Feminist Presence in Traditional Gender Roles in *My Ántonia*

Feminism in society has been a prevailing issue with women primarily since World War I; women were not permitted to vote in elections, own property, go to college, hold prestigious titles in the work force, etc. They were, on the other hand, expected to be submissive, subservient, and domestic, filling their traditional gender roles in society. Female characters in novels were not bound to this way of life if the author did not wish. However, some female characters were portrayed by the author in this real societal manner to empower their female readers. While discussing *My Ántonia*, Deborah Lambert comments on Willa Cather’s writing, “She [Cather] accomplished what few women authors have: the creation of strong, even heroic, women as protagonists. Cather succeeded in this because she could imagine women achieving identity and defining their own purposes” (678). We see this same pattern of strong women characters in Willa Cather’s novel, *My Ántonia*.

In the beginning of the novel, Ántonia fits the mold of a woman filling the traditional gender roles in society and being a stereotypical woman. For instance, Ántonia screams and jumps away when Jim kills the big snake, then praises him again and again for his bravery, thus being the customary “girly-girl” (Cather 1234). Unknowingly, Jim recognizes traditional gender roles in his own family and neighbors; “For instance, although Jim Burden admires the Bohemian speech of Antonia's father and categorizes it as ‘kindly and grave’, he castigates Mrs. Shimerda's speech as ‘vindictive’ and ‘boastful’, qualities that he also ascribes to Antonia's speech when she proves too ‘manly’” (Wussow). Even though Mr. and Mrs. Shimerda speak alike, his opinion is that Mrs. Shimerda is too forthright and not enough of a lady, i.e. submissive and humble. Jim also associates Mrs. Shimerda’s speech with that of Ántonia’s after she starts working in the fields with her brothers, showing that she has
associated more of her mother’s tone into her dialect. When Mr. Shimerda dies, Ántonia becomes more of the conventional “woman” when she fills the role of nurturer in a family by helping her mother care for her younger siblings, both physically and emotionally (1260). However, Mr. Shimerda’s death seems to be a turning point in Ántonia’s life. When Ambrosch becomes head of the household, Ántonia does not develop into a blossoming young woman, but becomes like one of the boys, following in her brother’s footsteps to help provide for the family; she wears her father’s old overalls, her hands get rough with the farm work, her skin turns brown because she is out in the sun all day, and the way she eats is not dainty and polite anymore, but rough and manly. To finalize her transformation from a Bohemian beauty into a tomboy of the Nebraskan prairie, Jim Burden gives Ántonia the male nickname “Tony.”

In the middle of the novel, Ántonia goes to work in the city where she develops into more of a girl; she throws aside her father’s old overalls and replaces them with frilly dresses, going out to the community dances at the Vanni’s tent and flirting with the boys. While working for Mrs. Harling, she “often stopped her work and fell to playing with the children” (1273), also characterized as a female quality/activity. However much like the city girls Ántonia wanted to have become, the hired immigrant girls were more fun for the boys to be around because they were different from the girls raised in the city. The country girls who came for work had learned from their struggles and were stronger because of them; they weren’t afraid to get dirty or to wrinkle their clothes, much unlike the city-bred girls. “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, and made them conspicuous among Black Hawk women”
Eventually, Ántonia wanted some adventure, so she decided to go work with her friends for Mr. Cutter who had a reputation of turning his hired girls into prostitutes. This adventure of Ántonia’s did not fit traditional gender roles of the time period. She was learning how to be like an American girl, experiencing her own path in life.

In Black Hawk, the characters from the country meet the Harling family where their oldest daughter, Frances, also did not fit the traditional gender role mold. Where Frances acts more like a woman than Ántonia did after her father died, she is also modernized through working for her father in the bank instead of in the fields or as a babysitter. Frances has position and prestige in the community and earns a salary, something not congruent with traditional gender roles of the time. Instead of being ostracized for her forwardness and advancement, the community reveres and respects Frances Harling as a business partner and as a woman.

