been permitted to prosper, if it is only to take my friends away from me" (Cather, 1913, p. 105). History is repeating itself. It's common to find a woman behind successful men. But it is rare to find a man behind a successful woman.

### **Antonia's Frustration With Social Bias**

"When boys and girls are growing up, life can't stand still ... they have to grow up, whether they will or no" (Cather, 1994, p. 155). Cather portrayed Antonia who fully developed her characteristics through the conflicts with society. Antonia's move to Black Hawk signifies another milestone in her development. In order to better support her brother Ambrosch's farm, Antonia moves to Black Hawk town as a hired girl for the Harlings. There she will explore and battle with physical and mental challenges in the form of people and societal conventions for women and immigrants. The hired girls in Black Hawk have received social prejudice on their dual identification of women and immigrants. The self-consciousness of Alexandra is exposed. Although the immigrant country girls are good laborers, people of Black Hawk have prejudice and regard the immigrants as stupid foreigners. People in the town thought these immigrant girls were another race and a great menace to the conservative social order. "Physically they were almost a race apart, and out-of-door work had given them a vigor which, when they got over their first shyness on coming to town, developed into a positive carriage and freedom of movement" (Cather, 1994, p. 127).

They are not used to accepting the unconventional figures with vigor, positive carriage, and freedom of movement. Pioneer women are totally different from traditional Victorian women.

In the new stage of life, Antonia is industrious and hard working. She also displays vitality, vivacity and strength as she has done on the farm. She reveals a deep and spontaneous response to life, so she immediately

becomes popular with her employers. She herself also displays a happy life in the Harlings' family. Antonia is at first just as servile to her employers' family as Mrs. Harling is to her husband, but soon rebels against the orthodox expectations on the hired girls like her in *Black Hawk*. Her transformation is brought about after a dancing pavilion has come to town. Being the best dancer of them all, Antonia is soon so fascinated by the dances that she talks and thinks of nothing but the tent. As a result of her success at the tent, Antonia becomes the center of a group of males who start to circle around her like flies. The iceman, the delivery boys and young farmers all come to tramping through the Harlings' yard to the back door to engage dances, or to invite Antonia to parties and picnics, so a crisis is inevitable. Eventually she is forced by the autocratic Mr. Harling to quit going to the dances where she attracts so much attention or get another job. In the eyes of Mr. Harling, Antonia has offended public decency, as he tells her: "You've been going with girls who have a reputation for being free and easy, and now you've got the same reputation" (Cather, 1994, p. 165). Mrs. Harling is of course on the side of her husband. But to Antonia, the dances mean so much more than can be understood by men like Mr. Harling that she refuses to give them up even if it means rebellion against her boss and giving up her job at the Harlings. "Stop going to the tent?" she panted, "My own father couldn't make me stop! Mr. Harling ain't my boss outside my work" (Cather, 1994, p. 165). Then Antonia and the Harlings part.

Antonia's revolt against the Harlings is a rebellion in favor of the good things of life. Years of drudgery on remote farm with an unpleasant mother and brother for company have begotten in her a fierce desire to enjoy life's sweets. The rebellion seems mild since it consists chiefly of having a good time and going out with young men to dances, but the significance of her rebellion is that it shows Antonia's asserting her independence from Harlings as well as from her family.

After leaving the Harlings, Antonia decides to work for the notoriously dissolute Wick Cutter. Cutter is described in such a degrading way that he reminds the readers of the filthy snake that Jim Killed. He is so hated by the people that a boy would go to a good deal of trouble to throw a dead cat into his back yard. In fact, Cutter is obviously planning to rape Antonia, but finally failed.

After leaving Cutter's house, Antonia falls in love with a railroad conductor named Larry Donovan. He lures her to Denver with promises of marriage and then deserts her. Antonia has to come back to the prairie, pregnant and disgraced.

During this period, Antonia's life stage moves to the town and city—Black Hawk and Denver. Antonia is suddenly removed from a sparsely populated country to grow. In the beginning, Antonia lives the happy life at the Harling's. But as she leaves the prairie, she loses much of her contact with the land, which is the source of her vitality and happiness, and experiences the bitterness of life in town and city. When she returns to the prairie, she tells Jim, "I'd always be miserable in a city. I'd die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly" (Cather, 1994, p. 250).

### **Pioneer Women's Realization of Self-development**

Traditional marriage is usually dominated and oriented by autocratic men. Hence, creating harmonious family and marital life requires cooperation and endeavors of both sexes.

Women as geniuses always express their opinions and positions properly in order to achieve their rights. With outstanding ability to express them and communicate with the world, these women characters never

embarrass them in facing difficulties and awkward situations. Pioneer women's special capacity functions as a rival to the suffocating and rigid social atmosphere. This trait of femininity symbolizes women's devotion to life and comprehending nature. Through communicating with their natural environment and people around, women characters express themselves, forcefully and can comprehend their situation accurately. Consequently, capable women are able to find adequate ways to adapt themselves to their environment. This feminine characteristic qualifies them for keeping pace with the advancing world. In addition, independent women characters' ability to link strength with imagination carries weight in the process of their self-development too.

Alexandra differs from Antonia in that she lays her emphasis on farming the land while Antonia pours her energy to create harmonious family atmosphere. However, in addition to managing the farm, Alexandra protects Ivar, watches out for Mrs. Lee, helps Emil to escape the corn fields, advises Marie, and organizes her brother's work. What she does shows her feminine and maternal affection. In a sense, she plays the role of a spiritual pillar among people around her.

Antonia attracts Jim with her good nature. From the innocent and hard working country girls like Antonia, Jim sees beauty, vigor and hope. Antonia as the most important woman in Jim's life signifies the country, the conditions, and the whole adventure of his childhood. Her womanhood and strength conform her into "a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (Cather, 1994, p. 275). Jim admires her mainly because "whatever else was gone, Antonia had not lost the fire of life" (Cather, 1994, p. 306). This merit of endurance is the very element that Jim lacks in his life. From the beginning to the end, Antonia's charm is demonstrated in forms of womanhood, love and maternal affection. Jim remarks affectionately to Antonia "I'd have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife, or my mother or my sister anything that a woman can be to a man" (Cather, 1994, p. 251). Actually, his admiration for her reveals men's sterility and their psychological dependence on maternal love.

### Conclusion

This thesis focuses on pioneer women's development of the self from the perspective of feminism in *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*. As rigid social connections and concepts restrict women's autonomy and freedom; they must transform themselves and the world in order to survive. Through hardship, Willa Cather's protagonists have some common places that lead to their success. Pioneer women transform their environment with their outstanding traits. Being intelligent and ambitious, pioneer women are extraordinary women who embrace new ideas and new things full of passion, imagination and adventurous spirit. For them, life is to try, to experiment, to pursue, to adventure, to transcend, and to die of having lived. Dissatisfied with her life no wider than her cornfields, pioneer women yearn for the wide world to express herself and fervently hopes that they can enjoy the freedom that men enjoy, the freedom, not just to create, but to be, to think and to feel. In Cather's works, her protagonists all respect knowledge and are interested in the things around them, which make them different from the other people and could achieve unusual achievements. In order to analyze pioneer women's process of self-growth in the special period, the author compares and contrasts the specific situation, and analyzes the characteristics of the protagonists in the two novels. Through analysis, the author concludes that pioneer women always create a nurturing and gracious atmosphere in their household. Practically, these women successfully transmit the old civilization to the newly established homestead.

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