

## My Antonia: The Role of Women

My Antonia, by Willa Cather provides a strong feminist statement in the way women are portrayed throughout the novel. Cather takes a bold step in literature, reversing the limited stereotype of women, by giving them strong and independent roles in the story.

Lena is able to start her own business, which is rare at that time. Several other women show their acumen in business, like Tiny Soderball, Frances Hurling, and Mrs. Gardener. This novel questions society's norms for women and their place in the society, and, in doing so, opens up many possibilities for women to find happiness and fulfillment in life independent of men.

Cather does a very good job of representing women from every aspect. The women's role as the traditional housewife, the independent girl, the self-dependent worker, and the family's foundation. First we start with Grandmother Burden. She whole-heartedly welcomes Jim into her home, being his grandma and the only mother figure of his life, now that his mother has passed away. She bustles and hustles around the home preparing meals and doing what a grandmother does best, taking care of everyone. Now Mr. and Mrs. Shimerda were having a hard time finding food for their family and when Grandmother found out about this, she went over to their house with food. Grandmother Burden and Mrs. Shimerda played the traditional role of married women in the story, cooking and cleaning.

Things haven't changed too much in women's roles, it's more so that people are more acceptant of women and their many roles in the society. Married women are still seen as needing to be home to take care of the children, prepare the meals, keep care of the house and so on. That is why many women now do not feel the need to get married.

As in My Antonia, the women who got married couldn't be successful businesswomen, except Mrs. Gardener.

Mrs. Gardener wore the pants of the relationship. "It was Mrs. Gardener who ran the business and looked after everything. Her husband stood at the desk and welcomed incoming travelers. He was a popular fellow, but no manager" (117). Her and her husband had switched the role of the male and the female in the marriage. Mrs. Gardener seemed like the typical business man, the way her mannerisms were cold, socialized little, kept rules and was constantly making sure that everything was running fine at the hotel, while Mr. Gardener always took time to stop and talk to guests. Mrs. Gardener was the exception, the successful businesswomen in the story were single, like Lena and Tiny Soderball.

Lena showed up in Black Hawk all "dolloed" up. She had now become the dressmaker for Mrs. Thomas. Before this job, Lena worked at home and was very poor. Back on her farm, she was scantily clothed because of the lack of money her family had but now with her new job, Lena was now seen dressed in dresses and very proper. With her new clothes came a new attitude. Lena knew that with a married life came restrictions so early on she decided that she didn't want to get married, even though her and Jim had a little liaison. "I don't want to marry Nick, or any other man," Lena murmured. "I've seen a good deal of married life, and I don't care for it. I want to be so I can help my mother and the children at home, and not have to ask life of anybody" (103). Lena and Tiny Soderball end up not getting married. Lena set up her own dressmaker' shop and moved to San Francisco, where she continued in the dressmaking trade. Tiny Soderball moved west and made a small fortune during the Alaskan gold rush

then moves to San Francisco with Lena where she enjoys her life of leisure on the strengths of her savings.

Girls will be girls. In Chapter VII, Jim and Antonia are walking down at the prairie-dog-town and encounter holes, which belong to snakes. While they were looking at the holes, a snake slithered up behind Jim. Antonia screams, stands back and watches Jim kill the snake. This was very typical for the woman to be helpless and have the male come and save the day. Also when there is constant dancing in Black Hawk, Lena, Antonia, and Tiny went every night. Men and boys would line up to dance with Lena and Antonia. The girls loved the attention because there were never enough girls but always enough boys to go around. Antonia even gets kissed and even though she slaps him, she liked it.

When Antonia first meets Jim, she grabs his hand and together they run over to the steep drawside to play. Antonia never was shy when it came to Jim. She was definitely a free spirited, confident girl. "Antonia had opinions about everything, and she was soon able to make them known" (22). Even though there wasn't very much food at her home and her father was constantly sick, Antonia always seemed to be relatively happy. The younger you are the more oblivious you are to the serious things that are happening in life. However, even after her father dies, Antonia doesn't complain about working out in the fields, neither did her sister. "We knew that things were hard for our Bohemian neighbours, but the two girls were lighthearted and never complained. They were always ready to forget their troubles at home, and to run away with me over the prairie, scaring rabbits or starting up flocks of quail (23).

Antonia's father's death marked the beginning of her working career. She needed to help support her family now and took up working in farms and in the city.

Ambrousch, her brother, seemed like he didn't work, but just ordered around Antonia.

"Ambrousch hired his sister out like a man, and she went from farm to farm, binding sheaves or working with the threshers. The farmers liked her and were kind to her, said they would rather have her for a hand than Ambrousch" (95).

Tiny, Lena, and Antonia went to Black Hawk to work. They worked hard for their family, so whenever they received their wages, they sent it home, which was the main reason why the girls went to the city to work. There were also the four Danish girls and the three Mary's. The daughters of merchants in Black Hawk didn't work. They didn't go outside during the winter because it was cold and they wouldn't go outside during the summer because it was hot. So not only were the foreign girls more skilled they were also more beautiful.

Foreign farmers in our county were the first to become prosperous. After the fathers were out of debt, the daughters married the sons of neighbours- usually of like nationality- and the girls who once worked in Black Hawk kitchens are today managing big farms and fine families of their own; their children are better off than the children of the town women they used to serve. (129)

These daughters: Antonia, Lena, and Frances seemed to be in charge of the family's financial situations. Frances was the eldest daughter of the Harlings. "Frances, was a very important person in our world. She was her father's chief clerk, and virtually managed his Black Hawk office during his frequent absences" (97). The daughters were always the ones helping out. The book never talked about sons going to the city or out on

farms to work, to support their families. Instead it was more that the females went out and worked while the males went to school. Antonia had an advantage when it came to schooling. When her and her family had just moved from Bohemia to Nebraska, she had a hard time communicating with other townspeople because of the language barrier. That is also why foreign girls could not be school teachers, because the language barrier kept them from being able to communicate well enough with the children to teach them.

When Jim and Antonia were neighbors, he went over and taught Antonia how to speak English. Even before Antonia's time, the women and girls were expected to stay home and work while the boys went to school.

Cather represented these women as strong and independent and ready to attack whatever the world threw at them. She represented them in a fair and realistic way. These women weren't scared to work and to have fun, but rather scared to not succeed. Considering when this was written, in the early 1900's, the women were given chances to prosper by working and being independent, which in doing so made them happy. Women were working, owning their own businesses, and were happy and single. My Antonia helped the public become aware that women are just as capable as men are and helped it become socially acceptable to be a working single woman. Books such as My Antonia have helped pave the way for the equality of women that we have today.