Also in Black Hawk, Jim and Ántonia meet Lena Lingard. Although she is an immigrant to the United States like Ántonia, her speech is more refined, as is her demeanor. In comparing Lena Lingard with Ántonia Shimerda, Helen Wussow comments,

Jim Burden, in My Antonia, derides Lena Lingard for "flat commonplaces" in her English speech. He delights in her use of "limb" for "leg" and smiles at her hyper-correct English. Yet, earlier he complains of Antonia's grammatically imperfect English speech and her lack of interest in learning English grammar as taught in school. Neither overly correct English nor ungrammatical slang satisfies Jim for both are marked by the gender and ethnic background of the speakers.
Even though Lena is also an immigrant, Jim feels differently about her than he does towards Ántonia. I believe he has more respect for Ántonia, because of the way he treats her and the way she acts around him. He recognized that she had worked hard in life and had gone through some mature experiences. One major difference between Ántonia and Lena is that Lena never wanted to be married and Ántonia did. Lena did not want to be a cookie cutter impression of the typical woman of the late 1800’s; she wanted to travel and have her own established company, not needing to report to someone constantly and wait on them hand and foot. Lena had spent her growing up years helping to raise her siblings and had then gone to work as a hired girl in the city, helping to raise other children, along with doing their housework; she was tired and wanted to be free from it all. On the other hand, Ántonia wanted to be married, to have children, to take care of a family the way her parents had taken care of her, and the way the Burden and Harling families had taken her in. Some may say she sought after and accepted the traditional female gender roles of the time.

The next phase in Ántonia’s changing life came at the end of the novel. By this time, twenty years had gone by and Ántonia was a different person from who she had grown up as. The most significant event in Ántonia’s adult life that helped shape her and her views of femininity was when she came back home, unmarried and pregnant. I believe Ántonia’s life had gone full circle when she reached this point. In a high school edition of the English Journal, Vicky Greenbaum gave this remark:

Students may realize the problems inherent in gender polarization through reading My Antonia, for instance, where Antonia diverges from social norms by dressing as a man and working in the fields, then coming home to remove her manly boots and give birth to her child. Cather makes clear that the frontier
community in which Antonia lives is divided in its view of this gender-bending: Farm women sometimes take on "masculine" work and roles, while town girls keep closely to stereotypical feminine ways of manner and dress.

Even on the day Ántonia gave birth to her baby, she was working in the fields to help support her family. Even though a stereotypical, traditional woman would stay at home and be pampered by those around her, Ántonia dressed in her father's old clothes and spent time in the fields, coming full circle in her life.

We can see instances in Ántonia’s life that parallel her mother’s, possibly explaining Ántonia’s lack of “feminine qualities”. “Like her mother before her, Antonia becomes pregnant outside of marriage. And like her mother, Antonia is excluded from the larger society and banished to a land of her own making” (Wussow). Sometimes we don’t learn from the mistakes of others, but have to experience them ourselves in order to be made stronger. But unlike her mother, Ántonia finally had the family she experienced so much in order to have and had always wanted.

However happy the reader may be that Jim and Ántonia were reunited, “by the end of the novel, Cather simultaneously praises Antonia's role as mother and demeans the value of their independent lives” (Lambert 688). Ántonia is praised for having raised such a wonderful family and having learned from the conditions in her life. At the same time, she is also demeaned for the life she has chosen; whereas Lena Lingard and Tiny Soderball never married, but went out and made their fortunes and built their businesses themselves, being praised for doing such, Ántonia stayed at home with her nine children and was looked down upon by society for it. It was almost as if she had become dead to the world because she didn’t have any material wealth or fame.
From Willa Cather’s novel *My Ántonia*, we see how some women of the late 1800’s were treated, not only by their friends and family, but by their community as well. Women at the time were still fighting for the right to vote, to be equal in social status with their husbands, and although Ántonia wasn’t allowed to vote nor had the chance to receive a formal education, she was still revered as a great woman by those who knew her. In her life, she had achieved the true meaning of the word “feminism.” Other women characters in *My Ántonia* who held positions of social standing, such as Frances Harling and Lena Lingard, were also considered great women of the time. But only one held the title of “beloved.” *My Ántonia.*
Works Cited


